

BEYOND CREPES AND VICTIMS

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The Georgia Department of Education has posted the draft of a plan (Rule 160-4-2-.48) to toughen the requirements—effective July 1, 2008—for high school graduation. The purpose of the plan is to prepare all students equally for college or the workplace in recognition that the workplace—today more than ever before—needs individuals who are prepared for college-level work, even if they have no immediate, post-high school intent to attend college.

The plan is meant to apply to all students, except those with “significant cognitive disabilities.” The plan is simple, a shade more demanding than the current plan but less rigorous than what would have been called the academic curriculum when I was in high school.

In basic terms, the new requirements are four years each of English/language arts, mathematics, and science; three years of social studies; seven years of electives; and 1 year of health/physical education. Included in the category of electives is “modern language/Latin,” of which two years of the same language “are required for any students planning to enter a University System of Georgia Institution or other post-secondary institution” but are not required for other students.

In truth, in the new requirements, there are only three quite modest changes:

(1) an elimination of the previous diploma categories (college preparatory and technology/career, with or without distinction);

(2) an increase in the mathematics requirement from three years to four; and

(3) the specification for admission to the University System of Georgia of a two-year foreign language requirement.

In essence, the new plan is nothing more than the educational equivalent of reshuffling the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. The new requirements perpetuate the flaws of the old ones. Even the increases in requirements are shadow increases only. As is the case throughout our educational system, here too the new requirements are nothing more than the emperor’s new persiflage passed off as stylish educational raiment.

Before I examine the flaws in the requirements—that are not atypical in comparison to other states—I would be remiss if I did not emphasize the one potentially positive change, namely the elimination of the previous diploma categories. Such a change opens up the hope that at last a high school diploma will be a singular reward for meaningful academic achievement at a genuinely college preparatory level. To put it brutally, for a high school diploma to be meaningful, it must represent the same academic accomplishment for all students.

Every exception to the requirements for graduation is a dilution of quality. Our system has degenerated in part because exceptions have become the rule and individual accommodations rule the roost.

To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, a high school diploma should be a high school diploma should be a high school diploma.

Unfortunately, the hope for such high-quality uniformity is belied by the requirements themselves. To my mind, their flaws should be apparent.

First, the use of the alternate term “language arts” in tandem with “English” is revealing. The term “language arts” has gained in currency as the belief has grown that the study of language and literature is a “soft” study, not susceptible even to quasi-scientific rigor. Consequently, what should be the bedrock of education at all levels has become a bed of quicksand: What should be the anchor of the ship of education has become its Sargasso Sea. In addition, only two courses in the four-course English sequence have mandated subjects, the ninth-grade general course and a course on American literature. Furthermore, in neither of these designated courses is there a mandated core of authors and literary works. Unless we have the traditional sequence of genres (9th)/world literature (10th)/British literature (11th)/American literature (12th) or an equally comprehensive sequence parallel to the proper study of world history—with clearly specified lists of essential authors and readings—we are not equipping our students with the cultural treasury that they need and deserve.

Second, the lack of specific titles (such as algebra, geometry, trigonometry, pre-calculus) in the mathematics requirements—and the exception for “students with significant disabilities”—invites a continuation of the mathematically porous status quo.

Third, in the natural sciences, although the sequence of biology/chemistry/physics is there, so too are the alternate courses “physical sciences,” “earth systems,” and “environmental science,” courses that have been recognized by good science teachers as empty of scientific substance (which implies no judgment about any actual scientific discipline that may share the name of one of these alternate courses).

Thus, in both mathematics and natural science, students still have the option of taking fluff courses lacking solid content.

Fourth, the social studies (or social sciences) requirement is superficially acceptable, although our aversion to calling this strand “history” represents a shrinking from comprehensiveness and rigor. In addition, the requirement should be a full four years that includes ancient, medieval, modern world, American, and Georgia state history courses.

Fifth, the foreign language recommendation—it is not, strictly speaking, a requirement—is both inadequate and demeaning. Anything less than three years (a two-year basic course followed by one year of literature study) is less than what a student needs to achieve genuine mastery of another language. The goal of studying another language—just as with English—is the understanding of another culture, and no understanding of a culture can develop without a feel for the culture’s literature.

In Spanish, students should advance to the work of Lope de Vega, Cervantes, Pablo Neruda, and Carlos Fuentes, not stop with knowing how to cook a quesadilla. In French, they should advance to Rabelais, Moliere, Racine, and Camus, not stop with knowing how to prepare crepes. In Latin, Italian, German, or Japanese, they should advance to Vergil, Dante, Goethe, or *The Tale of Genji*, not stop with knowing how to ask where the bathroom is.

In addition, non-native speakers of any language should not be exempt from the requirements on the basis of an alleged conversational fluency in their native language. Instead, they should be required to take an appropriate third-year literature course, and only if they successfully complete an examination that demonstrates a mastery of their native language equal to what would be provided here in a good, basic two-year course.

Furthermore, to consider American Sign Language (ASL) a foreign language is bizarre. ASL is English—period. If we consider ASL a foreign language, we are opening the gate to accepting as foreign languages pig Latin, Pidgin English, CB chatter, computerese, Braille, and semaphore signaling.

Sixth, the enormous latitude in the choice of electives (allowing for up to 14 one-semester courses) must be addressed. Since our students are impoverished when it comes to the fundamentals of a good education, it would be worthwhile to peel off one year of electives to increase the social studies (history) requirement to four years and another year to introduce a geography requirement. That still would leave five years of electives.

In addition, the very term “elective” has become muddled. In its origin, an elective was a non-required, freely chosen supplemental course. Precisely because an elective was assumed to be chosen out of independent, personal motivation to learn, in my youth, electives were expected to be—and were—more demanding and more rigorous than required courses that, by their nature, were filled with “captive audiences.”

Sadly, over the past half century, the term “elective” often has become code for a non-demanding indulgence in a hobby-like pastime, a time- and space-filler not to be taken seriously. When I was in high school (and college), electives were our honors and AP courses rolled into one (and were far more challenging than their contemporary equivalents).

The later frivolous usage of the term “elective” must be eradicated and the original serious usage restored.

Finally, unless the category of “significant cognitive disability” is restrictive and rare, to allow this as an exception will simply fill the bank accounts of psychologists willing to name a syndrome (with appropriate acronym) at the drop of a hat. Such exceptions run rampant would become an impediment to strengthening our system.

Let me conclude by adding that no reform on paper will succeed in actuality if we do not hold our students’ feet to the fire of the requirements.

Our teachers may have weaknesses, but they can be forgiven some of these weaknesses when one considers the extent to which, in our system, in any disagreement between teacher and student, all too frequently, the teacher is “guilty until proven innocent,” while the student is innocent even if proven guilty.

Too many students today treat teachers with contempt, and the system supports them in that treatment.

As hard as it is for many persons today to believe, there was a time when students respected their most knowledgeable teachers—charismatic or not—and at least gave deference to the rest.

We have evolved a system in which everyone—in one way or another—has been victimized.

In such a system, students too often—and all unknowingly—have chosen as their behavioral exemplars Stepin Fetchit or the Frito Bandito or Charlie Chan’s Number Two son instead of W.E. B. Dubois or Jorge Luis Borges or Confucius.

In such a system, teachers—ill-equipped as they may be—have chosen to refrain from doing something meaningful out of a fear that they will be blamed for doing anything that students will find uncomfortable.

The new requirements are too little, too late, and unless the entire culture of teaching and studenting is renovated, even that little is doomed to failure.