

OUR SCHOOLS ARE A SCANDAL

BY KYLE CRICHTON



In Bullitt County, Ky., Lillian Smith, a high-school graduate, teaches fifty pupils in a one-room school, receives \$875 for eight and one-half months work. She has eight grades and teaches a total of sixty-one classes per day, seven subjects for each of the first three grades, eight for the other five. Note that books are all different

Ten million Americans can't read and write, thousands of teachers are underpaid and, try as they may, our poorer states cannot afford to do anything about it. Every Congress since 1919 has refused to improve the situation

DURING the war a visitor at Camp Edwards in Massachusetts asked the librarian at the Red Cross hut what she needed most in the way of new books.

"Picture books," said the librarian.

"Picture comics?" cried the visitor, with a trace of horror.

"No, I mean simple books for soldiers who can't read or write," replied the librarian.

The visitor was really shocked because he belonged to the great smug majority of Americans who felt that the little old U.S.A. was just about perfect in any of the essentials. He realized that there were sections of the country where the schooling was not so flossy as in Los Angeles or Chicago, but he felt sure that every American boy or girl had at least finished grammar school. When he looked into the figures he was shaken.

The Army was the first to feel the blow. Selective Service boards started out with instructions to reject all illiterates. This was a mechanical war and a soldier would be unable to function unless he could understand techniques and read orders. The draft boards went blithely along on this principle until there was suddenly an agonized cry from the Army. Between the men who were being rejected for physical reasons and the others for illiteracy, almost a third of the possible men were being lost. It was decided then to take the illiterates and educate them.

This was a move of desperation and it was only partially successful but it brought home

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time, and nothing can get them to school during those periods.

“What difference does it make if you bring nine-months school to the mountains of Kentucky?” they ask. “Do you think those kids are *going* nine months? It would take an army of truant officers armed with Garand rifles to pull it off.”

John K. Norton has the answer to that: We must realize that the social liabilities that flow from a denial of educational opportunity are so great that they can no longer be tolerated. Such opportunity should cease to be dependent upon such factors as the economic and cultural status of community and family in which the child lives. It should depend upon the child’s willingness and capacity to learn. Anything less makes education a creator of artificial and unfair class lines rather than the instrument of equality.

And, speaking in New York recently, President James Bryant Conant of Harvard shocked many of his listeners by saying that he disagreed with the widely held conception that “any boy who had what it takes can get all the education he wants in the U.S.A.” Doctor Conant said that he didn’t see how “you and I can preserve democracy here if we fail to practice democracy in the educational field.” The remedy, he added, is federal aid to schools.

We’ve been trying to put this over ever since the Smith-Towner bill in 1919—and getting nowhere. What happens now will be important . . . if anything happens at all.

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the awful truth in a way nobody could ignore. According to Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Owens, 1,704,000 men fell short of the Army's minimum standards of a fourth-grade education in this war!

This was approximately 13 per cent of the men in the armed services and is a nice black eye for American education in general. In the richest country in the world the Army had to stop what it was doing and teach grown men to read and write. Men who had been working for years and raising families of their own sat down for six-weeks courses in which they learned to recite: "This is a rifle—The rifle shoots—I keep my rifle clean—This is my barracks—This is my bed—I make my bed every morning. . . ."

Obviously, something is wrong. We are a great country and we are also a lopsided country. It happens that the states having the greatest percentage of children are also the poorest states. A child born of poor parents in Mississippi or Arkansas, for instance, doesn't get anywhere near so fair a break in life as in some of the richer states, and not even the citizens of those states will maintain otherwise.

If these youngsters are going to get the equal break that our Declaration of Independence postulates, somebody has to make up these inequalities. The federal government is apparently the only agency that can help, but when the subject arises (as it does in every term of Congress), there are shrieks and imprecations so loud you'd think the elimination of mankind was being proposed.

We will go into this opposition later. What is important now are the facts about our schools. There are 790 schools in this country that spend \$6,000 a year per classroom. By contrast, there are 1,674 schools which spend less than \$100 a classroom per year. This is what John K. Norton of Teachers College, Columbia University, calls the 60 to 1 difference.

Most of the children in the low-grade schools never become really literate. That



wouldn't be so bad if the state couldn't do any better and their illiterates stayed put, but it happens that Americans are rovers. Sixty per cent of our people are not living in the states where they were born. So what happens to children in Alabama can have very definite consequences later in Detroit. In short, we bemuse ourselves when we consider education a local problem. In a highly industrial nation like ours, it certainly isn't, and the huge illiterate minority acts as a heavy drag on the country's progress—politically, economically and socially.

The Statistics of Ignorance

Things were bad enough before the war; now they are really serious:

(1) Seven million children between the ages of five and seventeen are not now in school.

(2) More than ten million American adults are functionally illiterate (which means that they can't read a newspaper or a book or write a letter).

(3) One teacher in ten—instead of the one in two hundred of pre-Pearl Harbor days—now holds a substandard teaching certificate.

(4) Teachers' colleges have fifty-three per cent fewer students learning to become educators.

(5) There were 50,000 fewer teaching positions filled in 1944-45, and 280,000 teachers have left the schools since Pearl Harbor.

(6) In October, 1944, there were 10,000 closed classrooms.

Naturally, the war is responsible for some of this but the records show that the condition was almost as bad before we had that excuse. Even with war-swollen salaries there were 28,000 teachers in this country who were paid less than \$600 a year; and another 197,000 got less than \$1,200. At a recent Senate hearing in Washington, Florence Christmas,

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an intelligent and well-trained Negro teacher, testified that after fifteen years of service she was now being paid \$60 a month for six months of the year. When she was asked why she didn't quit and work in a war factory near by, she replied:

"Teaching is my profession. I want to work with my people."

But other teachers were not so reluctant. The clatter of feet scrambling out the front door was very noticeable. Teaching was the profession best represented in the Wacs and Waves, Spars and Marines. Other teachers escaped to factories and may now return, but there is small likelihood that they will be overjoyed by the prospect.

The greatest tragedy is found in states which strain themselves to the utmost to overcome their deficiencies, but still fall short of decent educational standards. For example, in 1943, the state which had the most children of school age (West Virginia) had an estimated income per capita of only \$688, while California, with the fewest children per thousand of population, had a per capita income of \$1,429. Thus California was three and one third times as able to educate its children as West Virginia. In order to raise a specified amount of money per child, West Virginia would have had to make about three and one half times as much effort as California.

Actually, New Mexico made the greatest effort to support public schools in 1942-43. The national average per pupil is \$106 a year. To support its schools New Mexico spent 64 per cent more than its wealth would justify and yet only brought its expenditure up to \$92 a year per pupil.

New York spends \$179 a pupil and Mississippi is low with \$35. Other expenditures are: Arkansas, \$43; Alabama, \$48; South Carolina, \$49; North Carolina, \$52; Georgia, \$53; Tennessee, \$55; Kentucky, \$59; Virginia, \$64; Florida, \$74; Louisiana, \$74, and Oklahoma, \$75.



The truth seems to be that schools are no longer America's sweetheart. When there is money to be divided in a state, roads come first, public health second and schools third. Much of this is inevitable but a great part of it stems from an underground and perennial feud between teachers and taxpayer-parents. The teachers feel they are grossly underpaid and keep yelling for more money; the taxpayers consider teaching a soft touch and fiercely resist the raises. "What is so tough about a teacher's life?" ask the taxpayers. "They have short hours, five days a week and long vacations. Most teachers would starve trying to hold any other job and are just waiting around to get married, anyhow." The teachers reply that they have the most nerve-racking job ever invented, battling as many as forty little demons (it is now said to be sixty in some classrooms) who are either actively sadistic or have adopted a manner of silent resistance that defies a grain of learning to pierce their craniums. Thousands of teachers have answered the taxpayer argument by simply retiring from the scene. If teaching is so jolly, they are saying, let somebody else have the pleasure.

The Pros and Cons of "Tenure"

Another thing that really creates a hub-bub between the factions is tenure. When a teacher has tenure she can't be ousted from her job except by bringing specific charges against her and giving her a hearing on them. This security makes up in some part for low wages and is supposed to protect the teacher from the whims of school-board members, but it also keeps in their positions teachers who are cordially detested by the parents. The teacher may be crotchety, inefficient and outmoded, but unless she hits somebody with an ax or is caught in some other flagrant misadventure, she stays on.

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There are only a few such cases but when they show up, they cause real trouble. Without tenure, however, the teacher is a helpless slave to the prejudices, whims and possible spite of school boards or busybodies. It is an impasse that will probably never be solved. As a prominent woman once said in Washington about civil service: "The only thing worse than civil service is no civil service."

All these conditions have bearing on the main problem of illiteracy. During the last quarter-century, strenuous attempts have been made to even up the inequalities in education by federal grants, but the opposition has always been too strong. As often happens in politics, the roles of the North and South have been reversed in this particular version of the battle over states' rights; the South wanting federal help and the North (in general) fighting it.

The opposition at the moment has the following objections to federal aid:

(a) The federal budget is far overboard and must be reduced. The states have had little share, if any, in war costs and are in excellent financial shape. They should help their own.

(b) Federal control of education will inevitably follow federal grants. We want no part of that.

(c) Even the poorer states could do much more for education than they are doing.

(d) Raising teachers' salaries is not going to help education. If the teachers are no good, giving them more money won't make them better.

(e) Federal aid is a revolutionary proposal, against the very nature of our government. We have never had it and don't want it now.

Nobody will deny that the federal budget is enormous and must be reduced. It is also true that the states have piled up surpluses during the war. But that does not mean that the poorer states can now reach the national average of \$105-a-year-a-pupil by their own efforts. The rich states are inclined to look down their noses at the poorer brethren and hint rather tartly that they are stewing in the juice of ignorance because they like it that way. Listen to what John K. Norton has to say on that:

"In 1940, Mississippi paid \$12,000,000 for its schools—an average of \$400 per classroom unit. It would have cost this state an additional \$23,000,000 to have established a \$1,650 minimum in all districts—the average for the nation. This would have required a tripling of taxes for education. Why does

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Mississippi do this? Because it is already taxing itself heavily to provide \$400 per classroom. Its tax effort—as measured by ratio of money raised for education to total income of its people—was 33 per cent above that of the country as a whole. It was 31 per cent greater than that of New York and 30 per cent greater than that of California. To triple educational costs in Mississippi would be equivalent to confiscation of property.”

Beyond that, the objectors are entirely wrong in thinking education has never had federal help. It first came in 1785 when the federal government set aside two townships in every county for the purposes of education. When Ohio was admitted to the Union in 1802, it received land grants for educational purposes; similar grants were made to other states in the years that followed.

“These grants comprise 121,000 square miles,” says R. B. Marston, of the National Education Association. “An area larger than Italy and nearly two and a half times as large as England.”

In addition to that, Land Grant colleges have been established and the federal treasury has made many outright grants of money for education. Since the passage of the Hatch Act in 1887, yearly grants have been made for experimentation in agriculture, and, lately, for vocational schools. The federal treasury was distributing \$153,572,186 to the states and territories for education as late as 1940.

“The federal government has never said a word about how the states should handle the money,” says Mr. Marston. “The various state agricultural colleges have been one of our proudest successes. Are there any voices raised to halt federal aid for these schools? We’ve always had federal aid and the control has always been with the states.”

And the vocational schools saved our life during the war. Not only did we have 2,000,000 boys previously trained by the program, but the government immediately expanded the schools to such an extent that 10,000,000 additional were trained during the war. That largely supplied the reservoir of trained workers which allowed us to make our great war production record.

“Hundreds of millions of dollars were poured into this program,” says Mr. Norton, “and a great deal of it was wasted because we only took such steps in an emergency.”

A Demand That Defeated Itself

At a recent meeting in Chicago of the American Association of Junior Colleges, a demand was made for a federal aid to school

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programs of three billion dollars a year.

This was a brave gesture. The fact that Congress has refused any appropriation whatever since the project was first broached in 1919 would seem to indicate that a more modest approach might have a better chance. Last year there were two bills before Congress—the Thomas-Hill-Ramspeck bill and the Mead-Aiken bill. The first came closer to getting on the floor, losing in committee by the narrow vote of 10-9. This was a bitter pill but it encouraged the federal-aid advocates, who had never before come so close.

In its original form this bill called for an equalization fund of \$100,000,000 and an emergency fund of \$200,000,000. For a time it was felt that the emergency was over so the latter feature could be dropped, but reports coming in from various sections of the country seem to indicate that the war is not over as far as the schools are concerned.

A report from Georgia had this to say: "The chief worry of this state's many communities at present—and the situation is the same throughout the South—stems from the inability to get qualified teachers in the various school systems. Many schools in Georgia have been forced to close down from lack of teachers. Others are struggling along with high-school students conducting the primary grades. Approximately half the teachers in the state schools now have no professional training. In one instance, a woman who never went beyond the fourth grade is teaching the seventh. The salary scale is miserably low and more capable teachers are being attracted to other states and other professions."

The equalization fund of the Thomas-Hill-Ramspeck bill simply provided that communities having insufficient money for schools would receive enough federal money to bring their standards up to the national level. Naturally some states such as California, Connecticut, Delaware, Nevada, New York and the District of Columbia do not need help and would get none. The fund is restricted to *public* elementary and secondary schools. To qualify for the money, a state would be required to continue to spend for its own schools at least as much as in 1943-44. This is to keep the states from cutting their budgets and allowing the federal government to carry the burden.

Opponents of the bill complain loudly about this latter provision on the ground that it would forever keep the states from lowering school budgets. Proponents answer that it would be silly to talk about reducing salaries, even if we had a depression again.

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"Even in New York State with its average salary of \$2,697 a year," said a member of the Teachers College faculty, "nobody is getting rich. High-school teachers must have a college degree and in many instances a master's degree. The same training brings real money in other positions. The miracle is that we keep any good teachers at all."

And in the South, where salaries are 'way below New York's level, many of the finest teachers are weaned away by higher salaries. They may have a real devotion to their own people but when they are offered three and four times the money elsewhere, the temptation is hard to resist.

The chances of success for the federal-aid program in Congress are lowered by the conflict between the backers of the Thomas-Hill-Ramspeck bill and the Mead-Aiken bill. The former provides aid solely to public schools. Among the most active defenders of the Mead-Aiken bill are the National Catholic Welfare Conference and the American Federation of Teachers, an affiliate of the A.F. of L. There is fear that the bitterness over this difference of opinion may play into the hands of those who want no federal aid.

There are powerful forces lined up against it. Opposition comes from big business groups (which are naturally opposed to anything that raises taxes) and from those who fear federal domination of the schools and thus of public thought. An answer to their objections appeared recently in a United States Chamber of Commerce booklet, which showed that good business was not possible in areas where illiteracy flourished. In these areas no books and radios were sold, and very little of anything else.

The inference was that a wealthy country is an educated country and the statistics seem to bear this out. This booklet, prepared by a committee, does not necessarily represent the view of the general membership of the U.S. Chamber and certainly not of the powerful New York State Chamber of Commerce, which is a vigorous opponent of federal aid.

Illiteracy and the Ballot

In the meantime the problem remains. Millions of citizens in the richest country in the world reach voting age without being able to read the names of the candidates on the ballots. There are cynics who maintain that dumping federal money into the states would have no effect whatever. They claim that farmers in the poorer sections need the help of their children at planting and harvest