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## A National Curriculum

Events since World War II have led to a searching reexamination and reappraisal of our schools. The great debate has centered around the public schools and especially around the high schools, which have been roundly, even intemperately, condemned by some and staunchly defended by others.

Those who launch the criticisms—in this as in any other discussion—attract the most public attention. We need only mention the outspoken attacks by Albert Lynd in his *Quackery in the Public Schools*, Arthur Bestor in his *Restoration of Learning*, and Admiral H. G. Rickover in his numerous speeches and in his recent book, *Education and Freedom*. The archdemon responsible for our educational ills is, according to the critical refrain, John Dewey, who has a supporting cast of lesser demons, the professional educators.

But the indictment is too simply drawn. The role of the high schools has changed markedly in the last half century. At the turn of the century, the high schools were primarily college preparatory schools, which offered academic or "solid" subjects almost exclusively. Public pressure for more educational opportunity for all, as well as other factors, led to the introduction of compulsory attendance laws. The percentage of those of high-school age in school climbed rapidly, from 11 percent in 1900 to more than 80 percent today.

The ideal has been to educate everyone to the limit of his ability and to give those headed either for a profession or for a trade a common educational experience. This common educational experience has been widely held to be essential to the maintenance of our form of democracy. According to this view, it would be a mistake to segregate, as Rickover suggests, the academically talented in special "demonstration schools." The opposing contention is that the comprehensive high school meets the needs of both those who plan to go on to college and those who plan to terminate their education with high-school graduation. With proper counseling and ability grouping in a sufficiently large high school, the needs of both groups can be adequately met, or so goes the argument. This position is strongly supported by James B. Conant in his latest book, *The American High School Today* (reviewed on page 382). Conant thinks that the best of the comprehensive schools are satisfactory and that our educational salvation lies in creating more schools equal to the best by consolidating small high schools. Only a large school can afford to be both good and comprehensive.

The increased public interest in education is a hopeful development, but it entails a potential hazard in that popular pressures may force curricular changes too hastily. A group of educators and citizens, which recently met at Stanford University under the auspices of the Ford Foundation [*Science* 129, 316 (6 Feb. 1959)] concluded that the hazard would be reduced if a national curriculum were established. The group recommended that a nongovernmental and broadly representative commission be appointed to plan a curriculum. Such a national curriculum would establish standards by which local schools could judge their own performance. If it is granted that a commission should be appointed, the question remains who should the commissioners be? Which voices from the Tower of Babel should be amplified?—G.DuS,