

Forward with Basics

Teaching high school students information they should have learned in elementary school left me frustrated. I wanted to teach the subject at the proper grade level, but often students could not grasp what was being offered. Unless tests were extremely simple and material was repeated over and over, many pupils would fail. Everyone makes occasional mistakes, but there was a serious educational deficiency here that was so disturbing.

Frustrated Teachers

We teachers would discuss the students' deplorable educational ability. One day I decided to probe for the exact reasons for their deficiencies. After taking a survey of one of my tenth-grade classes, I discovered the answer to the riddle.

I searched every student's permanent record and noted reading and math scores, age, and birthplace. More than half of the class had a fifth-grade reading level or lower; nearly half had a fourth-grade math level; and all students were either at the proper age or one year behind for their grade, except for one foreign student who was behind two years. After I had analyzed the survey, the mystery for the massive educational failure unfolded—automatic promotion. Students were put back a maximum of one year; then advanced regardless of their educational achievement. If students neglected to study; refused to do homework; failed tests; did not know reading, writing, or math; were absent; cut classes; or were truant—whatever they did or did not do, it made no difference—all were automatically advanced.

Often I witnessed these underachievers refusing to do the work required to pass the course. They would neither study nor do the necessary homework; in fact, some felt it was even too much effort to take out a pen and copy blackboard notes. After all, why should they? All along they had been taught that minimal effort brings success.

To this same sophomore high school class I gave a math survey test: only 8 out of 23 students could correctly add $7\frac{1}{2}$ and $11\frac{1}{8}$; five students could not write the dictated number 1,094; and for the number 785, one student wrote 70085. When comparing permanent records, I

found that foreign students had higher scores in both reading and math than American-born.

Every year over one million high school juniors and seniors take the College Entrance Scholastic Aptitude Tests, which serve as a common denominator for students across America. For decades the test scores were steady, but since 1970 they have declined alarmingly. Concerned parents and educators have demanded reasons for this high rate of failure. The College Entrance Examination Board commissioned an independent panel to find out. Spending more than \$750,000 in research, they produced an eight-inch-thick volume of 34 special research reports.

The committee found two periods of decline. (1) Before 1970, two new groups of students helped create the declining averages. There was a greater influx of poor people, who generally do receive lower test scores; and of women, who score lower in math. (2) After 1970, the excuse of new test-takers was no longer valid, but scores fell even more alarmingly. The panel traced the failure to a general “lowering of educational standards.” Some of the reasons cited were high rates of absenteeism, grade inflation, “less thoughtful and critical reading,” lack of stress on careful writing, half the former homework, lower-reading-level textbooks, and promotion that was “almost automatic.”¹

Promotional Standards

The crucial question is: What can the schools do to assure that every student receives an adequate education?

The goal to graduate properly trained students must begin, not in junior high or high school, but in the early grades. Educators should concentrate on making the first three years of schooling productive by establishing proper learning habits. In these early years children acquire their basic skills and educational foundations. Each grade in the elementary school should have a minimum level of proficiency in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and there should be a minimum standard for graduation from junior high and high school.

The first grade should prepare children for the art of learning. First grade should be considered “preparation”: a time devoted to preparing children ready for second grade. After half a year in preparation, there should be an adjustment: Children who master the required material for the first half of the term will advance with the class, while those unable to do the work will be placed in another class to continue doing beginning

work. Then only the children who have learned the required first year's work will be advanced to second grade; the others must remain in preparation until they are able to start second-grade work. Some children may need to spend one and a half or two years in preparation. The term *preparation* is used to minimize the negative effects of telling children they are retained.

Advancement will be based not on chronological age but on learning ability; only children who reach reading and math readiness for each grade will advance. Piaget offered sound advice when he stated that methods of education will be most productive when they are tuned to the child's natural learning abilities. However, once children are ready to learn, they should be encouraged and not left to flounder; students tend to set their standards no higher than required.

Schools should institute semiannual promotions: Children entering second grade should go into 2A, then 2B, then 3A, and so on, right through to high school. Pupils need not receive a new teacher every half year. This method permits failing students to be retained a half year instead of the customary whole year; it also allows children to enter school every half year. Children held back for two years should be put into ungraded classes or "opportunity classes." These failing children should be placed in smaller classes where they can receive special attention and continue through the school system. This procedure prevents the retention of 16-year-old students in elementary school. However, when they reach their minimum grade level, they have the "opportunity" to be placed in their proper class.

Schools should not take the hard-line position: you have failed—now suffer for your ignorance. On the contrary, utmost concern should be had for the early grades: Remedial help should be provided, and parents should be invited to a conference set up to help both children and parents. Every avenue should be explored to help students succeed in each grade. Remedial help would be used now to nip problems in the bud, instead of waiting till pupils are academically lost. Children still unable to perform in the grade should be told kindly that they are being put back a half year.

The present system of social promotion displays no great concern with pupils' success or failure; all automatically advance grade after grade. Instead of becoming alarmed over failing students, school personnel often leave underachievers alone. Consequently, many children just drift along

without applying the necessary effort to learn. Automatic promotion rewards incompetence, which in turn promotes laziness and mediocrity; achievement promotion fosters diligence because it encourages and rewards students' efforts and abilities. By rejecting social promotion, schools will have to accept the responsibility for their students' learning. Classes will have to be designed to fulfill that responsibility, and teachers will have to create an effective learning environment.

Promotional Standards and Self-Esteem

Perhaps the most subtle argument for not failing students is that because children enter schools with various abilities and maturity levels, and permitting them to experience failure lowers their self-esteem and produces devastating psychological damage. Children certainly enter schools with various abilities and maturity levels—the slow learner, trying to do the work but unable; the semiliterate, coming from a foreign-language home and incapable of comprehending and expressing himself clearly; the late bloomer, acting childish and immature; the culturally deprived whose impoverished neighborhood and home have kept him from reaching his full potential; and the underachiever, having the ability but lacking inner self-discipline and motivation and thereby becomes quickly discouraged. Students do not like to be left behind. But we must honestly ask, “What procedure will prepare failing children best for their own future, being left back or being automatically promoted?”

A healthy self-esteem is extremely important. But is it wiser to let pupils advance beyond their ability and experience constant failure, or to let failing students be instructed by compassionate and understanding teachers and advisers that retention is not punishment but a means to help them succeed? Children retained because of lack of learning ability who then discover their ability to keep up with the class will experience a great ego boost. The greatest builder of lasting self-esteem is true success. Dr. James C. Dobson, Jr., assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern California School of Medicine, says, “Make certain your child has learned to read by the end of his second year in school. I’m convinced that self-esteem has more frequently been assassinated over reading problems than any other aspect of school life. And it is all so unnecessary! . . . Every child, with very few exceptions, can learn to read if taught properly.”²²

“At the Gesell Institute of Human Development,” reports Louise Bates

Ames, the associate director of the institute, “we feel there is no need for children to be emotionally damaged when they are retained in the school grade they are already in. A slight and temporary hurt would be worth it if retention resulted in the child being placed in a grade where he could be comfortable and could do the work.”³

Psychologist Verne Lewis of Jefferson, Iowa, questioned more than 400 parents of children who were left back. Lewis’ study showed that 87 percent felt the retention was beneficial, 90 percent declared it was justified, 89 percent did not regret their decision, and 88 percent would repeat having their child retained.⁴

Automatic promotion punishes children by putting illiterates with literates, thereby causing these underachievers to remain ignorant because of their inability to function. Education, trying to be humane, has been inhumane by deceiving failing children to think they are successful. Helen Wise, president of the National Education Association, declares, “If you hold back a slow child, he will get slower.”⁵ But slow children are not helped when they must sit in classes and listen to incomprehensible jabberings of teachers instructing regular students, the presumption being that when teachers have some “extra time” they can help these slow pupils. These low-achieving students belong in the grade where they can function and learn.

Picture children knowing just second- or third-grade arithmetic while the teacher is instructing a class of 25 to 35 pupils in fifth-grade math. How can these children learn? They will retrogress more and more in each succeeding grade; the teacher is always instructing beyond their capabilities. Providing underachievers with 40 minutes of remedial help will assist them for their grade level; but upon returning to class they are lost again. Such students need constant remedial help. How much wiser to put children into their functional grade where education will be in harmony with their intellectual and psychological ability. This would eliminate much remedial help. Likewise, how much more profitable for students to have teachers devoting their entire time to a class at its proper grade level instead of skipping around the class and dividing their time among various levels of ability.

Social promotion is like the vain king who wanted to impress his subjects with his fishing skill. He instructed divers to hook large fishes to his line so he could boast of his achievement while the people marveled; inwardly, however, he knew better. Automatically advanced children, are

victims of deception. They may boast ignorantly of their achievement while others are amazed at their stupidity. At least the king had fish; these children's hooks are empty.

Teacher and Student Failures

Often teachers are blamed for the failures of the children, but teachers are not always at fault. Effective teaching is not an automatic mechanical response; rather, teachers must be flexible and be able to flow with the class. What profit is there if students cannot understand the teacher? Can learning take place? How can algebra be taught if students cannot add or subtract; or literature, if the majority can barely read third-grade material? Comprehension must precede learning. If students come into classes improperly trained, what can teachers do? They must start where the class is. This further lowers the level of the other students. The next grade teachers react the same way, and the dominoes continue to fall even up to the college and university level.

The *Lansing State Journal* had this letter from Ralph W. Lewis:

Most of the arguments against minimum standards for passing to the next grade are spurious or unrealistic. The spurious arguments are often based in a superficial psychology that has been discarded by psychologists. And the unrealistic arguments are based on a time-limited concept of child as child rather than on an open concept of child as a becoming person.

Only one argument can be considered now. This is embodied in the question: which is a greater hardship for a person to bear—the failure of promotion at grade three or the failure to hold a job at eighteen because of inability to read directions? Or failure in college because of a reading deficiency?

Most people will agree that the third grade penalty is much less, especially since it can be cushioned and corrected so as to lead most children through it into a rapid growth phase.

As a teacher of college freshmen I can tell you that the tragedies suffered by failing students are very harsh. There are not many cushions for them at this age and often there is little hope for further advanced education. When students finally discover that their troubles stem not from a lack of native ability, but from a lack of standards in their formative years, they are disillusioned and begin to wonder about the quality of knowledge and judgment in their home communities.⁶

Then there are devoted teachers who insist on course standards but are pressured by the administration to lower them. “I used to be tough and demanding, but I was told to lay off,” said a high school teacher in Medford, Massachusetts. If more than 20 percent of his students fail, he is “called on the carpet.”⁷⁷ Another teacher in Coos Bay, Oregon, complained about the great pressure to pass students: “If my failure rate exceeds 12%. I’ll be questioned.” He added, “Someone would likely ask me if I weren’t expecting too much. So the failure rate goes down, but the quality and quantity of work also go down.”⁷⁸ Once underachieving children have been granted success regardless of their effort or ability, it is often too late when they reach junior high and high school to help them develop successful learning behavior. Schools may salvage a few children, but it is not realistic to expect some remedial program radically to alter pupils trained for six years in permissive failure and turn them into devout students.

Often in my high school classes I tried to motivate non-achievers. With rapt attention these students listened as I enumerated incidents dealing with the value of receiving an education and of learning how to work. They were interested, and practically all wanted to be successful, but what can be expected of students who are barely reading and doing math at a fourth- or fifth-grade level? All the good intentions they could muster would not change their ability. They were years behind in their education; to achieve at proper grade level would take an extraordinary amount of willpower and work for which they were never adequately trained. Many of these non-achievers take the easier alternative—they drop out of school.

Dr. Howard L. Hurwitz, former principal of Long Island City High School in New York City, called the remedial reading programs “sheer fakery” for high schools and colleges. “If you lose a kid in the first three years you have lost him,” Hurwitz said. “The kid can never learn to read in high school. You shouldn’t have social promotions. No one should be in the fourth grade who can’t read.”⁷⁹

The real culprit in the educational crisis is the current system permitting nonachieving and nonworking students to advance automatically without mastering the subject material for each particular grade. The simple procedure of guaranteeing competency for each grade would revolutionize the entire educational system from elementary school through the universities. Fifth-grade teachers would no longer have students reading

at the second-grade level; they could begin teaching at the proper level knowing that every child was able to comprehend fifth-grade material. High school teachers would not have students unable to do basic math or read simple instructions. Colleges would no longer have to offer remedial reading and writing; every student receiving a diploma would understand the basics. Furthermore, all students would receive tremendous benefits from having teachers who devoted their full time to the regular subject material instead of doing unnecessary remedial work.

Promotional Exams

To ensure competent students, each elementary grade should have some method of testing basic knowledge. If examinations are given and for some reason a child expected to pass receives a failing mark, another test should be offered. Some elementary school children may do poorly because they are nervous or upset; such children should be given a personal evaluation test.

To break this syndrome of success with failure, students in junior high school should have flexible scheduling as in high school, and not be automatically promoted from grade to grade whether they pass their subjects or not. There should be certain basic requirements for graduation as in high school. A Graham Down, executive director for the Council for Basic Education, gives an excellent view on what basic education should be:

It means that all students, except the severely retarded, should receive competent instruction in all the fundamental disciplines. Basic education means that before students graduate from high school, they should at least be able to read at an eighth-grade level, write with grace and accuracy, possess computational skills, have the perspective provided by sound historical knowledge, have some acquaintance with a foreign language and its culture, some knowledge and understanding of science, and an appreciation of the role of the arts in the history of man and contemporary life.¹⁰

Some authorities disagree with having eligibility examinations for promotion; they would eliminate such tests altogether. Standardized tests are “like a lock on the mind, a guard at the factory gate,” says NEA executive director Terry Herndon. He is against college board tests, achievement tests given to elementary and secondary school children, graduate record

exams, IQ tests—in fact, any uniform test that compares large numbers of students. “The only real beneficiaries,” according to Herndon, “aside from the test marketers themselves, are insecure school managers striving for comfort in their relations with school boards, legislators, and governors.”

Herndon complains that “it’s time to get the children out of the factory and back into the classroom where they belong.” To him education is a very complex process, and hence too difficult to be assessed by standardized testing.”¹¹

Fears have been expressed that minimum standards will become the maximum and teachers will teach only for the tests. Certainly there are those few who will want to take advantage of any system and teach only for test results, but principals should encourage teachers to develop each student’s maximum potential. Educators need to realize that there are essential skills other than just mastering the basics: analytic thinking, problem solving, logical reasoning, self-discipline, self-motivation, and developing proper moral principles.

Some are concerned over failure to evaluate the tests properly, and the ruinous effects this could have upon children. Tests must be carefully designed and evaluated so as to reflect achievement accurately. However, the danger of not having proficiency tests and standards or some method of evaluation far outweighs the few errors that are likely to appear. It is much more dangerous for schools to have low student performance and to keep pushing through thousands of illiterate children.

Teacher Accountability

Establishing standards and guidelines for the basics does not mean curtailing teachers’ creativity and freedom. The guidelines should not be so stringent as to forbid teacher flexibility or to force all teachers into some particular mold. A recommended pattern should be offered for teachers who need one, but teachers should be free to use their creative abilities as long as students meet the acceptable standards. It is a system that combines discipline and freedom.

There are, of course, superior, regular, and inferior teachers. The use of standards can provide guidelines for them all. Incompetent teachers will suffer because they will be exposed as a result of standardized tests. These teachers should not be immediately eliminated; administrators should first try to assist them to succeed by supervising and counseling them on how to teach more effectively. Only when all else fails should such teachers be removed. Standards should not be a punitive device to eliminate teachers

but a means to ensure the best education for all students. Nevertheless, a class is only as good as its teacher. There is no substitute for competent teachers, and there ought to be safeguards to make certain that competent teachers are in all classes.

Unfortunately in America, teachers are grossly underpaid. This causes many capable individuals to choose other occupations instead of teaching, and those who are teaching to leave the profession. Though there are many capable teachers, there are those who are incompetent. Teacher organizations need to beware of defending these incompetent teachers; otherwise the public will become antagonistic toward education and not support it as it should.

Establishing promotional standards for each grade will allow teachers to see the effectiveness of their pedagogical methods, particularly when large numbers of students have either failed or succeeded. When quality control is brought into the schools, it will become apparent which methods and materials are the most effective. While teaching reading to first-grade students as a substitute teacher in Lower East Side, Manhattan, I was surprised at how simple the work was for a class that in one month was to be promoted to the second grade. The children studied four pages from their workbook containing only three simple words: an, pan, pin. The workbook was overly simple and very ineffective for teaching reading. Perhaps it was no strange coincidence that the second-grade class had the second lowest reading rate in the school district.

When I asked a group of elementary school teachers what was the reason for children's low achievement, a teacher remarked, "Teacher accountability." Along with others she acknowledged that they as teachers are unsupervised. Freely she admitted that being held accountable was a more taxing way to teach. Certainly not being held accountable is a much easier way to teach than having a supervisor checking one's performance. But such supervision is essential if schools want to produce competent students. One teacher complained that one's efforts are all lost when a good job is performed and next term the class receives an incompetent teacher. Ninety percent of the 49 principals who responded to my survey acknowledged the need for greater teacher supervision, and the same percentage favored teacher accountability.

The *Council for Basic Education Bulletin* reports that in Pinellas County, Florida, "about one-third of the applicants for teaching jobs have failed a general knowledge test at the eighth-grade level. Confronted with such evidence, the state Board of Regents has decided to require

professional competency tests before a prospective teacher can graduate from a state university.”¹² “According to the National Council of Teachers of English,” notes *Newsweek*, “it is now possible for an aspirant who wants to teach high-school English to go all the way through high school, college and advanced-education degrees without taking a single course in English composition. “Some researchers estimate that more than 50 per cent of the nation’s secondary-school English teachers did not specialize in English at all during their college years.”¹³ When 535 first-year teachers in the Dallas school district were required to take a basic academic test for high school students, more than half the teachers failed.¹⁴

Professor R. R. Allen of the University of Wisconsin said that English teachers are unable to teach reading and writing skills properly because they are improperly trained: “The certification of teachers of English is largely a fraud.” Allen pointed out that the “English establishment seems largely disinterested in basic skill development,” and “it is arrogant and abrasive in its responses to calls for educational accountability.” Then Allen analyzed the situation:

And so, my friends—Johnny can’t write. And why should he be able to? Those entrusted to nurture his talents are not primarily inclined to do so, seeking instead to invite his love of literature he is largely unable to read. Teacher preparation institutions and state certifying agencies continue to sanction college English education curricula largely irrelevant to the work which teachers must do. And the English establishment stands by saying, “What we do is so immensely complex and sophisticated that no one can tell whether we do it well or not.”¹⁵

The schools must get away from the educational philosophy that lets everyone do as he pleases. This approach of not requiring accountability from students, teachers, and administrators must be eliminated if schools want to become effective learning institutions.

New York City’s Promotional Standards

Back in December 1973, New York City was hailed for establishing stiffer promotion standards. *Time* stated:

This month, in a break with recent policy, New York City’s school system announced that it will no longer promote students

who lag far behind their grade level in reading ability.

For the past six years, the nation's largest urban school system (enrollment, 1,490,000) has passed elementary school pupils on from grade to grade even when they have been as much as 2 1/2 years behind the norm for their grade in reading. From now on, however, students in grades four through eight will not be promoted if they are more than a year behind. Even under the new policy, slow readers would not be forced to languish year after year in the same grade. Except in rare cases, students will not be held back more than once in elementary and once in junior high. Those who repeatedly fail to meet eighth- and ninth-grade standards will nonetheless eventually be admitted to high school.¹⁶

Reading this, one would be led to believe that New York City had really begun to crack down on the problem of automatic promotion—but it was still a disaster. The article stated, “Students in grades four through eight will not be promoted if they are more than a year behind.” This is exactly the problem; in the early grades where educational habits are formed the children are still automatically advanced. Then somewhere between grades four and eight they can be left behind for a maximum of one year in elementary school and for one year in junior high; however, I discovered few students put back two years. Instead of learning from its past failures and instituting standards for advancement, particularly for each grade, New York City will again require promotional standards for the fourth and eighth grades.¹⁷

If standardized testing for the basics is utilized for promotion, there ought to be careful evaluation of the tests. This appears obvious, but I received one of my great educational shocks when assigned to mark one of these standardized tests. Students received the Nelson-Denny Reading Test for high schools and colleges, which consisted of multiple choices of five answers for vocabulary and comprehension, and a method to determine the reading rate. While marking the test I became curious as to what mark someone would receive by pure guessing. If a foreign student not knowing a word of English, or for that matter an idiot having just enough sense to pick one out of five multiple-choice answers, took the test, what reading grade would he receive? Using the law of averages, I figured out his grade. I went to the comparison chart and was dumbfounded. Something must be wrong. I could not believe the result—an 8.0 reading grade! The exact level needed to graduate from high school!

I questioned the teacher in charge of the test to make certain I had marked it properly; he assured me I was right. Then I asked the assistant principal in charge of these tests, who also affirmed that I had marked it properly. Still not satisfied, I wrote to the company that produced the test. The editor in chief of test services compared a similar test and noted that a student could get a 7.8 grade equivalent by pure guessing. “We still think there is a too-high reward on the Nelson-Denny Vocabulary Test for guessing at grade 9—and it does affect the total score upwards more than we want,” he replied. “We intend to correct this with our next edition of the test.”

How such a test could be devised by specialists to measure reading grades is beyond me. Fortunately, not all the reading tests are like this, for when I checked another test by using the law of averages the grade was 3.7.

A New Honesty

We need a new honesty to evaluate what is taking place in our schools. No one likes to proclaim their faults. Schools act the same as individuals—success makes front page, failures are not advertised. But no longer can America afford this deplorable situation. A full disclosure of what is transpiring is called for so schools can become the kind of institutions they were meant to be: providing a proper education for all.

All students should know the basics; otherwise the entire educational system crumbles. The massive presence of illiterate children cripples and contaminates every aspect of today’s education. Its effect reaches into every level of our educational system and acts as a brake holding back learning from all students. No longer should schools be permitted to be unsupervised.

There must be a total intelligent approach to cure educational failures. This is not a costly, elaborate program. In fact, it will probably save money by eliminating many remedial teachers. There may be an initial cost in ridding the schools of ineffective books and materials. But basically, the establishing of standards is not a matter of increased expenditures; it is rather an educational concept that expects and plans for achievement from the first grade on. The time to straighten a crooked tree is not when it is old but when it is a sapling. The old adage “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is still sound advice.

Perhaps the shock of what is happening to inadequately trained children can be best expressed by excerpts from a letter published in the *Kansas City Star*, by Herman R. Sutherland of the Sutherland Lumber

Company, Kansas City, Missouri:

In our business it is necessary that people have a good grasp of simple arithmetic, probably what would be expected of a competent sixth-grader. Constantly we are finding job applicants with a high school diploma not able to pass the simplest part of our pre-employment test. Something is fearfully wrong. How can these applicants obtain a high school certificate when they haven't even mastered grade school, simple arithmetic?

Some recent inquiry has developed the astounding information that in our school system a child need not become proficient in one grade before he or she is passed on to the next one. In other words, everyone passes. I understand that this practice of just moving children through the grades year after year, without any qualifying ability being required or tested at any level, has been in force for some 15 years.

As I discuss this with mature people who are not educators, they simply can't believe that this is an accepted part of the system. This flaw is so monstrous that it is hard for me to believe it is not better known and publicly appraised and debated. To me it undermines the very foundation of our nation's future. Do we want a world where children are taught that everyone passes and that whether they work and achieve or not, the rewards are forthcoming just the same?¹⁸