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Learning Disputes

By Mortimer J. Adler

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Secretary of Education William J. Bennett's recent proposal for a national curriculum for our public high schools and for national tests to measure student achievement in them will not produce the much-desired reform of basic compulsory education in the United States.

The secretary's ideal curriculum for his imaginary James Madison High School would not accomplish the sound objectives set by those who, better than Bennett, understand what needs to be done to reform our public schools—Profs. Theodore R.Sizer of Brown University, John I. Goodlad, formerly of UCLA and now at the University of Washington and Diane Ravitch of Columbia Teachers College.

Sizer, who wrote the classic book on the teacher as a coach—“Horace's Compromise” (Houghton Mifflin), published in 1984—now heads the Coalition of Essential Schools, where the training of teachers to coach the fundamental skills as well as other subjects is a primary consideration.

Goodlad, after a five-year study of American schools, wrote “A Place Called School” (McGraw-Hill), also published in 1984. In it he documented the appalling statistic that 85% of all classroom time in the United States is spent in teachers *talking at* students who memorize what is needed to bone up for examinations, and only 15% of the time is spent in teachers *talking with* students, interacting with their minds in protracted discussions. Any substantial reversal in those figures would accomplish a major reform.

Ravitch last year wrote (with Chester E. Finn Jr.) “What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?” (Harper & Row), which detailed the literature and history that should be part of a sound curriculum.

Bennett has manifested no acquaintance with—and has acknowledged no indebtedness to—those educational reforms. If he had paid some attention to them, he might have realized the shortcomings of his own thinking about education. The most serious of these are his failure to recognize that educational reform must begin in the primary grades, that a truly democratic school system must give all the children the same quality, not just the same quantity, of schooling, and, most important, that there are three very different kinds of teaching and learning:

- Didactic instruction in subject-matters.
- The coaching of the language and mathematical skills.
- The Socratic conduct of seminar discussions of the basic ideas and issues to be found in books assigned for study.

Of these three, Bennett is concerned only with the first, which now predominates in our schools. This is the least-effective kind of teaching and the learning that results is the least durable. In truth, it is not genuine teaching at all, but rather indoctrination by the teacher, and not genuine learning by the student, but memorization for the sake of passing exams. Genuine learning involves activity of the learner’s mind; genuine teaching involves the cooperative activity of the teacher in helping and guiding the learning by interacting with the student’s mind.

All this Bennett might have understood had he paid attention to the earliest of these recent educational reform movements—“The Paideia Proposal,” an educational manifesto issued in 1982 by a panel of American educators and teachers that I chaired and that included Jacques Barzun,Sizer, Ernest L. Boyer (president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and author of “High School,” published in 1983 by Harper & Row) and Ravitch.

The Paideia group has focused on the three methods of teaching and learning in ascending order of importance—the acquisition of knowledge (not information, which is the memory of facts without any understanding of them), the formation by coaching of the intellectual skills, which are possessed as habits, and increased

understanding through Socratic questioning in seminar discussions.

There are now more than 50 U.S. primary, middle and secondary schools in various stages of implementing the Paideia program-in California, they include the Santa Monica and Culver City school districts, Hanson Lane Elementary School in Ramona and the Moraga schools in Contra Costa County.

In these schools, we have conducted seminars for students, with teachers observing the method—"Jack and the Beanstalk" for first-graders; "Aesop's Fables" and "Charlotte's Web" for third-graders; Frost's "The Road Not Taken" for fifth-graders; Shakespeare's "Hamlet" for sixth-graders; the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address for eighth-graders, and for high school students, Plato's "The Apology," Aristotle's "Politics," Rousseau's "Social Contract," Sophocles' "Antigone," Machiavelli's "Prince," Martin Luther King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," along with the "Encheiridion" of Epictetus.

The institution of the three methods of teaching and learning at all grades from kindergarten through 12 and the training of teachers to employ effectively are indispensable ingredients to any sound school reform. None of this appears in Bennett's Proposal.

The inadequacies and defeats of the secretary's proposal should be obvious to anyone who has given much thought to what is wrong with our public schools. Concerned only with subject-matters to be covered and with standardized tests to measure the coverage, Bennett's plan does not concern the methods of teaching and the different kinds of learning that must be instituted to give all the children in our public schools—*all*, not some, not just college-bound—the general, liberal and humanistic learning, the cultural literacy and the preparation for thoughtful citizenship that all our children deserve, and without which our democracy will not prosper.

Concerned only with high schools, it fails to recognize that high schools cannot succeed in doing what they should be doing if coaching the basic skills and the understanding of basic ideas and issues, through critical thinking about them by means of Socratically conducted discussion, do not play a major role in our schools from the early grades on.


The manifest elitism of Bennett's program, aimed at the survival of the fittest who go on to college, is ill-concealed. Some children, he says, may take six years to get passing grades in his proposed high

school. What he does not say is that, measured by his standardized tests, many children will not graduate from high school at all.

At the beginning of this century, John Dewey formulated perfectly the creed of a democratic society's commitment to a democratic school system. He said that what the best and wisest parents want for their own children, the community should want for all its children, all of whom are destined for the same futures—earning a living, acting intelligently as enfranchised citizens and leading the richest human life of which each is capable.

More recently, Diane Ravitch has described in detail what the Paideia reform group thinks the best and wisest parents would wish for their own children.

They would want, she wrote, “their child to read and write fluently; to speak articulately; to listen carefully; to learn to participate in the give-and-take of group discussion; to learn self-discipline and to develop the capacity for deferred gratification; to read and appreciate good literature; to have a strong knowledge of history, both of our own nation and of others; to appreciate the values of a free, democratic society; to understand science, mathematics, technology and the natural world; to become engaged in the arts, both as a participant and as one capable of appreciating aesthetic excellence.”

Some people may mistakenly suppose that Bennett's plan for prescribing what should be studied in high school may look like a step in the right direction. But if it is not accompanied by other prescriptions of how these studies should be conducted by students and helped by teachers, and also by instituting other methods of teaching that are not now employed, it is a vacuous step that will get absolutely nowhere. 

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