

RETARDATION IN FIFTY-FIVE WESTERN TOWNS.

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Recently the writer had occasion to investigate the grade-age status of 17,279 children in the grades below the high school in 55 villages and smaller cities in Minnesota, and possibly the results may prove of interest and value to others.

A word about the towns themselves. They have, on the whole, excellent school systems, each having a high school, which, together, with the grades that sustain it, is inspected annually by the "State High School Inspector" to ascertain if the work done is such as to entitle it to "special State aid," which is granted annually to such schools as he approves because of their high standard of efficiency. The towns are widely scattered throughout the State, so as to represent every variety of social and industrial condition. Some are old (as Western towns go), others new; some are largely peopled by recent immigrants, others are almost exclusively American; some are principally engaged in manufacturing, some in lumbering, some in mining, while others are mainly agricultural. Yet, in spite of this wide range in the conditions surrounding the towns studied, the prevailing tendency among them, individually considered, is about the same, and the study yields a fine average for the State, which would not, I am convinced, be greatly modified if all the towns were included.

Only the pupils in the grades below the high school are considered, for the reason that the high school students are invariably promoted by *subjects*, and are required, in case of failure, to repeat only the study in which they failed; hence statistics as to retardation among them, in the sense that the

term is used concerning grade children, are not easily obtainable. Promotion by subjects obscures class and grade lines, and makes figures based upon retardation by *subjects* difficult to compare with figures based upon a grade or *year* of work. Then, again, most of the retarded pupils have become discouraged before the high school is reached, and, having nothing to fear from the truancy law, owing to their age, have dropped out of school altogether. So the problem of retardation becomes confused by the kindred problem of elimination in such a way as to make the study of either alone very difficult.

Dr. Ayres, in "Laggard's in Our Schools," sets up a certain standard for measuring the amount of retardation, which has been widely followed by others. By it children in the first grade are considered normal if they are not over eight years of age; in the second grade the norm is nine years, and so on. The reason for allowing that extra year in the first grade and in each successive grade is not given, beyond the bare statement in the text that the ages allotted to each grade are those used "by common consent." In the towns studied, at least, the practice is quite different. In each of them the children enter at six years of age or less, the number entering later than six being approximately offset by the number entering before they are six. The effect of the Ayres standard if applied to these schools would be to conceal one year's retardation for every child, possibly, during his progress through the grades.

In the actual administration of these schools the children do enter at six, spend a single year normally in a grade, and, unless retarded, having entered the first grade at six, they find themselves in the second grade at seven, and so on. Now, to illustrate how the Ayres standard conceals retardation, we have only to suppose that a child enters the first grade at six, and the second, the next year, at seven, and the third, the next year, at eight, but, failing to "make good" in that grade, he remains there two years, repeating and certainly retarded, yet

his age when he finally reaches the fourth grade at ten is normal under the Ayres standard, and under that system he would not show as retarded when he really is.

It is no doubt more correct than either the Ayres or the Minnesota method to follow the *progress* of each individual child, but the data for such a standard are not at hand in this State.

We might add that from the administrative point of view the State expects to provide each child with eight years of grade schooling, and no more. He is to begin this at the age of six, and from this point of view, if he waits till he is seven before entering, he is already behind the schedule. He will get through school one year later than he otherwise would, for the records show that a year once lost is rarely recovered; indeed, the same causes that operated to produce the lost year continue, with exceptions, to keep the child retarded. This is shown by the fact that during the year 1909-1910 in 96 school systems in Minnesota, with 40,710 children in the grades, only 400 promotions ahead of the schedule were made. At the same moment 4640 of the children were "repeaters." That is a ratio of 10 to 1. There is nothing to show whether the 1 per cent. thus promoted consisted of repeaters regaining their lost grade or of bright children who were skipping a grade. Probably there were some of both. At the same time, 59.3 per cent. of all the children enrolled were behind grade, so it must be evident that the number regaining a lost grade is relatively few. The child who enters late or loses a year will get out of school, therefore, that much later, and loses that much of his economically productive life, which is what the State has in mind in educating him at all.

The complete results of these investigations are given in Table A, which shows the grade-age status of 17,279 grade children in 55 towns in Minnesota. The data were gathered in the fall, and account only for children then actually enrolled. This makes the showing favorable to the schools, because some of the children who failed of promotion in the spring doubtless dropped out of school during the summer. Had the data been collected from the school records at the end of the year, the percentage of retardation would have been greater.

TABLE A.

Shows, grade by grade, and by sex, the per cent. of retardation.

Gr.	Numbers			Retarded.		Percentages		Advance.	
	Total.	Boys.	Girls.	Boys.	Girls.	Boys.	Girls.	Boys.	Girls.
1	2691	1436	1255	34.7	33.6	57.8	59.0	7.5	7.4
2	2065	1096	969	54.0	41.1	37.8	47.2	8.2	11.7
3	2164	1134	1030	61.1	53.7	33.1	38.0	5.8	7.4
4	2268	1134	1134	65.9	56.1	28.2	35.5	5.9	8.4
5	2129	1109	1020	68.8	63.2	25.2	29.8	6.0	7.0
6	1944	977	967	73.7	67.7	21.0	25.0	5.3	8.0
7	1862	929	933	70.4	65.9	24.3	27.1	5.3	7.0
8	2007	886	1121	74.0	67.0	30.5	26.4	5.8	6.6
Total: 17,279.				Averages: 58.7		34.1		7.1	

In studying this table one will note two things in particular, both probably contrary to popular opinion. First, the boys equal or exceed the girls in number in every grade up to the seventh, where they fall only four behind. It is in or at the close of the seventh grade, then, that the boy meets his decisive defeat. From then on the girls outnumber him, both in the eighth grade and, in fact, in all four years of the high school. Second, the retardation begins heavily in the *first* grade, and steadily increases, grade by grade, through the eighth grade, with the exception of the slight downward drop of the curve beginning in the seventh, which is practically overcome in the eighth. This drop is very likely due to the working of the law of elimination, and not to any change in the matter of retardation itself. A third matter, quite as one would have predicted, is that the retardation of the boys is greater than that of the girls from the very start, and remains so, grade by grade, to the end, varying from an excess of 1.1 per cent. in the first grade to 7 per cent. in the eighth grade.

The average percentage of retardation officially reported to exist in these schools, under their own standard of requirements, is 59.3. As I have said elsewhere before, when the course of study and the other demands made are such that only 40.7 per cent. of the children can and *do* meet them, we have an alarming state of affairs. To be rated as abnormal, under these conditions, is the usual or normal state.

There is an important factor, never alluded to, so far as I have discovered, in the literature of the subject, and that is

the practice, almost uniform among superintendents, of promoting a child at the end of two years in a given grade whether his work actually merits it or not. This practice conceals a considerable amount of the very worst sort of repeating, and likewise, by forcing a child on through the grades artificially, reduces the seeming amount of retardation. Similar to this practice, in its effects, is another—that of promoting a child “on trial” when he does not quite meet the requirements, but for one reason or another he is permitted to continue with the class. Once so permitted to advance, they are kept in this unearned position by the very same forces that caused them to be placed there. They are rarely reduced to their proper grade. This tends to reduce the apparent amount of retardation also.

While, as we have shown, the Ayres method of computing retardation would not hold true for these towns, nevertheless, for the sake of comparison, we have reduced the data used to that scale, and give the results in Table B.

TABLE B.

This is Table A reduced to the Ayres standard for retardation.

Gr.	Numbers			Percentages					
	Total.	Boys.	Girls.	Retarded.		Normal.		Advance.	
				Boys.	Girls.	Boys.	Girls.	Boys.	Girls.
1	2691	1436	1255	14.6	9.1	77.9	83.5	7.5	7.4
2	2065	1096	969	22.5	17.3	69.3	71.0	8.2	11.7
3	2164	1134	1030	30.6	20.8	63.6	71.8	5.8	7.4
4	2268	1134	1134	38.2	27.7	55.9	63.9	5.9	8.4
5	2120	1109	1020	44.2	34.8	49.8	58.2	6.0	7.0
6	1944	977	967	47.4	38.5	47.3	53.5	5.3	8.0
7	1862	929	933	44.2	36.3	50.5	56.4	5.3	7.0
8	2007	886	1121	45.3	39.5	49.2	53.9	5.5	6.6

This gives the average percentage of retardation as 30.9. And that is serious enough. However, this is only 52.1 per cent. of what is really *known* to exist in these schools. The balance is concealed by the allowance of that extra year in the grades for possible late entrants, when such are so few as to warrant no such allowance.