

## The Dropout—

# Our Greatest Challenge

THERE is much interest presently concerning the young people who are leaving our high schools before graduation. This is known as the "dropout problem." Concern with this problem is not confined to school people, but appears throughout our mass media—newspapers, magazines, television. Especially at the close of summer, newspapers often run articles exhorting our young to go back to school. They quote statistics to show how much better off the holder of a high school diploma is than one who does not have one. The appeal seems to state that if a young person will just hang on grimly until the band plays *Pomp and Circumstance*, doors to the good life will swing wide.

Some of those who decry the dropout situation are the same people who tell us that we give out too many high school diplomas to students who do not deserve them, and complain because, they say, the diploma has no meaning any more. Some suggest meeting this problem by giving the unworthy ones special diplomas that will show that they are inferior. Sometimes we even establish an inferior colored paper so that the quality of the

diploma can be detected from afar. At this moment it occurs to me that we might at last have found a use for the skin of the black sheep. We could give these youngsters black sheepskins. This idea falls down because there are not enough black sheep to supply diplomas to all who do not deserve regular ones. Perhaps the geneticists could solve the problem.

Nevertheless, the problem of having so many of our young leave school is a serious one, and I, for one, am grateful for the increasing interest of lay people in it. The problem is quite humiliating to school people, because these youths leave us with nothing else in mind. If there were plenty of jobs for our young, this would constitute a choice, but when they leave us for nothing else, it is hard to take. I question whether any commercial enterprise could continue as a going concern if it lost over a third of its business every year.

### What Is the Cost?

The cost to society and to individuals of so many leaving our schools is hard to calculate. Some of the dropouts, having nothing to do, become delinquent; others withdraw into mental illness. The

economic loss to society for delinquency and mental illness is staggering, and getting worse every year. The loss in self-respect suffered by those who find no place in our culture may cripple them for the rest of their lives. Who can compute the cost of a life wasted in comparison with a life well lived? How calculate the damage done to family and friends?

The *Saturday Evening Post* (March 12, 1962) published an article by Kohler and Fontaine entitled, "We Waste a Million Kids a Year." Some of these live in your own home town. Human waste is our greatest extravagance.

But we are here concerned with the large percentage of our young who have dropped out but are still in school. If we visit a secondary school class and look at the faces of the young people, we will see that in many cases the outstanding characteristic of the members is that they are not involved in what is going on. Most of them are going through motions to please their elders. Some are just sitting. Some are engaging in behavior which can only be interpreted as a protest. The latter are our "discipline problems."

While we have many studies of dropouts, we do not know much about the matter, because we have no way of including the dropout who stays in school. All we seem able to do is to count bodies, but physical presence does not mean presence of the whole person.

These young people are doing very little, learning very little; at any rate they are not learning much of the curriculum. We hear a good deal about how much homework a high school youth should do, but studies have shown that these youths do not do any homework. They have lost contact with what is going on in school, and are just passing time.

It is concerning this group that we get

the complaints of employers and college teachers about the youths who hold diplomas but do not know anything. These are the ones for whom the curriculum has been "watered down." It seems never to have occurred to adults that if a soup does not taste good in the beginning no amount of water will improve the flavor. The need is for a fresh and different soup.

It is good that these dropouts have stayed in school, because they have to be somewhere, and even though they eschew the curriculum, they are better off in school than they might be if they removed their bodies. They get good out of associating with their peers. They can enjoy many activities which are closed to the physical dropout. But this is not enough. They desperately need an education too.

### Response to Pressure

Why do these dropouts stay in school? Mainly, I think, because of the enormous parental and cultural pressure. It is "the thing to do." If they leave school, their fathers and mothers would be too embarrassed. The neighbors would wonder about their basic intelligence and whether or not the condition is hereditary. There isn't anything else to do anyway, so, all things considered, they decide they may as well stay in school, hoping that the teachers won't bother them too much. It seems that the quiet, well-behaved ones have entered into an unspoken truce with their teachers: "If you don't bother me, I won't bother you."

The adult reaction to the young people who cannot become involved with what we have decided they should care about is usually blameful. "If they were any good they would like what I've planned for them." We reward the ones who can

and are willing to do what we want, and punish those who will not (cannot). Thus while these dropouts continue to stay in school, their concepts of self continue to take a beating, so that it is possible that they are actually less able for having stayed.

I do not think there is very much that we adults do unless we see the reason for doing it, feel able to do it, and preferably have had some small part in the planning of it. I believe that young people are quite like us in this regard. They need to be able to see that their school work is worth doing, and that it comes within the scope of what they feel able to do. They do not have to have their own way, but, like us, they are more enthusiastic about what they have had a hand in planning than they are about things that adults plan for them. This is especially true since it seems to them that adults really live in another world.

If involvement is necessary, then we must involve these youngsters. This will call for the abandonment of many of our sacred cows, because when young people choose, there is no guarantee that they will choose what we had in mind. As for myself, I have some things I think everyone should know. But they don't and they obviously are not going to, so I might just as well relax.

Not only must each learner be involved but he must be free to be involved in his own way. Perhaps the best-proven fact in educational research is that each human being is unique. We will have to make it possible for unique learners to do different things and to come out with different learnings. They come out with different learnings now, and always have, but we teachers have not yet accepted this fact. This failure to accept the obvious and inevitable spoils the lives of many teachers.

People do things with goals in mind. The envisioned goal is the valid reason for doing anything. Children and youth are people. In general, the younger the person, the more immediate the goal must be. When we tell an elementary or junior high school child that if he does not do what we tell him to, he will not be able to go to college, he is not likely to be impressed. He has to have a better reason than that, and it seems likely that we may have to modify what we are doing.

When we urge youth to stay in school, or to return to school to do what has already been found wanting, we sell a shabby piece of goods. I would like for all of them to stay in school if for no other reason than there is no other place in our society for them. Just to "stick it out," however, will not do them very much good. What we could say is that "if you will stay with us, we will try something different, something that makes sense to you."

If he stays, he will of course get a "credential" or diploma which may be of some use to him. It is a poor substitute for an education. This is especially true if, as sometimes happens, we then give him a spurious diploma, saying in effect, that he really did not graduate after all.

### Why Not Try?

There is nothing new in the foregoing; certainly nothing new to supervisors and curriculum directors. If it is true that people have to be involved, that learners are unique, that goals have to be reasonably near, why don't we do more about it? What are we afraid of?

I have asked this question many times. Often the answer is, "We don't know

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mental Schools B and C, compared with Control School A. The mean difference for comprehension is highly significant for Experimental School C, but is not significant for Experimental School B.

Fifth grade children in the two experimental schools also made significantly greater gains in vocabulary than did children in the control school. Gains made in comprehension are moderately significantly greater for children in Experimental School C but not significantly greater in Experimental School B.

A questionnaire was sent to each family in the two experimental schools to determine what opinions parents held about the Focus on Achievement Program. Approximately two-thirds of all questionnaires were returned. Of these, 85 percent contained written-in comments and suggestions. The questionnaire contained three check-type questions and three open-ended questions. Parents indicated that they felt the program helped the children with schoolwork. They also said they would like to have the program continued. As a side benefit, the parents indicated that their involvement had helped them to improve their own academic skills.

The teachers conducted a home-study survey to see if parents had set aside the quiet time for study and reading. Parents indicated the daily study time, with not one reporting that the home study was not helpful. Results of this survey showed that 90 percent of the children in the experimental schools returned their completed questionnaires, another indication of parental interest in the program.

The experimental study has definitely resulted in improved student work habits and attitudes toward schoolwork, teachers report. The experiment is continuing at the two schools. In addition, the administrators and teachers are co-

operating in establishing the program in a third school following a request by parents.

The Flint Community School administrative staff and teachers have obtained as complete statistical evidence as possible. This corroborates findings that, as good practicing educators, they believe to be true.

In summary, they believe these findings offer sound evidence to educators in the elementary field, and perhaps higher levels as well, that education today is and must be a cooperative home-school project. Educators need not be afraid to go to parents with their educational problems. Indeed, as shown by the Flint experimentation, parents, when approached with forthright honesty, will return a thousand-fold creative efforts of their own.

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how." Superintendents and principals tell me they would like to have good core classes, for example, but they do not have anybody who knows how to do it.

It seems to me that if our profession requires us to do something we do not know how to do, then we must learn how. This applies to the teaching profession as a whole. We will have to be satisfied with small beginnings at first, because, not knowing how, we must learn in small ways at first. We can expand on these small beginnings until we *do* know how.

The dropouts, in school and out, are legion. In some ways, they seem faceless. Our society being what it is, they have no place in it, except in school. They are wasting their time, often deteriorating rather than improving. They constitute our greatest waste. They can give us our greatest opportunity.

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