SOME ECONOMIES IN
PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

INTRODUCTION.—During this particular period of financial depression the term economy is a popular word. Most any program can gain attention by announcing that it is intended to bring about certain economies. Economy in public school administration, however, means transferring to the rising generation, in the shortest amount of time and in the most efficient manner, the "group culture" and habits and methods of work which are likely to prove useful in the life which they will lead. Time is not, however, the only consideration. If what we teach is unimportant and superficial, no matter how long studied, it is uneconomical. If we permit the progress of the gifted to be retarded by the plodding and average student, it is uneconomical. If we permit a heavy percentage of our students to drop out or withdraw before graduation, it is uneconomical. If we permit or require students to acquire a fund of knowledge, habits, and methods of work which are not useful in their chosen life's work, it is uneconomical. If we permit an excessive amount of retardation and too many failures, it is uneconomical. If we permit "teaching units" to exist below a justifiable size, it is uneconomical. If we permit an excessive overhead expenditure for education, it is uneconomical. If we permit our schools to remain open 180 days and secure only 110 days of average attendance, it is uneconomical. If we permit our transportation program to be run and managed in such a way as to become excessively costly, it is uneconomical.

Time will not permit me to explain in detail how each of the suggestions just made can be administered in the most economical manner. I desire, however, to select a few of the situations and indicate briefly how certain economies may be realized.

A. The Problem of School Attendance.—
The Virginia school census counts 724,137 children of school age. The attendance records in the public schools show 79,855,869 days attended, or only 110 days per census child. The records show, however, that the schools were kept open an average of 170 days. Hence, we are wasting through non-attendance a considerable amount of school funds. Probably 10% to 15% waste through non-attendance is necessary; but no school division should be satisfied until 85% to 90% of its school population is in the public schools each day the schools are open and, in addition, have 98% to 100% of the children fully accounted for—in private schools, in out-of-state schools, in colleges, in welfare institutions, etc.

The state is now employing a sufficient number of teachers to teach every child of school age in the state—a teacher for each forty-two children. Of course, these teachers are not properly distributed; but there are glaring inequalities in the distribution of teachers in almost every school division. It is estimated that from one-half to two-thirds of the 616 non-legal schools with fewer than twenty pupils in average daily attendance can easily become legal schools if the teachers, school authorities, and patrons work for better attendance. There is not a school division in the state (with the possible exception of Scott County) that should not be able to secure much more education for the
money it spends through increasing attendance. The fact that we enrol only 80% of our school population and give the average child of school age only 110 days schooling in a year is a serious reflection upon the regard with which Virginians hold education, the interest which teachers create in school work, and the efficiency of school officials. We must face the issue, accept the responsibility, and right this deplorable condition.

What can be done?

1. Make good school attendance a condition for:
   a. Keeping a school open. Do not allow a school to run with the full quota of teachers or the full term unless the attendance keeps up. This forces public opinion to assert itself and keep the would-be delinquent in school.
   b. Securing maximum financial benefits. The state can do much in this respect through the distribution of at least half of the state funds on the basis of attendance. Several counties have made attendance a basis for determining the monthly salary of teachers, and report good results.

2. Make the schools so good that the pupils and patrons want to make full use of them. (This will be discussed more fully later.)

3. Make wise use of the compulsory attendance law.

B. The Problem of Retardation and Failure.—Ten years ago the average school child in Virginia counties was retarded two years. Last year the retardation was only one year. This has been commendable progress, but an average retardation of one year costs Virginia about $3,000,000 a year to re-teach pupils who failed to learn the first time they had an opportunity.

What can be done to reduce this waste?

1. Provide adequate and capable supervision of instruction. This measure alone will eliminate about two-thirds of this waste, or make a saving of $2,000,000 at a cost of approximately one-third of this sum, or about $700,000. It should be considered professional malpractice to organize a school system without making provision for classroom supervision. There is probably no other educational practice which is so completely justified by scientific measurement as is supervision in rural schools. Supervision improves the teaching, creates pupil interest, increases attendance, and tones up the work of the school from every angle. It costs only a small fraction of its measured value, and its unmeasured values are thought to be of much greater importance than the measured improvement in learning the three R's and in increased attendance.

2. Furnish free textbooks and teaching materials. These, of the right sort, are comparable, for eliminating waste, to the substitution of scythe for the sickle. In a few cases we might even make the comparison between the scythe and mowing machine. Science has made great progress during the past five years in inventing more effective teaching and learning tools. To ignore them is to continue unnecessary waste of public funds. About two dollars per child should be set aside for teaching and learning tools—textbooks, self-help work books, study guides, etc.

3. Organize health instruction and free clinics. Superintendent Irby, of Rockbridge County, estimates (after careful study of records over a period of years) that the poor physical
condition of his pupils costs the county $12,000 a year. His Five Point pupils make much better records and only a small percentage of them fail and have to be retaught. Rockbridge has an efficient health unit and is above the state average for Five Point pupils. School money spent for health service, according to the Virginia state program, is money well spent and brings increased educational values as well as great human comfort and lengthened life.

C. The Problem of “Teacher Load.”—Virginia employs one teacher for each twenty-eight pupils in average daily attendance. The City of Pittsburgh sees a need for only one teacher to forty-two pupils in average daily attendance. Maryland distributes its state money on the basis of forty pupils in average daily attendance per teacher. Many experiments show that classes of forty-five to fifty-five pupils are as satisfactory as smaller classes. In sixty-four Virginia counties when pupil learning was measured and averaged by size of class, in 1929-30, the first six places went to pupils in classes of thirty-five or more pupils. The evidence tends to indicate that learning takes place more rapidly in classes of thirty-five or more pupils. Sparseness of population will not account for the small class size in Virginia. Poor attendance has its influence, but the real cause is to be found in the schools with two or more teachers and a false conception of “grading” pupils.

What can be done?

1. Assign teachers, on the average, larger classes (thirty to forty pupils) and increase their salaries. Your teachers will be glad to take the extra pupils at one-half the per capita cost.

2. Divide the so-called “grades,” if necessary, to adjust the teacher-load. The best half of any grade is more advanced and can do better work than the lowest quarter of the grade above. A little mixing up will tend to force your teachers to remember that they are teaching children instead of grades.

D. The Problem of Transportation.—Virginia is now spending over $1,000,000 a year on transportation and is surely headed toward $5,000,000 or $10,000,000. As a rule, the present costs for transportation are about twice what can be justified by the public service rendered. At present rates, the potential transportation costs in Virginia are $10,000,000 annually, but with proper management a high type of service can be had for half that amount. Much of our present transportation is for the favored few. Only a few counties appear to have an equitable county-wide program of transportation. Over half of the bus routes are let by contract. The data show that those counties owning and operating their own buses get a higher type of service for about twenty-five per cent less money. This is generally true in Virginia and several other states where a careful study has been made. The only just argument in favor of the contract system is that it relieves public officials and employees of their inherent duties. Where county ownership and operation fail, poor management is the cause.

What can be done?

1. Work out a fair and equitable transportation program for the county, so that the service is free to all who need it on the same terms.

2. Work out long routes with one bus serving several schools en route, instead of having several buses making short hauls into one center. Such routing may sometimes enable four buses to give better service than eight
3. Own and operate your own buses.

Summary.—The four economies mentioned are only a few of the possible ones suggested in the introduction. A forty-eight weeks' school term might more than cut the present cost of education in half, co-operative purchasing of supplies might net the state no insignificant sum, and so on through numerous items, small and large. The educational dollar is probably spent more wisely than any other dollar of public funds, unless Health and Welfare have a just claim; but as efficiency engineers in education, we have barely started. Virginia is the first and only state so far to officially organize to test its own laws, regulations, and standards in a systematic and comprehensive way. We have been buying education “in a poke” long enough. We need to know what we intend to purchase and take a look at it rather than pay out good money for something which is thought to represent something which might be good.

The fundamental principles of economy in education are:
1. Know specifically what school money is supposed to purchase.
2. Pay out the money only on evidence that educational values have been received. These principles are easier stated than practiced, but we can do much more in this respect than we have been doing. The emphasis in education for the next decade or two should be upon how to secure more education for the money we have.

S idney B. H all

We think if by tight economy we can manage to arrive at independence, then indeed we will begin to be generous without stay. We sacrifice all nobleness to a little present meanness.—Th oreau.