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MORAL CONDITIONS IN HIGH SCHOOLS. A REPORT OF INVESTIGATION.

DAVID R. PORTER.

*International Secretary for Secondary Schools, Young Men's
Christian Association.*

The moral aim and the moral conditions of few high schools are determined by the teachers and the school officials. In many cases where the teachers are most upright in their private life and most desirous of spreading a good influence in the school, boys are in moral peril. You can lead a boy to a moral lecture but you cannot make him a moral being. Neither is the moral tone of a high school determined by the moral tone of the community at large. Often the deep undercurrents of school life run quite contrary to the accepted standards of the community in which the school is set. "High school spirit" is ardently cultivated in most places and it often means a unique set of social and moral conditions. Not only do the school principal and the boys' parents not determine the moral conditions of the school, but very often conditions exist which are quite the opposite of the beliefs of the principal and parent and in many cases neither of these parties is willing to credit things which the boys themselves know and practice.

The only way to find the actual moral conditions in any high school is to go beyond the testimony of school authorities, valuable as that usually is; to go deeper than statistics of church attendance even, eloquent as these often are, and find out what the *actual conditions are among the individual high school boys* who make up the high school. The present paper is, therefore, based primarily upon the boy's point of view. The valuable testimonies of men have helped; principals, teachers, ministers, Sunday-school superintendents, juvenile court judges, etc., but in every case they have been men who have seen things from the boy's angle. The back ground of this investigation is the actual condition in several scores of typical high schools; probably an equal number of frank conferences with that small group of from twelve to twenty leaders who in every high school practically dominate the under-graduate sentiment; and several hundreds of personal interviews with all kinds and conditions of high school boys. This investigation has been no local experiment, but has been carried on in many states all the way from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Of course, we must state at once that there are many high schools where the standards of honor are high; where the conscientious efforts of the teachers, in co-operation with the boys themselves and other agencies, have brought about really high standards of righteousness in school life, and no one who sees

the remarkable responsiveness of high school boys to an appeal for higher living, sanely presented, can be anything else than most optimistic. Nevertheless one who approaches the subject with an open mind and faces things as the average high school boy does is soon impressed with the fact that there is a surprisingly large number of schools which do not have this high moral tone. Often many individual boys, or groups of boys, in a high school are caught in the grip of corroding sins, even when some special phase of personal or social sin does not sweep like a contagious disease through the whole school. With the growth of an intense and exclusive school spirit, which seems to have been a comparatively recent development in many places, there has grown up a peculiar type of high school immorality. A discussion of this should group these evils as definitely as they usually appear.

(1). *Dishonesty.*

Recent years have seen great activity on the part of publishers to put illegal translations and other aids in the hands of secondary school boys and one is often surprised at the extent to which this form of dishonest scholarship is carried even among the best boys in the school. Closely connected with this is cheating in examinations which is all too often a mode of procedure uncondemned by school sentiment. Several school leaders state that they believe there is an intimate connection between the graft and corruption which we see in our American public life and the graft and corruption which is so often found in school life. In the last analysis there is little difference between the boy who writes his name at the bottom of a piece of paper at the top of which there is knowledge which he has stolen from some other boy's desk or from some other forbidden source, and the man who writes his name at the bottom of a piece of paper at the top of which is a call for money that is not his own. We call the second a forgery and we have no moral guarantee that a boy who will do the first thing in school life will not later do the other thing in business life. In a school recently visited the five students among the total school population who would not cheat in examinations were well marked characters. In many cases forms of petty larceny are tolerated by the boys because of their thoughtlessness and by the teachers because of their inability to stop it. Boys from the best families often show a painful disregard for the rights of other people's property and everything from school books to gymnasium suits and overcoats are apparently considered the spoil of the most crafty and energetic. In one university town three older boys of the school were recently arrested for theft and admitted stealing twenty books during the preceding month. In the

same school money had been taken from girls' pockets in sums ranging from twenty-five cents to twenty-five dollars; bicycles, jewelry, and laboratory material and other things had disappeared so rapidly that nothing was safe even when under lock and key, and many of the best known boys of the school were suspected. It would not be surprising to find such occurrences occasionally in rough mining towns. The investigator becomes startled when he sees the frequency of their repetition in quiet country villages and in great suburban centers.

Gambling is not an unknown peril of school life and it is surprising to find in how many cases it is carried on where the school officials know nothing about it. Boys who do not have to do work at home because of *dishonest scholarship* during school hours are driven during the idle hours of the afternoon and evening to various forms of betting and games of chance. In several schools the boys do not "pitch pennies" but pitch nickels and dimes and even quarters. In many cases school loyalty is considered to demand that fellows bet on the athletic games even if pools are not made up in which the whole school may participate; in one school it was found that a single pool of \$300 was placed on the last football game with a rival school and in a conference of the leaders of that school several of the strongest boys asked very frankly what could be the harm in such a thing. In one county high school it was found that some boys frequently hired a room at the local hotel and spent the whole night in playing poker. Isolated cases of such ignorance of correct moral ideas must always be expected, but such frequent exhibitions of *dishonesty* as one sees who gets in close touch with high school boys all over the country leads one to question whether our American educational system is turning out a type of real American gentlemen who will hate all lies.

(2). *Dirty Athletics.*

The strongest influence in the life of secondary school boys in the United States today is the influence of the college men. Home life, political life, and the church itself, do not begin to wield so strong a direct influence in the life of the average high school boys as college athletics and the college fraternity. But unfortunately most high school boys imitate the vices of both and the virtues of neither. It was only a short time ago that organized high school athletics began to be generally promoted and they grew up because boys wanted to make high school spirit as strong as college spirit. All too frequently this opportunity of education by physical expression has been uncontrolled, or what is even worse, controlled by the worst type of semi-professional coaches. The result has been that we see dirty athletics in its various forms; a smuggling in of players'

not in good standing; underhanded attempts to break the rules; the spirit of "win at any cost" and the game is played in an atmosphere of profanity and obscenity. One interested in athletics as a phase of education must ask whether a boy who learns to be underhanded in football will not be later underhanded in business and political life.

(3). *Impurity.*

This is a subject that it is difficult to speak upon simply because in many schools the conditions are literally unspeakable. From the investigation which is being carried on by the Young Men's Christian Association it would seem that personal vice among the secondary school boys is not the critical peril that it may have been in an earlier generation. But our self-congratulation at this state of affairs will be more than offset if we get first hand knowledge in regard to the social aspects of impure habits. Vices which many people used to expect of college men are found so often among school boys that many people believe that all over the country the age limit at which such things are known has gradually moved back two or three years during the past fifteen years. Many discerning principals state that such conditions are worse than they were at the beginning of the decade. College officials declare that they now find the chains of evil habits already tightened on boys' lives before they become freshmen. Many of the failures in college, whether in physical ability or mental grasp, are but the harvest from the seeds which were sown during school days. Unfortunately the reaping time is not always postponed as long as that. The worst offenders in this way are usually the striking characters of a school and slowly, but surely, a large proportion of the institution may become polluted. The spread of high school fraternities all over the country is another proof of the potency of the college man's influence, but it is noticeable that the word fraternity, translated into high school vernacular, too often means a room down town where the most exclusive and snobbish spirits of the school may congregate to smoke, have beer on tap, and tell smutty stories. Some high school fraternities make outbreaking forms of iniquity a *condition of initiation*. In some schools with good reputations, the boys who visit houses of ill fame are numbered by the scores. Actual facts on this point, as numerous as they might be in this paper, must not be dragged to light here, although one could wish to be frank enough and forcible enough to show the educational and religious forces of the country that actual conditions in the high schools of the country, as the boys face them, may not be tending as much as self-satisfied pedagogues think, to developing men and women with untarnished consciences and trained wills.

(4). *Selfishness and Pride.*

Although not so spectacular to talk about, nevertheless, the perils of pride, hypocrisy and selfishness which are found among many high school boys are far reaching in their significance. The perverted idea of what is meant by a college fraternity has sifted down into the high schools to aggravate the spirit of exclusiveness. The large amount of free time which many a high school boy has gives him a wrong idea of life's value. He has to do no work with his hands and everything from clothes to school books and note paper is furnished to him free of cost. To see boys who require two new neckties a week; who make frantic efforts to wear every latest style and fad of suitings; who cultivate during their school days that proud and selfish spirit that looks down on employed boys and refuses to recognize them as their equals; such things as these will not tend to hasten the perfecting of a democratic form of government. Neither will it tend to ease the friction between capital and labor, for in an increasing proportion do boys who leave school before their high school days are finished become hand laborers for life, and the high school boys are the capitalists of tomorrow. This spirit of greed, arrogance and pride in the lives of many high school boys is as evident as it is deplorable.

This investigation has had chiefly to do with moral standards among boys, but in many cases, the facts have been revealed that the high school girls are in no less grave danger. In fact it is doubtful if in many cases the influence of certain cliques of girls in the school has not been the primary cause of much of the difficulty. A large number of specific instances could be cited when an inner circle of the best boys have started a crusade for better things in the school only to have their success minimized by the girls' influence. In one school an effort was made to stamp out the use of obscene pictures among the boys, but the effort was in vain, until it was discovered that the supply was furnished by one of the older girls and that they were first circulated in the girl's section.

Such a study as this of the real perils of school life and their startling prevalence among high school students may justly make us thoughtful; it should not make us pessimistic. There is no question that in many high schools the moral standards are lower than in the community at large, nevertheless it has been found that there is a sign of promise as bright as the present is dark. And that is in the remarkable responsiveness of the boys themselves when an opportunity is given them to rally for higher things. In most cases evils exist because boys are ignorant and not because they are vicious. In the schools where a crusade for truth and purity has been started among the boys

themselves, there has been no difficulty in winning support. Immorality has usually spread in a school without the aid of the school authorities; by the passing on from boy to boy of the coarse jest, or the vile story. Are we wrong in expecting ideals of higher things to spread through a school in any other way than this? Will not a purely *voluntary* moral and religious movement succeed where compulsory moral and religious training would fail even if it were possible? The boys have their baseball teams to uphold the athletic reputation of the school; they have a school paper and debates to uphold the scholastic reputation; why should there not be a sane and virile moral and religious movement on the same voluntary basis, with perhaps the same amount of adult supervision as athletics may or ought to have?

An experiment of great promise in this line of work is now being attempted in a considerable number of places under the direction of the Young Men's Christian Association. It is being found as an actual fact, that larger numbers of thinking high school boys can be enrolled for a group study of life questions and the practical phases of the Bible than can be enrolled in voluntary gymnasium classes. As we see this remarkable response which can be gained, we ought to be more hopeful, as well as more energetic to face the appalling need.

A GRADUATED SYLLABUS OF MORAL AND CIVIC INSTRUCTION FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

PREPARED BY THE MORAL EDUCATION LEAGUE, LONDON, ENGLAND.

The framers of the present Syllabus wish to emphasize its tentative and experimental character. Their desire has been to keep it faithful to the facts of boy and girl nature; but these facts are so varied, and there are so many instances of precocity and retardation daily confronting the master or mistress, that no Syllabus, however carefully drawn up, is likely to be satisfactory at every point. The framers would, however, claim for the Syllabus that it is at least comprehensive, and may suggest subjects that would otherwise be overlooked. The treatment need not necessarily be that of a formal lesson—*e. g.*, one purpose the Syllabus might serve would be to suggest subjects for addresses or sermons.

Training is not Instruction. The remark sounds like a truism, but it is one of the truisms whose neglect may be a serious matter. Probably English Secondary Schools give as fine Moral