

education



Dr. Mahan, kneeling explains teachers trainee placement to Dean Warren standing right

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PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION: MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF INTERNATIONAL COMPETENCY

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The increasing interdependence of nations and a demographically changing workforce present U.S. education with a formidable challenge: to provide internationally-aware skilled labor from a student population increasingly drawn from minorities. A three-pronged approach is suggested. Open enrollment will give minority students the chance they deserve to receive the best possible education. The International Baccalaureate will encourage world-class high-school curricula and complement existing diploma with a common standard of excellence. Finally, multicultural course work will sensitize students to the often dominant role of our behavior and policies on peoples' lives in other countries.

Introduction

The domestic labor market will demand more of the U.S. educational system in the foreseeable future than it ever has before. As the social and ethnic composition of the domestic population changes, our nation will face a general shortage of skilled labor. In addition, successive generations will find themselves employed in a more international work environment. Commensurate with these new realities, schools will be challenged to: a) provide more skilled labor from a student population composed largely of minorities; b) achieve an internationally competitive average skill level; and c) convey an understanding of the changing role of the U.S. in the world. Below are some of this author's thoughts on policies that should be encouraged to ensure that tomorrow's graduates are prepared to lead the United States into an ever more complex and international world.

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The Importance of Primary and Secondary Education

Most measures indicate that America's greatest challenges will be in primary and secondary schools rather than higher education. SAT scores have been falling since 1967¹. In tests by the Institute for Educational Evaluation (IEA), the United States has fallen behind its international position in science², and its mathematics performance ranks 13 out of 20 countries³. The competitive gap widens in secondary school. At 18 years old, students are less competitive than they were at 14 years old, and at 14 they are less competitive than they were at 10 years old. The United States has a severe problem in the lowest quartile of students, which in science, for example, scored the same on the test as if students had simply guessed at every answer.⁴

A Three-Pronged Approach

1. Open Enrollment

Due to the impending shortage of skilled labor, school systems must strive even harder to provide equal access to quality education.

During the next ten years, approximately 25 million people will enter the workforce in America. About 85% of these new entrants will come from what has traditionally been considered minority groups in the work place: women, blacks, hispanics, Asians, American Indians, and Pacific Islanders⁵. During their tenure as students, all of them should be encourage to attend the best public school available, regardless of its location or racial mix.

States such as Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Ohio are currently experimenting with "comprehensive open enrollment" options⁶. Wisconsin has passed an educational choice bill which is now taking effect.⁷ Other states are experimenting with tax deductions, "tuitioning," or vouchers to help increase access to the best schools, both public and private.⁸

2. International Baccalaureate

The International Baccalaureate (I.B.) is an advanced high school program which provides an excellent, if ambitious, benchmark for the "internationally competitive average skill level" I referred to in the Introduction. Its founders spent much time picking the most consistent and essential elements of curricula from around the world to include in its seven modules. The seven modules are: First language, Second language, Study of Man in Society, Experimental Sciences, Mathematics, an elective sixth subject (including art and music, for example), and Theory of Knowledge. There are currently 400 schools offering I.B. programs in the United States. Such a program is clearly a well-reasoned approach to providing a broad, internationally accepted, challenging program for high school students.

The I.B. is a curriculum, a diploma, and a qualification. When compared to the SAT, the ACT, or the Achievement tests, the I.B. has the advantage of providing a recognized diploma which represents a standard mini-

mum of high-school preparation. Recent moves to incorporate more essays into the SAT will make it a more valid test of potential success in college than it had been in the past. Still, only about 57% of high school graduates take either the SAT or the ACT⁹.

The I.B. is a solid supplementary qualification to any U.S. high school diploma. U.S. high schools would contribute to economic growth and labor mobility by offering the I.B. because of its worldwide recognition. By way of analogy, the development of common standards was critical to the growth of the U.S. computer industry. In the 1970s, most manufacturers of personal computers were using incompatible technologies. Users had to learn new software and operating systems every time they switched machines. They were less apt to learn new applications because of the implicit cost attached to switching. Now, software has been developed to run on multiple operating systems, bridges have been built between operating systems, and manufacturers have been striving to achieve common, standard operating systems. This convergence fueled tremendous industry growth in the 1980s.

3. Global Perspectives

Most Americans currently have relatively little awareness of the impact that America's dominant position in the world has had on foreign peoples. However, as the balance of political and economic power shifts in a more interdependent world, it will be vital for young people to understand how our actions affect foreigners and their perceptions of the United States.

The range of issues is broad. Many of our policies and actions now transcend national boundaries as never before. For example, what should our position be on Latin American debt, ozone depletion, air and water pollution, or terrorism? In addition, trade policy is more important on a global scale as we face the reality of interdependence for

basic supplies like food, oil and forest products. Students should understand why Latin America greeted President Bush's recent visit with a rash of bomb attacks and attempted coup d'etat; why United States citizens are so often targets for terrorists; why Nelson Mandela had so many speaking engagements in the U.S. after his release.

I think the problem should be approached from three directions. First, convey an understanding of how our domestic policies affect the world. For example, students must have a realistic conception of the magnitude of the budget deficit (about \$220 billion per year¹⁰) and the cost of the Savings & Loan bailout (\$500 billion¹¹). Only then can they understand how these problems are likely to impact foreigners: a farmer in Eastern Europe, a clothing exporter in the Far East, undernourished children in Africa, etc.

Second, teach more geography and U.S. foreign policy/history lessons (according to one source, one-fifth of American school-children cannot identify the United States on a world map¹²). Based on my experience, most educated foreigners know more about American foreign policy than do most educated Americans.

Third, expose children to other languages and cultures by teaching a foreign language, exchanging students with foreign schools, and exploring comparative value systems (including alternative economic systems). Europeans have recently initiated a cross-cultural language program to cope with the increasing importance of transnational communication implicit in the 1992 program. This may be an interesting example to follow.

Conclusion

There are several unique challenges facing

primary and secondary education today: to provide enough skilled labor for tomorrow's labor market requirements; to raise current educational standards to a level of international competitiveness; and to prepare students for life in an increasingly interdependent world. We should encourage programs now to prepare today's students for a more complex world. Among them are open enrollment, the International Baccalaureate, and curricula which encourage students to become strong American leaders through their knowledge and culturally sensitivity.

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11. Includes \$160 billion of current expense, plus \$340 billion in interest. Source is Associated Press, 9/10/90.
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