

The Yardstick is the Child*

By Victoria F. Smith

I HAD no idea there were so many things about our schools that we liked." This was the most common reaction of parents, in eight discussion groups¹ scattered thruout Philadelphia, who set out to study their expectations for their children, and to evaluate the schools in terms of their expectations. Six of the eight groups have been meeting once a week for the past three years to discuss problems which they themselves set up. The other two groups have been operating for two years. For this particular study, each group met for two-hour discussions.

The problem was broken down into four questions: 1. What is your child getting from his school experience that you are happy about? 2. What should he be getting that he is not? 3. What is he getting that you are not sure of? 4. What is he getting that you don't want him to get?

Two of the questions were handled at each meeting, and the questions were presented a week in advance. The leader requested members of the group to think seriously about the questions and to discuss them around the dinner table, at bridge and canasta parties, with relatives, friends and neighbors. They did this so successfully that they brought interested new members to the group. The leader encouraged complete freedom of thought and expression. She tried to refrain from comment and to take down their thoughts as expressed by the participants. (It should be remembered that these groups have discussed and have had interpreted to them many problems dealing with philosophy of education, methodology, curriculum and child behavior.) Here then is the thinking of about two hundred parents on the questions which were considered.

The Things We Like

What is your child getting from his school experience that you are happy about? The number of reactions to this question far outweighed reactions to the other three, and the percentage of agreement was

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¹ There are 24 such groups in Philadelphia under the direction of the Division of School Extension of the School District of Philadelphia.

higher. All eight groups were agreeably and pleasantly surprised at the long list of things they liked about our school system. Here are some of the ways they expressed it:

The way children like school. It's the beginning and end of everything. When my kid says, "I don't think I better go to school," I'm really worried.

School makes children feel important — even my little first-grader. Her teacher is responsible. I know it!

Children become individuals. A kindergarten said to his mother, "You can't go! It's my room, my teacher, my school, my desk — even the toilet is made just for me!"

Our schools are willing to try anything new to benefit the child.

My son disliked Day Camp but begs to go to school.

It creates enthusiasm and a sense of belonging. My child loves school — she's just bubbling over.

Comments on curriculum. "School today opens so many vistas. The kids just blossom." "It was cut and dried for us. Today there is no set pattern. They bring words and learnings from the outside world."

"Mine often says, 'I had a wonderful time in school today.' It's not always because she was successful either."

There was great enthusiasm for the various trips, tours and outside activities. "Some parents just don't take children places, and it's so important."

"My daughter always has so much to talk about."

These parents praised the emphasis which our schools are placing on democratic life in the classrooms and schools, plays and dramatic productions which encourage freedom of expression, safety education with children taking part as guards, handwriting, music and rhythms, patriotism, and nature study. They especially appreciated the fire and retention drills which they said "give the children a sense of security and a lack of fear of the atom bomb."

Parents stressed the fact that education today is well rounded. ("Many families are so onesided.") It includes the outside world and a variety of experi-

ences — everyday living as well as culture and history. "The difficult and challenging tasks which they deal with now are so much more interesting to the children."

There was great praise for the language arts program. Parents felt children were being taught careful pronunciation and enunciation, and, along with those things, poise and ease in public speaking which they felt they had missed out on. The "show and tell" periods were especially mentioned because "they teach them to talk freely and encourage the shy child."

"It is wonderful the way children are being taught to read the newspapers today. I wish I knew how!"

"I like the way the schools introduce and teach about religious holidays regardless of creed."

There was much enthusiasm for clubs, handwork, and hobbies. "My boy made a screwdriver. I can't believe it! He made scoops and a cookie cutter. It teaches them that things can be made as well as bought. And they learn to take turns with tools and machinery."

Strong approval was expressed for the free discussion periods in the high schools and the sex education there. "Some parents still can't approach their children."

"I like the social studies program. Things are tied together. It makes more sense than the way I learned it — reciting dry facts — states bounded by this and that."

One person spoke in highest praise about a nutrition unit. "It really taught my daughter to eat. She wouldn't touch eggs. Then they ate breakfast in school. Now I can't keep enough eggs on hand! School did it for her. They get more out of school than we can do for them. If the teacher says it, it's so!"

Character education. There was almost one hundred percent approval of the job our schools are doing in teaching children to get along with others. "They accept people for what they are." "When a child is sick they send cards." "They help each other." "They learn to take direction and criticism from others." "School helps them to become aware of charitable organizations in their communities."

"I love the way children are encouraged to share religious beliefs." "Spiritual values are stressed without reference to creeds."

Hearty appreciation was voiced for training in responsibility and leadership. "School made her get away from me. She is more on her own." "Yes, they learn to go ahead on their own. I'm so thankful for that. My boy can busy himself in a constructive way." "School helps them to mature. We want to keep them babies."

"My child was aware of responsibilities before, but not to the point where he would check himself. This he got thru teaching."

Mrs. Joy-to-Any-School System said, "I think we ought to thank the school for anything they do in the way of character education. They have so many odds against them."

Habits and manners. Stress placed on habits and manners received high praise. Reporting on a school party one child said, "I was eating with my mouth closed."

"My child said, 'The teacher told me to wash my hands before eating.' I only told me to wash my hands before eating.' I only told her a thousand times!"

"My boy said, 'Mrs. K. said you should eat whole wheat bread.' So did I — but it didn't mean anything until Mrs. K. said it!"

Methods. "Methods have improved two hundred percent. They have kept up with the times. They are wonderful. The children are so relaxed. They are learning and enjoying it."

"The number stories are so interesting. They combine play with work. Children don't realize they're learning." "Grouping teachers gave them power of concentration."

"With these newer methods, it's easier to learn. Fractions were a mixed-up mess to me. They still are!"

Staff. There was much give and take among these groups as to the quality of teaching in our schools. But it was generally agreed that the variety of teachers — excellent to poor — was good for the children because it taught them to adjust to different people in authority which is so necessary to happy living. For the most part, they spoke of staff members with highest praise, appreciation, and affection.

"Our children love and respect our principal. She always has time to stop and praise them for the way they look or some nice things they do." "My daughter was always afraid of the doctor. She went with her group to get booster shots. He kidded her. Now she's not afraid anymore. She loves the school nurse, too."

"The teacher said' carries great weight. It has to be that way — right or wrong." "They're not afraid of the teachers as we were. Only the bad child got to see the principal in my day."

Teachers today are more enthusiastic, have broader knowledge, are more interested in problem children and in letting parents know, are more human and so understanding. "My little boy is so nervous. He can't keep still. He gets it from me. In correcting

him the teacher called him to her and put her arm around him. He was so thrilled! He's trying hard now and he's so much better."

Home and school. Strong and concerted approval was expressed for the increasingly close relationships of parents and teachers thru the Home and School Associations.² "Parents are encouraged to come to school and are more welcome than ever before. Parents know more about schools. The children urge us to go."

"Yes, I found out just the other day that there was a PTA in my day but I never heard of it then. The kids beg you to come today whether they're having trouble or not."

These special services came in for profuse praise: regular physical examinations, speech correction, banking, stamp selling, counselling, films, radio, TV, providing milk for young children at reduced prices, reading adjustment, remedial classes, orthogenic backward classes, orthogenic disciplinary classes, scout troops, cooking, sewing, homebound classes and discussion groups for parents. Most of the parents in these groups had visited our school for crippled children, school for visual handicapped, school for the deaf and hard of hearing, nutrition and heart classes, school for delinquent boys, and Wissahickon Farm School. The most gratifying reaction to these trips was, "I'm proud to be a Philadelphian and glad, more than glad, to pay taxes to provide outstanding services such as these to the public."

Facilities. In only one group were there comments in praise of the physical facilities. They mentioned the attractive rooms with plants and pictures, the little cots for napping, and the shelves of books with titles that appeal to such a variety of childish interests.

The Things We Miss

What should the child be getting that he is not getting? Parents were vociferous with respect to homework. They felt that a school should have consistent homework policy. Homework should be the type of work that "a child can put his hands on at home and not run around after." They need more training in how to go after information they are asked to get.

Many parents expressed a desire for definite and uniform minimum requirements for each grade level and for every school, regardless of location. "There should be more stress on fundamentals." This was echoed in every group. "More drill — purposeful and meaningful." Teachers should make the child see the importance of drill. Four groups stressed the need for a definite time for handwriting. "Scholastic standards should be higher."

One woman said, "Work is work, not a game. They get to junior high and have a rude awakening. There is too much playing in the elementary school."

There was a minority in several groups which felt that the social studies are too hazy. There is no conception of chronological order of history and location of places. "History should begin at the beginning." Mrs. L. said, "Theoretically, I am for the social studies. But not according to what my child is getting — unimportant detail, misrepresentation and incorrect facts from children's reports, and wholesale copying of meaningless facts from books. Nine months were spent on China. My boy doesn't know what the Adirondacks are! This week they started Liberia. If it were not for the fact that he is an interested child, he would know very little about the United States, England and France."

Some parents expressed a desire for a prescribed course of study in manners, more attention to habits of cleanliness, a special library period, striving for understanding of all people, and teaching *about all* forms of government.

Two groups made strong pleas for more physical education and for supervised play at recess and after school.

One group expressed a desire for more vocational guidance, more direct teaching of how to study, specially in the high schools, more written composition, more good literature, and a greater challenge in the junior and senior high school programs.

Character education. One group felt that we need character education. "There is too much cheating, probably because there is too much emphasis on marks and city tests plus the fact that they must have certain marks to get to college." "There is too much keen competition in school work, and in the world for that matter — to the point of throat cutting."

There was strong objection to this last statement. "No! There is competition wherever they go. What we need is more stress on kindness toward each other."

Methods. A minority referred to our methods as, "Too slipshod! Everything is a game. Life is no game! The number stories are just contraptions. Sure, the children enjoy coming to school. It's a picnic! Boy, will they get a boot when they go to work! Satisfactory for one is not satisfactory for another. When you get a job you do it regardless!"

"There should be more discipline. There is too much freedom. Those that take advantage set a bad example for others. The teacher needs respect and order to help the children learn."

A small number asked for special attention for the child who is absent because of illness, more op-

² We have 150,000 members of the Home and School Council in Philadelphia today.

portunities for the gifted child. and more supervision in the schoolyards.

Staff. Two groups felt we should have better trained, healthier, and more capable teachers and principals who are truly interested in and know how to teach children. The following were mentioned in one group only:

There should be men teachers.

A child should be prepared for the next teacher, especially if she is different.

The strongest and best teachers should have first grade.

There should be stricter dealing with incompetent teachers.

The elementary, junior and senior high schools should work together. "One doesn't know what the other is doing."

There should be more direct and active supervision by the principal.

Facilities. The majority expressed the need for more space and more play areas. There was a strong desire for smaller classes, more teachers, bigger and better schools with more adequate supplies and lunch-room facilities, and more and better books, plus more books which may be brought home.

The Things We Question

What is your child getting that you are not sure of? Two groups questioned the value of handwork which requires three pounds of flour and one pound of salt for making a map, or two quarts of boiling starch water mixed with l ux for finger printing.

One group talked at length seriously questioning the value of an annual dramatic production. "There's not much learning going on. The children taking an active part are the privileged characters. Children feel unfortunate when they get the teacher who is in charge of the production. She is under such tension and often explodes with the children. If they want Miss X to put on a production like this, she shouldn't have to teach a regular class, too. We realize this is an effort to get parents out, but does it get them into other worthwhile activities concerning the school?"

There was much conjecture and difference of opinion as to sex education. Some felt that it should not be delayed until junior and senior high but should begin in the elementary school. A minority felt strongly that such education is the job of the parents.

There was question as to the following:

"Shouldn't we have more practical courses to train us for living — courses such as family life, mating,

marriage and child care?" "I wonder if we shouldn't place more emphasis on self-directed interests and activities."

"Perhaps religious tolerance is overdone," said a few. "I'm not sure it isn't pointing out differences."

A minority was dubious about certain gym activities where extreme danger is involved, like rope climbing, student government in the elementary school; competition in collecting for charities; the wide freedom of choice allowed teachers with respect to the curriculum.

Character education. "Should we not strive for wiser guidance in behavior? Children often say and write what the teacher dictates or wants. They don't really think this is so themselves."

Method. Two groups seriously questioned "too much individual freedom and self-expression. They don't fear teachers today. Children like grown-ups better if they mean what they say."

"Shouldn't more attention be given to the quiet shy child?" one group asked. Another questioned leaving children in charge of other children. "Won't it make a child a squealer?"

Staff. One group questioned the value of retaining teachers "whose quality of work is way below par and who are apparently not emotionally fitted to teach."

The Things We Don't Want

What is your child getting that you don't want him to get? "Holes in his shoes and the seat of his pants" as a result of rough play in the schoolyard! This idea was mentioned by several groups. A majority placed great emphasis on the inevitable and eternal soap words and silly rhymes which seem to be a part of child growth. Some observed that the teacher has little or no control over the situation.

Mrs. R. said, "Watch what happens to your daughter when she goes from elementary to junior high. Bang! Everything changes — lipstick, dress, the opposite sex. She goes haywire. Something is wrong in this adjustment process. Something ought to be done about it!"

"High school students get too many big ideas about what the world owes them. They demand too much."

Curriculum. A majority of the groups made these critical comments on the subject of homework:

Too much of it in high school. "Two hours daily is too much. The teachers need to get together on this."

Homework which is boring. "My son got a list of words to break down and use in different forms for six solid weeks."