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ABSTRACT

Issues concerning performance expectations in American education are summarized in a staff report of a panel of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Discussion topics included: who is responsible for stating expectations for student learning; whether expectations for the American educational system differ significantly from those of other advanced industrial democracies; and the impact of clarifying expectations on student performance and the behavior of schools/colleges. The panelists included employers from the public and private sectors; college faculty and members of learned societies representing the disciplines of biology, history, and foreign languages; state agency officials responsible for the oversight of requirements for diplomas; and representatives of national independent educational organizations. Findings/themes included the following: expectations are a combination of objectives and standards; employers' expectations for postsecondary graduates entering white collar jobs reflect a desire for generalists, not specialists; there is considerable repetition in American education; and there is a national curriculum, with local and regional variations, that is reinforced by expectations implicit in the College Board Achievement Tests. (SW)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20208

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SUMMARY REPORT

Panel on Performance Expectations in American Education
April 30, 1982
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Description of Activity

In the lexicon of the Commission's activities, a panel is a public seminar, not a hearing at which testimony is taken. A panel involves the discussion of related issues around a broad educational theme. The discussion takes place in two dimensions: between expert practitioners and/or scholars and members of the Commission, and among the practitioners and scholars themselves, with the members of the Commission as a listening and learning audience. It is an intense, day-long interchange, with opportunities for questions and comments for the public audience as well.

The Commission's first panel, "Performance Expectations in American Education," was conducted at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia on April 30, 1982. The panel was designed to address one of the major elements of the time/content/expectations paradigm which the Commission has been using to date as a tentative guide to the exploration of American education.

In a variety of ways, the discussion focused on five questions:

- Who states expectations for student learning and how do they do so?
- Are these statements of expectations compatible with one another?
- Do the statements of expectations for the American educational system differ signnificantly from those of other advanced industrial democracies?
- What are some of the ways in which organizations and groups have attempted to clarify expectations for learning for the benefit of students, parents, teachers, administrators, legislators, and employers?
- Does the clarification of expectations have any real impact on student performance or on the behavior of schools and colleges?

The panelists were chosen so as to bring four perspectives to bear on those questions:

- That of employers from both public and private sectors. We chose large employers who ran their own education and training programs

and who had considerable experience in assessing the abilities and skills of incoming employees of all types: the Xerox Corporation (technologically-oriented industry), the CIGNA Corporation (financial services), and the U.S. Department of State (international public service). Technology, financial services, and international orientation, after all, are the three major forces that, taken together distinguish the American economy in the 1980's from that of recent decades.

- That of the Academic disciplines, as represented by college faculty and members of learned societies. Their expectations are commonly and most widely expressed through de facto national examinations such as the College Board Achievement Tests for high school seniors, examinations, it was assumed, that represent a consensus of what students should know or be able to do at the key juncture between secondary and postsecondary education.

  In advance of the panel discussion, we asked representatives of three academic disciplines representing three different types of knowledge--Biology, History, and Foreign Languages--to write a paper that compared college entrance examinations in their disciplines in four countries (the U.S., Great Britain, France, and West Germany) and that worked the International Baccalaureate Examination into the comparison. The paper was the basis of their discussion with the Comissioners.

- That of state agencies with legal responsibility for the oversight of requirements for diplomas of various kinds. While recognizing that curriculum and standard-setting are local responsibilities in American education, state agencies can and do assume leadership roles in assisting schools and colleges in defining specific expectations for student learning.

  The Ohio Articulation Commission, a joint effort of the Ohio Board of Regents and the Ohio Department of Education, was asked to present its experience in establishing curricular expectations for college-bound students. Prior to the panel discussion, the Commissioners received the final report of the Ohio group.

- That of national independent educational organizations which often provide a broad consensus concerning performance expectations, as well as the leadership upon which states and local institutions may draw. Project EQuality of the College Board set out to reach consensus on the desired outcomes of secondary education, and to express those outcomes in such a detailed manner that student achievement could be validated. We asked a representative of the College Board to present that experience; and prior to the panel discussion, the Commissioners received the definition of "Basic Academic Competencies" as developed by Project EQuality.

Prompted by questions from the audience, as well as by questions and observations of Commissioners and Commission staff, the discussion also

considered: (1) the lessons of collaborations between colleges and corporations such as the joint liberal arts program for clerical employees involving the University of Pennsylvania and CIGNA; (2) the translation of educational expectations into curriculum; (3) faculty and teaching staff development to bolster articulation efforts; (4) the place and use of technology in realizing educational expectations; and (5) the function of internships for both teachers and students.

Findings/Themes of the Panel Discussions

1. "Expectations" as a governing concept for the analysis of American education is a combination of objectives and standards.

   Educational objectives are stated in forms that range from pious platitudes to highly detailed descriptions of discrete abilities. The degree of generality in the statement of these objectives varies in direct proportion to the distance from the classroom of the person who is stating the objectives. The more general the statement of objectives, the more difficult it is to translate them into curriculum.

   Educational standards, as expectations, are expressed in two ways in our system:

   - o As a function of time x content, i.e. so many units or credits of a subject; and
   - o As the level of achievement in a subject.

   While the first of these is the most frequent form of expressing standards in American education, it is also a form which is increasingly at odds with the desires of educators, employers, and parents. The very formulation, time x content, may stand in the way of achieving excellence.

2. Employers' expectations for those entering the white collar workforce from postsecondary education reflect a desire for generalists, not specialists.

   Corporations and public agencies expect to offer the opportunity for edcuation and training, if not to demand it. In other words, they do not expect to schools and colleges to do everything. But directly (through recruitment literature and personnel policies) and indirectly (through the forms and content of their own education and training programs) employers have expressed two types of expectations that the education system should address:

   Knowledges/abilities, specifically:

   - o knowledge of change, i.e. how to look for and undertake an analysis of change;
   - o understanding of the nature of evidence and what constitutes adequate evidence in the several broad areas of knowledge;
   - o holistic and creative thinking abilities; imagination;
   - o differential perspective, i.e. the ability to set existing

knowledge and analysis in broad or new contexts.

Traits/attitudes, specifically:

- o comfort with change; adaptability;
- o tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty;
- o the ability to learn, communicate, and work in groups;
- o persistence in coming to closure on an idea or issue;
- o enthusiasm for work.

The first type of expectation, it was agreed, can be directly addressed in curricula--and starting at an early point in one's educational career. The second type, however, is more a result of "hidden curricula," reflecting values and desired behaviors that may be projected by educational institutions.

These expectations also apply to those who do not go on to college or to those who receive technical training in two year colleges or the military and subsequently enter industry. In large corporations there is a quiet revolution in management going on, a thinning out of the middle layers, which means that responsibility for problem solving gets pushed to lower levels of the organization, thus requiring the average technical worker to develop what we now think of as managerial skills and attitudes. Employers are very effective at screening out even college students "who don't know whether the calculator they are using is functioning properly" or graduate students "who think that Latin America is one country."

3. There is considerable repetition in American education, evidenced not only in remedial courses on the college level but also in the courses offered by employers that repeat material that should have been covered earlier. Problems with communications skills, for example, extend across all components of the entering workforce, with clerical, sales and managerial components being the most notable in deficiencies. But even in more "advanced" content areas, employers find the need to provide "re-education," e.g., in mathematics and computer-related courses (including elementary probability and matrix algebra), in foreign languages, and in economics.

There are two perspectives on repetition in American education:

- o Unnecessary repetition, i.e. that which occurs when someone's previous preparation is deficient. This is very costly and undercuts productivity. It is part of what the Japanese call "scrap," a concept that includes the wast of time, effort, or space.

- o Necessary repetition, i.e. that which offers the second and third chance in American education. From this perspective, too, repetition addresses both the process of forgetting as a result of not using knowledge and the need for exposure to new knowledge throughout one's life.

4. We in fact have a national curriculum (with local and regional

variations) that is reinforced by expectations implicit in the College Board Achievement Tests (even though only 20% of our high school graduates take them). While we recognize that performance does rise to meet stated expectations within the educational system, we seem to have no desire to enforce or control this curriculum or to invoke the achievement tests as a national institution. When states seek to control curricula, they are driven to do so primarily by budgetary considerations, but they seem to be relatively timid beyond the basic skills requirements.

5. There seem to be three barriers to innovations in statements of educational expectations:

   - o a wait-and-see posture, the classic resistance to change;
   - o a lack of communication between sectors of education (though efforts such as those in Ohio and those of the College Board are seeking to rectify the situation);
   - o cost implications, including the necessary development of new tests.

   In addition, the anticipated enrollment decline at all levels of education has a negative effect on the motivations of educators to accept the implications of new and more precise statements of expectations.

6. The question of who defines excellence determines what is defined. If, for example, examinations state expectations for learning, then those who write the examinations control the definition. College professors write CEEB achievement tests for students whom they expect to continue studying the subject matter. Employers design intake examinations and interviews to include not merely subject matter knowledge but also interpersonal skills; and excellence thus takes on a slightly different cast in the workplace.

7. It is possible to define excellence in education in terms of productivity, following Demming's law of output as the total of "usable activities." That means the elimination of "scrap," i.e. unusable activities. But we cannot achieve excellence in education in these terms until we train managers and leaders in how to set standards, how to define "what's good," and then to define "what's better."

Issues for the Final Report

1. The anachronism of a time-based system of credits and credentials in American education. This is an extaordinarily complex issue that goes to the heart of the Commission's inquiry. If one substitutes attainment for time as a criterion for credentials (at least beyond the age of compulsory schooling), the effects on examination systems, school and college organization, the academic workforce, and the delivery of curricula are substantial. There is also a damaging tendency for educators to translate "attainment" into "minimum competency," and that is obviously not what the Commission means by "attainment."

However difficult and complex the issue, it is now apparent that the Commission must address it in the final report and provide some bold recommendations.

2. Repetition v. Redundancy in American education. In both its descriptive sections and its recommendations, the final report of the Commission should consider what types of repetition in education serve to advance learning in productive ways and what types are unnecessary, costly for the system, and ultimately redundant, i.e. undercut productivity. We recognize, for example, that American history is taught at a number of points in the schooling process, from elementary to undergraduate, each time at a different level of sophistication. That may be a productive repetition. But if corprations are looking for generalists and if they are offering elaborate education programs in sales, marketing, insurance and management to people who already possess undergraduate degrees in these fields, we may be dealing with another kind of repetition that is less productive. The Commission is looking at American education as a system, and thus the question of repetition in the system cannot be avoided. This systemic analysis also suggests very strongly that the discussion of the education of teen-aged youth cannot be conducted independently of their potential further education as adults.

   It may be that repetition occurs because we forget what we have learned, and that knowledge loss is a very natural phenomenon. Some people have sought to explain knowledge loss by lack of use. Others have said that the utility of knowledge is not the only reason for curriculum. The Commission may thus choose to address the issue of repetition in terms of both time and content, i.e. reexamine the traditional curriculum and why we teach certain subjects when we do.

3. While the Commission may not be ready to invoke any national system of examinations to define expectations, it may wish to consider the issue of raising the quality and demands of examinations currently in use through a more judicious balancing of essay and objective questions. The issue here is whether raising the quality of examinations can serve to raise performance expectations.

   Allied to this question is the potential use of experimental examinations that assess such knowledges and abilities as analysis of change, creativity, and differential perspective. If the Commission wishes to agree with those who expect such abilities in college graduates (if not high school graduates), it should have a sense of how we have attempted to measure these abilities.

4. Cooperation and communication between the sectors of education. The Philadelphia discussion pointed to the need of increased cooperation, not merely between secondary and postsecondary institutions, but also between educational institutions and employers of all kinds.

   This communication and cooperation, it appears, can address issues of articulation (thus eliminating redundancies between school/college and employer programs), the potential of internships, the more

effective use of secondary school counselors and, most importantly in this context, the reduction of dissonance in statements of expectations that arise from so many sources in American society.