

Why Do High School Pupils Fail?

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PRINCIPAL Penhale formerly of the Iron River, Michigan, High School has contributed a well-written summary of opinions of his teaching staff on the subject: "Why do High School Students Fail." That is an inside view of the situation. Possibly the opinions and observations of an "outsider" may be in order. These observations are drawn from experiences of a high-school examiner who visits teachers in 300 to 400 classes in secondary schools each year. They are from the experiences of one who studies the entire school organization, school and community relations, the working of the board of education, and many other activities, including the local "hangouts" which take up a lot of time of boys and girls.

REASONS FOR FAILURE

The Iron River teaching staff listed as follows the ten reasons in the order of their importance:

1. Lack of application.....	146
2. Lazy	97
3. Wastes time	96
4. Lack of interest in subject.....	94
5. Lacks background	87
6. Lacks ability	73
7. Frequently absent	69
8. Written assignment prepared about 50 per cent of the time.....	68
9. Daily assignments not read.....	66
10. Never recites	56

From time to time this writer makes up a list of reasons for failure and from time to time revises and compares the reasons with former lists. The reasons remain about the same. The order of importance changes somewhat. At the moment an outsider's reasons for failure in the secondary school are as follows, though not given in the order of importance:

1. Heavy load carried by teachers, both in and out of school
2. Lack of interest on the part of the pupil
3. Lack of understanding of pupils on the part of the teacher
4. Indifference and unconcern on the part of the teacher
5. Inability of youth to do the work expected
6. Parental unconcern for the education of boys and girls
7. Community misunderstanding or lack of understanding of what real education consists
8. Inability of educators to measure educational growth and the consequent inability to show the pupil and the public the extent to which growth has been made

9. Spoon feeding in home, school, and community
10. Rigidity of school curriculum and school requirements for both pupils and teachers

An examination of these lists of reasons for failure reveals at least two fundamental differences. The first list is concerned primarily with (1) school accomplishment, and (2) the statements are given from the point of view of teachers who are responsible for the work of pupils. The second is concerned with (1) the total educational development of youth and (2) the reasons are listed by an observer who is not directly responsible for classroom accomplishment. These points of view should be kept in mind by the reader.

HEAVY TEACHER LOAD

There are only so many hours in the day and any one teacher can do only so much in his working hours. The increasing of the number of teaching and other duties and the spreading of each teacher over many activities, merely spreads the teacher a bit thinner with each new duty, and that makes the teaching less satisfactory both for staff and pupils. As teachers were drafted their work was divided among the remaining staff members. When volunteer, emergency "school-keepers" were available, they carried only a small part of the usual teacher load, thus throwing extra duties on the permanent staff. When one looks at some of the weary, heavily loaded teachers already worn about as thin as a rail, still doing their best to keep schools going, it is not difficult for even the casual observer to realize that instruction is far below par.

When a scrap drive is to be undertaken or a can collection or paper salvage campaign is to be managed or when any one of other numerous worthy enterprises is to be put on, we turn to schools for help. In addition to usual or even double school duties, many teachers already have a full-time job at home. Some of them are only substituting in order to keep schools open and running. Unless patrons have observed school conditions closely during the past two or three years it will be difficult for them to realize the tremendous load every teacher is carrying. It is no wonder that the teaching is not up to standard and that pupils fail in large numbers.

LACK OF INTEREST ON THE PART OF PUPILS

It is a well-known fact that many pupils are not interested in the subjects which are offered in secondary schools. Some pupils are not greatly interested in any sort of study; they are merely attending school to get out of work at home or to avoid a real job, or merely to participate in athletics or to have a good social time. There are many others, however, who lack interest because they have never been shown the need for studying and understanding the subjects being taught. At this point in the pupil's educational career the interested parent and superior teacher must together strive earnestly to convince youth of the importance of getting a good start

toward an education while young. At the moment, however, one of the very real reasons why many pupils fail in secondary schools is their inability to see the value of a high-school education; this blindness results in a lack of interest in the subjects being offered and in ultimate failure.

NONUNDERSTANDING OF PUPILS

A very large per cent of all failures in life grow out of a lack of understanding on the part of the worker or operator or teacher. On the writer's first long trip as the driver of a car, the discovery was made that the car just did not live up to the promises of the salesman. In the first city, in the midst of heavy traffic, the car would not go. It stalled again and again. Now it can be told, in the words of a neighbor, "We have discovered that no matter what goes wrong with the car it is not the car's fault." Had he known there was such a thing as a choke on that World War I model, and had he known just a few other things about it, the performance would have been much better. It is the same in working with children whether in the school, home, church, or community. Nearly 100 per cent of the poor performance of children is the fault of adults. When adults understand them and know how to work with them, their performance is both better in quality and larger in quantity.

The writer is aware that we have thousands of superior persons who are doing a first-class job of teaching. Their pupils are really learning. He sits in their classes day after day and has great joy watching them at work. Many a time he wishes it were possible for him to return to high school so he could study Latin with Miss X of ——; English with Miss Y of —— who has spent years of special preparation for teaching this subject and for understanding growing boys and girls; or biology with Mr. Z who is sure that that is the greatest subject ever taught in a modern high school and who is an inspiring leader as he takes the boys and girls into the laboratory or out on scheduled field trips. There are many really superior teachers. Unfortunately at the present time, however, there are entirely too many who are only fair or mediocre, or complete failures. The situation was bad enough before the war; it is many times worse now with probably 100,000 emergency teachers keeping school. Of course it would have been still worse if the emergency teachers had not volunteered to do what they could.

TEACHER INDIFFERENCE AND UNCONCERN

It is noted that unconcern is one of the reasons listed by Mr. Penhale; the one difference being that he is referring to "lazy" pupils while the present writer is referring to indifferent *teachers*. Teacher unconcern is more of a hazard than pupil unconcern. There are many reasons for this lack of teacher interest; some of these are: (1) the low salary paid which often seems to indicate that not much is expected, (2) the one-year contract

with the 30-day clause held over the teacher as a threat, (3) the constant taunt during recent years by pupils and parent that they are earning more money than teachers who have spent years attending school and college, (4) the exacting conditions prescribed by some school administrators, coupled with community restrictions on teachers' personal affairs, and (5) the small appreciation shown even when good work is done. These and many other conditions tend to make teachers indifferent.

Again let the reader be reminded that we have many really superior teachers in secondary schools along with the thousands of indifferent teachers who are directly responsible for the failure of hundreds of thousands of boys and girls who could and who would do excellent work if their teachers only had a passionate interest in their educational welfare. At the moment we are desperately in need of teachers with sufficient missionary spirit to enable them to see the possibilities of development in each individual. We need more teachers who can see a Riley in a tousled headed, uncouth country boy.

NATIVE INABILITY

Lack of sufficient native ability to do satisfactory work in a particular subject is a fact in certain instances. There are boys who cannot learn English. Others, both boys and girls, who cannot handle tools in a shop with either skill or satisfaction. And still others cannot get algebra, or chemistry, or music, or any one of many other subjects. There come times when pupils should be told plainly that they cannot get certain subjects. This writer is quite conscious of one school subject (his friends may know of more) which he cannot get. Had that subject been compulsory during his high-school days he could not have drawn an earned mark much above zero. Pupils do fail on account of lack of native ability. Wise teachers should guide pupils into subjects they can understand. It is not a kindness to award complimentary marks, unless the curriculum offerings are so limited that every subject is required in the prescribed course for graduation. The writer places lack of ability fifth in his list of ten reasons for high-school failure.

PARENTAL UNCONCERN

How many parents know the teachers of their children? How many parents visit the schools and manifest a little interest not only in the school organization and program but in the kind of teachers with whom their children are associating; or the philosophy of life of the adults who are moulding the lives of their children? How many parents are so interested in the educational welfare of their children that they make sure they are well fed and adequately clothed when sent to school? Only then can they hope to get the most possible out of the schooling. How many parents are willing to keep their children at home every week-night so they will get

the proper amount of sleep and rest? How many are willing to say that no picture shows or other entertainments may be attended by the pupils during the week until they are well along in high school and until these pupils have shown definitely that they are developing normal lives and that they can do good school work? How many parents are willing to remain at home evenings with their children so that they may all participate in satisfactory home life as a part of the total educational development? No need to attempt answers to these questions. Every reader knows that parental lack of genuine interest in the education of their children is one of the real causes of failure. Too many parents are expecting too much from a few hours stay in school.

COMMUNITY MISUNDERSTANDING OF EDUCATION

Another of the large reasons for school failure is the inability of adults to understand what education really is. Sometimes adults are so *naive* as to think that going to school for eight years, or twelve years or any other number of years is synonymous with getting an education. It so happens that going to school often does bring an education, yet thousands and thousands of youth streaming through the school hallways are missing a real education. They are failing to develop the ability to live efficiently, happily, and harmoniously in the home and community with their fellowmen, and without these characteristics no man can claim to be educated. When weighed they are found wanting. By the same measure many thousands, like Lincoln and others, obtain a good education with but little schooling. We need a more useful understanding and better measures of what education consists.

There always has been too much emphasis placed on going to school, or obtaining a diploma. One freshman entering Indiana University from New England some years ago offered the University \$5,000 for a B.A. degree. That was all he wanted and the sooner he obtained the coveted diploma the better satisfied he would be. In the same spirit, New Jersey and other state legislatures have decreed by law that boys selected by the army shall be high-school graduates. New Jersey legislators do not want to be disgraced when the final records are published. They "give" the fourth year of high-school education and a diploma to all through juniors. We have talked for so long about *giving* youth an education that legislators are taking the expression "seriously" and are just handing out diplomas to boys and girls who go into the armed forces. This total misunderstanding of the significance of the word *education* brings about large amounts of loafing and in the end failure and disgust when pupils finally realize that they are not able to do advanced work either in or out of school.

If anyone doubts the statement of community lack of understanding of what education means, all he will need to do to become convinced will be to consider some of the following questions. Why do parents keep pupils

out of school on occasions with so little excuse? Why do parents browbeat teachers and threaten them with all sorts of dire consequences if they do not *give* good grades to their dear children? Why did the president of a board of education hold up a commencement program one evening until he forced a teacher to give his son a passing mark in a subject in which the father knew the son had done nearly no work? Why do we continue to refer to people as educated merely because they have diplomas? Why do boards of education, despite the protests of teaching staffs, vote diplomas to boys and girls who did very poor school work, and who left a year or more before graduation? Final question: Why should not the board of trustees of a hospital vote certificates of good health to patients even though doctors say they are far from well?

INADEQUATE MEASURES OF EDUCATION

There was a time when the medicine man had to do a great deal of guessing as to a patient's health. Today there are some rather exact measures of temperature, blood pressure, and various other indications of health or lack of health. Time was when land was sold merely in estimated tracts. Today surveying is an exact science. Time was when a good deal of guessing and estimating were indulged in when it came to promoting a pupil in school, and there is still a large amount of guessing in education. A great deal of testing and measuring has been done, but the profession of education even now does not have the exact, easily understood measures such as are found in many of the other professions. This lack of satisfactory measuring rods puts a premium on guessing and leads to the awarding of higher marks or grades than pupil progress justifies. Later attempts in more difficult work, or in fields where the background of accomplishment has been shallow, result in failure and discouragement.

"SPOON-FEEDING"

One of the very real and important reasons why pupils fail in school comes from long continued spoon-feeding. For a growing, developing normal youth, a gradual increasing of the dose of strong food is imperative. Otherwise the individual does not show the proper growth. So far as the physical body is concerned, nature usually takes care of the situation. Mentally the situation is different. Many of the things which pupils ought to be doing for themselves today are being done for them by their sympathetic, indulgent, and near-sighted teachers. When pupils don't like to study, schools make arrangements for the long period with a teacher present at every moment to answer even the slightest question raised by the pupil so he will not need to take the trouble to hunt up the answer for himself. When pupils are falling down in their work, parents employ a tutor to carry them over the rough places, even to the doing of most of the work for them. When texts become too difficult for the indolent "darlings,"

administrators ask publishers to prepare something easier, yet to mark it as though for an advanced grade. (Publishers were quick to sense the situation, they have responded to about every wish of easy-going teachers and parents.) Why trouble youth to exercise their brains? The practice seems to be to continue spoon-feeding up through the grades and on into the high school. The home and school treatment of many capable boys and girls today makes one think of a prophecy made some years ago. Many teachers seem to see for the future brains of the race what that writer saw for our bodies and muscular system. He said, "Wars will cease, machines will do all our heavy work. . . ." "With our future food, itself prepared in liquid form from the chemical elements of the atmosphere pepsinated or half-digested in advance, and sucked up through a glass tube from a tin can, what need shall we have of teeth, or stomachs even?"¹ Gentle reader, if your flesh creeps at that picture, please someday take a few hours and watch the way in which your children are being "prepared" for the day when they will not have and presumably will not need trained brains or mental capacity. They are headed straight for the factory cog-wheel where someone else will do the thinking. Spoon-feeding seldom develops strong muscles either physical or mental. Pupils thus "fed" cannot avoid failing.

INFLEXIBLE CURRICULUM AND REGULATIONS

We hear a great deal about revising the curriculum to meet the needs of modern youth. When it is revised and then does not at once obtain 100 per cent interest we re-revise it. Curriculum revision is the indoor sport of about every educator who can think of nothing else to do and wants to get his name in the paper. A brief examination of the secondary-school offerings of 1890 and those of 1945 is quite convincing that hundreds of subjects and activities have been added during the past half century in an attempt to meet the needs of all boys and girls. Practically all of the revisions and additions, however, have been in the large schools. Curricula in the small high schools, of which there are probably 15,000 in this country with enrollments below 200, still hold to the traditional, academic, college preparatory pattern. Not much is offered which challenges youth in small communities or rural areas. Many failures are caused by narrow, non-meaningful curriculums. Likewise the rules and regulations governing both teachers and pupils in some schools are so rigid and inflexible as to discourage self-initiative or individual work on the part of either teachers or pupils. Instead of appealing to native interests and abilities, control and repression seem to be in the atmosphere. Teachers under these conditions are restless, pupils lackadaisical, and the end result is failure for many.

¹James, *Talks to Teachers*, P. 206.

CAUSE OR MERELY ASSOCIATION

Many of the items mentioned by the Iron River teachers are closely associated with failures. Some are hardly causes. Absence, for example, instead of being a cause is usually merely associated with failure. When "good" pupils have poor health or for other reasons are compelled to miss a great deal of schooling, failure does result, but such instances are not numerous. It is found, however, that failure is associated with absence. Instead of absence causing failure I believe it is more often the other way around, failure causes absence. Pupils not doing well in school are the ones who stay out on every possible occasion. Absence then puts them further behind the class, and more absences result. The reasons for failure on the part of high-school pupils in great need of much more thoughtful, unbiased, unprejudiced study than they have heretofore received.

SUMMARY

No one study of high-school failures can give the whole picture. Each attempt probably helps somewhat toward a better understanding of the reasons for failure. At the moment this writer believes we should give careful consideration to at least the ten probable causes just mentioned.

Teachers frequently are assigned so many classes, such large numbers of pupils and so many extra duties that it is almost a foregone conclusion they cannot give individual attention to pupils' personal needs. Many boys and girls do show but little interest in school work. What else is to be expected? Under favorable circumstances, however, teachers can and do develop interest in pupils. Teachers also can and in many instances do develop an understanding of boys and girls as human beings. Then fewer failures result. Some pupils cannot do the work to which they may be assigned in the course of school routine. Better guidance brings more satisfactory results.

Indifference and unconcern on the part of teachers often grows out of treatment received by boards of education, administrators, and the community. These unfavorable conditions can be changed; teachers can be helped to see the need for showing a real interest in pupils, and failures can be reduced. It is possible to help patrons and other adults to see what education really is and thus to gain support for teachers in the reports they make of the success or lack of success of pupils. In some communities teachers are not only given great freedom in their teaching and in their personal lives but also greater appreciation is being shown for those who try to succeed with forty youngsters in school even when the parent has not done very well with just one or two in the home. Parents are learning that it is no kindness to a pupil to insist that he receive a grade above what he has earned. Pupils are learning that good school work is the basic foundation for good work later and for success after school. When these lessons are fully learned by them, failures in high school will be greatly reduced.