

“REMEDIAL” IS THE RULE

BOB ZASLAVSKY

In diagnosing the ills of our education system, when one is vindicated by research—however little the research was needed to expose what should be manifest—one should feel gratified. However, one does not, because in education—as in politics generally—as little attention is paid to the statistical documenters of doom as is paid to the prophets of that doom.

The failure of our high schools to prepare their students for college (see my column of June 3) has been discussed in an issue paper prepared by the Washington, D. C.-based Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE) and funded by the MetLife Foundation. The paper was published in mid-September and was supplemented by a panel discussion of education pundits. The title of the paper, and the panel discussion, was *High School Teaching for the Twenty-first Century: Preparing Students for College*.

As the title indicates, the thrust of the report is two-pronged: it documents the deficiencies of our high schools in preparing their students adequately for college, and it correlates them to the deficiencies of our teachers taken as a whole:

Studies show that college remediation rates are high and college completion rates are low, signaling that a fundamental disconnect exists between the way that high school teachers prepare their students for the future and what students truly need to know to meet the demands of college...the nation has so far failed to address the biggest factor in improving student success—the type of teaching that occurs inside the classroom. Plans and actions designed to reform high schools must include efforts to improve teaching.

The report has a clear-sighted view of the fact that—according to the U.S. Dept. of Labor—almost 90 percent of jobs today require some form of post-high school education. It also recognizes that current research is showing that the ability and knowledge that are essential for college success are analogous to the ability and knowledge that are essential for meaningful adult employment in today’s workplace.

Unfortunately, our educators have not assimilated these realities. Consequently, there is a “fundamental disconnect” between what our high schools offer and what colleges (and the workplace) expect. As Bob Wise, AEE president and ex-governor of West Virginia, said, “Too many of our students are proudly graduating from high school only to find themselves unprepared to succeed in college or the workplace.”

Statistics vary somewhat on our high school graduation rates because the reporting of these figures by schools is so slippery. However, the range is between 50 and 70 percent.

Only about half those who graduate high school go on to college. Only about a third of those are truly ready for college. Of the two-thirds whose preparation is shaky, half are required to take remedial courses in college.

Two-thirds of college professors feel that high school standards do not prepare students for college-level study. It is no surprise, then, that only 18 percent of those who enter college graduate in four years, with another 20 to 25 percent managing to finish in six years. The rest fall by the wayside.

Such statistics paint a stark picture of the wasteland that our schools represent. Typically, state tests for high school graduation require no more than current ninth- or tenth-grade level knowledge. That is far less than would have been required when I was in high schools in the 1950s.

The report does not flinch from giving the prescription for what our schools need to do:

To prepare students for postsecondary education, educators and policymakers must perform two tasks at the same time: restructure high schools so they are aligned to the expectations of colleges and revamp instruction so that college readiness is the goal, measure, and substance of good teaching. The research is clear: the key to preparing students for college is rigorous high school course work.

Of course, this is easier said than done. It will take a combination of informed knowledge, tenacity, and courage that neither our current legislators nor our current educators possess.

Furthermore, the implications of the task are enormous. The reform of high schools requires a prior reform of middle schools. That requires a prior reform of elementary schools, which requires the empowerment of universal pre-K classes that are genuine portals to education rather than glorified playgroups. The whole process would take a baker’s dozen of years that would be painful and demanding.

The formula for reform is dazzlingly simple: establish more rigorous academic qualifications for teachers coupled with more rigorous requirements for students. The only question is whether we have the will to implement the formula.

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