

# *The Saturday Review*

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## *Revolt in the Classroom*

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**T** **TEACHERS** by the hundreds of thousands are leaving their profession. Normally there are about 900,000 teachers, principals and supervisors in the public schools. They are faithful public servants who work long hours for little pay. Now many of them, sick and tired of their jobs, are quitting. In a normal year, about 93,000 teachers change jobs or quit teaching, but in the school year 1942-43 the turnover was 189,000 — double the usual figure.

This depletion comes at a time when war has put a greater burden than ever upon the schools. Communities are seriously disorganized; juvenile delinquency has increased. Yet in this hour of crisis, the school — the only agency potentially adapted to dealing with the problem of the young — is being literally and figuratively emasculated.

Of course, we shall manage to keep most of the schools going somehow, but in order to fill the vacant positions we shall have to issue emergency teaching certificates to thousands of persons too old, too young, too ignorant and too poorly balanced to meet our ordinary requirements. In the process, some millions of children will be shortchanged, and they will present their bill for damages in the years to come.

In explaining the exodus of teachers, educational authorities tactfully stress the fact that salaries are deplorably low. Last year, 40 teachers out of every 100 (or 360,000 in all) received less than \$1200 per annum. Twenty-six states had teachers receiving less than \$600 annually. Even in Maine every sixth teacher and in South Dakota every fifth were below this latter figure. As of April 1943, teachers' salaries had risen about seven or eight percent since the war began, while living costs had gone up 20 percent or more.

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But I do not believe teachers are quitting their jobs solely because of low salaries. People do not leave a profession they love just for a few pieces of silver. The truth is that many teachers were already deeply dissatisfied, and they seized this war-time opportunity to get out of a way of life which they had grown to detest.

In addition to low wages, we inflict many personal indignities upon our schoolteachers. The very teachers whom the profession most needs — the bold of spirit and the intelligent — are the ones who find this conjuncture of insult and injury hardest to bear.

We may as well face it: the social status of the teacher is humiliating, and that fact has much to do with teacher unrest. Public speakers often indulge in rhetoric about the "noble profession," but their words do not represent the real attitudes of the American people. Communities have been infinitely ingenious in devising ways to make the life of the teacher unpleasant. They have forbidden him to smoke, drink, swear, dance, live in a hotel, play pool or take part in politics, and so on *ad nauseam*. In general, communities have forced the teacher to be a model of all the negative virtues, a man distinguished by no positive merit but only by the things he does not do.

Sometimes women teachers have had to sign contracts agreeing not to fall in love or marry, not to use rouge, and not to go out with young men except in promoting Sunday-school work. Teachers have been fired for manicuring their fingernails. The schoolmarm is such a terrifying figure that many young women find it desirable to hide their profession from men they have just met.

Able teachers sometimes resent the training which they are forced to undergo in preparation for their jobs. The training is in large part irrelevant to the work they do, and often consists largely of indoctrination with some weird dogma. Teacher training is by no means all bad, and much of it is excellent, but enough of it is bad to constitute a major source of teacher dissatisfaction.

Not content with denying teachers their rights as human beings, we

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have made their work unpleasant by putting over them as supervisors a fine collection of nitwits, nincompoops and crackpots. There are, of course, many able supervisors, yet inept supervision is one of the principal crosses which teachers must bear. Supervisors frequently have some dogmatic point which they stress to the exclusion of everything else, or perhaps a little anecdote or phrase that they repeat endlessly. Others are afflicted by a sort of monomania: the teacher must always have the window shades exactly even, no matter what the light conditions; the teacher must greet the supervisor in a certain way and no other; grades must come out exactly on a curve; lesson plans must fit a cast-iron pattern. Sometimes racial or religious prejudices enter strongly into a supervisor's estimates.

Such grievances operate constantly to drive able persons from the teaching field, and to discourage others from entering. We get and keep teachers who are willing to put up with low pay and unendurable conditions of work.

The relaxation of family controls and the deterioration of the schools have operated to make older school children extremely restless and rebellious. They are in revolt; of that there can be no doubt. Children terrorize their teachers, make their lives miserable and their occupation dangerous. Boys under 18 carry on race riots and commit crimes as never before. Hoodlums administer beatings, carry on gang warfare in the halls — and the teachers are helpless.

In considerable part, the deterioration of discipline has been produced by the diversion from teaching of young men — coaches, recreation workers, vocational teachers — whom boys imitate and admire. At present there is a desperate lack of such leadership; 39,000 young teachers left the schools for the armed services in 1942-43, followed by 15,000 more in the summer of 1943. In the same periods, 51,000 more went into industry. Discipline in our schools cannot be restored until the able young men are put back on the faculties.

Four things must be done if the situation created by deteriorating schools and disappearing teachers is

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to be met:

1. Salaries of teachers must be raised to the point where they compare favorably with industry. If we really wish to put teaching into a favorable competitive position, a good way to begin would be by doubling teachers' 1942-43 salaries.

2. We must induce married ex-teachers to return to the classroom. There was never any sense to the ban on married teachers, and these women are an excellent labor reserve. They have already saved the situation in many communities.

3. We must contrive somehow to put young men back into the schools. No more male teachers should be drafted, on the principle that the prevention of crime and the maintenance of education are essential to the nation. We should return certain keymen to the school positions from which they were taken, recapturing them from industry and the armed services. This is by no means unprecedented in the history of war.

4. As part of our long-term policy toward the teaching profession, we should leave teachers free to lead their own lives as long as they behave like ladies and gentlemen. In short, we must begin to treat teachers like human beings.

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