

## **EDUCATION: Looking at the issues**

**By Alpha B. Quincy**

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Education for what?" continues to be asked, and the answers continually change. What do we want students to know and be able to do? What kind of education is most effective and what learning environment works best?

Spilling over into the issues of education are those of campus violence, guns, weapon detection devices, parent involvement, media violence, and campus police. When these issues appear, we have lost student connections with education. We all want something to be done about those things, and now!

Because everyone has attended school, a tribute to America's universal education, by the way, everyone has an opinion to offer on almost any of the above "issues in education,"

This short discussion will center on the very structure of schools since many of the problem issues stem from the traditional school structure itself, particularly the high school.

Elementary schools have benefited from reducing class sizes, at least in grades one through three. It is a start in the right direction of restructuring the elementary schools. We also need smaller classes in the other grade levels and smaller schools located closer to home. All students need a place to call their own, and time enough spent there to feel that they belong and that someone cares. They should not be thrown into a large mélange of students far from home, too many to ever get to know, and too many for a teacher to get to know, either.

**Our high schools today are structured for madness.  
They have become the Procrustean bed of education.**

Twenty-first century students are no longer being educated for work on the assembly line, but will work in think tanks, collaborative groups, and world-wide communication systems.

The traditional structure didn't work for everyone in the last century either, but everyone didn't need to stay in school. Some could and did drop out to find other successful non-academic work. Today that is not possible. Such work is almost nonexistent. Even successful garages, farms, and McDonald's are highly technical. Very few students a century ago went on to independent university work. About two per cent of the population (only a few of the elite white males), was educated to think and explore issues. Most families opted for the education that was available, first elementary and later in the century, high school, a remarkable accomplishment from little or no available education past rudimentary reading and writing in the century before. Today all students must be given the tools with which to think and learn and be encouraged to explore from the very beginning.

Traditional schools are established with grade levels, a ladder expected to be climbed by each student, from grade one at age six to grade twelve by age eighteen. Exceptions have rarely been made, usually by retaining a student in a grade or by promotion over a grade, a belated recognition of the difficulties of keeping all students learning at the same level at the same age. Students are different. They are born different.

They grow and learn differently. Any educational structure needs to recognize differences to be successful at teaching and learning, and at encouraging and challenging all students.

The current issue of "no social promotion" is an attempt to nail students onto the rigid ladder of the grade structure, whether successful or not. Recent legislation reacting to popular misunderstanding has clamped the screws down tighter by requiring specific standards, benchmarks, standardized tests, an exit exam at each level, often with the high stakes of money or lack of promotion or graduation attached. The issue of "high-stakes testing" is an attempt to sort students into tighter yearly levels.

What is really amazing is that so many of our students in so many schools do achieve heights unimagined a generation ago (Sandia Laboratory Report on the state of education in the U.S. commissioned by George H. W. Bush, and Gerald W. Bracey's annual surveys on education in the U.S. in the Phi Delta Kappan magazine).

Some, however, fall between the steps in the grade ladder and drop out, physically or emotionally, to design their own world. This self-designed world is often patterned after a virtual world of gangs, drugs, sex, and the violence that bombards them daily from the various media. School structure must fit the students, not the other way around. Students need to feel they belong and teachers care for them to open their minds to learning.

Instruction needs to be relevant and challenging and safe. We find that students who do manage to find success in the rigid structures of the traditional school are those

students who have joined a smaller group of students within the school and stay with them over a period of time long enough for them to get to know each other. Such groups are often a sports team, drama club, band, or newspaper staff, for example.

Very seldom are small academic groups formed that stay together with a teacher over several years. Teachers who see thirty or more students for each of five to six periods a day, totaling 150 to 180 student contacts, find it difficult to get to know, let alone care about, each student. And in each of those periods, each student contacts different students as well, making it difficult to relate to anyone else over time. This structure does not permit an environment for learning.

It is this impossible situation that is driving the growth of charter schools, private schools, the clamor for vouchers to provide public money for private schools, and home schooling. Successful public schools must be smaller, with smaller class sizes, built in the communities where the students live. It can be done and still give students options for diversity in their studies.

Picture a high school of no more than 500 students, divided into five groups of one hundred. Each of the groups of one hundred is assigned five teachers to stay with the same students for from three to all four years. Teachers in such a group would also have time to build pride in their craft, since they would not be sending students off to other teachers for other English, math, history, or science. When a student learned the subject, the teacher would know the responsibility for that teaching. With only twenty students at a time and the same students over the several years, and with time to develop in depth the subject matter at hand, teaching would be a joy. Teacher accountability would be a natural development.

Teachers who come to know their students and their problems would be better at counseling each student than the traditional structure that provides a high school counselor for students who are a part of an anonymous student body of thousands. With only five groups, more or less, of these one hundred students sharing the same campus, more students can be involved in intramural sports and higher level or special interest classes.

Too costly? Pie in the sky? I think not, when you consider the numbers of students that are not being challenged today and the many pockets of highly restricted money doled out to try to remediate students who have fallen between the cracks of the rigid traditional structure and are labeled in what are supposed to be well-defined categories. These categorically restricted funds make up a major portion of each school district's allocation of state and federal money. Sorting students into categories would be unnecessary in the smaller, more personal schools and classes, freeing up categorical funds.

Some schools have begun to recognize this problem and have made progress in loosening the rigid traditional structure. California schools such as Deer Valley High

School in Antioch have established what they call "schools within a school" that they are finding successful. San Ramon Valley High School has found a way to fund smaller academies of interdisciplinary studies within their school. The academies give teachers a better opportunity to work closely with students over time. Pleasanton has a more limited approach called Pathways, or career clubs. Some school districts have formed "small necessary high schools."

Most of the progress has been brought about by teachers who recognize the need to work more closely with students. To move forward nationally, of course, the focus first must be on teachers, teacher education, and higher salaries to attract the best and the brightest.