

FORCES THAT ARE HANDICAPPING SECONDARY EDUCATION TO-DAY

J. B. EDMONSON

Dean of the School of Education, University of Michigan.

A review of recent educational literature—particularly the year-books, special studies, and investigations, as well as the pronouncements of regional and national committees—furnishes convincing evidence that numerous recommendations have been made for significant changes in secondary education. The imposing list of committees in the recent bulletin entitled *National Deliberative Committees* furnishes additional proof that leaders have concerned themselves with desirable changes in secondary education. In spite of all of this activity, when we examine the present programs of secondary education as found in senior high schools it is obvious that most of the findings and recommendations in these reports have received scant consideration and as a result have failed to modify practice except in a few scattered school systems. Because of the striking differences between the pronouncements of educational groups and the actual practices in our schools, it is most appropriate to raise questions concerning the forces that actually prevent senior high schools from making the recommended adjustments.

The well-known fact that we have two opposing forces in the field of secondary education is a further reason for reviewing the forces that are handicapping our secondary schools. One of these forces is concerned with maintaining traditions. Certain of the obstacles to change are a result of the strength and activities of the traditional group and would, from the standpoint of the friends of the traditional point of view, be considered as aids to a good cause. The other force has been concerned with producing change through the addition to the curriculum of new subjects which seem to be socially worth while, and through the adoption of new methods of instruction which seem to be better suited to the heterogeneous groups found in our classrooms. It should be clearly recognized that our senior high schools are the center of the fight between the traditionalists and the advocates of new curriculum materials and new instructional procedures. It is my belief that school

administrators and supervisors of instruction are, in general, allied with the group that favors changing from the traditional. But the obstacles to change are strong as well as numerous.

By some persons the mention of these forces will be interpreted as an effort to present the various alibis that the senior high schools might offer for failure to make adjustments and changes to comply with the recommendations of experts. But whether these are considered as alibis or as genuine handicaps it is my opinion that there are many more obstacles in the path of the change in senior high schools than are faced by any other unit in our educational system. It is commonly known that there are few forces that would prevent the elementary school from making significant changes in the curriculum, in teaching procedures, or in general organization; for the elementary school enjoys a large measure of self-direction. The junior high school has always enjoyed large freedom. It has always been looked upon as an appropriate unit for educational experiments and a spirit of experimentation has dominated the junior high schools in most areas. There is plenty of evidence to indicate that liberal arts colleges can make significant changes without loss of prestige, even when this means fundamental changes in organization, curriculum, and teaching procedures. In fact, the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools has gone so far as to revise the standards for the accrediting of colleges in such a way as to allow generous freedom to colleges in the matter of any type of experimentation that a college may wish to undertake.

When attention is turned to the situation of the senior high school one finds that as a result of the operation of a variety of forces, the freedom granted to other units in our educational system is not enjoyed by the senior high school. In my opinion the senior high school enjoys less independence in the control of its program than any other unit. It has been appropriately described as the "dependent child of the educational family." When any change is proposed affecting the senior high school such questions as the following are always raised: How will the colleges react to the proposed change? Will the proposed change be acceptable to the various state, regional, and national standardizing agencies? Will the pro-

posed change violate any of the numerous state laws that govern the curriculum of the senior high school? Will the proposed change arouse the opposition of the conservative element in the community? These questions are seldom raised when changes are proposed in our elementary schools, our junior high schools, or our colleges. Why is this? The answer is found in the greater freedom from obstacles to change that these various units enjoy.

The most potent force handicapping secondary education is lack of freedom to plan in terms of the basic facts on which the program of secondary education should be built. This lack of freedom is created by a variety of pressures.

In the first place the secondary schools feel the pressure of state legislatures more than other units. According to our American theory of educational organization, each state through its legislature has the responsibility for establishing and maintaining the school system. The legislature of a state, therefore, has large authority to determine the details of the curriculum. A study of the statutes of the states reveals numerous requirements affecting the curriculum of the secondary schools and requiring courses in nature study, physiology, state history, physical education, civics, and numerous other studies. No one can question the legal right of the state to demand emphasis on instruction in any subject that the state legislature believes is desirable from the standpoint of public welfare. In my opinion, however, it is not good educational policy for the state to enact specific legislation regarding instruction in any school subjects. Such regulations should be framed by the state educational authorities and made in the light of full knowledge of the problems involved. The present legislation relating to instruction in specific school subjects tends to make it very difficult for senior high schools to make needed adjustments to changing social and economic conditions.

A second source of pressure that restricts the freedom of the senior high school is the part played by the state and federal subsidies in the making of the secondary-school curriculum. A certain amount of work in agricultural, home economics, and the industrial arts has been introduced into our senior high schools, partly because of new educational demands

and partly because of a desire to secure financial aid. In some instances the regulations governing such grants of money interfere with the freedom of the professional leadership and tend to commit the school to policies which do not allow experimentation that might lead to change. It would be very interesting to know how many schools would discontinue instruction in subjects that are now aided by state and federal funds if these funds were suddenly withdrawn.

In the third place, pressure on the senior high schools is exercised by the colleges through their entrance requirements. A review of these requirements shows evidence of the enactment of protective legislation for English, foreign languages, mathematics, physics, chemistry, ancient history, and a few other academic subjects. These subjects are the so-called "most favored" ones. The college entrance requirements tend to place in an advantageous position in the curriculum of the schools those subjects that are highly valued by college faculties. Students submitting units in any of these favored fields are given more considerate treatment than students submitting units in the newer fields of work. This can be illustrated by reference to the social studies. It would appear that the college faculties interested in the social studies had made little effort to secure protective legislation for their subjects, with the result that the social studies in the senior high school do not have a recognition comparable with that now extended to mathematics, the foreign languages, and some of the sciences. The opinions of secondary-school leaders indicate that the social studies would receive increased emphasis if, in framing the curriculum, the schools felt free to disregard college entrance requirements. A similar change would doubtless occur in other fields if the pressure of college entrance requirements were removed or greatly lessened.

A fourth source of pressure that has restricted freedom is the activity of certain private agencies and societies concerned with having a particular point of view impressed on high-school students. These agencies and societies have sometimes so greatly influenced state legislatures that the legislatures have actually passed laws relating to the curriculum. Much of the legislation relative to instruction in physical education, civics, state history, and other studies may be traced to the zeal of small groups of persons who have not trusted

the teachers to determine what should be taught and have resorted instead to mandatory legislation. These organizations have sometimes sought through pressure on local school authorities or state boards to gain dominance for their point of view.

A fifth source of pressure that has prevented change in secondary education is the excessive emphasis that the standardizing agencies have placed on quantitative requirements governing such matters as credits, the length of recitation periods, the requirements for graduation, and the content of specific units. In spite of the splendid contribution of the state and regional standardizing agencies, it must be conceded that these agencies have tended to exercise a restrictive influence on senior high schools. The recent creation of a national commission to propose new criteria for the accrediting of secondary schools is a courageous admission that former standards have not been altogether helpful and have tended to handicap the senior high schools.

In all probability there are other pressures that interfere with a desirable degree of freedom for the senior high school. In view of these pressures it is not surprising to find that the teachers have very slight influence in determining the curriculum of the senior high school; the curriculum has been largely determined by a considerable number of pressure groups such as the college entrance bloc, the state subsidized bloc, the legislative bloc, the special interests bloc, and the standardization bloc. In the elementary school the principals and the teachers have a considerable voice in determining what should be taught in the interests of the children. In the junior high school the teachers and the administrators have come to have a major influence. In college the faculties are free to revise and to change the curriculum in terms of changing opinions relative to the educational needs of students. The grim determination with which college faculties will fight for freedom in instructional matters is in striking contrast to the action of these same college faculties in denying secondary-school teachers a comparable degree of freedom in the matters of instruction on the secondary-school level. If freedom is so necessary for the protection of the interests of college students, it would seem desirable that secondary-school teachers enjoy comparable discretion in dealing with their pupils. As

a matter of fact, the senior high-school teachers and administrators are reduced to the impossible condition of having been deprived of much of their freedom to plan in terms of the educational interests of pupils.

The foregoing pressures or forces that tend to restrict freedom in our senior high schools are aided by certain other obstacles to change, according to the testimony of a selected group of secondary-school leaders in the North Central territory. The testimony of this group points to eleven obstacles of serious import. These I will mention without comment in this paper because my study in which these are presented has been published in the *North Central Association Quarterly*.¹

The obstacles are as follows:

1. The fact that many secondary-school teachers are the product of colleges that do not give major attention to the training of teachers.
2. The lack of an expert jury that will blow away the chaff and reveal the grain of truth for the classroom teacher.
3. The fragmentary character of research studies dealing with learning and the lack of basic, integrated studies of the school subjects.
4. The high-school teachers' lack of training in experimentation.
5. The quantitative rather than qualitative character of the standards for high-school accrediting.
6. The lack of funds for modifications of the school program.
7. The statement of college entrance requirements in terms of certain patterns of units rather than in general measures of ability.
8. The teachers' lack of ability to apply the results of research except as it is organized by authors in the form of textbook material.
9. The failure of teacher-training institutions to introduce the results of research into the required professional courses.
10. The lack of understanding by teachers of the American philosophy of secondary education.
11. The smallness of the audience to which the results of research are made available.

¹*North Central Association Quarterly*, VII (June, 1932), 16-22.

One might be justified in concluding from a hasty examination of the foregoing obstacles that it is a hopeless task to attempt any significant changes in our secondary schools. There is some evidence to support the opinion that our senior high schools are faced with so many insurmountable obstacles to change that some new type of unit will have to be developed to replace the present senior high school if adjustment to new demands becomes imperative.

Unless certain of these obstacles can be removed, I can see very little hope that our senior high schools will prove equal to the task of providing a type of training suitable to the needs of the unselected group of adolescents who are certain to want some type of instruction above the level of the junior high school. I believe secondary-school principals should fight against the unwarranted interference of various blocs with the freedom of high schools. Unless freedom in reorganization can be secured for the senior high school I can see very little chance that the school will be able to make needed adjustments to changing educational demands. At present it is impossible for a senior high school to modify its program of work without taking account of the question of state and federal subsidies, the college entrance requirements, the legislative enactments, and the demands of strong private interests in society. One result of this situation is that we now have a program of work in our senior high school which is totally inadequate for a large fraction of our high-school population. A principal of a large school in one of our Michigan cities has assured me that 60 percent of the pupils could not with any hope of success pursue the curriculum as it is now organized, placing, as it does, major emphasis on college preparatory courses in English, mathematics, sciences, languages, ancient history, and similar older studies. It may be that the present insistence on curtailment in the school program, together with the present demand for the admission of larger numbers of pupils to our senior high schools, may force hindering groups to abandon some of the traditional points of view and practices and thus open the way for a new period in which more rapid adjustment will be made to new conditions.

For fear that this paper may have too heavy a tinge of pessimism I wish to cite trends which indicate that conditions are improving. In college entrance requirements there is a

trend toward greater flexibility and less rigidity in the matter of patterns of work. The growing realization on the part of the public that the secondary-school program must be modified in the light of new demands is also an encouraging development. The recent action of the five regional standardizing agencies in setting up a national committee to revise the requirements for accrediting secondary schools is likewise a very hopeful sign. Much should also be made of the increased determination of secondary-school leaders to develop better agreement as to the aims and objectives of secondary education. If these various encouraging trends and movements can be given adequate support, I am convinced that the more serious obstacles to change in our secondary schools will largely disappear, and the senior high school will then enjoy a freedom of action comparable to that enjoyed by other units. Until this takes place, however, the senior high school is in much the same situation as the youngest child in a large family who has a plentiful supply of older brothers and sisters, two grandmothers, and a half-dozen uncles and aunts, all of whom are greatly concerned to insure that the child is properly protected against facing its own problems and making its own decisions.

It is my opinion that the Department of Secondary-School Principals would render great service to public education if it gave its support to proposals designed to free the senior high school from the excessive outside control that has developed in recent years and thus paved the way for reorganization and reconstruction in terms of the findings and recommendations to be found in the numerous reports in the field of secondary education. How to do this should be a challenging assignment to a committee of the Department.

The chairman announced that L. W. Brooks, H. V. Kepner, Louis E. Plummer, and Joseph Roemer were elected as members of the Council of the National Honor Society.