

They All Go to High School

WHEN THE DOORS of secondary schools opened this fall, many a principal watching the students stream in must have believed that they *all* do. Many a teacher watched with dismay as some remained standing or sitting two in a seat before the last one arrived. Although the figures show that over 80 per cent of youth go to high school, some principals must have thought that the neighboring town's youngsters had gotten there by mistake.

Who Are They?

But there they were, from every nook and cranny of town and country: those who lived in ranch houses, in pre-fabs, in hovels, in trailers and in old mansions. They were children of truck drivers, farmers, businessmen, field workers, managers, factory workers, teachers and doctors. They were light-skinned, dark-skinned, of Mexican-born parentage and of native-born stock. In few places in the world was there such a variety.

What a challenge; yet what an opportunity! Among these many faces, some anxious for school to begin, some wondering what it had for them, sat side-by-side the future craftsman, laborer, scientist, political leader, artist and homemaker. Yet all were to be citizens in a democratic nation; all had to become experts in human relations and in those qualities that make for a live rather than a stagnant community. All would be faced with a fight to preserve liberty and freedom in a world where powerful forces, de-

liberate or deluded, worked against these hard-earned gains. This situation of diversity in the classroom presented the best opportunity for preparation for the fight.

These millions of youth, growing in numbers each year, have caused plenty of community headaches. The prediction is that there will be five million more young people by 1965! The situation of ever-bulging high school buildings presents an acute financial problem; but it presents a danger as well: the danger that communities will regard this as *the* problem and forget the real purposes for which housing is needed. Under the pressures to get buildings constructed, this alone may become the focus of community effort. Yet it need not be. Never before have we had such a golden opportunity to look at the school program to see how well it fits this teeming, diverse youth population. Never again if we muffle this chance may we get such a warm, sometimes overheated, interest in the public schools. What better conditions could we want for interesting teachers, the community and the students in a thoughtful consideration of the secondary school curriculum in terms of these young people? The next ten years should be the golden age for studying and improving the curriculum. Indications are that the pace has already been accelerated.

Communities can justly point with pride, not to pillars and colonnades,

but to a richness and diversity of modern secondary education unique in the history of man. From shop to languages, from history to art, from advanced science and mathematics to the application of these fields to everyday life, from landscape gardening to child care, the secondary school pupil—junior high through junior college—generally finds courses to suit his interests. No longer are these tailored to fit only the students bound for the Ivy League. Visitors to this country now remark about the numerous high school bands, orchestras, glee clubs, dramatic performances, student assemblies, sports, that many of us wish had been there for us when we were young.

Creative and imaginative school people have always tried to improve upon programs for high school youth. This year among these many young people, large numbers have the privilege of making decisions concerning their own affairs in the school. They serve as representatives on their own governmental agencies, the student councils and courts. They manage traffic, supervise study halls and lunchrooms, run their clubs, handle the financial affairs of student activities, operate school banks, plan assemblies, manage student stores, vote for their representatives, develop regulations for conduct, and plan their work in classes. These are significant learning activities under the guidance of skillful teachers, for learning democracy through living it in their laboratory, the school. Even more important they are learning *responsible* self-government. These are not play activities but are for keeps where consequences must

be faced, disgruntled elements dealt with, self-seekers and would-be autocrats held in check. These are real life problems, replicas of the adult community.

They investigate housing, traffic, city-planning, juvenile delinquency and other social problems out in the city. They raise improved beef cattle, manage poultry production for a profit, experiment with new crops, reforest burned out areas, develop plans to stop soil erosion. Some work part-time in grocery stores, newspaper plants, banks, hospitals under school supervision. Some assist Red Cross, Community Chest, county welfare organizations, religious organizations, assist in community surveys and in registering voters, and give concerts and other programs in service to their community. In growing numbers, they work on committees, make trips to factories, interview citizens, read widely, do research on social problems, write letters and reports, discuss problems of adjustment to family life and of adjustment to teen-age living in an adult world of often-confused moral standards.

The point is this. Somebody had to help young people do these things; these activities did not just happen. These somebodies are the real leaders in secondary education. Through the core curriculum, education adjusted to life, work experience and other means of gaining a worth-while education, some of which are discussed in this issue, these leaders are experimenting with ways of squaring secondary education with the realities of today's world, not with an age of even thirty years ago, which must seem like a land of

make-believe to the high school youth of 1954. These are not static means, forever written into a pedagogical constitution. Leadership in education must of necessity have an experimental attitude.

Something more of profound significance is happening in secondary education. It is increasingly being geared to change in behavior of students as the goal of instruction. Probably the fact that all—or almost all—youth now go to high school has made us conscious of the need for a new approach to making high school something vital in the lives of this diverse group of youngsters. These kinds of experiences focus on helping youth to act in certain ways as good citizens, workers, homemakers, and human beings who will help to make life richer and more blessed for others. True, we have a long way to go, but the picture is getting brighter. These schools and these teachers who are real thinkers and leaders in education are getting away from the idea of subject matter as something to be learned for its own sake instead of as a resource to help people to develop more fully.

How Do They Challenge Us?

Yet, these millions of youth still challenge us. We know that we must do everything in our power to leave them a legacy of freedom. The job is still a big one. There are many youth who are not challenged by their high school education. If education for democracy is a dull, uninspiring experience, how can we have any assurance that these same youth will suddenly catch fire and be boosters for democracy in adult life? They challenge us at

every turn: to give them an education that has meaning, to accept them as individuals — not as categories of “dull,” “slow-learning,” “college,” or what-have-you — to help them find themselves with respect to relations with others, earning a living, and helping to straighten out some of the confusion which they will inherit.

This is a big order. It cannot be filled by timid men. It will mean working at avoiding the stigma attached to segregation of any kind, whether it be separate schools, separate classes or any kind of device that brands one person as inferior. It will mean breaking down the barriers to unification of knowledge, making it possible for teachers to know students as individuals, assuring a freedom to look at all points of view and all issues, and achieving in the real sense a community school. It may well mean getting rid of the vestigial remains of credits, marks, traditional “college preparation,” and traditions that serve as anchors on progress rather than add to the richness of the cultural heritage. Surely, it will involve doing some forward-looking thinking and experimenting as exemplified in the articles in this issue. These are not neatly-packaged answers, for we should be wary of anyone who sends us such a gift. They are rather the serious and studied attempts to explore better ways of answering the challenge “they” present to us.

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