



Failing the Wrong Grades

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Everybody who is anybody seems to have decided that the American high school is responsible for the failings of American students. The Bush administration, many governors and even Bill Gates have now called for radical reforms. Reflecting this growing consensus that the high school is, in Mr. Gates's words, an "obsolete" institution, the governors of 13 states have pledged an overhaul of the high school system, and more are expected to jump on the bandwagon of reform. Let's slow down here. American education is famous for inspiring crusades, and the history of the 20th century is littered with the remains of failed reform movements. This 21st century campaign will fall flat, too, unless the proponents are clear-headed about the nature of the problem and willing to rethink their proposed solutions. It is true that American student performance is appalling. Only a minority of students - whether in 4th, 8th or 12th grade - reach proficiency as measured by the Education Department's National Assessment of Educational Progress. On a scale that has three levels - basic, proficient and advanced - most students score at the basic level or even below basic in every subject. American students also perform poorly when compared with their peers in other developed countries on tests of mathematics and science, and many other nations now have a higher proportion of their students completing high school. While the problems of low achievement and poor high-school graduation rates are clear, however, their solutions are not. The reformist governors, for example, want to require all students to take a college-preparatory curriculum and to meet more rigorous standards for graduation. These steps will very likely increase the dropout rate, not reduce it. To understand why, you have to consider what the high schools are dealing with. When American students arrive as freshmen, nearly 70 percent are reading below grade level. Equally large numbers are ill prepared in mathematics, science and history. It is hardly fair to blame high schools for the poor skills of their entering students. If students start high school without the basic skills needed to read, write and solve mathematics problems, then the governors should focus on strengthening the standards of their states' junior high schools. And that first year of high school is often the most important one - many students who eventually drop out do so after becoming discouraged when they can't earn the credits to advance beyond ninth grade. Ninth grade is often referred to by educators as a "parking lot." This is because social promotion - the endemic practice of moving students up to the next grade whether they have earned it or not - comes to a crashing halt in high school. It makes no sense to blame the high schools for their ill-prepared incoming students. To really get at the problem, we have to make changes across our educational system. The most important is to stress the importance of academic achievement. Sorry to say, we have a long history of reforms by pedagogues to de-emphasize academic achievement and to make school more "relevant," "fun" and like "real life." These efforts have produced whole-language instruction, where phonics, grammar and spelling are abandoned in favor of "creativity," and fuzzy math, where students are supposed to "construct" their own solutions to math problems instead of finding the right answers. Besides, in many ways our high schools are better than our primary system. They are the part of our educational system where students are most likely to have teachers who have a degree in the subject they are teaching. In the lower grades, most teachers are likely to have majored in education, not in mathematics or science or history; some even have both a major and a minor in pedagogy, yet end up teaching core academic subjects. This does not mean, of course, that our high schools are ideal. To some extent, the present-day comprehensive high school, in which most American students are enrolled, tries and fails to be all things to all students. It does not adequately challenge high-performing students, who get low scores when compared with their peers in other nations. It does a poor job preparing average students, nearly half of whom need remedial courses when they enter college. And it loses low-performing students, who are likely to drop out while still lacking the skills they need for gainful employment. A report released last month by the National Association of Scholars, an independent group of educators, outlined proposals that make more sense than those endorsed by the governors. Written by Sandra Stotsky, a former associate commissioner of education for Massachusetts, it proposes that students entering ninth grade be given a choice between a subject-centered curriculum or a technical, career-oriented course of study. The former would look like a traditional college-preparatory curriculum,



with an emphasis on humanities, sciences or arts. The latter would include a number of technologically rigorous programs and apprenticeships. All students, regardless of their concentration, would be required to complete a core curriculum of four years of English and at least three years of mathematics, science and history. Students graduating from either program would be well educated and prepared for higher education. THE report also recommends that teachers of core subjects have a solid background - at least an undergraduate major - in the main subject they teach, that teachers of technical subjects have either solid academic training or work experience in their fields, and that American schools have a longer school day and school year. In addition, contrary to the philosophy of Mr. Gates's foundation, which has spent millions to create hundreds of small high schools with no more than 500 students, the report recommends that schools should have a minimum of 500 students. Larger schools provide better staff depth and stability - imagine how disruptive it is to a tiny high school if just a couple of teachers leave over the summer - and have a broader range of music, art, drama, debate and sports offerings. And research by Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania has shown that small high schools are more likely than large ones to have out-of-field teachers - that is, teachers who have neither a major nor a minor in their subject. Our officials should be lauded for their concern about high school graduation rates. But the governors should scrutinize with great care the popular reforms of the day before imposing them on their states' schools. Just because Bill Gates is ready to pour millions of dollars into a big new idea doesn't make it a good one.

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