

to the welfare of the country; what can be done about this pressing problem?

by Kevin V. Brown

How Can We Keep Them in School?

Changing world requires many more technical skills.



Dropouts invariably swell the welfare rolls or, worse, the police blotters. Unskilled workers are the best candidates for relief payments because of their inability to find steady employment. Sociologists also admit another startling statistic: *juvenile delinquency is 10 times more common among dropouts than among all other teen-age groups combined!*

The dropout problem, however, involves more than finding jobs or saving taxes. It involves the nation's security!

Russia's recent scientific achievements shook many Americans' complacency. Used to being No. 1 in everything, we wondered, "How could they do it? How could a nation that was almost illiterate a generation ago get ahead of us, the greatest country on earth?" A simplified sketch of the differences between the two systems may help explain it.

In Russia, the individual's wants are ruthlessly subjugated to the needs of the state; yet it's no secret that the Reds place great emphasis on education. The U.S. Office of Education reports the average Russian child gets twice the education of his American counterpart, studying up to 12 hours a day, six days a week.

Under a controlled curriculum, every Russian pupil gets mathematics starting in 1st grade; biology in 4th; physics, algebra, and geometry in 6th; chemistry in 7th; astronomy and calculus in 10th. The upper 30 percent go on to college—and are paid for it! While American industry cries for more technically trained workers, Russia produces *nearly a quarter of a million physicists, engineers, and other professionals annually.*

Now, no American is going to say that Russia's system is better, but it has one frightening feature: no one is overlooked who can contribute anything to the state. Yet educators here feel that our system is better. It just hasn't been exploited properly.

Actually, we have compulsory attendance laws, too—those requiring students to stay in school past a certain age or grade—but they aren't always enforced, often with reason.

Charles M. Allen, principal of the University High School of the University of Illinois and an expert on the dropout problem, says, "Compulsory attendance has little relationship to the number of stu-

dents who drop out, but only affects the time they withdraw. If the laws are rigidly enforced, a heavy concentration drops out at the close of the compulsory period. Meanwhile, enforced attendance doesn't make school more meaningful."

That, in brief, is the difference. Russia enforces, we encourage. And educators here insist that the student who completes school voluntarily is better educated than one who is forced.

HOW, THEN, are more volunteers encouraged? By the same methods used in communities that have already tackled the problem: understanding the dropout, making school more attractive for him, relieving his outside problems.

A description of the "typical" dropout was made after a study by the Tucson, Ariz., school system: "This mythical person is 16, comes from a large family which lives in a poor neighborhood. The breadwinner is an unskilled worker, and the home may be broken by death or separation. The student makes below-average marks and may be overage for his grade. There isn't sufficient money, or enthusiasm, to stay in school, so the dropout quits to go to work. The cultural pattern of the home is such as to give little or no encouragement to return."

Thousands, of course, don't fit this pattern, and some communities go to extremes to make sure no one is overlooked. In Quincy, Ill., cumulative records are kept for evidence of irregular attendance, tardiness, gradual lowering of grades, and consistently poor achievement. Other research finds any financial, social, or emotional problems.

Whatever methods are used to spot dropouts, the second step is encouragement. Parents, of course, have prime responsibility here, but others, notably schools and churches, can help. Just one enjoyable class, or one sympathetic teacher or spiritual advisor, often means the difference between a youngster's making an extra effort to stay in school or giving up.

Even classmates can help. A committee in Grand Rapids, Mich., reported, "Among the hundreds of school-leavers we interviewed, only a few had been active, accepted members of any school club, team, or social group." Friendly invitations to shy class-

mates to join something can be vital, because the adolescent urge to "belong" is very strong.

It's in the area of outside problems, however, that the community at large can play its most active role. Samplings from three cities that fought the dropout threat are representative.

In Sacramento, Calif., an intensive part-time employment program for needy students was inaugurated by representatives from labor, management, PTAs, schools, and the employment-service office. The group incorporated permanently, soliciting jobs not ordinarily handled by adults for after-school hours and week ends. Within two years, 3,000 placements were made.

A similar program in Boise, Ida., used existing agencies but depended on widespread publicity to promote part-time jobs for youngsters. The YMCA offered its facilities as headquarters for the project and the *Idaho Statesman* donated free advertising space during the campaign.

One of the most comprehensive programs was undertaken in Tampa, Fla. Low finances caused most dropouts there, but teen-agers were not even considered for jobs unless first cleared with the schools. Employers, parents, and school officials discussed each student's problem *individually*, rearranging his courses, if necessary, even to the extent of letting him work days and complete school at night. Lunches and clothing were the chief financial burdens, so some students worked in the lunchrooms in exchange for meals, and the Junior League arranged for free clothing. Other agencies even provided needed medical care, glasses, and dental work free of charge.

The seriousness of the dropout problem cannot be overemphasized, and it hasn't escaped notice in Washington. U.S. Commissioner of Education Lawrence G. Derthick summed it up: "Pioneers got their education from life itself. As youngsters, they learned most of what they needed by meeting and solving daily problems with their parents. But in the highly dynamic social and economic order of today, the youth is lost who does not have formal schooling, as much and as good as possible.

"Along with the individual, society also suffers when the education of youth is neglected."