TV Previews

Troubling Report on Schools

By Lawrence Feinberg

This year's spate of reports on American schools has now spawned a film documentary. Its view is largely downbeat, like most of the reports, though it starts with the statement—later half-proved—that "mediocrity and excellence walk hand in hand" in the classroom.

The one-hour film, "High Schools," was produced by Charles Guggenheim and will be broadcast at 9 tonight on Channel 26. It is based on the report by Ernest L. Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and a former U.S. Commissioner of Education under President Carter.

Like Boyer's report, which was released in September, Guggenheim's film is thoughtful and often insightful. Many of its scenes of the schools ring true. Some are dramatic and jarring.

There are buses, bells and intruding public address systems. A male teacher walks into a girl's bathroom to summon its smoking occupants to class. A guidance counselor cajoles a student to take harder courses. In an auto mechanics class a boy struggles inarticulately to describe the kind of light he wants to work with. In interviews teachers complain that they can't afford what they want for their families.

Despite its merits, though, the film is incomplete in important ways and sometimes off-balance. Although it faithfully reports Boyer's major recommendations, starting with a core curriculum and mastery of English, it often focuses on a 1960s-style critique of the schools as uncaring and "unconnected" institutions rather than on the current hard issues of academic achievement and standards.



Scene from PBS documentary "High Schools"; by Grace Guggenheim

For example, there are no pictures of high school seniors stumbling through eighth-grade level texts, who can be found in many schools. Conversely, there are no shots of bright students and bright teachers analyzing a college-level text, which can also be found.

While the film mentions that test scores have declined, it says many students are "sufferers of information overload." Some of its most vivid complaints are about the "passivity" of classrooms and the "bigness" of schools and their "detached" bureaucracy.

Its only example of a student praising his teachers takes place in a small "alternative" high school designed for dropouts. Teen-agers go to work, it says, mainly "to give meaning and purpose to their lives."

The film also denounces academic tracking, "which assumes that some students are college-bound and others are work-bound," but its most lively example of teaching and learning is a college-prep English class.

Guggenheim is well-known as a political filmmaker for Robert and Edward Kennedy, and in 1972 for George McGovern. He has also produced widely acclaimed films on the construction of the East Building of the National Gallery of Art and on Thomas Jefferson.

His "High Schools" was financed by the Carnegie Foundation with a $450,000 grant from the Atlantic Richfield Foundation, and included filming in seven schools—in Baltimore, Missouri, New Jersey and Brookline, Mass. There is also footage from a meeting of the Montgomery County School Board—under assault from unhappy citizens.

Guggenheim says he didn't just report on what he found in the schools, but used them "to put flesh and blood" on Boyer's findings, though Boyer himself does not appear.

All this is quite different from the film made in the mid-1950s to accompany James Conant's report on schools. That documentary was mostly Conant himself explaining his views, a "talking head" kind of film that one Carnegie staff member said was "the sort of thing we wanted to get away from."

Guggenheim's film certainly does that.

Does it show us the schools? Yes, but partly, and through its own point of view.