

# News Notes

by Robert C. McKean and Bob L. Taylor

## School Retention Rates

The number of youth graduating from high school in the country reached an all-time high of about 3,150,000 in 1976. This large graduating class reflects the high birthrate in the late 1950s along with a trend for most young Americans to graduate from secondary school. A new report on school retention rates by the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that about three-fourths of the young people today are earning high school diplomas. While this graduation rate has remained relatively stable over the last decade, the rate compares favorably with that in the early 1930s when only about one-third of the students completed the 12th grade. By the 1950s, the rate was slightly more than one-half graduated from high school.

In the fall of 1968, about 98 percent of the fifth graders reached the ninth grade, 87 percent got as far as the 11th grade, and 75 percent graduated from high school in 1976. About 47 percent of the young adults entered a program of study in higher education leading toward a bachelor's degree, and around 24 percent of them (about half of those entering college) are earning a bachelor's degree.

The retention rate statistics are based on enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools and are adjusted to include estimates for nonpublic schools. The statistics on graduates include those graduating from regular day-school programs, but exclude individuals granted high-school-equivalency certificates and those

finishing trade and vocational schools that are not part of the regular school system.

For trends in school retention rates during the past 45 years, consult the *Digest of Education Statistics*, a publication of the National Center for Education Statistics. The 1976 edition may be purchased for \$3.75 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

## Human Relations Training

This summer, 25 members of the administrative and consultative staff of the Iowa State Department of Public Instruction voluntarily attended a workshop on human relations. Some of the objectives of the human relations program were: to create a greater awareness of basic communications techniques and to provide a medium for their use; to provide an awareness of basic barriers to communication; to understand and confront the effects of racial, cultural, and sexual factors on communication; and to improve communication within the Department.

A variety of exercises were used. One was collaborative group problem solving. Participants divided into small groups in which they were given the hypothetical problem of deciding who should live or die in a medical situation. The only rule was that the decision had to be made by consensus.

During their discussion, the individual groups practiced techniques of interpersonal interaction. They tried active listening, expressing feelings, and giving and receiving

feedback. Still another exercise had the groups practice the same techniques in dealing with male-female issues. The women and men broke into same-sex groups to discuss sex stereotypes. The women received information on assertive training, and the men tried an experiment in physical closeness.

The final session was devoted to learning the barriers created by ethnic prejudices. Participants did some role playing and again practiced group decision making. The experience assisted the individual to become better acquainted with his/her own feelings and with those of others.

## Supervised Discipline Centers

The Prince George's County Public Schools, Upper Marlboro, Maryland, have found supervised discipline centers to be a successful alternative to suspensions from school. These centers were tried in three secondary schools last spring where they proved to be a successful alternative to suspension for certain cases of misconduct. A total of 348 cases involving 295 students were handled at the centers. Students were kept isolated from classmates during the school day, were barred from participation in school activities, and were given closely supervised classwork and study assignments. During the last three months of the school year, suspensions in the three schools were cut more than 50 percent over the same period of the previous year.

Parents, teachers, and administrators have all been pleased with the program. It makes sense to parents having their child at school

performing work under supervision rather than at home or in the community where, in many cases, they are without supervision.

### Competency-Based Graduation Requirements

Denver, Colorado, has had a Proficiency and Review Program in operation for 17 years. Regularly, Denver schools have followed up on their effectiveness by asking large and small employers some questions about their high school graduates. While around 80 percent of the employers have indicated satisfaction, there have been comments over the years to which the school district listened closely. Some graduates were reported as not able to add a column of figures or write an intelligible sentence. Reading, arithmetic, and language arts were the basic skills that have presented problems.

As a result, a PAR Program was started. According to Jerry Cavanaugh, Supervisor, Development and Evaluation of the Denver Public Schools, "This program is not a way to solve every educational problem in all districts. We've had it for 17 years, and we're still having some problems."

The program includes a test to measure minimal basic skills of high school students. If they don't pass, they cannot receive a diploma and instead they receive a certificate of attendance.

The test's failure rate, which was at 14 percent in the beginning, was down to 1.5 percent in 1976-77. The failure rate has improved because students are given various means to overcome deficiencies—tutoring, remedial instruction, and special attention by teachers to basic skills. Since 52 percent of Denver Public Schools students are minorities, this is significant according to Cavanaugh. In the testing of 6,000 fifth-grade pupils in Spring 1976, the median reading score was at the 49th percentile. These students are reading nearly at grade level that is a very fine performance for a large metropolitan school system; however, the PAR Program alone cannot be given credit for this. No doubt, it has been a contributing factor to improved reading scores.

### Skipping Grades

According to Dr. Julian Stanley, director of Johns Hopkins' Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth, bright students who skip

grades will have less trouble if the grade skipped is the last one in elementary school, middle school, junior high, or senior high. Students will have less trouble making new friends and will be less conspicuous in a group where everyone is a stranger to nearly everyone else.

Other insights presented at the Second World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children in San Francisco were:

1. Start gifted children to school young and with kindergarten.
2. Have them skip the last year or two of high school to go on to college.
3. The child should be under a special tutor.
4. Have students take regular college courses for credit while still enrolled in high school.
5. Give students private lessons in college level courses and have them get credit by taking one of the Advanced Placement Program exams.

For more information about the Johns Hopkins program, write to Mathematically Precocious Youth, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland 21218.

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