

Efficient and Effective Schools

By Bill Hobby

A few weeks ago, with surprising lack of dissent, the State Board of Education took a bold step: They voted to raise educational achievement by scrapping some of the watered-down courses now in our high school curriculum.

What? Aren't these "gut" courses supposed to guarantee higher grades?

The facts are quite different, and the board's action, proposed by State Education Commissioner Lionel "Skip" Meno, should help move Texas into the academic mainstream.

The sad truth is that years of "tracking", of remedial courses, of ability grouping and free choice for students has only resulted in large numbers of students woefully ill-prepared for the demands of a competitive world economy.

Most recent evidence of this comes from a study of 26 Houston high schools conducted by Orby Holden, former mathematics teacher at Alvin High School and former director of the Texas Association of School Boards, who recently received his Ph.D. in Education at the University of Texas at Austin.

During the 1989-'90 school year, Holden tried to determine the factors that made a school successful in student achievement, course hours earned and student retention.

He concentrated on curriculum, which he notes has usually taken a back seat to such educational crises as school finance and school restructuring. He analyzed 280 factors, including courses offered, courses taken and credit hours earned.

His conclusion was simple. The schools with more students enrolled in academic core subjects (the "tough" courses) outperformed those schools where more children were enrolled in vocational courses, physical education and special education.

Holden does not subscribe to the idea that the students in what he calls the "ineffective and inefficient" high schools were either dumber or more intellectually impaired and culturally disadvantaged than those in the "effective and efficient" high schools.

(Just for the record, the Houston Independent School District high school population is 40 percent African-American, 40 percent Hispanic, 17 percent white, 3 percent other and about 30 percent poor.) He believes that some students were shortchanged by expectations that were too low and course offerings that were not challenging.

Of course, minority parents for years have protested curriculum tracking that early on derailed their children from any hopes of a college education. As Holden points out in his dissertation, "More than any country in the world, the United States has believed that natural ability and biosocial characteristics, rather than effort, explain human achievement."

"The tragedy," he continues, "has been that we communicate to millions of students every year, especially to low income and minority students, that we do not believe they have what it takes to learn."

Holden blames an education system that has progressed little from the model of the early 1900's when the task for public schools was to "select, sort and standardize" students based on their ability to fit into the urban factory system.

That model assumed that only a few fortunate students were capable of pursuing intellectually demanding work while everyone else must take courses "explicitly designed for those less able, less willing or less interested."

It resulted in the addition of "practical" courses in addition to academic courses, in vocational courses and a cafeteria approach that assumed that schools should provide choices that satisfied everyone. Such a system, Holden argues, is no longer suitable when the demand is not for unskilled production line workers but for a highly-skilled, highly adaptable and high performance labor force. Another study undertaken by the Fort Worth Independent School District shows the direct relationship between academic schooling and the labor market. FISD analyzed occupations involving 300 Fort Worth employers.

The employers identified seven generic skills--reading, mathematics, writing, speaking and listening, problem solving, originality and creativity--as essential components of their jobs. Levels of proficiency for each skill were established. The Bureau of Labor Statistics did an analysis to determine if higher skill levels would lead to economic benefits for the worker and the community. The results were clear--skills pay. The highest skill level for a high school graduate would earn 33 percent more or more than \$125 in earnings a week. Over a working lifetime, that would amount to a quarter of million dollars.

So, right on, Commissioner Meno! It's time that "consumer mathematics", "correlated language arts" (whatever that is) and "pre-algebra" were history.

When 50 percent of graduating seniors have never taken a real course in high school mathematics, something is wrong, as you pointed out.

The research tells us that emphasis on teaching skills, good preparation and high expectations produces students equipped for a competitive world.

"Lite" curricula, watered-down courses and lower standards do not.

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