

WHO SPEAKS FOR OUR SCHOOLS?

Daniel Tanner
Rutgers University

"American schools are in trouble," declares John Goodlad in the opening words of A Place Called School, his penetrating study of schooling.¹ But in the course of the history of American public education, there has never been a time when the public schools were not in trouble. Each epoch in the development of American public education has been marked by new waves of attack and new demands for reform only to be followed by counterreforms to undo the excesses of the predecessor reforms.

The new attacks and demands have an old ring about them. Somehow it seems as though we have been there before, that we are verifying Mark Twain's Law of Periodic Repetition, "Everything that has happened once must happen again and again and again — and not capriciously, but at regular periods, and each thing in its own period."² Yet the attacks cannot be taken lightly because so much is at stake, and because each period is marked by a successive generation to be educated.

Each new era of reform or counterreform has become a kind of ceremony in which our school leaders await the signal indicating the dominant tide to ride in a particular period. In the words of Kafka, "Leopards break into the temple, and drink the sacrificial chalices dry. This occurs repeatedly, again and again; finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes a part of the ceremony."

The Leopards have broken in and have done their thing, and so once again we can begin our ceremony here today. If our response is to be more than ceremonial, if our response is to be constructive, we shall have to reconstruct the educational situation — giving due recognition to the great accomplishments of the oldest public school system the world has known and the first system to be committed to open-access secondary and higher education. At the same time, we shall need to reconstruct the educational situation with a view

toward effecting needed problem-solutions, rather than following the dominant tide of the times.

Sigmund Freud once commented, "There is a common saying that we should learn from our enemies. I confess that I have never succeeded in doing so."³ One cannot say that our schools have not sought to learn from their enemies. During the short span of time since midcentury, our schools have shifted their priorities many times in response to their blamers. Witness how readily the schools shifted from the "back-to-basics" retrenchment of the early 1950s to the discipline-centered curricula with priority given to the sciences and mathematics during the late 1950s and early 1960s; from the discipline-centered curricula and "pursuit of academic excellence" to the call for "relevance" and "humanizing" the curriculum during the late 1960s and early 1970s; from "relevance" and "humanizing" to the retrenchment of "back-to-basics" during the late 1970s and early 1980s; and from "back-to-basics" to the contemporary call for "academic excellence" with the priority given to the sciences and mathematics. Witness the shift from the focus on the gifted and talented during the era of the Cold War and space race, to the priority given the disadvantaged during the "War on Poverty," and now back again to the gifted and talented.

After more than a decade of curriculum retrenchment through "back-to-basics," public school educators would appear to be justified in welcoming the current wave of "national" reports calling for curriculum reform and greater financial support for our public schools at the state and federal levels. Anyone familiar with curriculum history could have predicted that the "back-to-basics" syndrome could not last. From the vast body of research over many decades on the so-called "essentials" or "basic skills," the lesson conveyed in the professional literature is that the fundamental skills are ineffectively developed when taught as ends in themselves — devoid of ideas and stripped from opportunities to develop the working power of intelligence. Thus it should not have come as any great surprise when reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress began alluding to the "back-to-basics" emphasis in seeking explanations for the decline in higher-ordered thinking abilities.⁴

Early last year The New York Times Survey of Education featured the theme, "Teaching to Think: A New Emphasis."⁵ Thoughtful educators could be fully justified in applauding this realization of the bankruptcy of the "back-to-basics" retrenchment and the need for the curriculum to focus on the development of thinking abilities. But to regard "teaching to think" as a "new emphasis" leaves our schools in a situation of "rediscovering the wheel." Reflective thinking was a dominant theme of experimentalist progressive educators throughout the first half of this century. They rejected the Old World notion that the curriculum for the masses should be limited to the basics and that the masses should not be exposed to any unsettling ideas in their education. They held that a democracy can only be built upon a citizenry capable of attacking the pervading public problems and issues through the methods of reflective inquiry. They envisioned a unitary educational structure, unlike the divided school systems of the Old World. They invented the comprehensive high school where our heterogeneous populations could develop common bonds and mutual enrichment through general education while also engaging in differentiated studies to meet their special interests and talents. They looked to the great potentialities rather than to the limitations of the people and the public schools. They conceived of general education as a common universe of discourse, understanding and competence necessary for productive membership in the joint culture of American democracy. Then, during the 1970s, just when our leading colleges were rediscovering the need for general education, our high schools were under attack by national commissions calling for educational retrenchment by lowering the school leaving age to 14, shortening the school day and school year, and dismantling the comprehensive high school in favor of specialized high schools.⁶ (Now, only a decade later, there are calls for a longer school day and longer school year.)

The contemporary scene is marked by yet another foray of conflicting prescriptions for school reform by various national commissions, panels, and task forces. The three major reports produced under the auspices of public or quasi-public agencies are A Nation at Risk, the report of the National Commission on Excellence, appointed by the U.S. Secretary of

Education; Action for Excellence, the report of the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, issued by the Education Commission of the States; and Educating Americans for the 21st Century, issued by the National Science Foundation. All three of these reports blame the schools for our nation's waning position in the domination of world industrial markets and for our alleged decline in scientific and technological productivity. No blame is leveled at our existing political, industrial, and scientific leadership. No blame is leveled at our colleges and universities.⁷ In this respect as well as in the tone of national emergency which permeates all three of these reports, the criticisms and prescriptions resemble those that came in the wake of the Cold War and space race.⁸

Both A Nation at Risk and Action for Excellence are characterized by a tone of near hysteria with such language as "act of war," "rising tide of mediocrity," "urgency," "emergency," "mobilizing," "crucial to our national survival," and so on. In addition to giving new priority to the sciences and mathematics, all three of these reports call for an emphasis on the "new basics." The "new basics" are the standard academic subjects plus computer literacy. However, unlike the "old basics," attention is to be given to thinking abilities and knowledge applications — especially in the domains of science and technology. But these reports indicate little or no understanding and concern for the idea and function of general education for a free society, and they choose to overlook the shortcomings and failures of the unprecedented NSF-sponsored national curriculum projects of the Cold War era. The report of the national Science Board recommends that NSF "which has recognized expertise in leading curriculum development, should again take the leadership in promoting curriculum evaluation and development for mathematics, science and technology."⁹

Early in this century, Dewey had warned of the dangers to democracy when a nation subordinates its schools in service to "the superior interests of the state both in military defense and in struggles for international supremacy in commerce."¹⁰ All three of these reports would have us subordinate our schools to such narrow nationalistic interests. The report Action for Excellence, prepared by a "task force" composed mainly of business

leaders and governors, sees the main function of the school in providing business and industry with "highly skilled human capital." The "task force" calls for the establishment of a formal partnership between the business-industrial sector and the schools, and the adoption by the schools of the efficiency-management techniques of the business-industrial sector.¹¹ Oddly, no mention is made of the gross inefficiencies of this sector and its penchant for putting narrow-vested interests above the public interest. This same narrowness occurs when the report A Nation at Risk refers to our world as a "global village." It does so not in terms of promoting international understanding, world peace, and the principles of human freedom, but rather in connection with regaining our nation's economic and political global dominance.¹²

In vivid contrast to these three documents are Ernest Boyer's report, High School,¹³ prepared for the Carnegie Foundation, and John Goodlad's A Place Called School. Both of these reports are considered studies that avoid accusatory and condemnatory language. Both are deeply concerned with the idea and function of general education or common learning in a polyglot society. Both portray a deeper understanding and a larger vision of schooling than any of the other recent reports. Yet the prescriptions advanced in both of these reports appear to yield more problems than solutions.

After formulating a comprehensive and balanced set of goals and functions of the high school curriculum, and after having criticized the bookkeeping device of the Carnegie Unit in inventorying academic credits, Boyer's core of common learning is essentially a list of units in the standard academic subjects. He stresses that the core of common learning must relate to our interdependent and complex world and that teachers of the individual subject must "bring a new interdisciplinary vision into the classroom."¹⁴ But he fails to explain how this is to come about from a list of standard academic courses and credits.

All of our experience has shown that curricular synthesis does not occur in the isolated and insulated cocoons of the departmentalized high school, or for that matter in the college with its specialized knowledge domains and turfdoms. Boyer sees the half unit of the

senior independent project as providing for such a synthesis. Our experience with the old senior Problems of Democracy course should have revealed to Boyer that such an effort is too little and too late. Boyer calls for two units of a second language required of all students for graduation built upon an earlier study of a second language in elementary school. He overlooks the dismal failure of our federally funded effort of the 1950s and 1960s to create a population fluent in a second language. At the same time he calls for only 2 1/2 units of English in the common-learning core.

Goodlad points to the lack of student involvement in making any real decisions about their learning and observes that students are mainly engaged in the recall of specifics and skill-drill mechanics as demonstrated in classroom recitation and tests. And he perceptively observes that school administrators and teachers rarely exhibit concern for the development of a balanced and coherent curriculum. Goodlad also calls for building the interrelationships of studies in the curriculum; but like Boyer, he does not show how this might be developed. Neither Boyer nor Goodlad draw upon the work of experimentalist educators of the past who sought to develop curricular synthesis for general education. Instead Goodlad draws from the Harvard Report of 1945.¹⁵ But where the Harvard Report made an eloquent case for the comprehensive high school and the necessary interdependence between general education and the vocational studies, Goodlad would reduce vocational education to career education, subsumed under general education, with no more than 15 percent of any student's time devoted to such study. Like Boyer, Goodlad sees vocational education for the noncollege bound as ineffectual, and relegates any systematic vocational studies to the post-high school years. In effect, Boyer and Goodlad would deny our noncollege-bound students access to the federal-state programs in vocational education. In effect, they would eliminate the comprehensive high school as envisioned in John Dewey's fight for vocational studies within the unitary structure of the comprehensive high school; as envisioned in the Eighth Yearbook of the John Dewey Society, edited by Hollis Caswell; and as envisioned by the Educational Policies Commission and James Conant.¹⁶ In effect, we would be left with a general

academic high school with college preparatory studies for the college bound and a general academic curriculum for the majority of our youth who do not go on to college. (Boyer and Goodlad confuse the diffused shop class with vocational education. Had they applied the same logic in their criticism of the existing academic studies as they did for the vocational studies, they would have been impelled to recommend the elimination of the academic studies.)

Both Boyer and Goodlad correctly call for the elimination of student ability grouping and tracking. But their call for a one-track system implies that any systematic vocational studies would result in a vocational track. In his report on the high school in 1959, Conant made it clear that this need not and should not be the case.¹⁷ After the model of the land-grant college, the comprehensive high school could offer diversified programs of study for students of widely different backgrounds and interests. At the same time, through general education, students could share in the common universe of discourse, understanding and competence required for effective citizenship in a free society. Instead of two oppositional sides to the curriculum and a divided student population, the courses of study could be designed for mutual enrichment, and the cosmopolitan student population would likewise provide for mutual enrichment.

Goodlad's final chapter is most puzzling as he extends his prescription far beyond his data in calling for a radical restructuring of our entire school system.¹⁸ He advocates that schooling begin at age four and end at age 16. Some of the concomitant effects of this restructuring, contends Goodlad, would be a marked reduction in the costs of developing curricula, and the extension of the working years which would also help bail out our social security system. Aside from the fact that there are far better ways to bail out the social security system, Goodlad overlooks the extraordinary costs to the individual and society in providing productive work for an army of 16-year olds. In advocating the reduction of the age for college entrance by two years, Goodlad overlooks the fact that such efforts for education compression and acceleration were tried before with very dubious results. But the

most questionable aspect of his proposal is that it would end formal schooling at age 16 for the majority of our youth. Advanced democratic nations of Europe have been increasingly recognizing the need to extend formal education beyond age 16 for the populace, and have been coming to recognize the comprehensive high school as the appropriate vehicle for extending educational opportunity for all. It would be a sad chapter in our history if we should abandon the very institution which was created to meet our ideal of building unity through diversity for a free society, and of extending formal education upward for all.

In his proposal, Horace's Compromise, Theodore Sizer would eliminate the comprehensive high school and reduce the curriculum to four academic departments focused on "the discipline and furniture of the student's mind." The goal for most adolescents would be "mastery of the minima."¹⁹ Compulsory education for adolescents would be eliminated, and gaining a high school education would be a privilege rather than an obligation. The ideal of the adolescent student is a mind disembodied. Sizer draws freely from Mortimer Adler's Paideia Proposal which he had a hand in formulating.²⁰ Taken together, the two proposals are curious artifacts of perennialist-essentialist doctrine regarding mind, knowledge, and schooling. It is hard to believe that Sizer's proposal was sponsored in part by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. But it should be remembered that this organization, only a few years ago, had jumped on the bandwagon of back-to-basics.²¹

None of the reports of the 1980s have anything to say about the emergence over the past decade of segregated, specialized, full-time and shared-time vocational schools — and the dangers such schools portend for producing a divided school system not unlike that of the Old World. Virtually all of the reports of the 1980s call for an emphasis on the development of thinking abilities, but none say anything against school censorship and the essential need for probing into pervading controversial issues in the curriculum if adolescents are to learn to think critically. Neither Goodlad nor Boyer raise any questions about so-called "magnet" schools. In fact, Boyer recommends the establishment of such schools in urban areas for gifted and talented students and the establishment of a national

network of federally supported "Residential Academies in Science and Mathematics" to meet "the vital interests of the nation."²² Early in this century, Dewey prophetically warned that in seeing each special area of the curriculum as a fixed and competing interest, we would find ourselves with new and separate kinds of schools — leading to greater social isolation, sidetracking educators from addressing our most important educational problems, and undermining our prospects for building a sense of unity through diversity by means of a comprehensive and unitary school structure.²³

For too long a time we have regarded adolescence as a pathological period of human development, something to be gotten over as quickly and painlessly as possible. If we were to regard adolescence as an authentic period in human development, a time for testing oneself and for making fruitful mistakes, we would have a better vision of what the American high school should be like. Many undoubtedly would be appalled by the seeming inefficiency of such a high school. But it should be remembered that every formula for efficiency in the past has failed us. It is time that we recognized the deficiency of efficiency. Adolescents are not products, and education is not a production process. The seemingly inefficient unitary structure of our school system, capped by the comprehensive high school, is acknowledged internationally for having produced the greatest educational yield of any nation, without having sacrificed our most academically able youth.²⁴ If we are to improve, we will need to recognize our successes and build on them.

A great vacuum exists with regard to American educational policy. The Educational Policies Commission was a victim of Sputnik I, and from the time the Commission met its demise there has been no statesmanlike body to speak for public education. In one of its final statements issued in the wake of Sputnik I, the Educational Policies Commission warned Americans that, "Fully as important as progress in science are the promotion of American democracy and the preservation of peace."²⁵ It warned against allowing the crisis mentality to lead us astray of our ideals. In the concluding words of the Commission, "The challenge before American education ought not, therefore, to be regarded as a matter of competition

with Soviet science, technology, or education. The real challenge to America is to fulfill the great potential of her own ideals."²⁶ Unfortunately, the periodic outbreaks of reports on reforming our public schools do not reflect these ideals. And unfortunately, there is little positive to be said about our leadership at the federal level. President Reagan's announced platform for education is centered on student discipline, teacher merit pay, and "finding room in our schools for God."²⁷

The American public may be highly critical of the schools, but their belief in education has not waned. Education is the great contagion. Each new generation of parents seeks more and better education for their own children. The public is willing to invest more in public education to effect needed improvements. Judging by the record, the profession today lacks the wider vision which created an open system of education committed to human possibilities rather than privilege and limitation.

REFERENCES

- ¹John I. Goodlad, A Place Called School. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984), p. 1.
- ²Mark Twain, "Papers of the Adam Family," in Letters from the Earth (New York: Harper & Row, 1963; originally published 1938), p. 90.
- ³Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1964; originally published 1933), p. 139.
- ⁴National Assessment of Educational Progress. Reading, Science and Mathematics Trends: A Closer Look (Denver: NAEP, 1983).
- ⁵Gene I. Maeroff, "Teaching to Think: A New Emphasis." The New York Times Survey of Education (January 9, 1983), pp. 1, 37.
- ⁶B. Frank Brown, Ch., National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, The Reform of Secondary Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973); John H. Martin, Ch., National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education, The Education of Adolescents (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Education, 1976); James S. Coleman, Ch., Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee, Youth: Transition to Adulthood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
- ⁷David P. Gardner, Ch., National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983); James B. Hunt, Jr., Ch., Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, Action for Excellence (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1983); William T. Coleman, Jr. and Cecily C. Selby, Chs., National Science Board, Educating Americans for the 21st Century (Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation, 1983). Perhaps Involvement In Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education, Kenneth P. Mortimer, Ch., Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983) is the beginning of a spate of reports reproaching higher education.

⁸See for example, Human G. Rickover, Education and Freedom (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1959).

⁹Coleman and Selby, Educating Americans for the 21st Century, p. xi.

¹⁰John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1916), pp. 109-110.

¹¹Hunt, Action for Excellence, pp. 10, 14, 40.

¹²Gardner, A Nation at Risk, p. 6.

¹³Ernest L. Boyer, High School: A report on Secondary Education in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁵Report of the Harvard Committee, General Education in a Free Society (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945).

¹⁶John Dewey, "Splitting Up the School System." New Republic 17 (April 1915), pp. 283-284; Hollis L. Caswell, ed., The American High School: Its Responsibility and Opportunity, Eighth Yearbook of the John Dewey Society (New York: Harper & Row, 1946); Alexander J. Stoddard, Ch., Educational Policies Commission, Education for ALL American Youth (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1944); James B. Conant, "Unity and Diversity in Secondary Education," in James B. Conant, My Several Lives (New York: Harper & Row, 1970; address delivered at annual meeting of the American Association of School Administrators, Boston, April 7, 1952), pp. 665-670.

¹⁷James B. Conant, The American High School Today (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959).

¹⁸Goodlad, A Place Called School, pp. 325-349.

¹⁹Theodore R.Sizer, Horace's Compromise (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), pp. 88-89.

²⁰National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reducing the Curriculum (Reston, VA: The Association, 1982).

²¹ Mortimer J. Adler, The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982).

²² Boyer, High School, p. 239.

²³ Dewey, Democracy and Education, pp. 288-292.

²⁴ Torsten Husen, "Are Standards in U.S. Schools Really Lagging Behind Those in Other Countries?" Phi Delta Kappan 64 (March 1983), pp. 455-461.

²⁵ Educational Policies Commission, The Contemporary Challenge to American Education (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1958), p. 5.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁷ The New York Times, January 30, 1984, p. A-10.