

Florence C. Kelly

Ungraded Primary School

*Described is one plan
to promote
continuous growth.*

IN the Milwaukee Public Schools, the ungraded primary school is more than a theoretical plan of organization; it is an accomplished fact. Since its initiation in one school in January 1942, the ungraded primary organization has been adopted on a voluntary basis in 114 of the city's 116 elementary schools. Such educational progress has taken place during the past 18 years because the Board of School Directors and the administration, principals and teachers, parents and the general public have come to recognize and appreciate the values inherent in the ungraded primary organization of school administration.

To provide readers with an understanding of the ungraded primary school program and how it operates, this article emphasizes certain points. These are: (a) the basic philosophy underlying the plan of ungraded primary organization; (b) some desirable classroom practices which help in its implementation; and (c) certain observations of a general nature, relating to the recording and reporting of pupil progress, and the like.

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A Philosophy of Growth

The ungraded primary organization is a means of making functional a philosophy that has been talked about for years. It is a most effective way of adjusting teaching and administrative procedures to meet the individual differences among children. It permits adaptations to the variations in pupils' mental ability, physical capacity, and social development. The ungraded primary organization is *not* a method of teaching, but rather an administrative tool, designed to encourage and promote a philosophy of continuous growth.

Flexible Grouping

How does this work in practice? Under the ungraded primary school arrangement followed in Milwaukee, children who have successfully completed the kindergarten enter Primary One, or P¹, the first semester above the kindergarten. Each child then progresses to the next semester above the kindergarten through the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, or eighth semester, as the case may warrant, before entering the fourth grade.



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Each child is placed in a class suitable to his maturity and his particular needs.

The designations, P¹ through P⁸, serve only as convenient indicators of how many semesters a child has been enrolled in the primary school. These symbols do not show his academic achievement. Each child's progress is measured in terms of his achievement in reading, language, arithmetic, and other areas of learning rather than the amount of time he has spent in the primary school.

Each child is placed, in a primary school class according to his over-all maturity and his particular needs. As a result, most primary school classes above P¹ include several semester groupings, such as P³⁻⁴ or P⁵⁻⁶.

The total length of time a child spends in the primary school depends upon his abilities, accomplishments, and readiness for advancement to grade four. The range is from four to eight semesters. For most children, the work requires six semesters.

Within primary school classes, a plan of flexible grouping is carefully followed. In this way, problems created by individual differences in learning ability, academic progress, and social adjustment are met. Whether a child's maturation is fast or slow or "in the middle," he is grouped for work within his class in accordance with his own needs and in relation to the progress he makes in meeting these needs.

Throughout the school year, the rate of learning of each child is studied, and the teacher, parents, and child himself are made aware of progress patterns. Achievement, however slow, is recognized and the rate is maintained in keeping with the child's potentialities and his pattern of progress. Teachers feel free to concentrate on this progress because the pressures of meeting the standards and norms of artificial grade groupings have been removed.

Pressuring a child beyond his ability will not necessarily develop desirable learnings, attitudes and habits. If retardation appears, indicating that a child may need seven or eight semesters of preparation before entering the fourth grade, his primary school experience may be extended accordingly. No child is asked to repeat what he has already learned. Rather, he is helped in adjusting his learning to his own slower growth pattern.

A child who is maturing rapidly also needs consideration. The program of acceleration for such a child must be both interesting and challenging and may result in a shorter time spent in primary school. As each teacher adjusts curriculum content and materials to his group of children he finds a range of learnings and interests. This is especially true in the field of reading. To provide for continuity in the child's developmental program a pattern of 12 progressive levels of achievement has been established. To meet the range of abilities and interests within primary school classes, a variety of reading materials is provided.

Reporting Progress

Small sets of many different books, classified according to reading levels are made available. All children need not read the same book nor the same number of books. Since no one series is adopted as a *must*, each teacher is free to select reading materials from an approved list of many books. Books for developmental and independent reading are supplied in abundance.

An individual reading record sheet lists the developmental books by levels. On this sheet the teachers check the books read by each child and the semes-

ter in which he read them. This record accompanies the child through his primary school experiences and helps the teacher in planning the reading program.

A progress card, sent to parents three times each semester, indicates growth in learning skills and in personal and social development. Each child is marked on the basis of his own ability and effort, not in comparison with other children. Because each child's rate of growth will vary from time to time, only two marking symbols are used in the skill area: "C"—making progress, and "D"—needs to improve. Specific items under personal and social growth are checked only when a child needs to do better. The reading level chart is printed on this card and progress from one level to another is indicated by dates. A new date means the child is reading comfortably on the next level.

Door cards for classroom identification are labeled, "Primary School, Miss _____," with no indication of semester groupings within that room. These help to complete the picture of our ungraded primary.

Each year brings new children and parents, new teachers and principals, new schools and districts. With this growth and development come many varied educational problems and challenges. One of these is the efficient grouping of children for effective learning. From Milwaukee's experience, it would seem that the ungraded primary school organization provides the solution to this problem during the important early years of elementary education.

Robert Flahive, Editorial Assistant, Milwaukee Public Schools, helped prepare the final manuscript of this article. Many of the ideas in the article are incorporated in the handbook for parents, "The Primary School," Milwaukee Public Schools, 1960.

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