

A report on

Crowding in the Schools: 1954 to 1961

CROWDING in the public schools is not the only problem we face today, and perhaps it is not our most pressing problem. However, crowding relates to many other problems, such as curriculum planning, instruction and teaching, supervision, finance and administration, school plant construction and maintenance, teacher supply and morale, and parent relations. It is highly important that educators keep a vigilant eye on overcrowding, at least for the light it sheds on other conditions in the schools.

ASCD sponsored a Commission on Crowding in Our Schools for five years, 1954-59. The experiences of that commission, of which the author served as chairman, are the chief background for this article.

In 1954-55 the Commission on Crowding took an informal national inventory of overcrowding. This was done by questionnaires directed to state superintendents, to state or regional ASCD officers, and to other administrators known to be concerned with the problem. Two major impressions were gained through the questionnaire study. The first was that a majority of administrators tended

to deal with the physical aspects (e.g., buildings and budgets) more readily than with the *human* aspects of the problem. The Commission noted references to unwholesome classroom climate, losses of kindergarten services, trends toward militaristic atmosphere and rigid curricula, reduction of offerings in the "non-3R's" areas, and threats to medical welfare and hygiene were only infrequently made by administrators in their descriptions of the problem of crowding.

A second impression was that shocking discrepancies could be found region by region and state by state, in the actual existence of overcrowding. It seemed that there were three kinds of systems: (a) those in which enlightened and effective leadership, through good planning, had prevented a severe crowding problem from developing; (b) those in which the problem had become severe, to the distress of the leadership people; and (c) those in which the problems, though serious, were either denied or minimized by the leaders. In the example of the first group, the Commission believed, lay a key to progress for other systems; in the third group, the Commission recognized, lay the seeds of ultimate disaster.

In 1954-55 there was an emerging

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public awareness of the shortage of fully qualified teachers, of the burgeoning population, of the inadequacy of many existing buildings, and of the need for thousands of additional classrooms. Yet the "baby boom" was generally believed to be a temporary post-war phenomenon and even within the profession the teacher shortage did not generate a great deal of excitement. In 1961, there is still too little realization of the need in these areas.

Figures published in the past year or two are hardly encouraging with respect to overcrowding. The fall 1959 survey of the U. S. Office of Education reported public school enrollments of 35,286,000¹ (an increase of 1,205,000 over 1958), 1,367,000 classroom teachers (61,000 increase over 1958), 98,000 teachers with substandard credentials (5800 more than last year, and a greater proportion of the total than in 1958), and 1,883,000 in excess of normal classroom capacity.² Although this last figure, which represents 5.3 percent of total enrollment, is nearly 33,000 fewer than the excess-of-capacity enrollment a year earlier, it is still a shocking figure.

In the same report it was noted that 132,400 additional classrooms were needed in the fall of 1959: 66,400 to accommodate the excess enrollments and 66,000 to replace unsatisfactory facilities. Twenty-one hundred fewer new classrooms were completed during 1958-59 than the 72,100 completed in the previous year; and the 62,700 rooms scheduled for 1959-60 completion represented

¹ The NEA Research Division's *Estimates of School Statistics, 1959-60*, put the figure at 36.4 million.

² Samuel Schloss and Carol Joy Hobson. *Fall 1959 Statistics on Enrollment, Teachers, and Schoolhousing in Full-Time Public Elementary and Secondary Day Schools*. Office of Education Circular No. 604. Quoted in *School Life* 42:23; December 1959.

more than a 10 percent decrease from the 70,000 in 1958-59.³ During the year, it was reported that sales of school-bond issues were suffering a marked decline, sales during the 12 months ending September 1959 being 20 percent less than the preceding 12 months.⁴ At the voter level, resistance to bond issues appeared to be stiffening all over the country, with the defeat of a \$500 million bond issue in New York City, one of the most dramatic setbacks. Indications therefore pointed toward reduced construction of classrooms and in effect a reversal of the slight trend toward gains on the overcrowding problem as witnessed recently. Figures in 1960-61 tend to substantiate this pessimistic picture.

The need for additional classrooms is not a temporary or passing one. Since 1954, the phrase "population explosion" has become a familiar term in general conversation. Responsible estimates indicate an increase of at least *thirty million people* (over the present 179 million) *in the next decade*, some experts predicting that we will have 217 million people by 1970. This suggests that even if we were to double our present classroom capacity by tomorrow, we would be forced to further building before the 1960's run out!

Any claim that America cannot afford the new schools is at least ridiculous, and at worst immoral. In 1935-36 the total national income was \$59 billion. In 1959 the gross national product had soared to \$478 billion. The *New York Times* last year predicted a 1960 gross product over a half trillion. Phrases like "The Soaring Sixties" and "The Golden Sixties" are used by most economists. Some, like John Kenneth Galbraith, re-

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "News and Trends." *NEA Journal* 49:4; January 1960.

mind us sternly that our affluence carries with it a moral obligation to purchase civic and personal strength rather than mere material luxury. Our nation cannot be satisfied with two cars in every garage and two children squeezed into every school seat. Nor need it be: the economy can probably afford both the extra cars and the needed school seats, once we acquire the will for both.

Dangers in Crowding

Urgently needed is widespread public appreciation of the human meaning behind the statistics of school crowding. Over the past five or six years the teaching profession has gained in its own understanding of what crowding does to children, teachers, and to the quality of the enterprise. Evidence has accumulated as to the human values that have been forfeited, the psychological and emotional damage that has been done, the intellectual and academic losses that have been suffered, and the losses to health and safety in overcrowded school situations. Strong allies in the battle against such conditions have been found in the professions serving physical and mental health and those which work for the social welfare. Economists and sociologists have pointed to the monetary and other losses that individuals and the nation suffer when children are crowded out of school opportunities, or crowded into unsatisfactory classrooms. In 1961 it can be said that the terrible price of crowding in schools is better understood by more people than it was in 1954.

Yet remedial actions do not follow swiftly enough, and crowding continues. In fact, crowding in the *colleges* (a little-discussed problem in 1954, except among the foresighted) is the big news in 1961. This in turn increases certain

undesirable pressures upon the secondary and elementary schools and the vicious circle spins 'round and 'round. In general, the greater *enlightenment* of the profession with respect to school crowding is not matched by greater *effectiveness* in doing something about it. There are, of course, exceptions, but this was true also in 1954.

While patience is a necessary attribute of the educator, it is difficult to avoid impatience in the face of conditions that imperil the very lives of children. The most frightening dimension of school crowding is the hazard of fire, yet many communities remain lax though confronted with the real possibility of fire in overcrowded schools. Even in the wake of the December 1958 fire in Our Lady of the Angels School in Chicago, which cost 93 lives, public reaction in many places was essentially apathetic and unconstructive. A few safety measures (some of them almost foolish) were rushed into law in some states, but few communities bothered to study the real problems involved.

Not enough communities, if we properly understand what is happening to school budgets, have stepped up their efforts to enforce maximum-class-size regulations, or to provide additional instructional and janitorial (and other) personnel where needed to compensate for overtaxed staff, or even approve necessary building-maintenance expenditures.

Solving Problems of Crowding

The existence of crowding in any school is a serious threat to individual and community welfare. Comments by workers in all branches of the profession make it clear that school crowding exacts a terrible price.

I firmly believe that school crowding need not exist anywhere in America. The nation's total resources are equal to the total task of providing uncrowded and appropriate schools. Resources within the profession, similarly, should be equal to the task of shaping a program for remedying existing conditions, if only these resources can be marshaled.

It is, of course, much easier to describe (and decry) overcrowding than it is to find suitable means for preventing it. Nevertheless, the bases of sound school programs have been well known for a long time: high standards of quality, effectively translated into broad policy to govern operations; an adequate financial base, not solely dependent upon one tax source; enlightened leadership possessed of both the tools and the inspiration to do the job; adherence to professionally-acceptable standards in decisions affecting personnel (pupils and teachers alike), curriculum, and materials including the school plant. It takes little magic to recount these factors, but does it require more magic than we possess to attain them?

It would seem that courage, imagination, and foresightedness are a sufficient substitute for magic. One reads with admiration, Florence Beardsley's account of how Oregon, "moving the beehive gently," has improved instruction in its schools by adherence to minimum school standards.⁵ One reads, again with admiration, how Lakeview, Michigan, refused to put its children on double sessions and arranged for temporary, and apparently satisfactory, use of renovated army buildings.⁶ One re-

members hundreds of pieces of correspondence received over a five-year period by ASCD's Commission on Crowding in Our Schools: here the determination and the ingenuity of school administrators and others were revealed as they tackled the problem of overcrowding on their own grounds.

Coping with Crowding

While the best way to cope with crowding in schools is to *prevent* it, it is nonetheless necessary to know how to cope with it when, despite our precautions, it appears.

When pupil enrollments temporarily outreach the available space, certain arrangements can give some relief. These might include:

1. Providing greater-than-usual opportunities for children to stretch their arms and legs under the guidance of physical education specialists
2. Expanding the library resources, to offset reduced per-pupil resources and facilities within the classrooms
3. Providing more creative arts experiences, under the guidance of an enlarged staff of qualified specialists, an antidote for the formal, "3 R's" emphasis that invariably characterizes a crowded program
4. Expanding the school staff in guidance and counseling, so that both children and adults will be given sufficient attention and services
5. Expanding the administrative staff not only in proportion to the increased enrollments but also in terms of the new or aggravated administrative problems that arise under conditions of overcrowding
6. Providing in each crowded classroom a full-time or part-time assistant to the teacher, either a nonprofessional "teacher aid" or a certified assistant teacher, to share the workload and to "drain off" some of the more explosive problems.

⁵ Florence E. Beardsley. "Move the Beehive Gently." *Educational Leadership* 17:203-207; January 1960.

⁶ Alvin Zachrich. "They Wouldn't Go on Double Sessions." *School Management* 2:29-31; December 1958.

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