

# What does the High School R

by Grant Blank

This country we call America is now in the middle of some of the most uncertain times in its 194 year history

The uncertainty, this commentary will suggest, is due, in large measure, to the fact that many American's lack any sense of themselves as unique individuals. It will further suggest that American high schools are one of the primary causes of this situation: They actually work against high school students who attempt to achieve a sense of personal uniqueness. Finally, it will suggest several changes that the high school can make to help students achieve a sense of their individuality.

The high school is, theoretically, designed for learning. Its basic purpose is to educate its students so that they will be able to function effectively in American society.

This task is not an easy one. High school students are still in the adolescent stage of development. Edgar Z. Friedenberg in "The Vanishing Adolescent" defines adolescence as, "The period during which a young person learns who he is and what he really feels. It is the time . . . he discovers he is an individual in his own right . . . different from everyone else."

Thus, high school age is the time when a person should achieve a sense of individual uniqueness. This means that, to prepare students to function effectively in American society, the high school must not only train its students in the traditional academic sense, but it must meet the student's psychological and social needs as well.

The sheer speed of American technical progress testifies to the fact that American high schools have been able to train technically skilled persons. But, has the school been able to meet Friedenberg's adolescent need for self-de-

velopment with education beyond the academic sphere?

American high schools have, without consciously trying, created a particular climate of opinion in which the student must function and learn. This climate of opinion is part of an educational ethic, deeply held by both the student and the teacher, that says a personal student-teacher relationship is a necessary prerequisite to any meaningful learning experience.

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**"... There must be an emotional interaction in the learning process."**

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In other words, students and teachers believe that there must be an emotional interaction in the learning process. Without this interaction, they believe, no real learning can take place.

As I see it, this ethic has had three major effects on American high schools: First, it has caused a search for glamour in the school, and a lessening of interest in the actual content of the courses. Second, it has oriented the high schools toward a new atmosphere that is best characterized by the phrase; planned happiness. Third, it has weakened adult authority.

The first of these effects concerns the immediate reaction of the student and teacher to the personalization ethic.

The fact that, students and teachers want to use their emotional resources in the school day rather than save them for a pleasure situation afterward suggests that neither find school very satisfying or meaningful in itself--they look for more out of school than 'mere' academic education. Consciously or unconsciously

Schools are products of the culture that breeds them. Some authorities contend that our culture is changing so fast that schools must struggle frantically to adjust to new cultural values and beliefs.

English, algebra, and physics are subjects traditional to a high school

curriculum. But of attention has other subject--tion itself.

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neither students nor teachers come to school for intellectual learning.

This in turn focusses student concern on getting the right teacher. Witness how many students transfer out of classes because they don't "like" the teacher, or "I just can't stand him!"

Typically, the dislike is oriented toward the teachers style rather than toward what is being taught; she's "boring" or he's "dull." Even when students don't actually leave a class with a "dull" teacher, they simply refuse to listen. As one junior at Ramsey said, "When I don't like a teacher, I just turn him off."

Teaching style is so important that it even determines how well a student does in class. "Newsweek" magazine recently quoted a high school student as seeing his school career in terms of, "Communication with the teacher--I do well in the courses I like and I do lousy in the courses I don't like."

Even teachers are concerned about the feelings of students toward their style. They want to make learning fun and interesting. They actively seek student approval of their teaching.

What carries the real weight for the student, and consequently the teacher, is not what is being taught but how it is being taught.

The teaching style students want teachers to use is best described as a style emphasizing glamour.

Students seem to expect school learning to be as interesting as 'out of school' experiences. As one high school teacher, quoted in "Newsweek" said, "Every day I say to myself, 'Please be exciting enough to get by again. They buy a teachers' personality. You have to compete with television.'"

What the personalization ethic has created then, is a situation where students want to feel an emotional (i.e. personal) feeling. To satisfy that want students look for a teacher who is exciting, unusual, fascinating and glamorous. And the gla-

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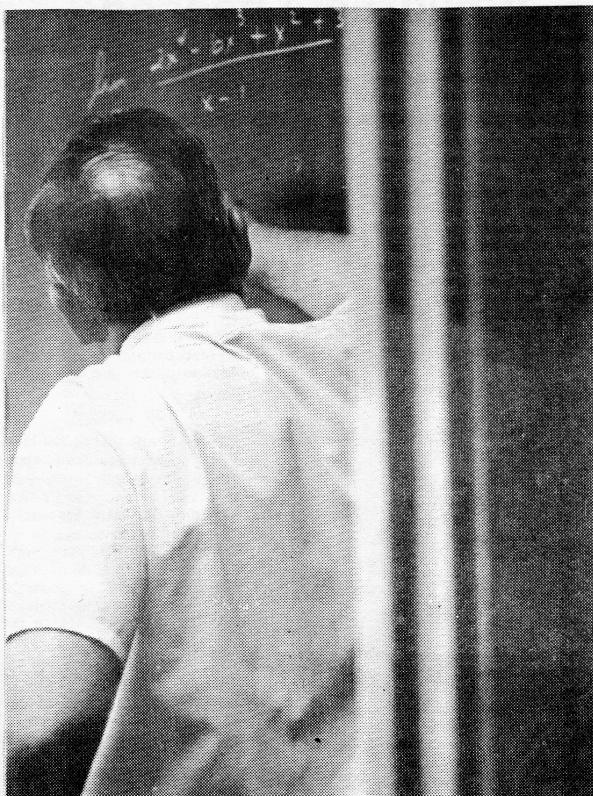
**... glamorous."**

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mour students look for is glamour in the same sense that the movies and T. V. use glamour.

When there is a search for glamour and excitement we must suspect a basic

"The student... never has the chance to become a unique individual..."



The academic side of school: Is it still meaningful for most students?

