

# Abolish The High School Diploma

## ABOLISH THE DIPLOMA

Imagine the following high school requirements being recommended as apt ones for national standards:

- 3 years of economics
- 2 courses in philosophy – one in logic, the other in ethics
- 2 years of psychology, with special emphasis on child development and family relations
- 2 years of mathematics, focusing on probability and statistics
- 4 years of Language Arts, but with a major focus on semiotics and oral proficiency
- US and World history, taught backwards chronologically from the present
- 1 Year of Graphics Design, Desktop Publishing, and Multimedia presentation

Outrageous? Hardly – if we do an analysis of what most graduates actually need and will use in professional, civic, and personal life. How odd it is that we do not require oral proficiency when every graduate will need the ability. How absurd it is that in this day and age that students aren't required to understand the capitalist system. How sad it is that physics is viewed as more important than psychology, as parents struggle to raise children wisely and families work hard to understand one another. Requirements based on old academic priorities and schooling predicated on the old view that few people would graduate and fewer still would go on to college make no sense: Ask any professionals how much algebra they used this past week.

Don't get me wrong. I am proud of my classical education at St. John's College. I learned physics through Newton's *Principia* and geometry through Euclid and Lobachevski - in a college program with no electives. I had a fine general education, one truly deserving of the title Liberal Arts (the arts that make you free). But would I mandate that all colleges look like St. John's? Absolutely not – no more than I would mandate that all schools be required to adopt my proposed new graduation requirements, above – even though they make more sense than current ones.

We are once again confusing standards with standardization in education. Our misguided quest for a set of one-size-fits-all requirements shows that we do not know how to make education *modern* – i.e. client-centered; adapted to an era where the future, not the past, properly determines curricula; and where the future is re-invented regularly, and far more personalizable than our forebears dreamed possible.

Why does everyone need the same medicine? It is absurd to mandate standardized *prescriptions* in a pluralistic democracy. Enforced uniformity, whether required in testing programs or a culture, has no place in a modern world. Student interests, needs, talents, and aspirations differ. Communities differ. Institutional requirements differ. Twenty-first century schools should be more like healthcare organizations than medieval guilds or nineteenth century factories. In other words, they should be responsive to individual clients and their present and

future needs. (We badly need a Hippocratic Oath for schooling: Above All Else, Do No Harm.)

Three telling small facts about how backwards things are: secondary teachers never pre-test to see where the students are as they enter, students get no say in teachers or teacher style, and they do not get to move in and out of courses or “majors” as needs and interests dictate. Each syllabus and the uniform credit system just gets under way and drags everyone along with it.

A single set of diploma requirements thus makes no sense, except as the anxious political urge to do something. At a time when a political revolution is sweeping the country to undo the harms of excessive federalism and rigid mandates, it is odd that educational policymakers seem bent on inventing a Procrustean diploma. What an irony that the liberal argument for choice in learning options has been taken over by conservatives!

*Plus ça change.* This cry to standardize school ‘output’ eerily echoes similar calls after the turn of the century. Then as now, the challenges and anxieties caused by immigration, student heterogeneity, new views of schooling, and the demand for greater accountability made everyone think that control of schools through mandated testing was needed. Yet it was and must be a failed strategy, given modern aims of talent development, teacher and staff entrepreneurship at the site level, and knowledge creation. (Readers are directed toward Ray Callahan’s 30 year-old history of this trend in *The Cult of Efficiency*, and Gerry Bracey’s recent wry analysis in *Final Exam* of the current hullabaloo and its politicized history.)

In the earnest chest thumping about “which” specific standards are needed, the answers invariably involve “whose” standards happen to be heard by influential ears. Thus, in France, for example, the *philosophies* have enough clout to ensure that philosophy is still required for a high school diploma. Last month it was the nation’s Governors making noise about the need for standards linked to tests. Would that they practiced what they preach to see the hypocrisy: why not say that all would-be governors should meet uniform national eligibility requirements to improve the sorry state of our governance? If the point of the current political revolution is that incentives work better than mandates, why aren’t we applying that lesson to schools – never mind to individual students?

We do not need the conventional diploma. Arnold Packer put it well in the SCANS report a few years ago: *students should graduate with a résumé, not a transcript.* That gets right the obligation of schools in a democracy to better play to the strengths and interests of its students. I would go further, to draw out what is implicit in the idea: schools should stop giving diplomas all together. They should merely report out each student’s achievement profile – their intellectual strengths, weaknesses, and levels of performance on novice-expert continua for each subject. Let the (aptly *differing*) entry standards of the student-desired next institutions dictate what course selection and exit-performance-level “passing” need to be.

Standards and requirements are nothing if not contextual. So-called requirements are thus more aptly characterized as “if-then” statements about very diverse entry-level requirements: IF you want to be a scholar, THEN certain requirements follow. But IF you want to be a lawyer, a businessperson, a musician, an actor, or an electrician, THEN very different needs follow. Not being able to

predict each student's likely profession does not change the fact that schools should treat students as subjects, not uniform objects. Teachers, not just doctors, must more vigorously broker personalized possibilities.

We should no more mandate what all schools should teach and require in the way of performance than we should mandate what all businesses should sell and their margin of profit. Modern schools would then be no different from modern professions in a crucial sense. They, too, would serve niches. All schools should be magnet schools, charter schools, and alternative schools – if we want to make schools more responsive, effective, and coherent.

Forewarned is forearmed! Client-sensitive schooling is coming – if not due to courageous school boards and new charters, then due to the Trojan Horse of the World Wide Web. With or without the support of educators, a world of client-tailored educational programs is on its way. Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?