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Curriculum Reform in American Public High Schools and Its Impact on Minority Students

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Introduction

It seems like the high school curriculum reform effort in the United States has come full circle. While its development has taken place over time, statistical differentials in academic performance among racial/ethnic groups makes one question, the adequacy of the modern day high school curriculum in addressing the needs of all segments of society. After all, progress in the evolution of the high school curriculum has been slow and no matter what changes were made to it, there always seemed the need for further development. The early stages of educational reform can be traced back to the early nineteenth century that saw the division of the course of study into different subjects at different grade levels (Kliebard, 1987, p.2). The mid-twentieth century marked the National Curriculum Reform Movement which introduced academic rigor to the school curriculum (p.3).

Historically, racial politics has played its own role in curriculum reform. Certain events during the aforementioned period resulted in what Pinar (2003) described as “intensifying the racialization of education in the American popular imagination.” These included the difficulty involved in erasing ‘anti-Negro’ sentiment from school textbooks (p.73). McCarthy (1990) contended that race alone was not the stand-alone cause for inequality in the classroom. His non-synchronous approach included other variables such as class and gender that were ‘interwoven’ with race to create a complex dynamic that is reflected in the way the educational system works. He called for an ‘egalitarian’ curriculum that compromises the needs, interests, and desires of majority Whites in order to accentuate those of minority students (p.4,5). The search for such a curriculum has been the endeavor of many an educational reformist.

In establishing a framework for this study, the related works of a number of prominent researchers in the field were considered. A definition of curriculum was first established through the works of John Franklin Bobbitt and John Dewey. Bobbitt (1918) believed that the purpose of education is to prepare students for life and therefore, curriculum should be based on life experiences. He stressed the importance of teaching ‘undirected experiences,’ that is, those that are not learned in everyday life (p.41-43). Dewey (1897) had earlier expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote:

I believe that the subject matter of the school curriculum should mark
a gradual differentiation out of the primitive unconscious unit of social
life (p.10).

The framework for this study was an adaptation of these definitions to the Tyler rationale which is based on Ralph W. Tyler’s Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction (1949):

- I. What is the purpose or objective of this reform?
- II. What principles or guidelines should curriculum reform be based on?

III. How can these reform experiences be organized?

IV. How is progress towards achieving this objective measured (p.1,6)?

The impetus behind these principles is Tyler's view that education is a means of changing the behavioral patterns of students: the way they think, feel and act. It is the duty of the teacher to immerse himself/herself in curriculum development and reform, to understand these means and achieve the end, to quote Tyler (1949):

Unless the objectives (of the instructional program) are clearly understood by each teacher, unless he is familiar with the kinds of learning experiences that can be used to attain these objectives, and unless he is able to guide the activities of students so that they will get these experiences, the educational program will not be an effective instrument for promoting the aims of the school (p.126).

Using this construct, the paper proceeds to discuss curriculum reform in the modern day American high school. It begins by outlining the purpose or need for curriculum reform in the current system.

I. What is the objective of curriculum reform?

There is certainly need to reform the curriculum in American public high schools. Policymakers suggest that problems with the current high school system include low expectations, poorly qualified teachers, badly designed curricula, oversized classes, undisciplined students, lack of effective leadership, or a combination of these (Rothstein, 2007). These lead to high drop-out rates, high achievement gaps and lack of student readiness for higher studies especially among racial/ethnic minority students. A 2006 report by the Harvard Civil Right Project stated that "of all the students who enter the ninth grade in the United States, about 32 percent don't graduate on time with regular diplomas after 12th grade...for some minorities the dropout rate is far worse (Paulson, 2006)."

Moreover, research has indicated that minority high school students have a higher dropout rate and consequently, lower college enrollment rate than White students. This is evident from a study conducted by the Hispanic Heritage Foundation (2007). According to its report, the high school drop-out percentage for 16-24 year olds for Latinos is 3.5 times that of White students. Subsequently, the college enrollment gap for 18-24 year olds between White and Latino students is more than 15 percentage points. These rates for Black students are lower than those for White students as well.

When it comes to the achievement gap, the difference between racial/ethnic minority and White students is again glaring. A report released by the Pew Hispanic Center and the Education Policy Institute (2004) found that 142 of every 1,000 eighth grade students of Hispanic origin earn a bachelor's degree within 8 years of scheduled high school graduation compared to 318 White students. The report further stated that minority students were more likely, than their White counterparts to have taken lower level curriculum courses.

The need for curriculum reform is evident from the above and studies that show that more rigorous curricula result in high educational achievement among students. In this vein, there is momentum for curriculum reform in high schools and the two major efforts currently underway are: 1) to have mandatory college preparatory work for all students; and 2) to raise the standard or level of difficulty of this college preparatory curriculum (Allensworth, 2006).

II. What principles or guidelines should curriculum reform be based on?

Before we discuss what curriculum would best serve as medicine to cure the ills of the American high school system, it is important to identify success factors that educational reformers should take into consideration before engaging in curriculum reform efforts. A study conducted in June 1999 for the United States Department of Education found that:

- the best indicator of a person's likelihood of succeeding in college is the standard of his/her high school curriculum. This is a stronger indicator than test scores and class rank/academic grade point average (GPA). This is especially the case for Black and Latino students, and the impact of this on these minority students is far greater than for White students;
- among all subjects, the standard of mathematics in high school curricula has the strongest impact on bachelor's degree completion. The report stated that completing a course of a higher level than Algebra 2 such as trigonometry or pre-calculus is a strong indicator that a student who enters postsecondary education will complete a bachelor's degree;
- Academic Resources (the composite of high school curriculum, test scores, and class rank) plays more of a role in bachelor's degree completion than students' socioeconomic status. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who fall in the upper Academic Resources bracket earn bachelor's degrees at a higher rate than a majority of students of high socioeconomic status; and
- students who take advanced placement courses also earn bachelor's degrees at a higher rate than those who do not (USDOE, 1999).

Another nation-wide study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics based on 1995 data compared the performance of high school students based on the level of curriculum pursued, that is, standard curriculum, mid-level curriculum or rigorous curriculum. The results revealed the following:

- In 2005, more high school graduates from the four racial/ethnic groups, White, Black, Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander, completed at least a midlevel curriculum than in 1990. The GPAs of all four racial/ethnic groups were also higher.
- When it came to the percentage of high school graduates completing at least a midlevel curriculum, there were White-Black and White-Latino gaps in 1990. While the Blacks closed the gap from this time to 2005, the White-Latino gap hadn't changed much during this same time period.
- A racial/ethnic disparity existed in 2005 in high school students completing calculus or advanced science courses with Black and Latino graduates lagging behind their White counterparts who also had higher GPAs (USDOE, 1995).

A significant finding was the thin spread of guidance counselors, the national average being 1 for every 407 students (Berdick, 2005). All this calls for the need to act and any reform effort should take place keeping in mind these issues.

It helps to move the clock back in time in drawing up a framework for curriculum reform. Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) and Shirley Grundy have written about the concept of 'emancipatory curriculum.' Stenhouse (1975) laid the foundation to this discussion when he wrote that allowing students to think

freely by setting them free from 'intellectual, moral, or spiritual fetters' is the way to enhance their learning experience. Grundy (1987) wrote about what this 'emancipatory curriculum' brings about when considered in a practical sense:

At the level of practice, the emancipatory curriculum will involve the participants in the educational encounter, both teacher and pupil, in action which attempts to change the structures within which learning occurs and which constrain freedom in often unrecognized ways. An emancipatory curriculum entails a reciprocal relationship between self-reflection and action (p.19).

In today's society, a curriculum with a diverse range of electives could be interpreted as an emancipatory curriculum. It removes the shackles that restrict students to traditional courses such as history and math, and offers them instruction in areas such as life management skills and foreign languages. The section that follows describes how different jurisdictions have begun organizing their curricula to increase the possibility of students' success later in life.

III. How can curriculum reform be effectively organized?

Organization of curriculum is a convoluted process, going by the writings of Catherine Cornbleth. Besides subject matter, it includes the role of teacher and student, and how they interact that determines the effectiveness of the curriculum. Cornbleth (1996) reckons that curriculum reform is unique to each educational system because each has its own social organization. In other words, curriculum is contextualized:

Understanding a curriculum and how it might be changed requires understanding the culture of the education system, which may involve several subcultures associated with occupational groups (e.g. teachers, administrators), subsystems (e.g. elementary education, teacher education), or regions (e.g. urban, rural). As several studies have documented, change efforts that do not consider the underlying patterns of social belief and conduct...may only rearrange the technological surface (p.158).

States have begun to respond to the social organization within their respective jurisdictions and take seriously the difference in academic performance between White and racial/ethnic minority students. They have set rolling the wheels of change to their respective educational systems through a number of initiatives designed to increase the academic performance of their students and prepare them for college and the workforce. One of these is creating a default curriculum which is discussed next.

College and career-prep graduation requirements have been adopted by nineteen states throughout the country and the District of Columbia (Achieve, 2008). Two of the earliest states to do this were Texas and Indiana. The Texas legislature passed a law in 2001 requiring all students, not just strong performers, to pursue a college-prep curriculum which is now the default curriculum. These are two options as part of this: the Recommended High School Program and the Distinguished Achievement Program. The requirements under the former include "four years of English, three years of science, two years of a foreign language, and, in what might pose the greatest challenge, three years of mathematics, including Algebra 2 (Cavanagh, 2005)." The Distinguished Achievement Program requires of the student "three years of foreign language and requiring students to choose from a number of additional options, such as conducting a research project or achieving a specified score on college-prep or college-entrance exams (Cavanagh, 2005)." Students can also pursue an easier 'minimum' academic plan but only if requested by the students' parents. The requirements of this

exclude Algebra 2 and a foreign language but include two years of science. Students pursuing any of these tracks receive a traditional high school diploma upon completion of a state assessment (Cavanagh, 2005).

Like Texas, Indiana has upped the standard in order to help lay “the academic foundation all students need to succeed in college, apprenticeship programs, military training, and the workforce” through “a balanced sequence of academically rigorous high school courses in the core subjects of English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies; physical education/health and wellness; and electives including world languages, career/technical, and fine arts...(Learn More Indiana, 2007)” While the Core 40 became the graduation requirement for all students starting in the fall of 2007, students can opt-out of it through a formal process requiring parental consent. (Learn More Indiana, 2007). Indiana is also upgrading its graduation qualifying examinations and Core 40 end-of-course assessments to reflect the requirements of post-secondary institutions and the workplace. States such as South Carolina and Tennessee are considering similar curriculum initiatives (Achieve, 2008).

IV. How is progress towards achieving these objectives measured?

Progress of students can be measured with the help of data tracking systems. A number of states are in the process of establishing P-20 longitudinal data systems. Those already having such a system in place (or something similar) include Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. These systems have ‘unique student identifiers’ in place that are able to track the progress of students from pre-kindergarten through the postsecondary level. The purpose of these systems is to gauge the current academic level of students against the required level for college or the workforce.

The establishment of such a tracking system has to go through a series of steps which puts pressure on the school system’s time and monetary resources. First, it is necessary to establish technological capacity to run such a system. There then needs to be the appropriate regulatory and legislative framework in place including how to address privacy concerns. Next, a suitable authoritative body has to be delegated the responsibility of data collection and matching, and a funding source be determined to sustain the technological and human resources costs of matching. Once this is in place, performance measures such as the percentage of students completing the default curriculum are established to determine the success of the system (Achieve, 2008).

The impact on states that do not properly prepare their students for the future can be heavy. A number of studies have measured the potential loss to states as a result of lack competitiveness of its high school graduates. A discussion on this ensues.

Discussion and Conclusion

When an educational system is plagued by high dropout rates, low graduation rates and high achievement gaps, it indicates that there is need for reform. Economists, Clive R. Belfield and Henry M. Levin (2007), empirically assessed the social consequences of an “inadequate education” at the national level:

Even the completion of one more year of schooling by age 20 yields to the government the present-

value equivalent of \$50,000. In addition to paying less in taxes, high school dropouts are costlier to society because of their dependence on publicly subsidized health care...each additional high school graduate would save the government the present-value equivalent of \$39,000 over his or her lifetime from age 20....Increasing the high school completion rate by just 1 percent for all men ages 20-60 could save the United States more than \$1 billion a year in the costs of criminal justice...(p.14).

States that do not participate in curriculum advancement also face the resulting consequences. An example of this is Florida which does not offer its high school students a default college/career-prep curriculum. Reports (Education Week, Manhattan Institute For Policy Research) indicate that Florida has one of the lowest high school graduation rates in the country. One report (Alliance For Excellent Education) figures this rate to be 66-69%. High school graduation rates in Florida are especially low among racial/ethnic minority students with 47% of African-American students and 59% of Hispanic students graduating from Florida high schools in 2006 in comparison with 66% of White students.

The numbers show the impact of this inadequate education on Florida's economy. In 2006, the cost to the state was more than \$24.7 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over the lifetimes of these dropouts. If these students had graduated, Florida could have potentially saved \$1.4 billion in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured care over the course of their lifetimes. Besides these, it has been determined that raising Florida's high school and college graduation rates among minority students to the levels of white students by 2020 would add more than \$14.6 billion to the state economy through the potential increase in personal income. Increasing the graduation rate and college matriculation would possibly lead to a reduction in crime. If the high school, graduation and college matriculation of male students is increased by 5%, crime-related costs could lead to combined savings and revenue of almost \$507 million annually (Alliance For Excellent Education, 2007).

The lack of a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for college could possibly be one of the factors responsible for Florida being below the national average for 25-64 year old adults with a college degree. This presents a barrier in Florida developing the necessary talent to cope with workforce demands of the 21st century (Villamil, 2008). A more challenging college and career preparatory curriculum should be supported by state funding for education and parental involvement in their children's education. Both variables are shown to enhance student success and achievement in high school.

This study concludes with a message to state governments: i) implement a rigorous, default curriculum that will include courses that prepare high school students for college and the workforce. Progress of students should be measured using data tracking systems and the use of performance indicators such as the percentage of students that enter college without needing remediation; ii) invest in teacher skill upgrading and other technological and human resources needed to successfully implement (i); iii) provide incentives for students to complete the new curriculum through scholarships for college or automatic placement in state universities; and iv) provide a stimulus for parental involvement.

These actions must be taken to address what statistics reveal are disproportionate graduation rates and achievement levels among racial/ethnic groups, and high drop-out rates among them. In this study, the author uses Tyler's rationale to explain the necessity for curriculum reform to address such gaps in America's educational system, how states have begun addressing these gaps and the potential social consequences to country and state as a result of inaction in the matter. It is imperative that all states follow the lead of those that have already set the wheels in motion to restore the American public high

school. We owe it to our children to advance their future by adopting a curriculum that addresses the shortcomings of the present school system in preparing them for postsecondary education and the workforce.

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