

BASICS, BUDGETS, and the SOCIAL STUDIES

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At this point, some seventy-five years into the twentieth century, perhaps the two most prominent issues in American education revolve around fiscal crises and increasingly strident cries for a renewed emphasis upon fundamental learning. These themes, of course, are closely related. As difficult economic times have brought forth increased pressure on the taxpayer, there has been an understandable demand that educational institutions cut "frills" and adhere to the "three Rs."

One does not have to venture far to find evidence of these trends. A visit to virtually any local school board meeting will provide ample evidence that these forces have indeed come into their own. Add to this the increasing media attention given to the situation, and the effect is subject to further acceleration.

Such circumstances present both opportunity and grave danger. Certainly there is always a need for self-assessment, and educational institutions are now being forced to take a hard look at themselves. On the other hand, it is so easy to permit irrational forces to destroy much of what is good. Unfortunately, the issues are so complex that the simplistic explanation, definition, or a newspaper article often confuses the real questions involved.

The Social Studies is one curricular area which often finds itself in the center of such ferment. In a typical secondary school, the Social Studies department is large, (hence vulnerable to staff cuts) deals with a significant percentage of the student body, and works with subject matter that may be controversial and is certainly vital to anyone's education. Thus, in the interests of self-preservation if nothing else, Social Studies teachers should pay particular attention to the varied issues which confront them.

In the last fifteen or so years, Social Studies programs have undergone significant change. Not unlike events in Mathematics and Science, the post-Sputnik

reaction witnessed new attention being paid to curriculum development with some areas receiving substantial funding. The result of this has been the birth of new programs in virtually all of the Social Sciences. These vary in theme and general content, yet many have a common thread - an emphasis upon student-centered learning with the objective of making the study vital and interesting. Thus interest was kindled about the educational possibilities of such items as resource centers which would feature a multi-media approach. Rote learning as an end in itself was questioned, as was strict adherence to the lecture method as a teaching style. "Critical thinking" became a paramount objective, while memorization of "truth" began to be severely questioned.

These programs have met a mixed reception. Some of their themes have been widely adopted, while others never took hold. In the year 1975, however, all of them seem to be under stress. Somewhere in the confusion of the past decade came the impression that innovation in the Social Studies meant a departure from basic studies which have been deemed vital. Thus there are many voices which call for a return to fundamentals, but who in reality demand a rescission of much of the curriculum development of recent years. What has not been conveyed is that most Social Studies programs never left the basics and that to undo much of the current reforms would be to handicap a rising generation of students.

Let us then take a look at what is meant by a "basic." To read articles in popular journals is to invite confusion. Is it basic to sit students in rows where they can recite on command? Is that to be considered a positive change? Should rote memorization of facts be the key in the process? If so, what is a "fact?" How long should the student retain it? One wonders how much of those "good old" courses some individuals could remember if tested. It also should be emphasized that no worthy Social Studies program does away with facts. They are totally necessary as building blocks. But to stop there is to halt just when the important process is about to begin - that of conceptualizing and thinking.

Thus "basics" is a difficult word. Perhaps it means discipline. Is the

disciplined classroom the model? Perhaps, but some of the best learning situations can (under certain circumstances) appear chaotic. Therefore order for order's sake is a lackluster objective.

What about charges that skills are being neglected? Clearly any program new or old that does not include a positive emphasis upon the special skills of the discipline (as well as varied linguistic approaches) is worth little. The important point, however, is that most programs being taught today do include appropriate stress in this area. The method of instruction may differ, but the skills remain. The modern "basic" course, then, should include facts and skills, along with a great emphasis upon concepts and the thinking process.

A closely related charge is that a varied listing of course offerings is costly at a time when basics should be the key. This is a common myth which demands comment. First, the sophisticated secondary school should offer a Social Studies program which includes such items as: European and American history, government, cultural studies of different nations, and basic courses in such of the Social Sciences as economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. If there is enough depth in the teaching staff, a varied program gives a wide range of options to the student and permits him to operate within areas of his interest. It should also be emphasized that such a program is not expensive. If there are three hundred students in a given senior class, and there is a single course offering, one will still have to provide sufficient staffing to cover ten to twelve sections. If there are five or six options, it still requires the same number of sections and hence staff members - no more and no less. Thus to criticize a varied curriculum on budgetary grounds alone is to misunderstand some simple principles of mathematics.

Therefore, in this day of economic crisis, schools should take a hard look at themselves. They should not, however, back away from programs which they consider significant, nor should they sacrifice innovation to the cause of momentary panic. "Frills" may have to go, but the word "basic" should take on a modern, clear, meaning lest additional curricular reforms be relegated to the educational ash heap.