



## Academic Excellence in an Early U. S. High School

David F. Labaree

*Social Problems*, Vol. 31, No. 5 (Jun., 1984), 558-567.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0037-7791%28198406%2931%3A5%3C558%3AAEIAEU%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6>

*Social Problems* is currently published by University of California Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## **ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE IN AN EARLY U.S. HIGH SCHOOL\***

**DAVID F. LABAREE**

Georgetown University

This paper explores the orientation toward academic excellence in high schools in the United States during the 19th century. Through a study of the first 80 years of Central High School in Philadelphia, I find several factors which encouraged academic excellence: a meritocratic ideology, voluntary enrollment, competitive selection of students and faculty, and the structure of public education at the time. In comparison, modern public high schools have only a limited commitment to merit, compulsory attendance, automatic acceptance of all students, less competitive selection of teachers, and a different structure of public education.

In 1983 a series of high-level panels charged that education in the United States had lost sight of its once dominant objective, the pursuit of academic excellence. The gloomiest assessment came from the national Commission on Excellence in Education (1983:5) which warned, "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." Blame for this decline in excellence has been placed at all levels of the educational system: from the elementary schools, which are accused of failing to ground students sufficiently in basic skills, to colleges, which are charged with failing to provide the necessary degree of advanced training. But it is the public high school which has received the greatest critical attention, and for good reason. The cumulative academic deficits of lower levels of education become more visible in high school; and since the latter is the highest level of schooling at which attendance is nearly universal, these deficits affect a broader spectrum of the population than do the failings of colleges.

Perhaps the most frequently cited evidence of the decline in achievement at U.S. high schools is the 40 to 50 point drop in average scores on the College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test since the early 1960s (Commission on Excellence, 1983:8). However, this is not the most compelling proof that could be offered, since this decline in scores was accompanied by a nearly 200 percent increase in the number of students enrolled in college during the same period (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982:Table 259). Thus, at least part of the drop in test scores may be the result of an expansion of educational opportunity rather than a reduction in student achievement.

This same caveat applies to another favorite example of growing mediocrity in U.S. high schools. The Commission on Excellence (1983:8) noted that U.S. students scored low on achievement tests compared with students from other industrialized countries; but as Husen (1983) has pointed out, this difference is the result of differences in the selectivity of the various systems of secondary schooling. In the United States nearly everyone attends high school and three-quarters of the students graduate, while in European countries high school is limited to a small number of the better students.

If much of the evidence about low levels of achievement among U.S. high school students is unconvincing, the evidence about the failure of U.S. high schools to promote academic achievement is stronger. As an institution, the modern high school is less academic in orientation and less rigorously academic in application than it once was. The growth of electives in the high school curriculum has permitted students to avoid the more difficult academic courses, with the result that only 31 percent of high school graduates took intermediate algebra, 13 percent took

---

\* This research was supported in part by a grant from the National Institute of Education (9-0173). The author thanks Michael Katz and David Hogan for their comments. Correspondence to: Department of Sociology, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 20057.

French, and 6 percent took calculus. At the same time, general track students earned 25 percent of their credits in such subjects as physical and health education, remedial skills, and personal development (Commission on Excellence, 1983:18).

At the same time as the content of the high school curriculum has been watered down, the rigor of high school pedagogy has also declined. One expression of this phenomenon is a lowered level of required work: textbooks are being written in ever-simpler English and homework is being reduced to the point that two-thirds of high school seniors report having less than one hour of homework a night. Another sign of declining rigor is that while work has fallen, grades have been rising, which means that grades no longer serve as a measure of a student's academic performance (Commission on Excellence, 1983:19). At the same time, a student's promotion from one grade to another is less likely to indicate mastery of the subject matter at the previous level. Instead of being promoted according to merit, students are promoted as a matter of administrative routine (Labaree, 1984).

Critics feel that the modern U.S. public high school is not as dedicated to academic excellence as it should be—or as it once was. There is a tone of nostalgia in the current critique of the high school, reflecting a desire to turn back the clock to the time when these schools taught the tough academic subjects and made students work hard at their studies.

This paper explores the orientation toward excellence of the early U.S. public high school. The ghost of this institution hovers over the current debate but its inner workings are not very well understood. There is a vague perception of the early high school as a more austere and arduous place than its modern counterpart, but this perception has never been convincingly documented. Krug's (1964, 1972) two-volume history of the U.S. high school picks up the story in the 1880s, 60 years after the first high schools were established, and it focuses primarily on national-level trends in curriculum policy. There have been a few quantitative studies of early high school attendance (Counts, 1969; Katz, 1968, 1983; Perlmann, 1980; Troen, 1975) but none of these has sought to establish the extent to which the early high school stressed academic excellence.

This paper is based on a study of the first 80 years of Central High School, Philadelphia's oldest and most prominent public high school. This was a school with a strong commitment to academic excellence and with pedagogical practices that were rigorous to the point of harshness. Founded in 1838, it was one of the first public high schools in the United States. For the next 50 years it was the city's only public high school for boys, and today it is still considered the best. (A sister institution, Girls High School, was established in 1848.) Frequently referred to as the "people's college" during its early years, the state authorized Central in 1849 to grant college degrees; it has exercised this authority ever since. For nearly 150 years its alumni have occupied important positions in the city, and at least 70 of them are listed in the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

The analysis which follows is based primarily on three types of data: (1) annual reports of Philadelphia's Board of Public Education (hereafter Board), including reports by Central's presidents; (2) histories written by the Central faculty (Cornog, 1952; Edmonds, 1902); and (3) a sample of approximately two thousand students including all students who entered the school during federal census years from 1840 through 1920, with fractional samples used for the large classes later in the period. Students' families were located in census manuscripts for 1850–80 and 1900, and this information was added to the file (Labaree, 1983).

#### **CURRICULUM: STRICTLY ACADEMIC**

During Central High School's first 50 years, its presidents liked to characterize the school's curriculum as "practical." This did not mean that the school was offering vocational training; in fact, vocational courses (such as stenography and bookkeeping) never occupied more than 12 percent of a student's time during this period. Instead, the curriculum was practical in that it was

intended to prepare students in a general way for direct entry into commercial life (by stressing sciences and modern languages) rather than for admission to college (which required a heavy dose of classics to the exclusion of modern subjects). To the modern eye, Central's practical curriculum appears heavily academic and allowed little choice. Indeed, from 1856 to 1889 there was no choice at all: everyone took the same classes. During the rest of the century students could pick from among several courses of study, but within these programs electives were either few or nonexistent.

In 1871, for example, over the course of four years, all students had to take six years of science, four years each of mathematics, English, history, and drawing, three years of classical languages, two-and-a-half years of a modern language, and three years of vocational courses (Board, 1871:29). Non-academic and non-vocational courses such as health, physical education, and personal development were absent from Central's course of study. While the Commission on Excellence (1983:18) complained about the "cafeteria-style curriculum [of the modern high school] in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main course," Central High School over 100 years ago was offering a fixed menu consisting entirely of main courses, emphasizing the subject areas now considered the most difficult in the liberal arts spectrum—science, mathematics, and foreign languages.

In 1889 the uniform practical curriculum was replaced by two alternative courses of study—a college-preparatory course with an intensified academic content and a commercial course made up of approximately 80 percent academic subjects and 20 percent vocational material. In 1912 a mechanical (engineering) course was added which had roughly the same mix of academic and vocational subjects as the commercial course. Then, in 1919, an industrial course was introduced which devoted 40 percent of its time to vocational pursuits. Thus, by 1920 Central was edging in the direction of the modern high school, offering a variety of elective courses of study, most of which represented a dilution of the academic work demanded by the older curriculum (Labaree, 1983:chap. 4).

#### **THE PEDAGOGY: MERCILESSLY MERITOCRATIC**

Not only were Central High School students subjected to a relentlessly academic curriculum, but their performance was judged according to a high standard of academic merit. Few were found worthy of admission to the school and fewer still were considered deserving of its diploma. Attrition was high at all levels of public education in the 19th century, and most of this dropout rate can be attributed to the pressures originating in social class. Philadelphia's school system was shaped like a pyramid, wide at the bottom and narrow at the top. In 1880, for example, 52.3 percent of the students in the entire school system were in grades one and two, 24.6 percent were in grades three and four, 14.6 percent were in grades five through eight, and only 1.4 percent attended the two high schools (Central and Girls). The remaining 7.1 percent attended consolidated schools covering grades one through eight (Board, 1880). Many students from working-class families were under pressure to quit school and work; this pressure was most severe among high-school-age boys. Katz and Davey (1978) found in their study of Hamilton, Ontario during the 1860s and 1870s, that the school attendance of working-class teenage boys was lower than that of middle-class boys and was inversely proportional to the availability of jobs.

Central students were disproportionately middle class in origin. From 1840 to 1920 the middle classes consistently supplied two-thirds of the student population, although they accounted for only one-quarter to one-third of the city's household heads. At the same time the semiskilled and unskilled working classes were heavily underrepresented at the school (Labaree, 1983:tables 3.3–3.9).

However, while the pool of candidates seeking admission to the high school was shaped by class considerations, the procedures employed by the school for selecting students from this pool were

scrupulously meritocratic. Throughout the 19th century there was an intense competition over admission to Central. Admissions were governed by the scores on a written entrance examination. Grammar school masters sent only their best students to take this exam, after careful preparation. In spite of this pre-selection and preparation, between 20 percent and 50 percent of the students tested each year failed to achieve a score high enough for admission (Labaree, 1983:table 1.1). Central's student body, therefore, was composed of the most academically able sons of the city's middle classes.

Once admitted, Central students found themselves in a tough academic environment which provided no special privileges for the socioeconomically advantaged. The work was hard and the outcome was by no means guaranteed. During Central's first 80 years, only 26.9 percent of its students graduated. Not only did most students leave before graduation, but most left during their first two years. Out of all the students that entered between 1838 and 1920, 37.1 percent had dropped out by the end of the first year, 60.9 percent by the end of the second year, and 71.6 percent by the end of the third year. In addition, half of those who left prior to graduation were forced to repeat at least one term while at the school (Labaree, 1983:tables 3.11 and 4.13, 307).

Class helps explain the process of admission to Central High School but provides no help in explaining a student's chances for graduation. Graduation rate varied little from one social class to another. Central had such a high rate of attrition not because so many students had to quit to go to work, but because so many students of all classes failed to make the grade. Grade point averages (GPAs) Central students are not available until 1910. For students entering in 1910 and 1920, 77 percent of the students with a B+ average or higher graduated, compared with 54 percent of the B- students, 28 percent of the C+ students and 5 percent of the rest. Even the best students had to struggle to meet the expectations of the Central faculty. One-third of the hardy and high-performing survivors in the 1910 and 1920 cohorts who succeeded in winning a Central diploma were compelled to repeat one or more terms during their high school careers (Labaree, 1983:table 4.13).

The addition of a variety of control variables did nothing to alter the conclusion that Central was thoroughly meritocratic in selecting its graduates. Multiple classification analyses of student chances for graduation revealed that factors such as nativity, birth order, family structure, siblings at work, prior school, and age had only modest impact. In conjunction with these variables, class exerted little or no influence on graduation—with a beta ranging between .03 and .12—while student grades continued to be by far the most significant factor—with a beta of .50 to .53 (Labaree, 1983:tables 3.14–3.18).

Central High School was dedicated to the principle of academic excellence. While the economically able dominated the applicant pool (because they could afford to attend high school instead of going to work), only the most academically able of these were actually admitted. Once admitted, students found themselves in an environment where their survival depended almost entirely on personal academic achievement. Uncompromising in its application of this single standard of evaluation, Central's faculty presided over a system of instruction which was both highly selective and scrupulously fair. The selectivity was dramatic: for example, in 1880 one boy in five from Philadelphia primary schools attended grammar school, one in 50 attended the high school, and one in 200 graduated (Board, 1880). But Central graduates earned their place at the apex of Philadelphia's elongated educational pyramid only through an intensive academic competition, especially during their high school years. Central High School, in short, was a model academic meritocracy.

#### **THE SOCIAL BASIS FOR CENTRAL'S MERITOCRATIC CHARACTER**

Central's dedication to academic excellence developed from a set of social conditions within the school and the community:

1) *Cultural commitment to the merit principle*: Meritocratic ideology provided one of the primary influences over the founding and development of Central High School. This ideology accommodates beliefs in political equality to the capitalist reality of economic inequality by means of the concept of equality of opportunity—which explains unequal social outcomes as the result of unequal personal merit. Speaking to a group of alumni in 1851, one of the school's founders, Thomas Dunlap (1851:16) defined its goals in just such terms:

It is emphatically the School of the Republic—it is emphatically the School of the People . . . opening its portals alike to the son of a President or a ploughman, a Governor or his groom, a millionaire or a hewer of wood—treating with equal justice—rearing with equal fidelity, and crowning with all its honors alike the one and the other, and demanding no passport to its blessings, or to its laurels, save that which the people demands, and forever will demand from all its sons—INDIVIDUAL, PERSONAL MERIT.

2) *Voluntary enrollment of students*: Students attended Central because they wanted to and their families wanted them to. Voluntarism gave the school a community of purpose which it would not otherwise have had. While Central was a largely middle-class school, it was even more homogeneous ideologically than it was in class terms. Parents from any class who disliked the school's meritocratic rigor could keep their sons away, but those who did send their sons supported the school's meritocratic aims.

3) *Competitive selection of students*: Until the entrance exam was abolished in 1900, the school also exercised a choice, based only on academic merit. By deliberately selecting only the best students, the high school reinforced its own commitment to merit and formed a student body that demonstrably thrived on competition. These winners were unlikely to question the legitimacy of Central's own harsh system of merit selection. Even that large majority of students who dropped out or were eliminated prior to graduation accepted the outcome as fair: they had performed well enough to enter the school but not well enough to graduate. At the same time, any students who were unhappy with the academic intensity of the school could simply be asked to leave if they did not do so voluntarily. Thus, voluntarism and selectivity produced a relatively high degree of ideological homogeneity in the entering class, while selective attrition enhanced the homogeneity of the upperclassmen even further.

4) *Competitive selection of the faculty*: Central's faculty had even more reason to be committed to a regime of academic excellence than the students, particularly during the 19th century. Between 1860 and 1900 approximately half of the Central High School faculty was drawn from the rarefied ranks of Central graduates, which means that these men had already achieved a high degree of academic success, proving themselves against the school's exacting merit standard. By selecting alumni for the faculty, the school's oversight committee was picking men who could act as role models of academic merit for the next generation of students, men whose personal experience was living confirmation to themselves and their charges that meritocracy at Central was both a reality and a blessing. In addition, between 1860 and 1890 approximately half of these men had proved their pedagogical merit by rising through the ranks of public school teachers (Edmonds, 1902:319–349; Labaree, 1983:chap. 2). Typically, they won the promotion from grammar school master to high school professor on the basis of their success in preparing students for the high school entrance exam. In the mid-19th century, therefore, Central's professors and students formed a closed and self-perpetuating system for rewarding academic achievement and transmitting meritocratic values.

5) *The pyramid of public education*: In the 19th century, the rate of attrition after the primary grades was quite high. The implications of this for Central High School were important. First, since attrition was high at all levels of the system, the high school's 75 percent dropout rate was seen not as a social problem but as part of a natural process of selecting the most worthy. That so few graduated from high school made the receipt of a diploma a rare honor. Because dropping out was the norm, it had no connotation of shame. Second, since Central was located at the very

apex of the pyramid, it offered unique attractions. In the absence of competitors, Central could offer credentials bearing enormous prestige, and a large number of students were drawn to compete for admission to the school in the hope of earning these valued credentials. The scarcity of high schools and, within the high school, the rarity of graduation, provided a powerful stimulus for student achievement.

#### COMPARISONS WITH THE MODERN U.S. PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

The social conditions which provided the basis for Central High School's intense commitment to academic achievement during the 19th century are largely lacking in the modern public high school in the United States. The following characteristics of the modern high school contrast with the traits discussed above:

1) *Limited commitment to the merit principle:* Meritocracy is stronger in principle than it is in practice in the modern public high school. Since the principle remains largely unquestioned by parents and educators alike, it is nonmeritocratic practice which comes under fire, and educational practitioners find themselves in the awkward position of defending policies which they may not believe in. There has been a decline in meritocratic process in the modern public high school brought about by changing social conditions, but there has been no corresponding renunciation of the principle of merit.

2) *Compulsory attendance:* In 49 states, students are required by law to attend school until at least the age of 16 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1982:table 30); in effect, high school enrollment is mandatory. This loss of voluntarism constitutes the most important difference between the modern high school and its predecessor. Voluntarism encouraged ideological homogeneity in the old Central High School, just as it does in contemporary private and Catholic schools (Salganik and Karweit, 1982). Students who were not interested in pursuing academic excellence simply did not enroll at Central; likewise, parents today do not enroll their children in a private or Catholic school unless they either share its values or are willing to abide by them. The modern public high school, however, is filled with conscripts, not volunteers. In this situation there is no natural consensus among the students around the core values of the school, and no reason to believe that students will be eager to devote themselves to intensive academic pursuits. For example, students in a working-class neighborhood may believe that the ultimate rewards for academic excellence (jobs) are not are not substantial enough to justify a major investment of effort into school work (Ogbu, 1974). Therefore, compulsion helped kill the consensus which supported the meritocratic practices of the old high school

3) *Automatic acceptance of students:* Not only are students now required to attend high school, but the typical public high school is required to accept and retain all students from its geographical area. These regional comprehensive high schools have no entrance exams or admission requirements, except that the student must have completed the eighth or ninth grade, and they have no provisions for academic expulsion. Thus, the modern high school contains students who are frequently both unwilling and unable to do serious academic work—since they do not need to believe in the value of rigorous studies and do not need to demonstrate academic achievement in order to enter the high school or to remain there.

The result is that the modern high school is attempting to promote educational achievement in a situation where students may not value this goal and where the school lacks such selective incentives as competition over limited admissions and even more limited diplomas. By contrast, the professors at Central in the 19th century had a relatively easy situation in which to create a model of meritocracy. They had a voluntary and selective student body made up of students who were predisposed toward the school's meritocratic ideology, who had already demonstrated academic excellence in order to enter the school, and who knew they had to perform at a truly exceptional level to graduate.

A variety of private, Catholic, and special public high schools share the voluntarism and selectivity which helped make possible the dedication to academic excellence at the early Central High School. Private schools can choose whom to admit and whom to expel; Catholic schools may not be as free to select incoming students but they may expel or remove students. These special advantages which private and Catholic schools enjoy are unaccountably ignored by Coleman *et al.* (1982) in their study of high school achievement. They control for the effects of family traits such as class and race but fail to consider the extent to which parents and students were ideologically oriented toward the academic aims of the school prior to enrollment. Thus, they attribute the superior performance of the private and Catholic school students to the form of instruction in these schools rather than to the process by which students become enrolled in them.

A special case is presented by a small but influential group of voluntary and selective modern public high schools. The present Central High School is such a place. After spending the first three decades of the 20th century as an ordinary regional high school, it was restored to something of its former status in 1939. Since that time, Central has admitted boys from all over the city, but only if they choose to apply and if they have high grades and test scores. These conditions have allowed Central to become rededicated to academic achievement: students who apply know they are taking on a greater challenge than they would find in a regional high school, but they are motivated to respond to this challenge by the knowledge that a Central diploma carries greater value in the marketplace for educational credentials.

However, in a society which compels students to go to school until the age of 16 and expects them to complete high school, only a relatively small number of public high schools can operate on a voluntary and selective basis. The school systems must provide secondary education for that large majority of the students population who either do not want, or do not qualify for, an intensively academic public high school (or do not want, do not qualify for, or cannot afford a private or Catholic high school).

As a result, the new Central High School has a very different impact on the school system than did the old Central. When the school was founded, it was one of a kind; if its students did not go there, they could have attended private school or gone to work. Thus, the creation of the high school added another layer to the school system, which attracted middle-class support to the public schools and fortified total enrollment. The modern voluntary and selective public high school, however—like the modern private and Catholic school—draws to it students who otherwise would have attended a regional high school. Instead of creating a new level of education, all of these schools drain students from one segment of secondary education into another as part of a zero-sum game. This is a sure way to create a meritocratic school, but there is serious question about whether such a rarefied creation will promote educational achievement by example, or if instead it will undercut average achievement in the regional high schools by removing their most motivated students.

4) *Less competitive selection of teachers:* At the early Central High School, professors were chosen out of the exclusive and meritorious community of high school graduates. Today, however, the Commission on Excellence (1983:22) notes, "Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students." Two important conditions have changed since the 19th century which help explain why the the best students often turn their backs on teaching. First, modern teachers have no career mobility as teachers; their only upward route is out of teaching and into administration. The old Central High School acted as the top rung on a career ladder for male public school teachers, since Central's faculty was largely recruited from the ranks of the most successful grammar school masters.

Second, salaries for today's public school teachers are low compared with those of other college graduates. To the extent that pay reflects job prestige, then teaching does not seem to be held in



very high esteem. In the 19th century, Philadelphia teachers were, on average, earning less relative to other occupations than they do now. The difference was that this pay was distributed much more unevenly. Men and teachers at higher-level schools received considerably more than others. Thus, for much of the century, male high school professors (note the honorific title) were paid 20 percent more than a male grammar school principal, twice as much as a female grammar school principal, and more than four times as much as a female elementary school teacher (Labaree, 1983:chapter 2).

Thus, the career incentives and pay differential in 19th century Philadelphia encouraged the most ambitious and the best male teachers to set their sights on advancement. Yet this motivational tool was obtained at the expense of the vast majority of teachers, whose pay remained quite low and whose opportunities for advancement were negligible. The reason: in 1880 only 77 of the city's 2,075 public school teachers were men (3.7 percent) and only 16 of these taught at the high school (0.8 percent) (Board, 1880). In the latter part of the century, the school board equalized pay between the sexes and across school levels while raising the average pay level of teachers as a whole, setting a pattern for compensation which has continued to the present.

The Commission on Excellence and other commentators have suggested at least a partial return to a more differentiated pattern of pay and position for teachers. The Commission argues for establishing master teacher posts and a structure of merit pay in schools as a means of reintroducing some of the kinds of incentives for the better teachers which existed in the early school systems. The potential danger of such a policy, as revealed by the Central case study, is that this increase in merit pay for a few may occur at the cost of continuing low pay for the many.

5) *The flattened pyramid of public education:* The provision and consumption of education has dramatically increased. Three-quarters of those who enter primary school graduate from high school. Educational expectations have risen to the point that many people consider a 25 percent dropout rate a major social problem. The rising level of education leaves the high-school dropout in a state of educational and occupational disadvantage, and it leaves the school with the problem of trying to accomplish something which the faculty at the old Central would have seen as odd indeed—to keep underachieving students in school. In the 19th century, Central High School did its best to bar such students from entering in the first place and it expelled those who failed to meet its demanding standards. The modern public high school takes everyone and tries to graduate everyone.

One way to foster high graduation rates in such a situation is to set up intensive remedial instruction programs for students whose work is below par. Thus, the modern high school expends considerable resources on raising the achievement of its low-achieving students to a minimally acceptable level. While the early public high school devoted its energies to teaching the most advanced subjects to the highest performing students, the modern high school diffuses its energies to meet the needs of a wider range of students.

Thus, the inclusiveness of the modern U.S. high school makes it difficult for the school to concentrate resources on the promotion of academic excellence and to set standards for achieving this end. This undercuts the effectiveness of the academic incentives which the high school uses to motivate student achievement. The old Central High School's exclusiveness meant that its diploma was a rare commodity on the educational credentials market. During most of the 19th century very few Central graduates went to college because Central's stature was equal to many colleges.

Now that a majority of 18-to-21-year-olds are attending a college or university, high school credentials are less an end in themselves than a stage in an elongated educational career. To find a contemporary level of education that is as exclusive as Central High School's was in the 19th century one must look past college to the graduate professional schools—medicine, law, business,

and engineering. Here, at the apex of the modern educational pyramid, the competition is intense, the numbers accepted are few, the level of academic rigor is high, and the marketability of the credentials received is extraordinary.

At this level the old meritocratic incentives which so spurred Central students to high levels of achievement are still very much in force. The problem for the modern comprehensive public high school is that these incentives are now so far removed that they are likely to influence only the most future-oriented students, who perhaps are already planning to become doctors or lawyers. It is unrealistic to expect that the average tenth grade student is going to strive for excellence in math class in the hope of attaining a medical degree, knowing full well that he or she is separated from this level by a chasm of 10 more years of schooling. Meanwhile, the more immediately attainable degree which the modern high school offers to its graduates has a commodity value which has been diluted by expanded enrollment. The high school's very success in attracting and retaining students over its 150-year history has therefore impaired its ability to promote high levels of academic achievement.

The U.S. public high school in the 20th century has gradually become dedicated to the principle of extending secondary education to the entire population. The problem that high schools face is how to promote educational excellence in a student body that is a true cross-section of the community. The Central High School case shows that the high standards of the early high school were achieved at the cost of radical exclusiveness. Modern private, Catholic, and special public high schools in the United States, and most public high schools abroad, continue to maintain an orientation toward excellence through exclusionary practices.

None of these old or new examples of meritocratic education therefore provides a useful model for the modern U.S. public high school. The existing technology of educational achievement is simply inappropriate to the task of dealing with an inclusive population. What is needed is an approach which, in the words of the Commission of Excellence (1983:12), "sets high expectations for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them." Continued reliance on meritocratic practices, such as creating a larger number of selective public high schools or promoting private and Catholic schools through voucher systems, will only make the task of raising achievement in the residual comprehensive high school even more difficult.

The work of Benjamin Bloom (1976) suggests that the technology does exist to elevate the academic performance of a heterogeneous student body. While meritocratic pedagogy links excellence and exclusiveness, Bloom's techniques promise the more egalitarian fusion of mastery learning and open enrollment. Bloom's pedagogy may provide a starting place for those who want to deal realistically with the problem of academic performance. To fall back on the old meritocratic methodology, however attractive ideologically, ignores the irretrievably altered character of the modern public high school.

## REFERENCES

- Bloom, Benjamin S.  
 1976 *Human Characteristics and School Learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill.  
 Board of Public Education (Philadelphia)  
 Annual Reports.
- Coleman, James S., Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore  
 1982 *High School Achievement*. New York: Basic.
- Commission on Excellence in Education  
 1983 *A Nation At Risk*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Cornog, William H.  
 1952 *School of the Republic, 1893-1943*. Philadelphia: Associated Alumni of Central High School.
- Counts, George S.  
 1969 *The Selective Character of American Secondary Education*. New York: Arno.  
 [1922]

- Dunlap, Thomas  
1851 "Introductory address of the commencement of Central High School, February 12, 1851." Philadelphia: Board of Controllers.
- Edmonds, Franklin Spencer  
1902 History of the Central High School of Philadelphia. Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- Husen, Thorsten  
1983 "Are standards in the U.S. schools really lagging behind those in other countries?" Phi Delta Kappan 66:455-461.
- Katz, Michael B.  
1968 The Irony of Early School Reform. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.  
1983 "School attendance in Philadelphia, 1850-1900." Working Paper Number 3, National Institute of Education project report, "The organization of work, schooling and family life in Philadelphia, 1838-1920."
- Katz, Michael B., and Ian Davey  
1978 "School attendance and early industrialization in a Canadian city." History of Education Quarterly 18:271-293.
- Krug, Edward A.  
1964 The Shaping of the American High School, 1880-1920. Madison: University of Wisconsin.  
1972 The Shaping of the American High School, 1920-1941. Madison: University of Wisconsin.
- Labaree, David F.  
1983 "The people's college: A sociological analysis of the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838-1920." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.  
1984 "Setting the standard: Alternative policies for student promotion." Harvard Educational Review, 54(1):67-87.
- National Center for Educational Statistics  
1982 Digest of Education Statistics 1982. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Ogbu, John U.  
1974 The Next Generation. New York: Academic.
- Perlmann, A. Joel  
1980 "Education and social structure of an American city: Social origins and educational attainments in Providence, R.I., 1880-1925." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University.
- Salganik, Laura H., and Nancy Karweit  
1982 "Voluntarism and governance in education." Sociology of Education 55(2/3):152-161.
- Troen, Selwyn K.  
1975 The Public and the Schools: Shaping the St. Louis System, 1838-1920. Columbia: University of Missouri.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census  
1982 Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1982-1983. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce.