

Oliver on education

Dear Lucy:

We sure have been hearing a lot lately about the "problems" in our educational system. I remember how much concern was generated when the Russians launched the first "Sputnik" satellite, but that was a long time ago, and the fussing faded away.

Recently, I've heard about a steady decline in SAT scores among high school graduates. (SAT stands for Scholastic Aptitude Tests. These are used to help college admissions officers decide which applicants to accept.) We also hear much about high schools graduating functional illiterates.

Well, I've been thinking about these things, and it seems to me several reasons account for the problems, and none reflects "poor teaching" or "low teacher pay"... the excuses commonly offered.

Let's look first at declining SAT scores. From a long-term view, lower scores should be expected because, as a people, we grow less and less academically oriented. You can see this, just looking around you. It's fair to say, in general, that the less academically-oriented people tend to marry younger and have more children.

Their children grow up and are, to a degree, not only genetically endowed with their parents' intellectual strengths, weaknesses, and temperaments, but also are environmentally influenced to follow the example set by their parents. The process repeats itself, generation after generation, resulting in fewer American youth oriented to academics.

I remember Grandfather's remark that he "wouldn't go so far as to say everyone with a big family is a damned fool, but on the other hand, most damned fools I know have big ones."

It should be pointed out that there is nothing racially or ethnically prejudicial in this observation because the pattern is found within all racial and ethnic groups. Makes no difference whether one looks at Asiatics, Hispanics, Blacks, Jews, Northern or Southern Europeans, or wherever people's ancestors hailed from; within each group, the evolutionary tendency is clearly apparent.

With a growing percentage of our population programmed to place a low value on educational pursuits, we should anticipate SAT scores' decline, over the long term.

Then, look at the mid-range perspective: it's been a number of years since military conscription (the draft) was discontinued. If nothing else, the "draft" was a prime motivator for academic achievement. We well remember when attending college was an almost certain way to delay or avoid military service.

The draft raised academic standards across the board. Females, determined not to be upstaged by their male contemporaries, also studied harder. Competition became

intense. In the '60s, it was "get a good SAT score or go to 'Nam.'" Today, no such incentive exists. "SATs? Who cares?"

Looking a little more closely, we see the Baby Boom of the late '40s, the '50s, and the early '60s has pretty much passed through high school, even through college. This means, as you probably have heard, that colleges are desperate for students. While colleges still maintain the facade of requiring satisfactory SAT scores, the fact is that the Baby Bust, brought about by improved birth-control methods and relaxed abortion laws, caught colleges with over-expanded facilities and faculties.

Every warm body a college accepts mean receipt of between five and ten thousand dollars a year; with tight budgets, colleges want the money. The institutions are really whipsawed with no "avoid the draft" pressure on potential students and a shrinking pool of college-age kids. Result? Lowered standards of acceptance.

In addition, the government stands ready to finance practically anyone's college education. The money is there if potential students will only apply for it. Well, kids live in the real world. They know the "score" and it's not the SAT score anymore.

Some students attend college on athletic scholarships, and/or government loans, and graduate still functionally illiterate. I read about just such a case the other day in the paper. College athletic programs make money for schools. Well, if a student is very good, say at basketball, who weighs SAT scores? The college needs the money proud alumni will donate to a school with a winning team.

Then, I was talking with my neighbor about why our high schools were graduating kids who really are not up to reasonable academic standards. He felt that if it costs between \$1,500 and \$3,000 per high school student, per school year, then he, as a taxpayer, was glad to be rid of any reluctant learners.

"There they sit, physically and sexually mature, bored, insolent, refusing to do homework or to participate in classroom discussion, often a threat to other students or even the teachers. And at taxpayers' expense. Get rid of them!" he said.

It's easy to understand his annoyance, but one must remember the fundamental purpose of mandatory public schools: to assure that the citizenry is literate and possesses fundamental skills so the majority of people will not be chronic burdens on the state. It is very important to understand this.

Unfortunately, the emphasis in public schools tends to be on further developing the skills of those who are already academically competent, even precocious... advanced courses, "mathletes," clubs, etc. This is not the basic purpose of mandatory free public education. Effort should be concentrated on those who need it most, rather than those who need help least.

Now turn your attention to physical education. Grotesque emphasis placed on athletic programs seriously distorts the purpose of mandatory free public education. You know and I know that only a miniscule percentage of public school graduates remains off welfare rolls on the basis of its prowess in sports. Athletic skills are fundamentally useless as tools for earning a living. Possibly tennis and golf can be useful to salespeople or executives, but the big five-- football, basketball, baseball, soccer, and hockey-- are a waste of time and money.

But these sports are big business. Think what all the related equipment costs! Just for perspective, the total retail cost of running shoes worn in the Boston Marathon this year was somewhere between \$120,000 and \$200,000. Think of the loud squawks and foot-dragging by those with vested interests in sports if they were de-emphasized. Coaches, equipment suppliers, sportswriters, bookmakers, and all who enjoy participating in office football pools, would be up-in-arms.

None of this should be taken as a "put down" of physical education. But Phys. Ed. should be an elective subject or, in some cases, a remedial not a required one. If a student passes certain physical requirements, then he or she should not be forced to waste time on Phys. Ed. If a student wants to participate in a sport, and his or her parents can afford to supply the equipment necessary, fine. Parents of students

who play in the school band rent or buy the instrument. Similarly, if a student wants to play on a team and can qualify, parents should buy or rent the equipment.

State law requires every student complete four years of Phys. Ed. in high school to graduate. State laws can be changed; they have been in the past; they will be in the future. This is one law citizens of Massachusetts should rescind, just as Blue Laws have been eliminated recently.

So far in this letter nothing has been said about teachers' pay. Certain unique circumstances are associated with the teaching profession. Some of these are:

- A short work-day; typically, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
- Many vacation periods during the working year: all holidays, Thanksgiving break, Christmas break, spring break, and roughly two-and-one-half months off in summer.
- Total working days per year are 180. (This compares with 240 days for the average person working five-day weeks with two weeks' vacation and ten holidays.)
- Roughly 30% non-taxable fringe benefits: i.e., life insurance, medical and dental insurance, pension, special tax-deferred annuity benefits, etc.
- Pay increases for "professional enhancement" activities, such as taking courses, or foreign travel to subject-related areas. Note: These are tax-deductible "expenses."
- Strong unions which dictate, among other things, that the school day will include a certain number of non-teaching "study hall" hours, and the number of students in a classroom.
- Regular pay increases based on length of service, in addition to "cost of living" raises.

Now let's look at actual salaries. Teachers' starting pay averages around \$16,000 a year. This may not seem like much when technical graduates are starting at \$30,000. On the other hand, teachers work only three-quarters of a year (180 days/240 days). If their pay reflected a full year's work, it would be \$20,000 to start. The fringe benefits add another \$4,000. Not too bad for a seven-hour day. Teachers are practically never asked to work nights, Sundays, or holidays, or to move to another office 700 miles away. For technicians, such requests are commonplace.

Furthermore, technical graduates often lead lives of migrant workers. They make great pay for eighteen months; then the contract is either cancelled or completed, and they are laid off. Teachers rarely face this situation.

I am amazed at salaries veteran teachers receive. A few years ago during a teachers' strike in the community where I live, the school board published the teachers' salaries. I recall one elementary art teacher who was being paid \$28,000 a year, plus 30% fringe benefits. This works out to about \$36,000 for 180 days of work a year. That's \$200 a day! And how much preparatory work do you need to teach elementary

Well, please forgive my verbosity; let me sum up all these "problems" with education by concluding, as Pogo did, "We have met the enemy, and they is us."

Lowered SAT scores have little to do with quality of teaching. In general, I feel teaching quality in this country is really very good. The problem lies partially in our demographics.

Functional illiterates receive high school diplomas because our society is permissive, sports-oriented, and hedonistic.

Teachers have pretty good jobs, steady work, and reasonable pay (although it's no fun spending one's life in front of a reluctant audience "casting pearls before swine," to use a Biblical phrase).

Then why all this commotion all of a sudden? Because threats of foreign technology has industrial America worried. And it's just about time for politicians, thinking about 1984, to begin throwing money at "the problem" to please the teachers' unions. No doubt it will, and teachers are bound to jump on the bandwagon.

But look at the bright side. It isn't too terrible to be functionally illiterate... and neither know nor worry about such things.

Love,
Oliver

Colleges still have openings

College applicants can still find openings at the New England college of their choice if they act quickly, according to a June survey conducted by the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE).

Limited openings exist for qualified freshman applicants and transfer applicants at more than 155 of New England's 260 higher education institutions, the annual regional vacancy survey shows.

The NEBHE survey reveals that more than 13,600 freshman vacancies and more than 8,000 transfer vacancies exist for the 1983 fall term.

More than half of the current 13,600 freshman openings are in the region's two-year colleges, while four-year colleges report more than half of the transfer vacancies. Public institutions account for about three-fourths of all vacancies and the region's public two-year institutions account for about 45 percent of all vacancies.

The survey reveals three percent fewer vacancies in 1983 as compared to 1982. But that percentage may be skewed because 29 percent of the survey respondents did not specify the number of vacancies they have. Last year only 20 percent of the survey respondents did not indicate the number of vacancies available.

Some of the more popular programs of study at the responding institutions are closing rapidly, the survey shows. In some cases, openings are for commuting students only.

Applicants who have been denied admission to any of the reported institutions are advised against reapplying.

The 1983 survey is available from the New England Board of Higher Education, 45 Temple Place, Boston, Massachusetts 02111.