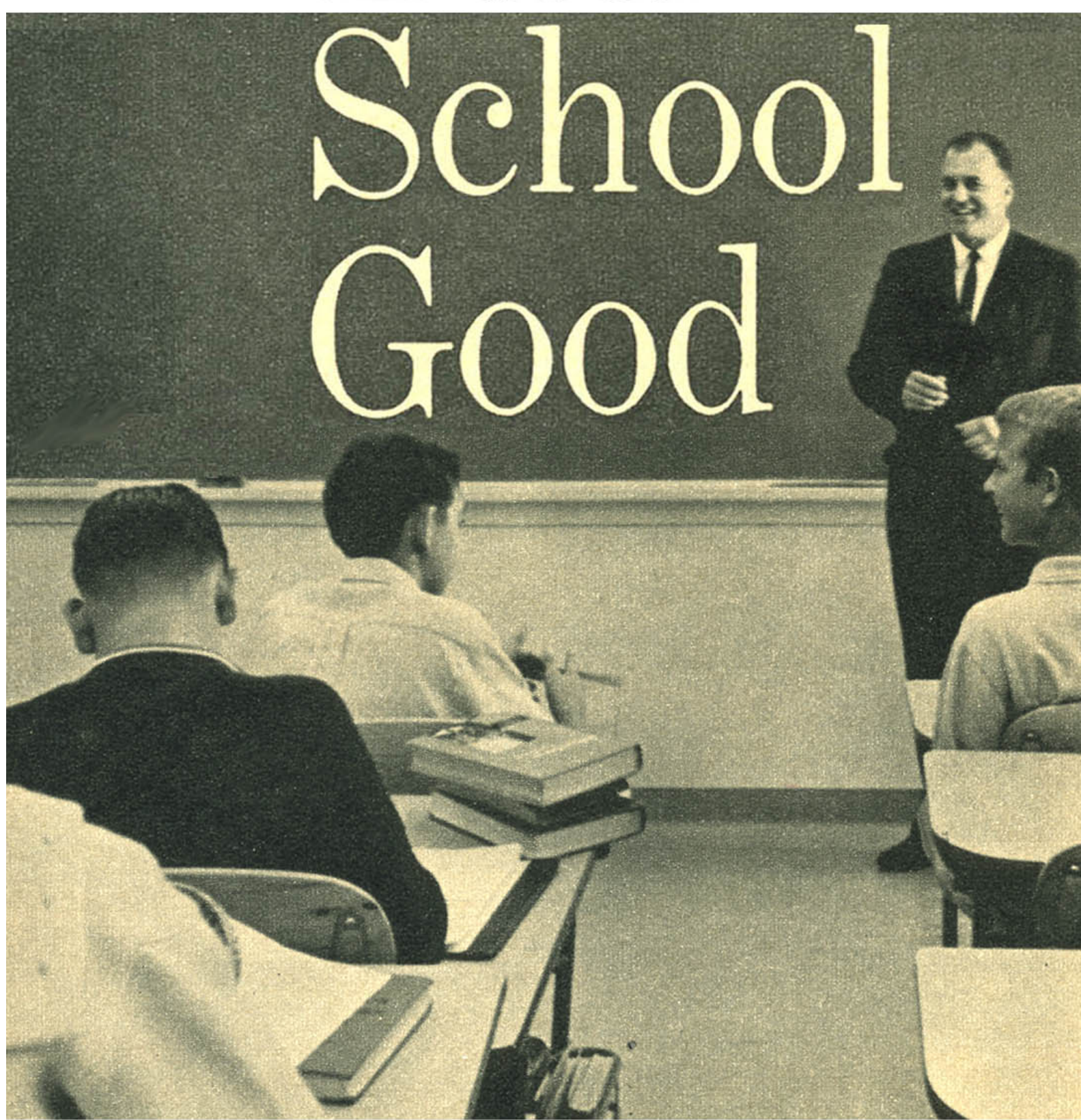


How to Make a 'Bad'

School Good



While many of us worry and complain about the standards of our public schools, this town found miracles can be made to happen. Once students were social outcasts if they earned high grades. Today, the school system—and its students—are providing a valuable lesson in learning

BY ARNOLD HANO

A TEACHER stood before his fourth-grade class in an elementary school in Laguna Beach, California, and very slowly said: "Remember what 4 and 8 equal. Add to it the sum of 3 and 5, and 4 and 1. Double the total. Now square it. Take half, and deposit it in a bank. Withdraw it after a year. At four per cent interest, how much have you withdrawn?"

Within seconds, there was a sprinkling of hands. Before a minute had passed, every child—nine and ten years old—had the answer—\$1300.

Unusual?

Only in that the fifth-graders were all using typewriters.

In a class at that same school, children greeted their teacher, counted, noted the date, sang songs, and said good-by—all in a foreign language. These children were kindergartners.

In another fourth-grade class, students were multiplying and dividing—on slide rules.

Bulletin boards at each school are crowded with photographs of the outstanding “student of the month” in each subject.

All this is part of a continuing revolution within the schools of one small (pop. 9500) town in southern California—a revolution with deep significance for schools all over the nation. Less than three years before, a bright student in Laguna Beach faced the jeers and ridicule of his classmates. If he persisted in “showing off” (which meant anything from getting good grades to turning in homework on time), he would find himself a social outcast.

THERE WERE, in Laguna Beach, two kinds of youngsters: “beach bums” (self-styled, and the majority), and “squares” (so named by the beach bums, and a definite minority).

A handful of case histories thrusts an ugly light on this condition:

Susie C——, a high school senior well on her way in 1958 to becoming the first straight-A student in Laguna’s history, deliberately botched her final exams, and got a B in one subject. Visibly relieved, she confessed fears of being cut dead socially if she kept up her A’s.

Nathan A—— and Lucille K——, high school graduates who had compiled C-minus averages in Laguna, went on to become honor students at a nearby junior college. Explaining this sudden blossoming, they admitted they had purposely done badly in Laguna because “we didn’t want to be considered square.”

A teacher, now retired, admitted he had made a private agreement not to call on certain students in class, for fear of revealing to their mates how bright they were.

This establishment of mediocrity as the academic standard might not be so distressing in a town where

the students' IQs approximated the nation's norm of 100. But the average IQ of Laguna's 1650 students is 112, thus placing them high among the nation's youth in intelligence.

The town itself, with its colony of artists and writers, its cosmopolitan air and relatively high level of culture, might have been expected to provide a rich environment for prodding the slumbering intellects of its young. It failed miserably.

On May 20, 1958—seven months after Russia exploded its first sputnik, and allegedly incited Americans to the need for better schooling—the townspeople trooped to the polls to vote Yes or No on a \$2,500,000 bond for the purchase of a building site intended eventually to replace Laguna's outmoded high school plant—part of which was soon to be condemned by state inspectors.

In California, it takes a two-thirds vote to put over such a bond. Fewer than half of those that turned out voted Yes. More than half the town's eligible voters stayed home!

This was the condition Laguna Beach faced in its schools short months ago: unmotivated youth; a lackluster curriculum; an over-age, crowded high school; and an apathetic environment. Today, Laguna Beach boasts that its school system is the finest in the county (at a recent Orange County fair, with educational projects displayed by students of 20 secondary schools, Laguna's high-schoolers walked off with 11 of 18 possible ribbons); it claims to be one of the finest in southern California; it confidently expects to be among the nation's best by September, 1962.

The formula? Laguna Beach restored academic excellence to its once high position of respect. Any community in the United States can copy the formula. It takes neither added money, nor new buildings, nor bigger football stadiums.

All it takes is desire.

Here's how Laguna Beach, Cali-

fornia, did it:

In 1959, the town's school board (two housewives, a locksmith, a lawyer, and an industrial research director) found itself faced with the added problem of suddenly finding a new administrator by the opening of the school year in September.

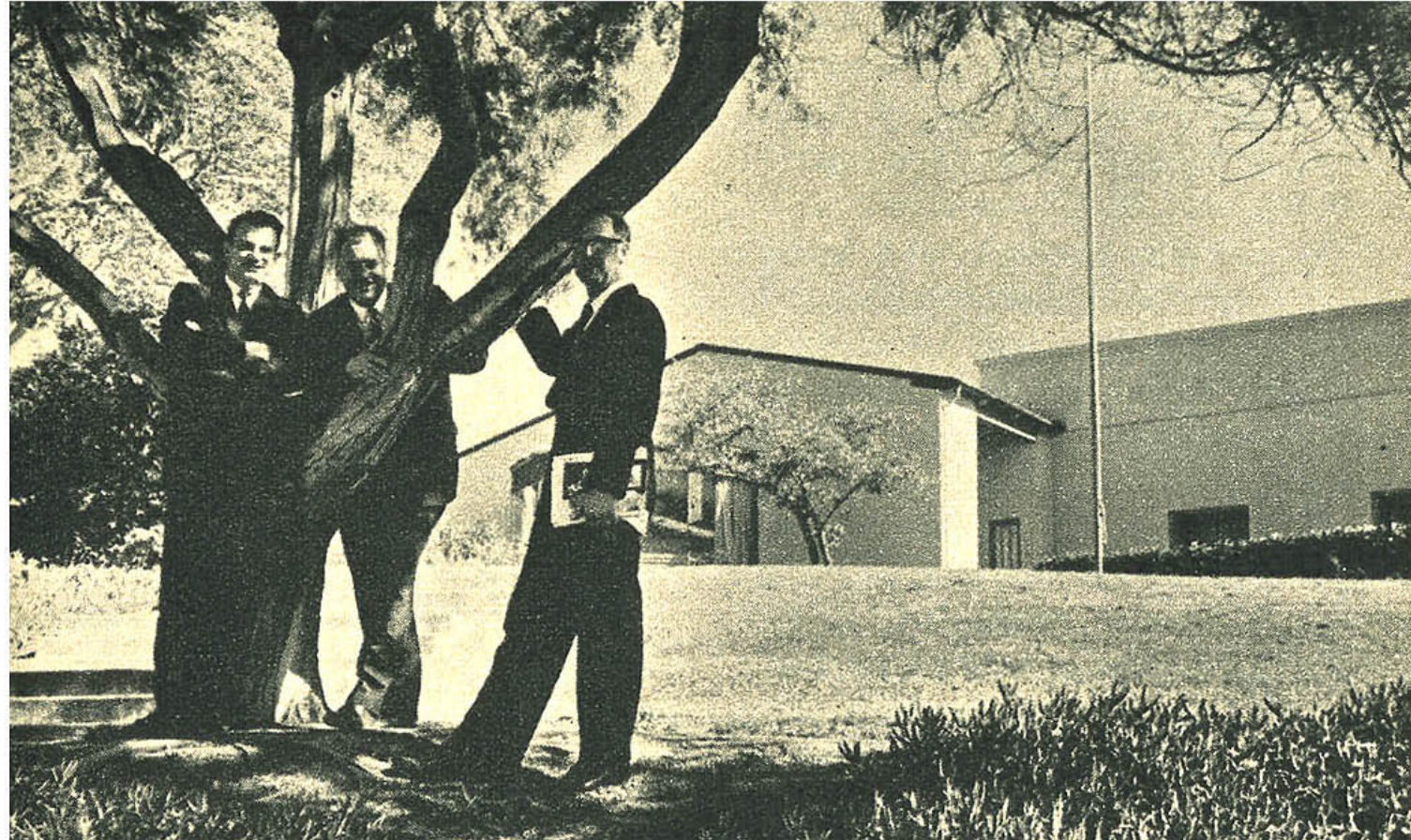
THIRTY-FIVE applicants were screened for the \$13,000 post. Five of the 35 appeared for a second interview. Each of these was asked: "Knowing what you do of conditions in Laguna Beach as we have outlined them, what do you propose for our schools?"

Of the five, only one man didn't qualify his reply. He said. "With the caliber of teaching I understand you have, with the intelligence of the students, and with the budget you people work under, you ought to have the best educational system in the United States in five years."

On August 1, 1959—just 45 days before school opened—the board hired California-born, Nevada- and California-educated Alfred A. Artuso, 38—ex-footballer, former teacher, principal, athletic coach, and personnel and curriculum director. With a year plus under his belt as school superintendent. Artuso says the five-year goal will be reached in three.

The burly (6-foot, 215-pound) gray-templed Artuso believes in teamwork. He also believes in teachers, in youth, and in accenting the positive. Most important, he believes in change.

"The biggest fault in the school system—as it is in industry and else—can't stand still."



Three who sparked a revolution: high school principal Bedard, administrator Artuso, curriculum head Taylor (l. to r.). "We were too green to be scared," says Artuso

Artuso brought with him as curriculum director Frank D. Taylor (the men had worked together in two other school districts); and chose as his high school principal Donald J. Bedard (whom Artuso had never met, but whom he hired after much research and a single chat). Taylor and Bedard are in their 30s.

“We were so green,” says Artuso today, “we didn’t know enough to be frightened. We had no time to plan, so we just pitched in. If my curriculum man Taylor came in with an idea, and it seemed sound, I’d say: ‘Let’s try it.’ If the idea was so new I couldn’t tell whether it was sound, I’d say: ‘Collect the evidence,’ and Taylor would be back in a day or two with his facts. We had to work fast.”

It probably was toughest on principal Bedard—last to be hired, and completely unknown when he appeared at the Opening Day Assembly in September. Bedard strode onto the stage, waved his hand, said: “Hi-ya, cats!” and has been home free ever since.

Artuso’s first act was to scrap the school district’s old discipline system, with its demerits for acts of misbehavior, and suspension or even expulsion after a certain total of demerits. “It was exactly wrong for Laguna,” Artuso says. “What the youngsters needed was something that revealed how smart or skilled they were—not how bad.”

So even before school began, word leaked to the town’s 1650 students that the administrator was “on our side.”

Artuso, however, is not a go-easy-on-the-kids man. “Students must earn their grades. If you make academic excellence more attractive, then you can toughen the curriculum and raise your standards. That’s what’s been done. It is more difficult to get an honor diploma in Laguna today than it’s ever been. By 1962 it will be nearly twenty per cent tougher again. Yet we’ve got

more students eligible than ever before.”

NEXT Artuso insisted the administration keep in touch with what goes on in class. “It is very easy for a superintendent to find himself wrapped up in the problems of the three B’s—buildings, buses, and budgets. But whenever I’m at my desk too long, I ask myself: ‘What am I here for?’ and I rush out to class. I love sitting on the rug with kindergartners or discussing physics with high school seniors or kibbitzing with a teacher.

“If an administrator was meant only to handle logistical and fiscal problems, school boards could hire efficiency experts out of industry. A superintendent is here to help see that the students get an education, and the place they get educated is in class, not on air-cooled buses. The three R’s are still more important than the three B’s.”

Artuso tries to visit every class in his district (two elementary schools, a junior high, and a senior high) once a week. Most of the visits are brief, although he may devote considerable time to a class newly added to the curriculum. Curriculum director Taylor and the four principals make the rounds even more often.

Artuso shook up the curriculum in the elementary schools in that first 1959-60 year, inserting a new pilot program at each school. He had a television course in Spanish piped into the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades at one school; at the other, the same grades started to take up typing.

ARTUSO IS not afraid of the word “gimmick.” “Call it what you will,” he says, “just as long as it stimulates the kids.”

It surely stimulated Laguna’s teachers. Thirty-five of them from kindergarten to sixth grade signed up for a 17-week course in Spanish, taught by a senior language professor at Long Beach State College.

By the end of the year, nearly every Laguna grade-schooler had picked up a smattering of Spanish. And to take full future advantage of this developing skill, Artuso has instituted a fourth-year Spanish course in high school. Artuso believes the real gain to be a development of language plasticity in the very young, so that foreign languages come more easily in high school and college.

The typing program provided swift results. In six months, a fourth-grade class showed 16 months of progress. Interesting by-products popped up in other areas: typing improved students' reading, spelling, and vocabulary proficiency; it also actually enhanced the speed and quality penmanship.

Again the teachers get much credit. Because there was no text available for students this young, the grade-school teachers prepared their own manual. It has been so successful that other schools in the county have borrowed it.

A pilot program of broadly varied electives has been started in the junior high this year, and a program will begin in high school in the 1961-62 year. Artuso has increased the school day in high school from six periods to an optional seven. Some 30 per cent of the students have volunteered for the extra class. A handful of extremely bright students will take eight periods.

The main emphasis, however, is not on new courses, but on individualized teaching.

"There is an approximate five-year spread in any class between the brightest student and the dullest," Artuso says. "A teacher can't reach all of them by saying: 'Turn to page sixty-four,' and having every child do the same lesson."

Artuso has no magic method for individualized instruction. Teachers work out their own methods, with help from curriculum director Taylor, whom Artuso calls "the best darn teacher in America." It

is not uncommon to see a teacher operating on a half-dozen levels in one room. Some teachers use a "wheel" procedure, by which one section of a class works on one exercise for a few minutes, then on signal moves to the chalkboard, then to another project, back to their desks, and so on.

To the uninitiated, it looks like bedlam, students bustling about in groups of five and six, books, chalk, and training aids passing back and forth in a frenzied relay race.

The results indicate more method than madness. The number of students in Laguna's Honor Society (no grades below B) has doubled this past year, as has membership in the more elite Scholarship Society (average at least halfway between A and B). Artuso has placed a carrot before the noses of his students. Members of the Scholarship Society get to go to the lunchroom a minute before the rest of the school.

There are other rewards. The local Rotary Club blows the Honor Society to two all-expenses-paid field trips a year; in 1960 this meant outings to Disneyland and the San Diego Zoo and Museum.

The local chapter of the D.A.R. gives a scholarship to the best history student; the Business and Professional Women's Club offers a scholarship to the outstanding commercial student; the town's art gallery puts on its walls the creations of students for a full month each year.

Artuso insists, in fact, that major credit for improvement in Laguna's schools go to forces other than the administration: the school board, the faculty, and the community itself.

There is no doubt that the community has been stimulated. The school district held its first math-science fair in May of 1960 to celebrate the opening of a new science wing. Townspeople jammed the school grounds to view exhibits in biology, zoology, algebra, geometry, physics and chemistry.

And to derive further benefits of a nationwide interest in science, Artuso has opened the science laboratories for individual student research in the evenings. Similar research facilities will soon be available for history and mathematics students, also on their own time.

IT IS PROBABLE that Laguna is seeing on a small and intensive scale a national trend toward fuller year-round use of school facilities. In 1960 nearly one of every three Laguna students went to summer school, many to take "enriched" curriculum courses. In one summer-school room, listed as a sixth-grade class, there was not a single sixth-grader. Half were fifth-graders, the rest fourth- and third-graders. (Artuso calls this "taking the lid off the subject.")

Artuso straddles both sides of the question of *teaching the subject* vs. *teaching the child*. He says: "Teach the subject to the child. *Don't* teach the grade. If a student in a nominal fifth-grade class is ready for what is conventionally thought of as seventh-grade work, give it to him!"

Curriculum director Taylor occasionally toys with the notion of advancing the entire grade-school curriculum by one year. That is: give the first-grade student what used to be considered the second-grade course of study, and so on.

None of this appears to have neglected the "average" or "dull" students. Under the incentive of individualized attention, Laguna teachers are discovering hidden talents in students. Artuso, Taylor and the Laguna principals and teachers believe that unless a child is feeble-minded, there is at least one thing at which he excels.

"Find out in elementary school what each student does best," Artuso says. "Let him do it. Praise him sincerely. The student is suddenly more confident. Invariably he blossoms in other directions. We owe it to each student—no matter how bright or how dull—to tap his po-

tential, bring out his best. The worst thing we do in schools is to red-pencil creativity to death.”

A cursory look at Laguna classrooms would make it appear that the school district pours unlimited funds into education. In the lower grades, there is a record player in every room. There are tape recorders, projectors and screens, and reference works of all sort.

Actually, Laguna—a beach resort with no industry—has a low tax base and a correspondingly modest school budget. Yet Artuso and Taylor have found means of saving money *and* adding to the facilities.

A prime example is the library at the new District Curriculum Center. Previously, Laguna received 780 books for classroom use and paid an annual rental fee of \$2500. The books were rotated every nine weeks. This meant that each class of 30 students would have 30 books, changed about four times a year. At the end of the year, all books had to be returned.

The district decided to quit the rental service, and in 1960 bought 3100 books—some new, some used—at an initial cost of \$3000. Now there are more than a hundred books per teacher, with new books available every day! Each year’s replacement cost runs about \$1000, making the outlay for the first two years of the new plan \$4000, as against \$5000. And savings for each additional year amount to \$1500!

There has grown, from all of this, a sudden respect for education in Laguna Beach. This new respect has had an offbeat sidelight. A custodian of one of the town’s four schools began to notice in 1960 that there were fewer and fewer markings on the walls of rest rooms and on desktops. Lately there have been none.

A war has been fought in Laguna Beach, California. And the squares have won. ■ ■

PAGEANT
March, 1961
p. 26