

THE FOURTEENTH YEARBOOK

OF THE

NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY
OF EDUCATION.

PART I

MINIMUM ESSENTIALS IN ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL
SUBJECTS—STANDARDS AND CURRENT PRACTICES

BY

H. B. WILSON, H. W. HOLMES, F. E. THOMPSON, R. G. JONES,
S. A. COURTIS, W. S. GRAY, F. N. FREEMAN, H. C. PRYOR,
J. F. HOSIC, W. A. JESSUP, W. C. BAGLEY

Edited by S. CHESTER PARKER, Secretary

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This Yearbook is the 1915 report of the Committee of the Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association on Economy of Time in Education.

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PREFACE

This volume continues the policy that has characterized the publication of Yearbooks in recent years by the National Society for the Study of Education, namely, to present discussions that deal directly with the practical problems of readjustment that now confront American educators, and to include descriptions and suggestions that will prove of direct practical value to teachers and administrators in solving these problems in their own schools.

At the meeting of the Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association in Richmond, Virginia, in February, 1914, the Committee on Economy of Time from this organization presented a report and was continued for another year. Members of this committee who were also members of the National Society for the Study of Education, and who were familiar with the policy of the latter organization in publishing Yearbooks *before* the meeting at which they were to be discussed, suggested the possibility of the National Society's publishing the 1915 report of the committee in this way. This plan was adopted and carried out. The present volume is the result.

PART I
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I
THE MINIMUM ESSENTIALS IN ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL SUBJECTS
REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY OF TIME

H. B. WILSON, *Chairman*
Superintendent of Schools, Topeka, Kansas

This report to the National Department of Superintendence by its committee on Economy of Time in Elementary and Secondary Education, made with the assistance of a number of co-operating investigators, constitutes the fourth large effort within the last two decades by some branch of the National Education Association to examine and improve the curriculum of the public schools. Attention was first directed to the high-school curriculum in the report of the Committee of Ten. The report of the Committee of Fifteen was concerned with the training of teachers and the organization of city schools, but it also gave large attention to the correlation of the studies of the elementary schools. The report of the Committee of Twelve on Rural Schools, in its treatment of instruction and discipline, discussed the course of study, accepting the report of the Committee of Fifteen on the several branches of the course of study.

The present report on the minimum essentials in certain subjects of the elementary curriculum is one result of an effort to develop a program for economizing time in public-school education. The attack on this large problem was begun in the National Council of Education in 1903 under the leadership of President Emeritus James H. Baker.¹ The

¹ The chief initial impetus toward the movement for economizing time in education, probably antedating somewhat the attack on the problem by the National Council, was given by the late President William R. Harper, of the University of Chicago, before a notable gathering at the University in the autumn of 1902, where he read a brief paper proposing a scheme for saving two years of time in the completion of a college course. Participating in this discussion were the late Superintendent Louis Soldan, of St. Louis, and Professor John Dewey. See "Shortening the Years of Elementary Schooling," by John Dewey, *School Review*, II, 17, January, 1903.

most significant result thus far of the work of the Committee from the Council is the report on "Economy of Time in Education," published in 1913 as *Bulletin 38* of the Bureau of Education. Upon the initiative of the Council committee the Department of Superintendence authorized the appointment of a committee of five at the meeting of the Department in Mobile in February, 1911. The earlier efforts of this committee were directed toward arriving at an understanding of the meaning and scope of the problem and in enlisting the co-operation of those who can aid in a fundamental way in its solution.

Preliminary reports defining in outline form the scope of the problem and the possible lines of attack in its solution were made at the meetings of the Department in St. Louis in 1912 and in Philadelphia in 1913. At the meeting of the Department one year ago in Richmond, two typical reports on English and arithmetic were presented as illustrative of the type of studies which the committee had come to believe should be made in all subjects, in the interest of determining the proper content for the subjects of study in the elementary curriculum. The Department responded to the presentation of these reports and to the projected plan for treating all subjects in the elementary curriculum similarly most enthusiastically by recommending that an appropriation sufficient to defray the expenses of such a piece of work be made, and guaranteeing the provision of the same in case the Executive Committee of the National Education Association found it impossible to appropriate the money from funds at its disposal.

While the Department committee was made responsible by a resolution adopted at the meeting of the Department in St. Louis in 1912 for studying possible ways of economizing time both in the elementary and in secondary schools, our attention thus far has been mainly directed, and in this report is wholly directed, to the study of elementary-school problems, reserving until a later time the study of such problems in the secondary field as are vitally related.

In the report referred to above the Council Committee on Economy of Time in Education brought forcibly to the attention of the country the desirability of shortening the period of formal education. The following proposals pertinent to the purposes of the Department Committee on Economy of Time in Education are quoted (see pp. 18 and 19):

1. The contemporary judgment is that the period of general education should be shortened at least two years.

4. In the elementary and secondary period, economy through selection, elimination, vital methods, relation to modern life, would yield much better results and little or nothing would be lost by the proposed change in time.

8. To define the form of discussion, the following divisions of the entire period of general and special education are proposed:

| | |
|---|----------------|
| Elementary education | 6-12 |
| Secondary education (2 divisions—4 years and 2 years) | 12-18 |
| College | 18-20 or 16-20 |
| University (graduate school and professional schools) | 20-24 |

Preceding their statement of conclusions, the committee said:

When by economy—this does not mean more cramming, but less—as much can be accomplished in the elementary and secondary schools and in the first two years of college as is now done in the full sixteen years, the last two years of college can count toward graduate and professional degrees and two years in the whole period can be saved.

Upon the general thesis that the period of formal education should be shortened there appears to be fairly general agreement. Where and how this shortening is to take place is, however, not so generally agreed upon. The committee of the Council believes that the greatest waste in education is in the elementary schools and has recommended that the period of elementary education be reduced to six years, maintaining that the essential knowledge, habits, ideals, and attitudes for individual and social needs can be and should be acquired in that time. This attitude on the part of the Council was evidenced in the resolution proposed by Professor Suzzallo of the committee of the Council in closing his address before the meeting of the Department of Superintendence at Mobile, as follows:

The main requirement at this point in our progress is to investigate the waste in the elementary schools and to make definite proposals for eliminating the archaic and least useful materials of the course of study and to propose more economic methods of teaching. To this end I move that the Department of Superintendence appoint a committee of five on Economy of Time in Elementary Education, this committee of five to co-operate with the general Committee on Economy of Time in Education.

The same attitude is further indicated in the following quotations from the report of the Council:

We approach now the question of saving time in the elementary period or of accomplishing more within the time. . . . The committee agrees that there is much waste in elementary education and that the elementary period should

be from six to twelve. Nearly all our correspondents are emphatic regarding waste and the importance of shortening the entire period of general education. Saving of time can be made in the following ways:

1. The principle of selection is, first: Choose the most important subjects and the most important topics; make a distinction between first-rate facts and principles and tenth-rate; prune thoroughly, stick to the elements of a subject; do not try to teach everything that is good; confine the period of elementary education to mastering the tools of education. This does not prevent inspirational work, which is a demand on the skill of the teacher rather than on time. A great secret of education is to accomplish a maximum of training with a minimum of material. This is especially true of formal subjects; it is true also of inspirational subjects, in that after a general survey of the field emphasis should be placed upon a few selected points. Under the conditions above enumerated the formal elementary period can end in six years.

The committee of the National Department of Superintendence is not yet committed to the thesis that it is necessary or desirable to shorten the period of elementary education. It does, however, agree with the Council committee that there is great waste in elementary education and that either the period should be shortened or that more should be accomplished in the time allotted, or both. Economy of time in elementary education may mean either a shortening of the period of formal education or the more economical use of the time required, whatever it may be, in order that the maximum accomplishment in knowledge and skill may result. It is the latter conception of educational economy that is the more fundamental. The significant problem, then, is not what can be done to accomplish in six years what now requires eight years, but what can be done in the elementary schools of our democracy to secure that degree of accomplishment in knowledge, character, and skill essential to equip those who finish the elementary schools with an intense desire and the training necessary to make the greatest possible additional personal growth and with the disposition and ability to contribute to the welfare of society. Society is still depending primarily upon the elementary schools to furnish not only the tools of knowledge but also those facts, concepts, and principles essential in a democracy to common discussion and to the collective consideration of common problems. The training of the elementary schools must supply the requisite basis for "mutual intercourse, mutual understanding, and mutual sympathy," which are absolutely essential to a successful democracy. It is from the point of view of insuring that the schools supply this common basis for conference and

intercourse that the determination of the indispensable content for each subject of study is of paramount significance. We must determine what the absolute essentials are in the equipment of our citizenship that they may discuss and confer on a sufficiently high level to insure the progressive evolution of our democratic society. By concentrating our teaching efforts upon these essentials, their thorough teaching and permanent fixation will be insured in the minimum time.

Our first objective, therefore, is not merely time gain. If gain is accomplished, it must issue because the efficiency can be secured in less time. Saving of time is undoubtedly desirable if it can be secured without sacrificing efficiency. The saving of time will not only result in less cost to the taxpayers for the maintenance of the public schools but it will likewise result in increasing the earning power of those who graduate from these schools, owing to their earlier entrance into remunerative occupations.

Economy in time under either conception may be attained (1) by the elimination of nonessential subjects or subject-matter and by including only such additional significant material as is clearly vital in realizing the ends of elementary education; (2) by the improvement in methods of teaching and learning; (3) by the organization of the whole school system and the course of study so that each part may be taken at the optimal time in the child's development. In view of the objectives in appointing the committee from the Department of Superintendence, attention is first devoted to (1) in this report. For logical reasons also (1) should be treated first.

The ideally constructed course of study for the elementary schools in the interest of providing adequate general education is one stripped of all content not essential to the needs of modern life and organized so as to harmonize with the child's growth in capacity and experience. Its presentation with due regard to the most efficient methods of teaching and learning must be assumed, of course, if it is to secure the largest possible results. With reference to this task Professor Dewey says the problem is "the selection of the kind, variety, and due proportion of subjects answering most definitely to the dominant needs and powers of presentation that will cause the selected material to enter vitally into growth."¹ Again he says: "The selection and grading of material in the course of study must be done with reference to the proper

¹See Dewey "The Psychology of the Elementary Curriculum" in *The School and the Child*.

nutrition of the dominant directions of activity in a given period. The difficulty is in seeing just what materials and methods, in what proportion and arrangement, are available and helpful at a given time."¹

Before the question can be convincingly answered whether the period of elementary education can be shortened, it would seem necessary to determine the minimum standard curriculum selected and organized to meet fully the general aims or purposes of elementary education, specifying a minimum essential content for each subject of this standard curriculum. Whether the aims of the elementary school can be satisfactorily realized in six years or not, or in what time they can be realized, can be discovered only after such a determination has been made. In other words, we must work out a minimum content for each subject of study, holding in mind those standards of attainment which good teaching should seek to approximate. With this tentatively accomplished, we shall have a basis for determining the standard time required for executing such a course of study.

Whatever time may ultimately prove to be necessary, the fundamental questions are: (1) What subjects are essential constituents of the elementary curriculum? (2) What is the absolutely essential content in each subject? It is the second question on which the Department committee and the co-operating investigators have been working during the past year. The results of these investigations follow in this *Yearbook*. It is perhaps unnecessary to point out what a careful reading will render evident, that in the time available it was impossible to make the reports more than partial and tentative. Not only do the results submitted need the testing of use and criticism, but much more work remains to be done.

The formulation of a minimum essential content for any school subject is a complex problem and is beset with theoretical and practical difficulties. Various methods of procedure may be adopted: (1) An examination may be made of representative curricula the country over to determine the consensus of experience and practice as to the topics to be included, time to be allotted, etc. (2) Subject-matter to be included and time allotments may be determined on the basis of judgments of superintendents, principals, teachers, subject-matter experts, and students of education. (3) An examination may be made of progressive experiments designed to secure economy in time either by elimination

¹*Op. cit.*

or by improvements in methods and organization. (4) Each part or each subject may be subjected to some more fundamental educational criteria or tests of inclusion, emphasis, or exclusion. Until there are definitely established and accepted standards of attainment based on individual capacities and social needs, the determination of minimum essentials by any method is a difficult problem.

Is it possible to arrive at a definition of the function of the elementary school which will be generally accepted? And more especially, is it possible to derive from such a definition acceptable fundamental principles which may guide in determining the minimum essentials in school subjects? Apparently our leaders in education agree that the function of the elementary school is to provide those educational opportunities necessary to insure, with the assistance of the other institutions of society, the acquisition on the part of elementary-school children of those habits, skills, knowledges, ideals, and prejudices which must be made the common property of all, that each may be an efficient member of a progressive democratic society, possessing the power of self-support and self-direction, the capacity and disposition for co-operative effort, and, if possible, the ability to direct others in positions of responsibility requiring administrative capacity.

The selection of subject-matter for any given period must be made with reference to the capacities and interests of children at this period and with reference to common social needs. Ultimately, the content and emphasis in each subject of study is determined by society's judgment in reference to its needs, while the organization of this content and the methods which shall be employed in teaching children are determined by the nature, ability, and interests of the children to be taught.

Two general principles of inclusion of subject-matter may therefore be formulated thus: (1) Whatever is included in any subject for any age must be reasonably comprehensible by children of that age. (2) Whatever is included must minister to the social needs common to ordinary American children. Corresponding principles of elimination may be formulated thus: (1) Subject-matter too difficult for the majority of normal children without undue expenditure of time and energy must be excluded. (2) Subject-matter that is not essential for at least the majority of children must be excluded. The fixing of minimum essentials upon any other basis than the abilities and social needs of the majority of children leads at once into difficulties. A curriculum or a content

for any subject based on the ability and needs common to all normal children gives an impossibly low standard. One based on the capacities and needs of 75 per cent of children is likewise too low to be useful. On the other hand, a minimum standard which is adjusted to the capacities of but 50 per cent of children is a misnomer.

The only escape from the dilemma is a graduated series of essentials progressing from the skills and abilities necessary for all normal children up through those that are desirable for all normal children, if they can be attained. The great variability in individual capacities and the possibly equally great variability in individual needs for effective social adjustment make any other basis of selection impossible.

If it is impossible to discover from educational theory fundamental tests for exclusion or inclusion, we are driven to the method of determining minimum essentials on the basis of the best current practices and experimentation which give satisfactory results. Those results are satisfactory which meet adequately the common needs of life in society. This in the main is the method employed in the investigations upon which the following reports in the *Yearbook* are based.

Following the introduction, Part I, the report consists of three parts. In the general survey, constituting Part II, Professor Henry W. Holmes reports a study of the time distribution by subjects and grades in 50 representative cities selected at random, which was made as a means of determining the current practice in reference to the grade in which the various subjects of the elementary schools are taught and to the time which is devoted to their teaching. His conclusions are summarized on p. 21 *infra*. Following this, Professor Frank E. Thompson has characterized the types to which experiments in economizing time in the country at large can be reduced. He holds, on the evidence of reports from progressive educators in all parts of the country, that there is a strong movement for educational efficiency, but that the movement is essentially for rearrangement and new emphases: very few would reduce the total time.

Parts III and IV of the report are devoted to such studies in the subjects of reading, writing, spelling, composition, and grammar, history, geography, and literature as were possible and necessary to enable those in charge of the studies to make a tentative formulation of the minimum requirements in each of the subjects. Part III deals with the formal subjects. Part IV presents reports regarding the essentials in the content subjects of history, geography, and literature.