Changing Pupils in a Changing School

Evidence of gain in pupils' learning has appeared since desegregation.

"ONCE nine hundred children went to school here." The retiring custodian of West School was speaking 16 years ago when, as neophyte principal, I first came to work in the community. "That was when the neighborhood was young."

But "young" neighborhoods grow up. At the time he spoke, only 400 children were attending. Later, in 1954, numbers had dwindled to less than 300, and West's "grandchildren"—offspring of parents who had attended the school—frequently enrolled. Meanwhile, small changes were taking place in the area as urbanization forces crept slowly out from the center of the city. The neighborhood kept neatly manicured lawns, proud and gracious homes. Yet, here and there on the edges were evidences of a creeping blight—hedges left untrimmed, or worn through by careless feet, a crumbling porch, homes converted into small business enterprises.

Our Community Changes

Most of the parents were still "salt of the earth," stable, friendly people providing a background of cultural experiences for their children and cooperating with their school and community. Almost half were Jewish people, ambitious for their children and generous with time and money. As time went on changes were noted in the occupation of the fathers. The percentage of professionals dropped, and more children from lower middle class homes attended. Differences began to be noted in the background of the children. The span of intelligence level widened. Mothers went to work outside of the homes—some because of economic necessity, others, to provide for their children the luxuries of life, or a college education. Soon there appeared in the windows a dark face or two. In the back yards little Negro children played quietly together. Slowly, conducting themselves with decorum and dignity, upper class Negroes moved into some of the homes on quiet streets. We had Negro neighbors.

Later, after integration, we were to know these people better as kind and
loving parents and as cooperative patrons of the school. Now, however, we learned little about them except through an occasional confidence from the earlier residents, "I used to step out to get the milk in the morning in my robe, but our new neighbors never do that, so I have stopped doing it now."

In September 1954 West opened as an integrated school. The enrollment soared. Three classes were opened the first year and two each succeeding year. Now children from parents in all occupational classes came. The widest disparities were noted in cultural background. We had become in truth a small "melting pot" from which, with other similar schools, the liberties of future generations of Americans of all races must be forged.

Our Children Differ

Our children's range in intelligence was tremendous—at one time from 68 to 167 IQ! In many cases there was an educational lag of one to six years in reading achievement. "Sixth grade" children tested in reading from grade 1.4 to 9.0. For many years past our children testing high average in intelligence had ranked far above the national norm in reading. Now our reading achievements dropped down far below national norms. Faculty morale slipped to a low ebb. Our Negro teachers were eager to learn new methods and willing to share with us their understanding of Negro children. But even they grew discouraged with achievements.

The problem of discipline reared its ugly head. Freedom in classroom and corridor sometimes became license. Indirect methods of control were of no avail. Hall and playground duty became difficult tasks for experienced teachers and thwarting for the inexperienced.

White and Negro teachers were working together—many with the pride of long years of successful experience, working harder than any of us had worked in all our lives before. Were we failing in our duty to these children and so to our country?

We Accept the Challenge

The words of Abraham Lincoln in his Address to Congress in 1863 leaped to new life within our minds: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise to the occasion. As our case is new so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthral ourselves and then we shall save our country."

We decided to "think anew and act anew." The methods by which we had established a good school in other days with outstanding character development and achievement in our children were unequal to the "stormy present." We began to "disenthral ourselves," and it wasn't easy.

We resolved to hold fast to our high standards, to learn more about our present pupils, and to experiment with different methods of work.

We Seek New Dimensions

It was not easy to gain clear understandings about our children. We were plagued by oversized classes and high rate of mobility.

We studied our children in class, on the playground, in their homes, and in the community. We invited parents for long conferences which revealed family values, mores, and methods of home discipline. We learned that in some homes beating was the form of punishment ac-
cepted by both parent and child. In school, without fear of physical reprisal, children often worked out their aggressions and thwartings with results not at all conducive to pupil progress.

We learned, too, from these conferences that the insistent demand for more and more homework from homes, cultured and uncultured, was tied to ambition for the children, to a lack in many instances of sound recreational patterns, and not infrequently to a desire to use the homework to substitute for family discipline.

We learned that false and too sweeping generalizations on the part of Negroes about whites, and on the part of whites about Negroes, created tensions. Sometimes rejection was experienced by young children. A young mother wrote to explain a sudden rebellious attitude of her daughter to her kind and capable white teacher: "In January we moved here from a block in which Phylicia was one of the most popular children in the area. She had almost too many friends, if such is possible. Never a dull moment. Then abruptly we bought a home, moved to a block where not one little girl has been allowed to play with Phylicia although at first all have attempted friendliness. Reared in an atmosphere where only behavior has counted, the rejections of the past months have been a great shock to Phylicia and she is still confused. She could not understand the 'sudden' color distinctions, especially since her own complexion is fair and people have always 'made a lot over her.' After our talk this morning, Phylicia went to school probably feeling quite rebellious toward an image of Susan's (a rejecting playmate's) mother. As a result, she associated Susan's mother with you probably (through no fault whatever of yours)."

We studied pupil records. We saw broken homes, children living insecurely, in many instances with neither parent. We saw frequent changes of schools as economic necessity forced families to move from one school area to another.

As a faculty we shared our knowledge and understanding of the children. We asked for, and gave advice and help to each other. Sometimes the teachers served as my consultants. We used our master teachers, white and Negro, as group leaders, policy planners, helpers to new teachers.

As we learned more about our children we saw changes in their reactions to us. Faces of children in trouble lost the "dead-pan" look and came alive with changing emotions as they sought with us a solution to their problems. Children in trouble trusted us. Rude, negative answers to questions diminished in number and violence. Often the truth, even though damaging, was told at the start of a conference, and a healthy emotional tone was established for the improvement of the situation and of the child.

We "Act Anew"

Coincident with our deepened understanding of our children came changes in methods of teaching. Frequent evaluation meetings were held. In these, our faculty took an honest look at our methods and their effect on the learning of our children.

Both our experience with the children and the low test scores in paragraph meaning showed us that our children needed consistent and sequential development of concepts. Through trips and other firsthand experiences as well as with books and visual aids we developed concepts in science, in social studies, in math, and the arts. "Milk really does
come from a cow!" said a sixth grade girl aide helping a second grade group on their trip to a farm, "and a cow is so big!"

We worked constantly for improvement in pronunciation and enunciation. In our oral English work, in spelling and in phonetics related both to reading and to spelling, we worked to improve speech habits.

Each teacher learned to make an informal reading inventory and used this technique to group her children for instruction in reading.

We made assignments on the level of each group—very simple factual ones for slow groups and, for those more highly endowed, assignments involving fine discrimination, critical thinking, and interpretation.

It was evident that some form of ability grouping was necessary. It was completely unrealistic, for instance, to give a sixth grade teacher a class of sometimes 40 children, ranging in IQ from 73 to 167, and in reading level from 1.4 to 9.3.

We wanted, however, to avoid the undemocratic complications of the old XYZ ability groupings—with consequent parental pressure to put each child, no matter how limited, in the highest group. Rather we developed a policy which we called Overlapping Ability Grouping. We used reading level as our main criterion, but also considered mental age and social maturity. Miss A, who had the fastest learners, had also a few high average ones. Miss B had a high average to low average range. Miss C had the slowest ones with some low average children. Not a perfect system, of course, but under it grouping for reading instruction could be done on three levels usually, and so each child could read at his instructional level. Yet since there was no hard and fast delineation between groups, parents seldom asked for changes of placement. A truly democratic grouping is one where each child's needs, social and intellectual, can most nearly be met.

We gave our children the kind of discipline they needed—firm and kind—with external controls established first and leading to internal controls. We found something in every child that we could honestly praise. We feel that a child needs something to live up to, not to live down.

We provided many opportunities for pupil leadership through Patrols, Girl Aides, and school and classroom committee work. We made every opportunity to overcome the handicaps under which some of our children live—social, moral, intellectual, and economic—and to make school a happy place for them to live and to work in.

Our Children Achieve

We had worked prodigiously. We had studied, planned, evaluated as a faculty. Early in the year 1958-59 there were some evidences that a degree of success was crowning our efforts. We knew that many of our children had achieved a high level of self-control in halls, in classrooms and on the playground. Some of them had developed outstanding leadership. But what about reading and understanding? There were evidences throughout the year in books read, in teachers' tests and in semi-standardized commercial tests that our children were achieving very well. By now we were almost afraid to believe it.

At the start of the year the fifth grade tests (Stanford KM) disappointed us. We felt that in one class they did not reveal the children's true ability. So two months later we gave 30 children the Stanford M, a comparable test. Incre-
ments ranged from -.1 year to 3.6 years with the mode from one to two years (instead of the expected .2 increment). These results to some extent increased our confidence in the job we were doing. Our Superintendent and our Department of Pupil Appraisal were much interested in the results of our second test.

In March 1959, our sixth grade pupils were tested with the Stanford Reading Test, Intermediate Form. Results indicated that in all subjects West sixth graders averaging 100 in IQ were well above national norms. Concerning our reading achievements Dr. Carl Hansen, our Superintendent, said in his "Summary of the Desegregation Experiences in the Public Schools of the District of Columbia for the Notre Dame Conference (May 8, 1958)":

An illustration of superior growth is found in the summary of achievement gains (in reading) made by three classes of sixth grade students in the West Elementary School, March 1959, over their fifth grade placement in the fall of 1957.

The West School, formerly all white, has an enrollment of 572 Negro and 84 white pupils, a faculty of 12 white and 8 Negro persons.

Class A
- Fifth grade median 6.3
- Sixth grade median 8.7
- Mental maturity 7.7

Class B
- Fifth grade median 4.5
- Sixth grade median 7.2
- Mental maturity 6.5

Class C
- Fifth grade median 4.5
- Sixth grade median 6.4
- Mental maturity 6.2

How well have we succeeded in educating these youngsters? Improvement in achievement tests is only one index. It is difficult to evaluate the major factors—the growth in poise, in self-discipline, the development of cultural background and interests, the growing desire of the children to learn, to understand, the constant use of the public library, and the increase in pleasure and pride in their school.

Over and over again in their letters evaluating their school the children refer to it as a respected school or as a school with a good reputation. They recognize that the program involves more than the skills. "The teachers teach us right from wrong." Pamela, a sixth grader in Class B, writes: "I think that West is a wonderful school. I like it because I know that I can be well educated. I also like it because I have such a nice teacher. Another reason why I like West is because I not only learn to read, write and do arithmetic, but I have learned how to make friends and keep them. I have learned that when someone picks a fight with me, to walk away. I have learned all that from West School's teachers and my principal."

Through the years, our community has changed, and the children entering our school have reflected these changes. Our faculty has accepted the challenge of a changing school, has reached out to new dimensions in understanding children, has held to high standards while adapting methods of work to the learners' needs.