The Latest Fad In Public Schools

by Phyllis Schlafly August 29, 2007

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Every few years a new fad sweeps across the public schools. We've had self-esteem, new math, whole language, New Age, outcome-based education, school-to-work, mental health screening, school-based clinics, global education, diversity, multiculturalism, and early childhood education.

The newest public school fad was announced last week on the front page of the New York Times, so educators must be taking it seriously. If it hasn't come to your town yet, no doubt it will come soon.

Freshmen at Dwight Morrow High School in New Jersey, starting this fall, must declare a major, and they must take at least one course in that subject every trimester for four years. The major will be noted on their diploma.

How many kids between the ages of 14 and 18 do you think ever change their minds about what they like and don't like? Let's rephrase my question: do you know any teenagers who don't change their minds frequently?

Most teens have a hard time deciding what to wear, what to eat, and with whom they will go to the prom. Probably most students haven't even selected their lifetime career when they start college.

But at Dwight Morrow, those who change their minds are out of luck. If they find they don't like their original choice, they can't change unless they produce a "compelling reason," but even that may not be sufficient.

In preparation for this "choose major" plan, students were asked to write essays about what they wanted to specialize in. The most popular subject chosen was sports management.

The Times quoted a girl named Akelia who at 14 declared she wanted to be a lawyer, but after two years realized how much work she would have to put in studying "boring" cases, so she tried to switch to computers. Alas, she found she was locked into her major and not permitted to change.

Don't worry about students' difficulty in making a decision. They will be assisted by a school guidance counselor whose task is to map out a six-year career path that even includes the first year of college.

If a teen is a world-class genius like Michelangelo, it could be a good thing to get started developing his talent early. But most of us are not Michelangelos, and we can't count on the "choose major" experiment to produce modern Michelangelos.

Most teens are not ready to lock into a lifetime career so early; they need to explore and investigate options and opportunities. Anyway, there are magnet schools for those who are ready for specialization.

It is customary for educators to initiate their new fads in poorer schools where they feel they have a better chance to con parents and students into believing that they are getting the most modern improvements in education. The Dwight Morrow classrooms are ridiculously labeled Harvard, Yale and Rutgers.

Dwight Morrow is a high school with low test scores and racial tensions. Three-quarters are black or Hispanic, and 60 percent qualify for free or reduced lunches.

This "choose major" fad seems to have spread nationwide under the radar without prior publicity. Apparently some hundreds of high schools now require students to specialize, but most are not so rigid as to require a major.

Mississippi has a pilot program to have ninth graders choose one of seven career paths from construction to technology.

Like any new school fad, "choose major" of course requires more taxpayer funding. The New Jersey district has hired five new teachers, and set up advisory boards for each track that include performing artists, doctors, and lawyers.

Public schools should teach all first-graders to read by the time-tested phonics system, and teach all schoolchildren to know and use the fundamentals of arithmetic by the end of the third grade. This would end the shocking epidemic of illiteracy that now permits students to get into high school and even graduate without being able to read, write or calculate change at the grocery store.

Choosing a major won't solve the problem of high school dropouts who can't read, write, add, subtract, multiply, or divide. Public schools will remain a national embarrassment unless and until the fundamentals are taught in elementary classes.