

V

DISCUSSION

IS THE HIGH SCHOOL SUCCEEDING ?

In measuring the success or failure of secondary educational institutions today it is necessary to consider, with other related problems, the holding power of the system. A study aiming to discover the strength of the holding power of a particular high school or of high schools in general will lead to a revelation of facts which will startle school administrators; and the reward will be an increased knowledge, somewhat painful in its fullness of meaning, which will point out definitely some of the most important fallacies underlying school administration, particularly curriculum-making.

A recent study was made by the writer of the holding power of a certain West Virginia high school which enrolls annually about 160 different boys and girls. The period covered by the study was 1914-1920.

During this period the high school enrolled approximately 520 different boys and girls. Of this number, 167, or 32 per cent of the total enrollment, withdrew from school before graduating.

A large per cent of the membership of the group were over age. A much larger per cent had reached or passed the compulsory age limit fixed by law. The actual distribution of 138 of the total number of withdrawals, based on age, is shown in the following table. The per cent terms cover the actual number of students accounted for in the table and not the total number of withdrawals. This modification of the study was necessary because twenty-nine withdrawals do not have their ages recorded in the permanent files.

Age	No. pupils withdrawing	Per cent
14	3	2.1
15	19	13.7
16	28	23.1
17	31	22.4
18	37	26.4
19	14	10.1
20	3	2.1
21	2	1.4
22	1	.7

According to grade the distribution was as follows:

Grade	No.	Per cent
I	55	32.9
II	54	32.3
III	40	23.9
IV	18	10.7

Distribution according to sex:

Sex	No.	Per cent
Male	96	58
Female	71	42

An approximation of the per cent of boys withdrawing to the total number of boys enrolled during the period is thirty-eight; and, on the same basis, for the girls, twenty-nine per cent.

The distribution of boys and girls within the group of withdrawals determined by cause for leaving school is as follows:

Cause	No.	Per cent
Economic	90	53.8
Transferred	38	22.7
Illness	5	2.9
Married	3	1.8
Failure	2	1.2
Not known	29	16.7

A comparison of the number of withdrawals year by year with the number of graduates illustrates in a graphic way the alarming exodus of under-graduates from the school.

Year	Graduates	Withdrawals
1914	18	15
1915	22	32
1916	34	25
1917	28	18
1918	33	27
1919	25	34
1920	27	12
Unaccounted for		4

Conclusions based on the data tabulated above are not encouraging. First, the larger per cent of pupils leaving school before graduating were over age. Second, the larger per cent were boys and girls who had spent less than two complete years in the high school. Third, a majority of the withdrawals were boys. Fourth, more than half the number left school to accept positions in offices and stores and work shops. Fifth, the number of withdrawals for the period studied almost equals the number of graduates of the school for the same period.

It would be unfair to the particular high school under surveillance and to its community to infer that the situation described

is not typical. As a matter of fact, conditions modifying the particular situation just reviewed compare favorably with conditions modifying other situations of like character as reviewed by the Federal Bureau of Education and by other source authorities. However, it matters not how favorably this situation may compare with those elsewhere; the problem is not the less real; neither is it of less concern.

It is from this situation, and a great many others of like kind, that we discover one of the most evident needs for reorganization inside the field of secondary education. What can be done to hold our young men and our young women in our high schools? And, holding them, what shall be provided for them in the way of educational opportunities superior to and more attractive than those offered them in the field of industry?

From accurate, detailed knowledge of each of the ninety boys and girls who left school to accept positions in business, it is known that the change was registered very largely as voluntary action by the members of the group. Economic necessity was not the motivating power behind the transition. Fundamentally the responsibility for the emigration rests upon the curriculum.

For many years secondary courses of study have been shaped to conform to requirements imposed upon our secondary schools by institutions of higher learning—requirements that can be defined only in terms of the classics. It has been presupposed all along that the supreme aim of education as related to high school processes and methods is that of "preparing young people for college." As a matter of fact, the aim of preparing young people for college should apply in the instance of the boy and the girl who are able to afford a college education and intend to follow the plan through to completion. We know today, however, that only a small per cent of high school graduates attend college. To the large majority of our secondary school population we have accordingly been offering a course of study, in content and nature a series of intellectual exercises, unrelated and unsympathetic to the practical every day life that follows the conclusion of school days. No longer do we find it possible to convince young people or their parents that the conjugation of *amo* or

the interpretation of *Q. E. D.* correlates with the active, practical duties of citizenship and of bread winning. And if we found the thing still possible, on what ground could the logic be justified, if we face the issue squarely?

It is here that the holding power of the school lacks strength. Nor will the school be able to function successfully until it has bridged the gulf that now so clearly and definitely separates the school from the community. In order to meet the present emergency it is necessary to reshape our point of view; to accept in practice a more embracing aim; to widen our conception of the field of service of our high schools; to reorganize and broaden the present curriculum so that it will take into account individual differences and the widely varying aims that the high school population entertains toward the educational process and toward life—to make these aims coincident. For too long a time has the educational process been victimized by the elusive, the indefinite cultural-classical aim. The banker does not attempt to conduct business with the public in Latin. Neither does the merchant review the campaigns of Alexander in an effort to improve the efficiency of his clerks. How then can the high school function successfully if it continues to limit its activity to the traditional subjects? Surely there is need for a compromise between the past and the present, between the ancient and the modern, between the ideal and the real in our class rooms today. The aims and processes involved in high school training must be made more practical. Instead of revolving about life they must make life itself the real thing in the class room. More of business and less of Latin, more of the practical arts and less of trigonometry, more of present day issues in politics and economics and less of remotely detailed history, more of the laboratory and less of the class room lecture would do much to make school life real life and would go a long way toward improving the holding power of the school. This is one of the directions for the school to follow in its effort to understand and to realize within its possible sphere of influence the hopes and aspirations of its population.

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