

WRITING, REFORM AND OPTIMISM

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I want you to know I agreed to accept this invitation with some *trepidation* and *anxiety*. Admittedly, I come here as no expert compared to those of you assembled *but* I have had a unique window through which to observe the tidal wave of educational reform initiatives which have almost drowned us in a sea of rhetoric over the last couple of years.

Moreover, under the auspices of its EQuality project, the College Board is playing a significant role in helping to shape that reform agenda. We are encouraged that our message is being heard, heeded, and I'm pleased to have the opportunity to share some of that evidence with you this afternoon.

It is from this window that I'd like to provide a snapshot perspective of the national reform movement in education — including our EQuality effort as well as to share with you my observations of how writing figures into the current educational deliberations and into the number of recommendations which prescribe what we ought to be doing as we begin this academic year.

Ralph Waldo Emerson gave counsel on such times when he was writing what he called "A Declaration of American Intellectual Independence." In 1837, he wrote: "If there is any period one would desire to be born in — is it not the era when the old and new stand side by side and admit of being compared; when all the energies of man are searched by fear and hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the era? This time like all times can be a very good time if one but knows what to do with it." It is against this background that each of you must ask yourself daily, "What can I do to change and improve the quality of education?"

The answers abound as to what we ought to be doing. It

has been sixteen months since the National Committee for Excellence in Education sounded the fire alarm alerting the nation to the deteriorating condition of schooling in America and high school education in particular. And over the ensuing months there have been some thirty-three reports, analyses of the reports, and further studies of the studies.

The wave of reports which has inundated us ranges across a number of problem areas. They suggest schools need to achieve a greater consensus on the goals of education. Some suggest calling on the business community to shape the following emphases:

There needs to be a focus on strengthening the academic curriculum of schools, with a common core of learning and stiffer requirements for high school graduation and college entrance.

Teachers are on center stage, considered both a root of the difficulty and a primary means of solving the problem of poor student achievement. The emphasis is on attracting, training, and retaining more able people, using merit pay as one strategy and providing higher pay generally.

There is also a new look at the function of the school principal. All the reports take into account the importance of principals as instructional leaders.

The reports support fundamental responsibility for elementary and secondary education at the state and local level. Most reports also call for a strong federal presence in education in identifying national priorities and implementing them through legislation for research equipment and dealing with issues of equity and equal opportunity.

In recent months we have begun to see the finger of blame moving up the educational ladder. Public concern about the basic academic competencies of college students and graduates is now on the rise. Complaints are growing that too many holders of college degrees do not possess appropriate levels of communication and computational skills. Concern seems to be focused particularly upon inadequate writing abilities, though other competencies are also in question. In response, many postsecondary institutions are reviewing their academic practices and curriculum.

As for what to do about all this, the reports suggest building connections and increasing support: building connec-

tions with higher education, with business and labor, and with public authorities — federal, state and local — and, in this process of building public confidence in the educational enterprise, generating new dollar support of it.

School improvement efforts undertaken in response to these various reports include the following: Thirty-five states have raised high school graduation requirements; twenty-one have initiatives to improve text books; eight have approved a larger school day; seven have voted a longer school year; and twenty-four are examining pay incentives for teachers. What is more, half the nation's schools have been adopted by local businesses; 350 private school foundations have been formed; and the PTA membership is up after a twenty year decline.

So are our SAT scores — four points up this year — an encouraging sign that perhaps we have begun to stem the tide of mediocrity. Such results, however, cannot be attributed to the recent wave of national reports, neither ours nor the current administration's in Washington. In all of the reports and current deliberations there is no substantial agreement on one problem, the need for upgrading the academic preparation of students. In most of the reports, few reasonable practical solutions are provided. A lot of talk about what's wrong, but just *how* the schools and academic preparation are to be improved remains somewhat obscure.

The College Board's contribution to the reform movement is a very narrow one and intentionally so. We're sticking with the business which we know best. Our central focus has been on academic preparation for college and, thus, it remains so.

The Board was called into being some eighty years ago to address a similar consideration. The original College Entrance Examination Board brought together school and college teachers into collaboration early in the century to define the required knowledge and skills for entry into postsecondary education and then, subsequently, how to assess this learning. Now under circumstances somewhat different from the past the College Board is bringing school and college educators again in a bold new collaboration under the auspices of the EQality project. The cornerstone of our project is the booklet published last spring entitled, *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need To Know and Be Able To Do*. We have unofficially dubbed it the Green Book.

It differs from the other major reports in a number of

ways. For one thing, it represents the Board's second-generation effort to assess our nation's educational problems: The first was the report of the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline, *On Further Examination*, published by the Board in 1977. This blue ribbon panel of external experts was appointed by the College Board and Educational Testing Service in 1975, and it was that advisory panel that reported seven years ago on many of the same conditions of the current reports.

This Green Book is the result of three years of subsequent work by high school and college teachers, administrators, curriculum specialists, other professional educators, parents, and students from across the country. Their work represents an authentic, grass-roots, "bottom-up" effort. Thus we feel their conclusions are scholastic and feasible.

Although generally similar to the other reports in its identification of the subjects to be studied in high school, *Academic Preparation for College* is different in its definition of objectives. By and large, the other prescriptions call for "years of" subject-matter coverage — such as four years of English, three years of mathematics. We don't talk about learning in such terms. The Green Book describes what a high school graduate should have achieved in each of the subjects regardless of the number of "years of." The focus is on learning outcomes — results. Perhaps most important, the Green Book's definition is uniquely two-dimensional with its equal stress on Academic Subjects and Academic Competencies. It includes reasoning among them.

Nearly all the leading proponents of reform have something to say about the primary of writing skills in the curriculum. The major reports put a high premium on literacy in general and writing in particular. In *High School*, the Carnegie Foundation's report, Ernie Boyer focuses on language as the first curriculum priority. High schools, he says, should "help students develop the capacity to think critically and communicate effectively through the written and spoken word." Boyer emphasizes that students who don't become proficient in the primary language of the culture are enormously disadvantaged both in and out of school. "Clear writing leads to clear thinking," writes Boyer, adding that "clear thinking is the basis of clear writing" and that "all high school students should complete a basic English course with emphasis on writing." *Action for Excellence*, the report of the Education Commission of the States points out that technological

change and global competition make it imperative that students acquire a much more highly developed competence in writing. The report of the 20th Century Fund Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy calls the development of literacy in the English language the most important objective of elementary and secondary education in this nation. And the highly publicized and quoted report, *A Nation at Risk*, cites some of the most dismal statistics on illiteracy that I have ever seen.

The National Commission's report recommends that the teaching of English in high school should equip graduates to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use what they read; write well-organized, effective papers, and be able to listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently. In *Horace's Compromise*, Ted Sizer asserts that "exercises in writing should be the center of schooling." Easier said than done, as you all know.

In the EQUality project we identify writing as one of six basic academic competencies which are absolutely essential to do effective work in college. In addition to writing, students need to be able to read, to speak and listen, to study, and to do mathematics. At first glance these academic competencies may appear to be simply a listing of old favorites, a rehearsal of "basic skills": as titles they are not new but as skills they have not typically been identified explicitly. Most people take them for granted — assuming that high school students are competent in them and that secondary school teachers teach them. This is not essentially so. The Green Book recognizes that these are not simple skills and mechanical procedures; rather, they are developed abilities, the results of learning, intellectual discourse, teaching, and practice. Plainly, spelling out these competencies provides a way to tell students and all teachers what is expected of them.

Competence in writing, for example, is not defined only as "the ability to write Standard English sentences with correct structure, verb forms, punctuation. . . and other matters of mechanics, word choice, and spelling." That list is included, but it is preceded by "the ability to conceive ideas" and "the ability to organize, select, and relate ideas."

The ability to vary one's writing style, including vocabulary and sentence structure, for different readers and purposes.

The ability to improve one's own writing by restructuring, correcting errors, and rewriting.

The ability to gather information from primary and secondary sources, to write a report using this research; to quote, paraphrase, and summarize accurately; and to cite sources properly.

Developing these skills and abilities is the domain of all high school teachers. What this means is that teachers of math, science, social studies, the arts, and all subjects should share with English teachers in accepting responsibility for teaching writing.

There's a very good reason for making writing a component to learning in other subjects. Research indicates that writing, no less than reading, is a primary learning technique. Students who don't write don't learn as well as those who do. This is because writing is closely linked with reasoning and has been acknowledged as "one of the most complex mental activities that anyone ever undertakes." The 18th century French philosopher, Voltaire, called writing "the painting of the voice." He might also have called it the painting of the mind. A great deal of research supports the close relationship between reasoning and writing. In selecting and organizing ideas, asking questions, stating problems, formulating solutions, and developing coherent arguments, writing engages the thinking faculties of the human mind. As the Green Book says: The ability to write is a way of discovering and clarifying ideas.

Norman Cousins, who has delighted and inspired us all with his articles and books, says that writing coordinates and balances the faculties of imagination and reasoning. In a lecture to students at the University of Michigan in 1950, Cousins said, "Each writing project is like a difficult battle, requiring a skilled combination of strategy and tactics to accomplish a specific objective. It demands a mobilization of concentration — and concentration is or should be one of the higher gifts of human mental activity." All of you who have participated in writing workshops can understand what Cousins meant. Writing is not just the end result — the article or research paper or essay. It is a process that encourages thinking and learning of the highest order.

One of the frequently posed questions is, how can teachers of disciplines other than English, teach writing? I asked the members of our Academic Advisory Committee to help in supplying an answer.

Some of you may have seen an interesting article called

"Teaching Writing in Geography Classes," which appeared in the January-February 1983 issue of the *Journal of Geography*. This article emphasizes writing as a mode of learning. The process of writing, say the authors, Libbee and Young, "is the process of organizing, expanding, and revising thought in a slow motion, observable way. In a geography class then, teaching students the process of writing essays means that instructional time is focused on teaching people to think like geographers." Similarly, math teachers can contribute a great deal to learning. I explored this notion recently. Skill in mathematics requires close reading, logical thinking, and precision in stating formulas. Raul Murgia, professor of English and Director of the San Antonio Hi Tech High School, advised that math classes provide an excellent opportunity for studying the denotative aspects of language. Students can be asked to describe the way they think through and solve a problem. At Hi Tech all teachers are encouraged to emphasize writing. Within that school some of the most successful work has been done in a logic course. He has also set up a technical writing course that focuses on science writing and enables students to learn word processing. With the cooperation of biology and physics teachers, students write papers that can be handed in in both the technical writing class and their science class.

The second emphasis which writing receives in our EQuality project is treated in Chapter IV of the Green Book. Here we move beyond the definition of competency to specifying additional learning outlines in the arts and skills of English — *as a subject*. These outcomes build upon abilities delineated under the basic academic competencies. On page 15 the study of writing is given additional attention in underscoring the preparation college students will need in English.

Writing

The recognition that writing is a process involving a number of elements, including collecting information and formulating ideas, determining their relationships, drafting, arranging paragraphs in an appropriate order and building transitions between them, and revising what has been written.

The ability to write as a way of discovering and clarifying ideas.

The ability to write appropriately for different occa-

sions, audiences, and purposes (persuading, explaining, describing, telling a story).

Skill and assurance in using the conventions of standard written English.

As we move into the Educational EQuality Project's fifth year, our emphasis is on implementation, translating our rhetoric into policy, application, and action, especially in the classroom. Toward this goal we have formed a national network involving school-college collaboratives. Currently thirteen collaboratives are involved. They represent a broad mix of institutions, both public and private, with respect to region, racial, and ethnic background, financial resources, urban, suburban, and rural location. As part of the Models Program we share common goals related to school improvement; all have expressed a willingness to share with each other their materials, promising practices, research, and programs.

We have also turned to the Academic Advisory Committees, which played such an important role in drafting the Green Book's statements, for concrete suggestions for curricular and instructional strategies to achieve the results described in the Green Book. Committees, each with a mix of high school and college representatives, are working on a series of six booklets, one for each subject, which we hope will be completed by early 1985. This activity is quite a complex undertaking. Each of the booklets is expected to deal not only with achieving the learning outcomes for a particular subject, but also with developing interrelationships between the subject and each of the basic academic competencies. This means that all six booklets — not just the English one — will deal with developing students' writing skills.

The booklets will analyze many of the critical issues now arising for each discipline. For example, with respect to competency in writing, we will be emphasizing writing as a process that involves certain logical and psychological steps, such as brainstorming, questioning, analysis, composition, and revision. We anticipate that the publication of these new booklets will raise questions and stimulate discussion and debate among teachers and administrators.

There are many issues and problems that need to be addressed. Finding a means of translating our best understanding about how to teach writing into classroom practice is one big concern. Another is training teachers across the curriculum to incorporate writing as a technique for learning.

There is a need to educate administrators and policy makers on what has been learned during the past twenty years. By efforts like the National Writing Project, and your own efforts here in Indiana, the importance of ungraded writing and small group work need to be much more widely appreciated. We hope that our new booklets will provide some help here. Of course, we recognize that there is no one way to improve the quality of education. Each school must find its own way using its own talents and resources. But it is important to consider what those talents and resources will be used for.

What we are striving for with the EQuality project is a balanced curriculum, above all, a curriculum designed to help *all* students, not just the gifted or those who, because of a privileged background, are already college-bound. The EQuality project stresses both equity and quality. We capitalized the “E” and the “Q” in our name to symbolize the College Board’s conviction that quality and equity in education are inseparable.

As the current movement to improve education gains momentum and as colleges tighten standards and states increase the requirements for high school education, we must insure that the results include more, not push out too many. Often in the past the words “quality” and “standards” have been used as codes for exclusion — the concepts behind them debased into expedients for limiting the aspirations of some students. The real challenge before us, as I see it, is to translate these concepts and terms to express concern for delivering a quality education to the student. Educational institutions must provide access in the truest sense of the word. That means more than opening the door. It means success. It means providing students not only with the opportunity to get into college, but the wherewithal to *stay in*, do well, and graduate with the knowledge and skills to continue their education or to enter and advance in the world of work.

Building writing competency into the entire curriculum will go a long way toward helping all students become effective learners. It will also help them develop skills that are essential for the world beyond academia.

Most of what I’ve been saying so far has been from the perspective of our work for the college-bound. Academic preparation is not just for the college-bound, however. Students who enter the work force directly from high school need many of the same skills as do most going to college. This con-

clusion, surprising to many educators, emerged from a series of dialogues co-sponsored by the College Board, local business groups, and educators in five major cities. They had this to say about writing:

Lack of competency in writing also limits the effectiveness of communication in the workplace and hurts productivity and employee relations, agreed business leaders. Many pointed to lack of accuracy and basic English skills. "Students may know how to type, but they don't have the English skills to punctuate properly or recognize spelling errors," said Janet Saunders, Affirmative Action Manager for the Chicago firm of E. J. Brach and Sons. Saunders added that her company could live with a typing speed of fifty words per minute if the employees could spell and punctuate accurately. Clerical staff, she emphasized, are expected to act as backup for management.

In the world of work, competency in writing is required to prepare memorandums, job applications, proposals, brief presentations, summaries, letters, resumes, and directions or instructions to others. Penmanship and the ability to express ideas accurately, succinctly, and with correct spelling are especially important. "Before teaching kids computer literacy, the schools must teach them how to spell," said Anne Brill, Employment Manager at Michael Reese Hospital and Medical Center in Chicago.

I invite you to ally your efforts as teachers of writing with the Educational EQuality Project's efforts to improve the quality of education and, at the same time, help more of our youth acquire the knowledge and skills they need. Early on, we recognized that the College Board could not achieve these goals alone. So, our major strategy has been to stimulate partnerships, to enlarge our national grassroots network of people and institutions working together.

This momentum is building, and the timing has never been better. Because of the national spotlight on education, people *are* concerned. Politicians *are* paying attention. I believe with our collective experience and expertise we can make a difference. Because I believe all children *can* learn, and there is no greater reward for teachers than to turn on the lights in young people's minds.

I believe we have already turned a corner, and the future is bright with hope. Your efforts to improve the teaching and

learning of writing are a crucial part of the movement to restore excellence to our schools. Indeed your efforts can be called the “write way” to excellence.

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