

GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE HIGH SCHOOL: SOME MASSACHUSETTS PERSPECTIVES

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THE THREE FACES OF CURRICULUM

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Since time immemorial, the number three has possessed powerful characteristics. . . religious, historical, and mystical. It is also a truism in modern times that there is no single way in which any thing can be done which automatically ensures its absolute success. Absolute success evades us absolutely.

Both of those notions inform a conceptual framework about what should constitute curriculum. Since we all know that people all learn in different ways, and even perhaps that different subjects are best learned in different ways, it seems realistic to view curriculum as a combination of exposures.

The idea which is being proposed in this paper grew out of a sustained and comprehensive review of one high school's graduation requirements. It seemed to a committee composed of the principal, the guidance director, an English teacher, a physics teacher, a parent, a student, a biology teacher . . . that the traditional approach, of simply requiring "time spent" as verified by a passing grade, was limited and unsatisfactory. One did not know really whether students had learned any facts or skills which would stay with them later. Furthermore, the committee subscribed to the philosophy stated below which had been accepted by the school and the School Committee.

Philosophy

This school, an educational institution in and for the community, intends to provide students with an environment, resources, and guidance to enable them to develop their full potential as individuals and as members of the larger society.

This means encouraging students to acquire skills for survival in the future and for self-actualization. We want students' experiences in this school to provide them with skills in decision-making: analysis, reasoning, problem solving, and communicating. We want them to emerge with a willingness to take risks, to take responsibility, to act autonomously, and yet at the same time, to feel impelled to volunteer to help others because such "helping" is valuable.

In another direction, we want them to emerge from this school with a sense of history, an appreciation for beauty, confidence that they have an imagination and can create, an awareness that knowledge is specialized and yet interrelated, that the most effective way to acquire knowledge is to be committed to being an independent and continuous learner.

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On still another dimension, we want them to be prepared to undertake some satisfying career that they have chosen, to be prepared for the practical implications of that career, to be satisfied that they have chosen the career wisely, based on knowledge of the alternatives.

And finally, we want students to be aware that people have differences, as well as similarities, and to be tolerant of these differences, thereby widening their understanding of mankind.

We want our students to be able to describe a value system that they have arrived at. All of these intentions, if achieved, would mean that students would leave our charge with positive and productive attitudes toward their own futures as well as their own pasts. To this philosophy all of our programs should be geared, each making an unique contribution and sharing the results.

KNOWLEDGE

The committee did not wish to eliminate the concept of requirements since it felt that there was certain knowledge that was worth having and that, in fact, that knowledge should be shared by all members of a common society.

In consequence the committee invited all disciplines to propose what they considered to be a core of knowledge that should be acquired by all, what they felt was necessary only to parts of the population, or whether, in fact, they felt that their subject should be "elective." While most subjects taught at that high school at that time, the mid-seventies, did indeed want a "captive audience," controversy reigned over the role of foreign language, in particular. The final decision was that in the United States, at that moment, foreign language should not be a requirement. On the other hand, in the practical and fine arts, it was felt that students ought to be required to study one or two of those subjects for half a year each since it is anticipated that Americans will, with the increase in robotics and computerization, have a great deal of leisure time.

The result of that part of the discussion was that a list of distribution requirements was drawn up (which subjects would be studied and for how long). One consequence was that of increased requirements for graduation. Students had for a while been taking as few courses as possible and in as many disparate areas as possible.

The list of requirements that emerged included English (four years), Social Studies (three year; the third year might be interdisciplinary credit), Mathematics (two years, one of which would be in the area of personal or practical mathematics, such as budget building), fine or applied arts (one year), community or school service (to be done primarily in the sophomore year and designed to teach students to be selfless), Science (one year), Foreign Language, Business, Interdisciplinary courses or

the Walkabout (more on this later; here one year's worth of credit was required), and a core course in the ninth grade which covered such subjects as health, study skills, first aid, and career education. Further distinctions could be made within those distribution requirements, such as a year of European and a year of American history within the three-year Social Studies demand.

SKILLS

What distinguished this committee from other review committees is that it asked all the disciplines to also list what *skills* they felt students needed to have by the time they graduated from high school. This produced a remarkable list:

- a. To be able to write an expository theme of at least three paragraphs, assigned by a teacher as part of a first semester course in the senior year, with correctness and clarity (the English Department will come up with criteria for those two parameters). This theme, written in any standard language, will be judged by a panel of teachers. The names of the papers in the class will be removed, but the class papers will stay intact, and the paper will be placed in the permanent record of the student.
- b. To be able to spell ordinary words such as Warriner's 300 commonly misspelled words and to know at least the four basic rules of spelling (this is to be tested once a year and to be measured against our high school norms).
- c. To be able to make a short, articulate speech before a group (to be tested in the sophomore year) in any standard language.
- d. To read a minimum set of books (to be determined by the English Department) and to be able to define a minimum set of vocabulary words (dependent on first part).
- e. To increase reading level by two years and/or maintain reading at the appropriate grade level.
- f. To demonstrate the correct use of library resources (dictionary, encyclopedia, readers' guide, card catalogue, etc.), to be handled by the library itself as a department.
- g. To conduct an ecological analysis of a selected neighborhood site.
- h. To take one's pulse and temperature and to recognize both normal and abnormal values.

- i. To demonstrate ability to use the metric system (schoolwide Impetus).
- j. To show proficiency in giving emergency first aid to include:
 - stoppage of bleeding
 - mouth to mouth artificial respiration
 - treatment for poisoning
 - treatment for shock
 - simple bandaging and splinting
- k. To be able to create an original visual project on a given theme in two or three dimensions (collage, montage, mobile, stabile, sculpture) or to compose an original piece of music (originality to be determined by a panel of experts/teachers).
- l. To be able to plan a nutritional breakfast, lunch or dinner and explain the nutritional value.
- m. To be able to participate in an interview outside of school.

The committee felt that proof of accomplishment in one of these skills could be demonstrated by performance, on a paper and pencil test, if that were appropriate, or in the actual desired behavior. Students should be able to choose when they wished to show proficiency; a record would be kept by the school and be portable by the student. (This was at the same time that E.T.S. was deliberating the notion of an "academic passport" on microfiche which would contain, in addition to the student's record, examples of the student's work). The skills proficiency concept made up the second part of the proposal.

EXPERIENCES

Finally, the third part of the proposal expressed the belief that experiences constitute an important part of the learning process. If you haven't done 'x', went the proposition, then you are not an educated person. When the committee began to list its ideas of experiences (and it discovered that in a community thirty miles from the city of Boston, there were students who had never taken a train, or visited the city!), it found it could produce a long and varied list:

- a. A primitive outdoor experience of at least two nights' duration such as a Project Adventure weekend.
- b. Four different live artistic performances such as theater or musical performances.

- c. A professional, live sports event such as a baseball game.
- d. A preplanned day in Boston or another large city.
- e. A visit to three different types of museums (art, history, science, etc.)
- f. Participation in a competition or tournament.
- g. A series of regular visits to a public, political forum.
- h. A visit to the legislature and follow-up contact with one's representative.
- i. A day-long visit to another school district (possible exchange).
- j. One school event such as a dance or sporting event each semester all four years.
- k. Participation in an ongoing group or task force.
- l. A day in small claims court.
- m. A tour of a hospital and/or visit to a nursing home (tour to include specified locations).
- n. Following a person who is in business for a day in:
 - factory
 - stock market
 - Haymarket
 - Federal Reserve Bank
 - Etc.
- o. A visit to a university or college or other institution of higher learning.
- p. A visit to the airport.
- q. Participation in a political campaign.
- r. A visit to a variety of religious institutions.
- s. Climbing a mountain of about 4,000 feet.

- t. Traveling ten miles on water in a non-motorized vessel.
- u. A day in one of the media.
- v. A guided tour of a professional stage.
- w. A day in the Quincy Naval Yard and a talk with a recruiter.
- x. Etc.

Some of these experiences, the committee felt, should be field trips integrated into the curriculum; others, they felt, should be undertaken by the family or with peers. Certification of the experience could be accomplished by having the student fill out a form if it were not part of a course. Or if the student chose to verify the experience to the homeroom teacher through a speech, the speech might also fulfill the skills requirement, underlining the importance of the integration of learning.

The Walkabout mentioned above was proposed as a method of demonstrating that a student is a competent member of the adult society. It was designed to be done in the senior year and was described as follows:

An original literary work, musical work, piece of original scientific or social scientific research, an extended internship, the log of an extended trip, etc. This would be worked out between a faculty member or adult in the community and the student in a contract form.

COMMENTS

A number of questions come immediately to mind after reading this description of an idealized approach to a complicated problem.

First, isn't it already outdated in its specific demands? Indeed, one can see how much has changed in education in the last half dozen years. There is no notice here of computers, for example, and too little of science and mathematics is required. In fact, in 1980 the school began requiring typing for graduation as a precursor to the possibility of requiring computer knowledge. What this experience indicates, in fact emphasizes, is that curriculum must always be in the process of review. Curriculum design and implementation are cyclical in nature and must consistently be revisited.

Second, would the approach described here require additional personnel? At the time of its presentation, it was thought that a record keeper would be needed. Now with computers, such record keeping would hardly be a challenge. In fact, with declining enrollment even in the late 70's empty seats were assumed in some of the classes, which made it practical to think of requiring more courses of all students. With today's financial limitations, the question takes on new meaning.

Third, in view of the current criticism of the American high school, doesn't this tripartite idea imply that the high school can "do it all?" It is certainly true that the philosophy stated early in the paper is one which considers the entire student, but by specifying three ways in which students can learn, the proposal makes it possible for more students to achieve success. By recognizing student learning outside of the school classroom, the burden is taken off the school to provide all education within its walls.

Fourth, can it work? We never had the opportunity to try it formally and systematically. The School Committee allowed us to raise the number of requirements for graduation so that students would spend more time in classes. They let us increase the number of credits of Social Studies we could require. They allowed us to create a senior course called "Senior Decisions" which covered many of the issues listed above as part of a ninth grade "core course." We, ourselves, looked at our curriculum guides and made sure our objectives were clear, and in most cases, measurable. We learned a great deal about how curriculum decisions are made in high schools. It, was, finally, an educational experience for the committee and the staff.

It seems to me that whether or not one adopts a paradigm such as the one described here, the idea of seeing curriculum as dynamic and multifaceted has merit.

