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REDUCING RETARDATION

By FREEMAN E. LURTON, Superintendent of Schools, Anoka, Minn.

It is unwise, wasteful, and largely unnecessary for children in the grades to be retarded, that is, to be too old for the grades they are in, and therefore less likely than others to complete the work of the grades, to say nothing of attempting the work of the high school. Since retarded children receive less education, in thoroughness and extent, than others, and acquire the *habit of failing*, they are ill prepared for competing with the more fortunate ones in the affairs of life, and the handicap incurred in school is likely to impede them to the end. Therefore it is highly essential that careful consideration be given the matter of retardation.

Two kinds of retardation are recognized: Mental and administrative. In the former the child is wanting in normal mental capacity and is properly a subject for special schools and special treatment. He should be dealt with primarily by a psychologist. There are comparatively few of such and they do not concern us at the moment. Those *administratively* retarded are of normal mentality but for some reason have fallen behind the school schedule laid down by the school authorities. The major part of the retardation present in the public schools is purely administrative and accordingly susceptible of remedy at the hands of school superintendents; hence the situation has its encouragements.

Years of experience seem to teach that there is less difference than is commonly supposed in the actual mentality of children. Habits of industry or idleness, home-staying or street-running, attention or inattention, plenty of or too little sleep, regular or irregular school attendance, sufficient or inadequate nutrition, and similar matters of training or environment rather than difference in mental endowment, determine largely whether children do well or not in their school work.

A school system is efficient about in proportion to the number of its pupils who do the required work in the scheduled time, assuming always of course that a constant and reasonable standard of thoroughness is maintained.

Three years ago, on taking charge of the schools here, the writer concluded, after a preliminary survey of the situation, that there existed too large an amount of retardation, and

at once attacked the problem. By various means the desired end was approached. The attention of the teachers was called to the condition and their sympathetic interest enlisted in a systematic effort to reduce the amount of existing retardation.

They were convinced that there was a direct and controllable relation between retardation and irregular attendance, tardiness, technicalities in setting and marking examinations, neglecting to coach up the slow pupils and those who have lost time from school, care or carelessness in assigning lessons, and similar matters that lessen the pupil's grasp upon his work. The exercise of greater care and sympathy, and in general a greater concern for the individual than for the "room" has produced some cumulative and valuable results in more ways than are indicated by the tables that follow, for such things transcend statistics and refuse to be tabulated.

The most serious thing is time lost from school. Pupils cannot often absent themselves from school and still "make grade." On the other hand very few pupils who attend regularly fail to be promoted at the year's close.

The first table gives the average number of days attended by each enrolled pupil annually out of the 180 that constitute the school year.

TABLE I—AVERAGE YEARLY ATTENDANCE, IN DAYS.

Year.	Number Days.	Gain in Days.	Gain in Per cent.
1909-1910	147		
1910-1911	154	7	4.7
1911-1912	159	5	3.2
Gain of 1912 over 1910, 12 days per child or 8.2 per cent.			

This increase in attendance was brought about by showing the pupils what the loss of time meant to them, by requiring written excuses for absence and accepting none that were trivial, by compelling pupils to make up lost work and lost time if excuses were not accepted, by writing to or calling upon parents of irregular pupils, and by giving to each one who was absolutely perfect in attendance a certificate vouching for the fact, duly signed by the officers of the Board, the teacher, and the superintendent. These certificates are eagerly sought for and have proved a strong incentive to good attendance. Their results are shown in Table II and were a large factor in the results shown in Table I.

TABLE II—CERTIFICATES OF PERFECT ATTENDANCE.

Year.	Number.	Gain
		Per cent.
1909-1910	22	
1911-1912	61	177.2

As one would expect, a gain of twelve days per year for each child and a gain of 177.2 per cent in the number perfect in attendance would lead to a larger number of promotions each year. And it did. See next table.

TABLE III—PROGRESS RECORD.

Year.	Per cent	Gain
	Promoted.	Per cent.
1910-1911	79.6	
1911-1912	87.3	7.7

This agrees quite closely with the gain in attendance.

Now, for final consideration, it is interesting to note how the number of retarded pupils has decreased, year by year, under these efforts.

TABLE IV—DECREASE IN RETARDED PUPILS.

Year..	Per cent	Per cent
	Retarded.	Decrease.
1909-1910	70.0	
1910-1911	65.8	4.2
1911-1912	62.1	3.7
1912-1913	55.3	6.8

A total reduction of 14.7 in three years.

An investigation conducted in 1910 and covering practically the entire State of Minnesota showed the percentage of retarded pupils to be 59.3, so that now this place instead of being one of the worst towns in respect to retardation is now better than the average. There seems to be no good reason why the continued application of the above methods should not reduce the percentage of retarded children to a very small minimum, probably not over 10 per cent.