

The Open School Door

A Series of Articles on Clinton County
Schools and Their Problems

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How important is the junior high school time of a student's life?

What role does the junior high play within a young person's education?

We could say that the junior high school time is the middle age time of a child's education. This period is an important time of decision. It's an age that a child does or is about to turn the state minimum age required for him to attend school. Also it is that awkward problem age when a child's interests are changing.

LET'S SEE what one of the more well-known experts says about the junior high schools. James B. Conant, in his new book on the junior high, presents some interesting points.

Pointing out that junior high students are at "a crucial age in the transition from childhood to adulthood," he makes a plea for providing them with the best education that communities are able to afford.

He also urges better co-ordination of instruction between schools and between grades in the same school, saying, "lack of articulation I consider one of the most serious problems in many school systems."

HIGH ON the list of prerequisites are teachers who combine real competence in the subject matter with deep understanding of the psychological needs of this age group. He points out that few teachers are being prepared specifically to teach in junior high schools, and that grades 7 and 8 "certainly should not be viewed as a training ground for senior high school teachers."

Dr Conant recommends a seven-period day to allow for some flexibility in scheduling which he feels is usually impossible in the more customary six-period day. He concedes that this "may well mean more teachers, classrooms and therefore, higher costs."

Some of his other recommendations, such as the following, would also mean added expenditures for many school systems:

pils in grade 7 (if started in grade 7, instruction should also be available in grades 8-12).

A WELL-STOCKED library; a gymnasium with locker rooms and showers; an auditorium or assembly space that will accommodate at least half of the student body; cafeteria space for at least one-third of the pupils; rooms specially equipped for teaching home economics and industrial arts.

Remedial classes for pupils who lag in basic subjects especially in reading and arithmetic.

Sufficient administrative assistance to allow the school principal to exercise his role as instructional leader (generally speaking, a full-time assistant principal for every 750 pupils; a clerk or secretary for every 250 pupils).

"School boards in many communities should make it plain to the public", said Dr Conant, "that more money is needed if better schools are to result."

HE FEELS that all students should have instruction in English (with emphasis on reading and composition), social studies (including history and geography), science and mathematics, and that these subjects should take up 60 to 70 per cent of classroom time. He advocates an eighth grade start in algebra for "a small fraction of pupils."

He regards homework "profitable" in grades 7, 8 and 9, but only if it is "meaningful" and not mere busy work. Because mastery of certain basic skills is essential, he believes that high standards should be maintained in academic courses, which as he says, "implies that a few pupils might be held back, though certainly for no more than two years in the first eight grades."

Grouping he holds to be desirable. He recommends "three groups in academic courses with the bulk of the pupils in a particular grade in a large middle group."

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A GUIDANCE and testing specialist for every 250-300 pupils in grades 7-8. At least 50 professionals for every thousand pupils, with five teaching periods of 125-150 pupils as a reasonable teaching load, but with no more than 100 pupils for English teachers and 750 pupils as the responsibility of a professional librarian.

Instruction for all boys and girls in art, music, and physical education; instruction for all girls in home economics and for all boys in industrial arts ("In areas where school drop-outs are high," he says, the latter two departments "have a responsibility to start the development of vocational skills.")

Instruction by a bilingual teacher in the conversational use of a modern foreign language for some, if not all, pu-

with the bulk of the pupils in a particular grade in a large middle group."

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HE FAVORS co-curricular activities which have "particular relevance for early adolescents" such as assembly and home room programs, interest clubs, musical and dramatic activities, student council, and intramural athletics.

On the other hand, he comes out bluntly against interscholastic athletics and marching bands in the junior high school on the grounds that "there is no sound educational reason for them and too often they serve merely as public entertainment."

He certainly presents some interesting, sometimes controversial, ideas but it all may not be in vain if we consequently think about more constructive school programs at that vital junior high level.

Success comes to the man who has the ability to stick at his chosen work until he gets there.