

Advocates of strict curriculum are mired in past

By Irwin J. Hoffman

THE editorial department of the Rocky Mountain News has strongly criticized the Denver Board of Education for postponing "tougher" graduation requirements. Thank goodness the board wasn't swayed by these arguments.

School boards around the country have instituted similar requirements for high school graduation. These more stringent standards are like the crusades of the 12th century, killing our educational system in the name of saving it. Saving our children by subjecting them to a curriculum that fits the industrial age (c. 1900-1940) is not the answer to the malaise infecting education. What was a "core" education 50 years ago is not a basic education today.

Society is just beginning to define what constitutes a fundamental education for our "Information Age." It is an education impacted by hand-held calculators, computers, word processors with spelling dictionaries and thesauruses, complex consumerism, the prospect of seven vocational changes in a working lifetime, an overwhelming abundance of data, the necessity of technical reading and writing skills, and the myriad of other aspects of our highly

technical and rapidly changing society. In Denver, the courses students were taking to satisfy the "upgraded" graduation requirements did not meet these needs.

Communities around the country are judging the quality of their schools on the results of the SAT and ACT examinations, tests as hopelessly anachronistic as the curriculum that engenders them. These tests examine, to a large extent, rote memory and algorithmic skills for a society that needs a citizenry with a different array of talents. The screening tests do not forecast real-world achievement; they are designed as predictors of collegiate success.

The result of this malfeasance is twofold: 1) the growth of vast training programs within corporate America and 2) a resonance into the curriculum of a counterproductive emphasis on an "Industrial Age" education.

In Denver, the postponed graduation standards were regressive in nature. The students were allowed two non-core classes a semester. Non-core classes, labeled electives, included typing, word processing, drama, journalism, music, art, electronics, computer courses, industrial arts, oral communication, business classes, ROTC, foreign languages and many others. In the case of a student planning to attend college, one elective was pre-empted for the required foreign language requirement. A

college-bound student who is a musician and wants to continue with the orchestra or band would have been unable to take any of the other courses described above. In a similar way, students interested in an intensive pursuit of computer science, business, art or debate had to limit their high school experiences to very narrow areas.

In the first year of the new requirements, a year affecting only those students graduating in 1989, the computer education department at George Washington High School dropped from a daily enrollment of over 700 students to less than 500 students. A projection of the impact of this kind of attrition on other non-core courses necessitated another look at the requirements.

A basic education in our society should allow and encourage students to experience a variety of curricular offerings. The demise of the elective program was too heavy a price to pay for the core graduation requirements. Our egalitarian society must satisfy many interests and the appropriate education for its citizens requires an intelligent infusion of core skills within the elective courses as well as the development of new courses that articulate with the needs of our society. Such changes in curriculum take a long time and, obviously, the Denver Board of Education recognized that fact.

Three years ago, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics declared that the

use of the hand-held calculator should be part of the mathematics curriculum and that the years spent in learning the long division algorithm could be better spent in applying mathematics to real-life situations. This was a new definition of an Information Age "basic" from the national organization of the mathematics discipline. Yet, conservatives who were educated in the Industrial Age are fighting this change. This intransigence is occurring even when these same people admit they no longer do long division by hand.

Change is slow and the new requirements being instituted across the country often do not properly take into account society's new needs. It is encouraging that Denver is taking a more thoughtful approach. Perhaps other school boards will re-examine what the new standards are doing to their students and will develop courseware that: 1) recognizes students require an ownership in the learning enterprise; 2) reflects an awareness that contemporary society has emerging needs and education must be responsive to these Information Age enterprises, and 3) demands appropriate evaluative instruments with which to judge student achievement.

Irwin J. Hoffman is a teacher at George Washington High School in Denver.

Educator writes a revealing essay

Editor: On Jan. 13, the *Rocky Mountain News* published an essay by Irwin J. Hoffman supporting the Denver Board of Education's recent postponement of more stringent graduation standards. Hoffman's essay says a great deal about our public school system that I am sure he did not mean to say.

Our public schools are in bad shape indeed when a teacher writes that a result of malfeasance is "a resonance into the curriculum," that "students require an ownership in the learning enterprise," and (especially) that students should "experience . . . curricular offerings."

The phrases I have quoted above are all gobbledegook, of course, but there is real meaning hidden in the educationist nonsense. And that meaning is frightening. The mind that composed those nonsensical phrases evidently thought (to the extent that any thinking took place) them not nonsense. And that mind supervises a classroom in our public schools. Are the students required to produce nonsense such as this in place of real thought?

Hoffman's theses are that the subject matter dealt with by the courses whose requirement was postponed is archaic and of little or no use in today's world. I disagree. The subject matter in question is that of language and mathematics. The person who lacks mastery in these areas is disinherited. He lacks the capacity to think, for language and mathematics are the tools of thought. They will never be obsolete.

LOUIS A. TALMAN
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Editor: Irwin Hoffman's article, "Advocates of strict curriculum are mired in past," deserves an award. Hoffman, a



teacher at George Washington High School in Denver, has long been recognized as an outstanding educator. His superb Jan. 13 article shows why.

Hoffman understands and articulates clearly the need to design new core curricula for the "Information Age." Old "Industrial Age" educational designs are simply no longer adequate.

The *News* should send a copy of Hoffman's article to every school board member in Colorado.

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Letters

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