

## An Educated People, a Stronger Society, a Stronger Country

*Kyra S. Smith*

Dear Superintendent Zimmerman:

My name is Kyra Smith, and I am a graduate of Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School. I feel compelled to discuss the current issues surrounding the student curriculum at Orangeburg-Wilkinson. Recently a number of studies have indicated that most American students finish their education after the twelfth grade if not before and that other students perform well in their coursework but score below the national average on standardized tests. I personally believe that this educational reality contributes to greater problems in the American society, such as high rates of overall illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty. Education serves as a tool that contributes to the well-being of the American society. The key issue with school curricula is its failure to stress the importance of education. School systems need to be reconstructed in order to address this problem. Communities need to re-evaluate local school curricula in order to promote the value of lifelong education and to increase students' engagement in their K-12 experience. Schools need to design programs, such as those that address learning differences, in order to gain the students' interest. Thus, new systems with a variety of resources provided inside and outside of the school day should be developed so that students can learn and have a thirst for knowledge. For the purposes of this letter, I will propose that public school curricula be used in a way that enhances students' intellectual capacities and equips them with the knowledge and tools necessary to determine their own livelihood, to get involved politically, and to promote economic development and social advancement.

Students today need to take courses that will enhance their abilities to learn other subjects. Some people learn from reading, writing, or by examples, while others learn visually.

Currently, school systems stress the importance of reading, writing, and arithmetic. However, these courses are not the only courses available to assist in students' learning processes. For example, many schools are starting to do away with art and music courses because they feel that these courses are costing the systems too much money and because they do not see how these courses will directly benefit students other than for leisure or extra-curricular purposes. The truth is that the study of music and art helps students learn from different perspectives, which also aid in the learning of other subjects. The study of music can provide many benefits. For instance, many choral songs are written in other languages. These songs are often from famous poems, artworks, or plays from different countries or time periods. Students must learn how to translate them in order to gain a better understanding about the music. This approach helps students develop better interpretation skills, while also learning about different cultures. Music is actually a form of art. Studying art can stimulate the minds of students to help them learn in a different way. It can increase the creative, intellectual, expressive, and inventive abilities of teenagers to make them better students and people. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger says, "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (543). The way we perceive art aids in the way we understand other subjects. For example, some works of British literature, like Shakespeare's plays, can be quite difficult for the average individual to interpret, but with the study of arts these interpretations can be quite easy because a person will have already developed some skill in interpreting stories. According to *Americans for the Arts*, students who participate in the arts are four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement than those who do not.

A number of recent proposals have called for higher expectations and more challenging school curricula. I do agree with this proposal, but with some provisions. Proponents argue that

these goals should be achieved through increasing graduation requirements, offering more rigorous courses, and by just demanding more of students. I believe that school systems should focus on the overall quality of the education provided as well as students' performance. The demonstration of quality comes when schools focus on teaching students to understand and to learn how to apply the education that they have been taught. Often students are simply learning for the moment. The current curriculum allows students to pass courses based on their abilities to regurgitate information. Instead, the curriculum should be designed to improve students' abilities to understand and evaluate the significance of facts they learn. In order to do this, schools must create a curriculum more relevant to students' lives. Students must be able to relate to certain concepts in order to understand. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire says, "Students should become conscious of their own perceptions of reality so that education becomes a liberating process" (465). Freire is proposing an educational system in which students will be taught material that exists in their realities. Students will be more willing to learn about ideas that directly affect them. For example, the poor cannot be taught about the values and concepts of the rich unless they themselves have experienced that lifestyle. Instead, they must be taught about the causes and effects of their own situations in order to make changes. In his lecture, "Making Education Pragmatic," Andrew Miller said, "Education is useless if we do not apply it; the key to personal and intellectual development is learning beyond the walls of the classroom." This type of learning promotes economic liberation.

Many benefits associated with creating a curriculum can improve the education students receive. A newly constructed educational system that focuses on better education techniques will help students improve their economic situations as well as that of society. One explanation as to why illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment rates are increasing is the lack of opportunities

for higher education. Many students who finish their education at the end of twelfth grade or before end up living off government aid or working at minimum wage jobs, and raising families who live in poverty. These people end up accepting their situations and influencing their children with the same ideas, thus contributing to the recurring cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. For reasons such as these, it is crucial that primary and secondary schools change their curricula to influence the importance of education and its benefits to students.

The lack of higher education in the general population also affects many political decisions. The reason why there are so many political debates about government policies, such as social security, prescription drugs, and taxes, is that many people lack education about these issues. Our governmental system depends on the intellectual strength of its people. “The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms his strength into right” (Rousseau 152). Rousseau is referring to a governmental system, indicating that a government can only be as powerful as its people. For instance, the United States is ruled through a democracy of, by, and for the people; thus, if the people are not educated, then the government is not strong. The world around us is ever changing with new advancements in technology and people’s abilities, so education must change with it. Students are members of society, and the more educated a society is as a whole, the more knowledgeable they are about the world in which they live. The advancement of a country depends on the advancement of its people.

As a current college student, I understand the value of a higher education. Now I am able to communicate and to understand certain concepts better than I did before. I know that each level of education (primary, secondary, and college) has its own level of development, but as the number of students furthering their education decreases, major curriculum changes have to be

made in order to capture students in the elementary and secondary levels. Superintendent Zimmerman, I ask that you strongly take into consideration these benefits of how changing your school's curriculum will affect your students as well as our society. Thank you in advance, and I look forward to seeing the implementation of these changes.

Concerned Alumna:

Kyra Smith

Lynchburg College Senior Symposium

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