

## STUDENTS NEED CLEAR REQUIREMENTS

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The Atlanta Public School System is in crisis. The crisis is both of its own making and shared with the nation's educational system as a whole.

If one doubts this, one has only to ask teachers whether student attitudes toward learning have improved. They will assert that they have not, that social promotion is rampant, and that high school graduates are woefully unprepared even for today's more permissive colleges.

Or alternately, one need only compare the percentage of proficient students in Georgia according to the state's Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) to the percentage of proficient students according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In 8<sup>th</sup> grade English, for example, the state test rates 83 percent as proficient, while the NAEP rates only 25 percent as proficient. The situation in high school would be worse. Those who see such results and blame the test are like those who blame the messenger when they do not like the message. And here the message is that our schools are failing.

The community must energize itself if its schools are going to be rescued. The community must demand more from its educational system, from its children, and from itself.

How is a change to be effected? How are we to take a public education system that is in shambles and restore it to excellence?

Before I try to answer that question, a little historical perspective may be helpful.

In 1893, the first major codification of the principles of American education was presented in "The Report of The Committee of Ten" sponsored by the National Education Association.

It concerned nine key subjects in the American secondary education curriculum: Latin; Greek; English; other modern languages; mathematics; physics, astronomy and chemistry; natural history (what we call life sciences); history, civil government and political economy; and geography.

Some of America's brightest educators served on committees focusing on each discipline, including future President Wilson.

The committee stated unanimously "that every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil."

In other words, all students must be offered the same rigorous curriculum. The unspoken—but pre-eminently democratic—assumption of the committee was that all students are capable of achieving at reasonably high levels academically.

In 1918, the National Education Association appointed another commission to formulate the "Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education." The new document responded to three changes: in society, in the character of the student body (a threefold increase in the secondary school population between 1889 and 1915), and in educational theory.

The shift in emphasis from the earlier document is striking. Under the influence of the burgeoning disciplines of educational and developmental psychology, the emphasis was on differing abilities among students, practical application of knowledge, and developmental responsiveness.

Therefore, the commission now focused on "the main objectives of education: 1. Health. 2. Command of fundamental processes (i.e., the so-called three R's reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic). 3. Worthy home membership. 4. Vocation. 5. Citizenship. 6. Worthy use of leisure. 7. Ethical character."

This led to a de-emphasis on content in our schools and an emphasis on what I call "the three S's": skills, socialization, and self-esteem. The ideal of high-quality education for all was replaced by the ideal of adjusted quality for each—a decidedly anti-democratic and prejudicial ideal.

This shift marks the beginning of the decline of American education, although that decline was barely perceptible until the late '60s, after which the decline became so precipitous that it was hard to ignore.

Average verbal SAT scores declined by about 50 points between 1960 and 2000.

The "re-centering," or artificially inflating upward, of scores by the College Board in 1996 has made this trend less visible in the past decade. A current score of 800 on the verbal SAT is equivalent to a pre-1996 score of only about 730.

On international comparisons, American students are consistently outperformed by students in other nations, and the rank of American students declines as they proceed through school. Such trends have been well documented by experts such as Diane Ravitch and E. D. Hirsch.

How can we reverse this deterioration in our schools?

Let us recall the words of Sherlock Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*: "I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose." Our current system is designed to leave the attic empty but to make us feel good about living in that emptiness.

The Georgia Department of Education standards are a perfect example: They contain little that is essential and, especially in language arts, virtually no delineation of knowledge. In addition, they boast of this defect as if it were a virtue: "Performance standards go into much greater depth than *the content standards used in the previous curriculum . . . which simply told the teacher what a student was expected to know.*" (*emphasis mine*) This is so obtusely erroneous that one's jaw drops in astonishment.

In the Georgia standards for American literature, for example, there are no lists of essential American authors and works that all students should read. One barely knows that they are standards for American literature. Instead—and this is typical of the standards in general—there are lists of skills formulated in the virtually unintelligible educational jargon of empty formalism.

In fairness, one should add that the Georgia standards are not unique. Indeed, one could consult the education standards of any state chosen at random, and those standards would be virtually identical to those adopted by Georgia. This empty formalism of standards is endemic to mainstream educational thinking throughout the United States, and its appropriateness is inculcated vigorously by colleges of education. That is why we must reformulate standards so that they describe the furniture for our students' attics (i. e., so that they articulate clearly the content knowledge that students are expected to master).

After all, education reform is the ultimate test of any political leader in today's world, and it is a test that virtually all our political leaders have failed.

In Atlanta, the reelection of Mayor Franklin offers a glimmer of hope. In her first term, she has exercised fiscal responsibility and has demonstrated a combination of intelligence, tenacity, presence, and vision that seems to suggest that she could be up to the task of education reform with all the pain that such reform entails.

And it will be painful. It cannot be done overnight. To change the culture of learning in a school system requires a dozen years, a complete educational cycle. Teachers must be found who are more competent. Students may have to take longer to finish their education. Parents will have to support the effort.

Yes, it will be painful. To give birth to a competent education system is worth the pain.