

SCHOOL DAYS, GOLDEN RULE DAYS

(Originally published October 1975)

The arrival of fall and start of another school year brought forth a rash of newspaper and magazine articles bemoaning the sad state of public education. Almost everyone, it seems, is agreed that the quality of public education as measured by the educational testing levels of students it produces, deteriorates steadily year by year.

The publishing of the comparative test scores from 1963 to 1975 confirmed the decline. The Scholastic Aptitude (SAT) Scores in verbal testing decreased from an average 478 in 1963 to 434 in 1975, in mathematical testing, from 502 to 472. In the eyes of some critics, public schooling has become a "disaster area" in which more and more children are turned out whose ability to read, write, calculate, understand and communicate continues to worsen.

A succession of Dicks and Janes, those happy schoolbook characters who have been romping through twelve-year periods of fun and games for the last thirty to forty years, has apparently concentrated on looking and seeing instead of learning. Unfortunately, many of them are now teaching their deficiencies to new generations of Dicks and Janes.

John Dewey's progressive theories of socially aimed, functional and occupational education began to alter the older, abstract, classical education tradition more than fifty years ago. His admirers and followers have developed, redefined and expanded the trend to the present extreme where social studies not only dominate the curricula of most liberal arts colleges, but also have worked their way backward through the secondary into elementary grades. This has occurred almost entirely at the expense of the fundamental disciplines of learning. The high school graduate of 1910, or even 1920, had a sound basic knowledge of English, Latin, and at least one modern foreign language; he knew mathematics up through simple calculus; he knew ancient, medieval and modern history; he knew geography; he had some idea about civics and government; and, in addition, he could spell and even write legibly. Most old time, high school graduates were considerably more proficient in the basics than a majority of today's college seniors and it served them well.

We all seem convinced now that changes are needed in present-day educational methods. There are many voices demanding a return to the nostalgic "Three Rs" and other fundamentals. Our State Superintendent of Education wants to do away with "social promotions." The U.S. Commissioner of Education favors the idea of "alternative" schools where fundamentals will be taught. The editorialists clamor for reform. Parents

are upset, some apoplectic. But at the same time, in Atlanta, the Fulton County Board of Education has abolished the grade of "F" (failure) for the first and second grades and approved a nebulous concept of "eventually eliminating grades kindergarten through twelve" in all schools. A *Columbus Ledger* editorial states that the schools are not working and calls for an equally ambiguous "moving away from the repressive influence of formalized rigid structures in curricula and toward encouraging the student to develop his talents and intellectual faculties along natural inclinations."

In other words, everyone is dissatisfied, but no one wants to upset the socially oriented entrenched bureaucracy of our quasi educational establishment, which continues to promote permissiveness and obeisance to immature demands in the name of "relevance." Except for a small, constant, but diminishing, percentage of superior student intellects. The "natural inclination" of most school-age children is to study as little as possible; their "talent" is to get by with the least possible effort. Those attributes have always been present, and if they can be rewarded by passing grades and promotion, they will certainly increase.

Outside of the occasional, determined school system in an occasional community over the country, there has been little positive action. It might be refreshing to see a school system develop enough guts to junk the entire mess and return to seven or eight years of elementary work devoted to basic subjects without any "relevant" or "social adjustment" courses, and with courage enough to segregate high school years by sex once more into the Boys High and Girls High institutions of those old fashioned, golden rule days, eliminating, on the way, any elective or vocational courses until after the tenth year. It could be done, slowly and step by step, starting with the first and second graders and progressing year by year. Within a decade the young might be able to read, write and understand again. In any event, the results couldn't be worse than they are now, or will be ten years hence, if the present vapid system remains in effect.

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "Doctor's Lounge", Oct 1975, Vol. XXII No. 10, p.7