

## Serious Concerns About Public Schools

*By Bill Hobby*

Are public schools in this country as bad as we are led to believe?

Not by a long shot.

Can we do better?

You bet.

Hans Mark, Chancellor of the University of Texas System, recently put the figures about "dropout rates" and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores into perspective.

**SAT SCORES.** The SATs were first given 50 years ago. About 10,000 students, mostly seniors at Northeastern high schools, took those first tests. Mark guesses, as do I, that those 10,000 would rank in the upper one-third (and probably much higher) of the more than 1,000,000 seniors that took the test in 1990. In other words, the average test score was higher when only a small elite group of students took the test.

Last year, 42 percent of all seniors were tested. Of course the average score was lower. But that doesn't prove that our schools are doing a poorer job. All it proves is that the alarmists need a course in elementary statistics.

But aren't we spending a lot more money on education and getting poorer results? We are certainly spending a lot more dollars, but less of our effort. In 1970 we spent 4.2 percent of our gross national product on education, compared to 3.6 percent in 1990.

**"DROPOUT RATES."** The very term, Mark points out, looks at the hole instead of the donut. The more significant number is the completion rate--how many 17-year-olds finish high school. In 1911, the first year for which numbers are available, 10 percent of the 17-year-olds finished high school. By the late 1940s, when both he and I finished high school, 30 percent of the 17-year-olds did so.

Today (and for the past 20 years) 70-75 percent finish. The fact that that number has stayed the same for a generation suggests that we should consider a new approach to secondary education.

The first nine grades would provide serious basic education. Serious basic education means a no-frills, no-distraction program to equip all students with the basic skills needed to function in society and to learn whatever the student needs to learn as life's demands change in the future.

"Serious" means small classes. Educational research--as well as common sense--shows that the best learning happens in classes of about 15 students. A recent experiment in Tennessee re-emphasizes this fact and shows that small classes are particularly effective with students from underprivileged families.

"Serious" means physical education but not competitive athletics that take away from class time.

"Serious" means rigorous instruction for students that are hard to teach, not segregating them in what today passes for "vocational education."

"Serious" means a 210-day school year, not the current 180 days nor the 165 days advocated by Skip Meno, Texas' new commissioner of education. (The commissioner quite rightly wants to put more time into teacher development, but that time should not come out of classroom time.)

"Serious" means paying teachers twelve months a year, like any other professionals. That means a 15 percent increase in teacher pay. The longer school year and the increased time for teacher development means year-round school. It also means the end of the wasted month in the Fall, now devoted to teaching students what they have forgotten over the summer.

"Serious" means more dedicated, well-trained teachers. But fewer teachers enter the profession every year than leave it. Very few minorities now become teachers.

So where are these new teachers to come from? How about from among the several hundred thousand sand such men and women who will shortly be mustered out of our armed forces and will be looking for jobs? Officers and senior non-commissioned officers who have spent a decade or more in the armed forces are an ideal pool from which the leaders we need in our classrooms can be recruited.

They have spent about one quarter of their military careers as students or instructors in their technical specialties but have not put in enough years to qualify for retirement benefits. Why should not they be encouraged to teach by continuing to earn those benefits in our class rooms?

After the nine grades of serious basic education would come two years in which students immerse themselves in fields in which they are interested (and are more likely to excel). Magnet schools specializing in math and science (North Carolina has led the way), language and social sciences, performing arts, health sciences, law enforcement, electronics and mechanics, have been popular and successful.

A twelfth year would be available for college-bound students who need it. The twelfth grade has always been a pretty dubious idea. Some colleges now let students enter directly from the eleventh grade.

Here is a system that will let students break the pattern of frustration and failure that makes many of them to give up on school, and on themselves.

Here is a recipe for success.

*Written in 1991.*