

A RESPONSE TO
"THE QUALITY CRISIS: COOPERATION OR CHAOS?"

by

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It is hard to select from the excellent points Dick has made those that would benefit most from further discussion. It seems to me that each point that he has made is both insightful and wise. I have, however, selected three issues for comment.

Dick is right on target to call our attention to the possibility that if we are not more thoughtful about what we mean by quality in education, we could be headed for a return to "simplistic elitism." Many of the recent reports concerned about quality in education attribute the erosion of quality to the permissiveness of the 1960s and '70s and reason that the solution is to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction toward more control, more requirements, ^{tougher standards} ~~more regulation~~.

This prescription calls for simple correction of perceived excesses of the past. Not enough homework? -- assign more. Not enough testing? -- require more. Not enough time spent on

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learning? -- lengthen the school day or school year. These are ~~simplistic~~, unidimensional corrections that I shall label the swinging pendulum ^{solution} ~~syndrome~~. A pendulum is in constant motion, but it never goes anywhere. It simply swings from one extreme to the other. Indeed, the momentum gained from a swing to the left provides the energy for the swing to the right. If we are not more thoughtful about the goal of quality and how to attain it we will spend the 1980s correcting for the permissiveness of the 1960s and 1970s, and we will spend the 1990s correcting for the overregulation of the 1980s. Nor does the solution seem to lie in more modest corrections which would simply slow down the pendulum, eventually stopping all movement.

I suggest that the metaphor of a spiral staircase is a more complex but more useful way of thinking about quality in education. We may circle back to look at old solutions from new perspectives, but our motion is constantly upward to a higher plane of action. Our task in the 1980s is to attain quality for a wider spectrum of the population than was served in the 1950s. ~~The solution is not to be found in a return to the standards of the 1950s, and Dick's warning about "simplistic elitism" is well taken.~~ We must find today's excellence on a new plane of action that preserves the gains of equal opportunity, while improving education for this new population of students.

The second issue that I wish to comment on is Dick's

assertion that the schools are receiving confused signals from our society about what they should be doing. Indeed, they are, but I am not concerned here with the common and continuing debate over whether schools should be developing the mind or the person. That question, it seems to me, should remain in tension. To solve it once and for all is neither necessary nor desirable. The quality issue that I think is getting confused signals is whether we want to improve the image of institutions of education or whether we want to improve society through education.

the quickest and most certain route to creating serious
Actually, ~~performance on a number of measures that are~~
learning environments in schools and colleges is to get rid of problem learners
~~interpreted as quality these days can be improved rather quickly,~~
~~especially in higher education, by simply eliminating problem~~
learners. Test scores would go up, graduation rates would rise,
teacher
~~faculty~~ morale would improve -- all without bothering about
troublesome reforms in curriculum and instruction. Unfortunately
many of the recent reports and some recent legislative actions
promote various ways of eliminating problem learners -- by
raising college admission standards, by abolishing remedial
education, and in general by refusing to deal with students who
pose serious pedagogical challenges to education.
~~create a bad image for the school or college.~~ The problem with
this approach to improving education is that these problem
a high school diploma and without
learners are then released into society without ^{the} skills to get
a job or even to function in the coming information age.
Improving society through education is a far more difficult goal
than improving schools, but it is, I suggest, the real goal.

~~We must expect more complex interpretations of school improvement~~
~~It is common today for citizens to contend that we expect~~
~~than higher average test scores. Just as we must raise our~~
~~too much of our schools. Frequently those complaints come from~~
~~expectations of students, we must raise our expectations for schools~~
~~the same people who insist that we should expect more of our~~
~~students. I believe that it is quite appropriate to raise our~~
~~levels of expectations for schools.~~ Specifically, we should
expect schools to go beyond improving themselves to improving the
individual and collective lives of the people in this society.
That is a tall order, and the schools cannot accomplish it
without the help of a great many other actors in the learning
society. We have learned quite a bit over the past two decades
about working with problem learners in schools, high schools,
community colleges, and even universities. Now is not the time
to swing the pendulum away from problem learners; it is the time
to climb the stairs.

Finally, I simply want to endorse as strongly as I can,
Dick's caution that we must develop respect for diverse
educational objectives. The objectives of schools in different
parts of the country are legitimately different; the objectives
community colleges are certainly not those of the universities;
and the vocational curriculum at any level has different
objectives from those of the academic curriculum. There is no
single model of educational excellence; evaluation must be
individual, informed, and respectful of different goals and
different routes ^{to} and their attainment.

It would, of course, be far simpler to have one clear

definition of quality and to hold all educators and institutions to that standard, but diversity in education is one of our great strengths, and it is an essential ingredient of excellence in education. If we do it right, improving the quality of education in America will be complex, challenging, continuous, and cooperative.