

Texas Confronting High School Faults

By Bill Hobby

Once again, Texas Education Commissioner Skip Meno and the State Board of Education deserve a round of applause.

A few weeks ago, the Board adopted a much more rigorous set of high school course guidelines designed to better prepare students for college or jobs.

Mandates are out of fashion these days, so the State Board is only encouraging students to take the tougher courses. The curriculum is not a requirement but a guideline. It would increase credits from 21 to 24, include four years of English instead of three, algebra and geometry instead of some undefined mathematics courses, and a foreign language.

Still, it provides a template for parents who want their children to succeed and for students who aspire to something higher than unemployment compensation.

The guidelines were the result of a stunning discovery by education leaders. Texas children did poorly on national college entrance exams because many of them didn't have the preparation other states provided in their public schools.

Texas and Arizona rank dead last in the number of student who opt for college preparatory course. Only 25 percent of Texas students took 20 or more college preparatory courses last year, compared to 42 percent nationally.

One of the reasons for that is that our minimum graduation requirements are pretty wimpy--two years of unspecified science, no foreign languages, three years of social studies. Many Texas students could fulfill the 21 minimum requirements in three years without breaking a sweat.

They don't because the Texas school day is still designed to let kids out early to pick cotton, and to suit the schedules of school buses, teachers and coaches.

Texas students have fewer hours to learn than students get in many states--six periods instead of seven or eight. And large portions of the school day are typically captured by extracurricular activities like band and athletics.

Despite the progress made since 1985 in emphasizing academics over athletics, many Texas school administrators have not yet grasped the concept that extracurricular activities should be extra. They should be after school activities reserved to those with passing grades.

Not surprising then that Commissioner Meno's plan to beef up the high school curriculum has its critics, many of whom make their living teaching non-substantive courses.

We're told its too rigid and would deprive kids of meaningful electives like band, photography and journalism. We're told that students would lose their exposure to fine arts.

And understandably, students object because they would rather take soft electives like photography than geometry. Who wouldn't?

Fortunately, the business community took a strong stand for the new curriculum. Businesses have been struggling for years to find high school graduates with the skills necessary to fill basic craft jobs. There just aren't anymore good salaries and lifetime careers for those with strong backs and no skills.

Business has been strong behind Texas' continuing process of upgrading the public schools, from the 1985 school reform package to the State Board of Education's more recent actions to stiffen basic skills tests and eliminate Mickey Mouse courses.

There has been progress. Dropout rates are down. SAT scores are up.

But there's a long way to go. We hope school boards will embrace the graduation guidelines and encourage their students to take the tougher courses.

But while we have school boards like the one in the Round Rock Independent School District that is apparently more worried about whether the superintendent is a born-again Christian, maybe we shouldn't be too optimistic.

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