

SPUTNIK BETTERED OUR SCHOOLS

by Roger Ricklefs

Editor's note:

"What's the matter with our high schools?"

The question has been asked repeatedly by leaders in government, business, science and education, who have been appalled by the numbers of high school graduates unfit for college, a skilled job or even military service.

Now the high schools have begun some bold experiments which promise to pay off eventually in a caliber of graduates not thought possible a decade ago. This is a progress report on how some of these high schools are building a completely new concept of intensive education that may be the standard curriculum of tomorrow.

UNITED States colleges are expecting one of the best-prepared crops of freshmen ever next fall.

That's the almost unanimous word from college admissions officers. They say the widespread efforts of recent years to "beef up" high school curriculums are now beginning to pay off in a big way. Many of last spring's high school graduates will jump right into advanced college courses next fall, skipping basic courses that were mandatory for freshmen.

"The incoming class will be better prepared to handle advanced work than any class in my memory," says Henry S. Coleman, an admissions official at Columbia University. Mr. Coleman has been an administrator at Columbia since 1948.

Daniel W. Fagg Jr., assistant dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Emory University in Atlanta, comments, "There is no doubt that our average freshman this fall will be better prepared than the average new student five years ago. He will be better prepared in every field of secondary high school study."

The Sputnik Scare



Our high schools have improved remarkably, thanks to a kick in the planet from the first Russian satellite to orbit

The rising level of high school instruction is manifest in many ways. More high schools are offering college-level courses in such subjects as calculus and physics. More high schools offer foreign languages and more students enroll in such courses. Drill in English composition—a field college instructors have long thought particularly neglected by high schools—has been intensified in many school systems. Increasing use of “ability grouping,” the assignment of pupils to different classes according to their intellectual capacity, is heightening competition and speeding the pace at which bright students can learn.

Educators trace the push for better quality secondary school instruction to the Soviets’ orbiting of the first Sputnik in 1957. “Our special program for high ability students is a direct result of Sputnik,” says B. Frank Brown, principal of Melbourne High School, Melbourne, Florida. Other principals maintain, however, that Sputnik served mainly to crystallize a movement that was already under way.

Many educators single out the College Entrance Examination Board’s Advanced Placement Program as one of the most influential forces in the improvement of the nation’s high schools. On the basis of special College Board exams, 765 colleges and universities now grant college credit, advanced course placement or even sophomore standing for work completed in high school. The number of students taking the tests soared to about 29,000 this school year, up from 21,769 last year and 1,229 in 1955-56, the first year the program moved beyond the pilot stage.

The Sputnik Scare

The program has a major impact on high schools, because many of these institutions are working hard to prepare their students for the tests, usually by offering college-level courses. Over 2,000 high schools now cooperate in the Advanced Placement Program.

The advanced placement courses are tough. At Midwood High School in Brooklyn, students taking a course leading toward advanced standing in college history are expected to be able to write knowledgeably on New Lanark (site of 19th century socialistic experiments in Scotland), the Carlsbad Decrees (a series of reactionary resolutions promulgated by a group of German states in 1819) and Baron Hans Christoph von Gagern (an 18th century German statesman and political writer). These are subjects that would stump most college graduates. The advanced placement course in French at the same school follows the reading list used in Harvard's French literature survey course.

Perhaps surprisingly, most students seem glad to get the extra work. "I probably would have been pretty bored last year without advanced placement," says Margaret Rossoff, a Midwood High School graduate headed for Radcliffe.

Students not in the program also benefit. "Advanced placement raises the tone of all our courses," says the Rev. William McCusker, S.J., principal of New York's Regis High School, a well known Catholic institution. "Some teachers assign work from their advanced placement courses to other classes, and the results are amazing."

Many colleges report that advanced placement students earn higher average grades in advanced courses than students who studied the prerequisite subjects in college. Aware of the program's past success, Harvard in the 1963-64 academic year granted advanced placement to more freshmen than ever before; 520 freshmen, 43 per cent of the class, were permitted to enter advanced courses.

Besides giving their own college-level courses, some high schools

The Sputnik Scare

send their brightest students to nearby colleges for advanced work. The University of Illinois at Urbana accepts 15 to 20 outstanding local high school students in various courses.

Some universities even tailor special courses to high school needs. The Science Honors Program at Columbia University, which offers high school students special Saturday classes taught largely by college faculty members, enrolled 439 students last year, 84 more than in 1958, when the program started.

The trend to joint college-high school efforts extends to cooperation between faculties at the two levels. Regis High School planned its advanced placement English course with the help of English professors from nearby Fordham University. The National Science Foundation's Cooperative College-School Science Program supports universities, colleges and nonprofit research organizations that work with high schools to improve secondary school science and mathematics offerings.

Mathematics is one of the fields of high school study in which the gains have been particularly dramatic in recent years. The number of high schools offering calculus has tripled in the past five years, Arthur Brown, assistant director of the College Board's Advanced Placement Program, estimates. Columbia University reports that a third of the class starting the freshman year in September will have studied calculus, compared with a sixth of the freshman class six years ago.

In high school English, the trend is to more composition assignments on more taxing subjects than in the past. A critical examination of the nature of evil in "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" often supplants a lightweight essay on "How I Spent My Summer Vacation." The improvement in high school English has been so marked that Emory last year excused over a third of its freshmen from the basic English composition course. "Five years ago we had not even considered exempting students from the course," says Dean Fagg.

The Sputnik Scare

At least 75 per cent of United States public high schools now offer foreign language instruction, compared with 62 per cent in 1958, the Modern Language Association reports. By 1962, roughly one in three high school students was studying a foreign language, compared with fewer than one in four in 1958. About a third of high school modern language students now continue their language studies beyond the standard two years, far more than took advanced courses a few years ago. "Very few of the freshmen we accept have had fewer than three years of a foreign language in high school," says Mr. Coleman of Columbia.

Educators are impressed with high school students' abilities to absorb heavy doses of advanced subject matter. "We're getting away from the notion that an assignment suitable for college freshmen is impossible for high school students a year younger," says a high school English teacher.

Another teacher observes, "There's no question we underestimated kids a few years ago; we were really selling them short."

Of course, hundreds of schools still do sell their students short. Critics say many schools remain almost untouched by the drive for excellence. "The improvement in public schools is concentrated mostly in the well-financed schools, particularly in the suburbs," asserts E. A. Dunham, director of admissions at Princeton University.

There are also wide variations in the caliber of high schools from one part of the country to another. Schools in New York State spend \$750 per pupil, compared with under \$200 in Alabama. In Connecticut, foreign language enrollments total 66 per cent of the high school population; the figure for both Alabama and Mississippi is 7 per cent.



Coronet

September, 1964: p. 34