

# Readers View the Pressure Cooker

**O**UR MARCH 20 editorial, "Education in a Pressure Cooker," brought impassioned response from hundreds of readers in thirty-five states and Canada. Many of the letters were much longer than the editorial that stimulated them, and the total correspondence would fill a large book, one that perhaps deserves to be published. Letters came from high school and college students, parents, high school and college teachers, college entrance examiners, deans and presidents, school psychologists, high school principals, and unidentified readers. While some of the writers consider the present emphasis on grades and test scores inevitable and a few think it highly desirable, the great majority agree that the academic world has suffered a serious loss of time for quiet contemplation, leisurely reading, and discussion of the kind that leads to deeper understanding of the things that matter most. They agree, too, that the change has occurred within the past four to eight years.

The letters from students make it clear that the pressures mentioned in our editorial are felt by students in all kinds of colleges and in many high schools as well. Jean McKay, a student at Acadia University in Nova Scotia, says, "You don't have to go to the 'most highly selective' colleges to find this pressure. I have been here at Acadia now for four years, and I know the workings of the University of Maine fairly well, having lived in Orono for fifteen years as a 'faculty brat.' . . . Intense pressures are to be found on both campuses." Lee Lanza, a high school sophomore in Arlington, Massachusetts, says, "With all the pressure on students now, something will give. That something, unfortunately, seems to be exactly what should be encouraged, not lost: time for original and creative thought." The pressures have reached even the junior high school. Leslie Ellen Shear, a ninth grade student in St. Paul, says, "Grades are arbitrary. People are in school to learn, not to earn grades. This idea seems to have been lost somewhere along the way." But Michael F. Wilcox of Springfield, Massachusetts, comments ironically, "Education in a pressure cooker may be an effective preparation for life in a pressure cooker. If such a life is the American ideal, then our colleges are doing a great service."

It is obvious that the students who responded to the editorial are not slow

learners. Their number includes Phi Betas, winners of National Merit Scholarships, and members of many scholastic honor societies. Several mention College Board Scores of over 700—scores that would admit them to any college in the land. Their letters are literate and often wise; anyone who still believes that this generation of students does not read and cannot write ought to read our mail.

The educators who responded see the problem through different eyes, of course, but they, no less than the students, are concerned about the consequences of excessive academic pressure. William L. Wheaton, director of admissions at Pomona College, says, "It would be foolish to deny the existence of the 'pressure cooker' atmosphere on many an American college and university campus. Whatever its source—grades, worries about future success, parental expectations—it unquestionably robs many students of the leisurely contemplation of ideas and values which traditionally is part of a good liberal education." Martha Truax, principal of a high school in Oklahoma City, says, "I am increasingly disturbed by the growth of fear and apprehension in academically able young people." And, speaking of the pressures on college entrance, Margery R. Bernstein, school psychologist in Mamaroneck, New York, says, "Although there is nothing wrong with setting high academic standards, there is something devastatingly cruel in telling large numbers of eager, well-qualified youngsters that there is no room for them when the reasons are highly irrelevant: not enough beds, not enough money, geographical distribution."

Arthur H. Brown, Jr., physics teacher at Dearborn High School in Michigan, observes, "The dramatic change of the past decade has affected every aspect of our national life, not just education. With the launching of Sputnik I, we began a competitive binge which has left the nation reeling."

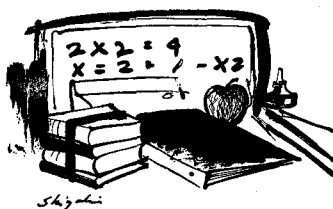
Burton Shapiro, chairman of the English Department at the Baldwin School in New York City, attributes the pres-

sure to a lack of teaching skill. The able teacher, he says, can deepen understanding without overloading the schedule; the less skilled teacher, when the heat is on, turns to more and more work for his students.

Several letters were from adults who attended college before the coming of the pressure and have observed the change. Mrs. Cynthia Engman of Philadelphia, who attended Pembroke College ten years ago, left at the end of her junior year, and is now resuming work on her degree at the University of Pennsylvania, comments, "I can say that certainly college has changed but I can't say it has changed for the better. As a freshman of seventeen I could never make it through college today." Mrs. K. W. Patterson, a countess educated in Switzerland who now lives in Washington, D.C., expresses concern over the pressures in American schools. "The pressure my children are experiencing [in an American high school] is staggering to the imagination. It is impossible for them to explore the possibilities of quiet contemplation." (Her comment should be of interest to Admiral Rickover, who has written a book setting forth the thesis that Swiss schools are more rigorous—and hence better—than ours.) One possible solution is offered by Mrs. Rose H. Agree of New Hyde Park, New York: "I say 'Ban the test.'"

But not all parents agree that the pressures are undesirable. Mr. Alfred D. Rosenblatt of Laconia, New Hampshire, has sons who have recently attended or are now enrolled in many different types of institutions: public schools, Philips Exeter, Harvard, and Brandeis. "Our boys," he says, "are all Honor students. . . . I think they work many times harder than we did, they know infinitely more, in sum they're simply much better educated than we were at their age. . . ." And Emily Shultz of Neosho, Missouri, urges us, "Please do not take education out of the pressure cooker! Too many college graduates are underdone already."

Many of the parents and teachers who expressed concern over the pressure cooker atmosphere asked, "What can be done?" We are not at all sure of the answer. We surely do not wish to lower the level of achievement or to eliminate all competition. But college professors and high school teachers who set out to raise standards might well ask themselves whether they are increasing the depth of the student's understanding or merely piling on more work. And perhaps the best advice to be given to parents who seek status through the achievements of their children is summed up in the words that provided the title for one of our articles a year or so ago, "Get Off Johnny's Back."





—George S. Zimbel.

"Education consists of a growing and changing blend of learning, understanding, and skill that an individual acquires and with which he combines the habit of advancing his own learning."

## Our Colleges Aren't Ready for Today's Students

By HAROLD HOWE II, *Director, Learning Institute of North Carolina and former Superintendent of Schools, Scarsdale, N. Y.*

**T**HERE HAS BEEN so much talk in the United States about the preparation of students for colleges that we have neglected, to our loss, the preparation of colleges for students. Unless these two endeavors go hand in hand, the educational system is out of joint.

The past ten years have seen a radical change in the preparation of high school students, a change amounting to a curricular revolution in the American high school. Under the influence of mathematicians from the universities, the content and the reach of secondary school mathematics has expanded dramatically. In the sciences, new national programs in physics, in chemistry and in biology are affecting a high percentage of those who study science in secondary school before going on to college. Foreign language teaching and learning have moved forward under the impact of federal support and of new American responsibility on the international scene. Significant changes in the English curriculum and in social studies have been slower in coming, but are currently upon us. Through the College Entrance Examination Board's Commission on English

and through Project English, financed with federal funds, the years immediately ahead will give students vastly better preparation in that field. Probably because social studies concerns itself with our image of our past, it has been slower to move. It is more controversial and more difficult to change. But there are now across the country at least two dozen significant efforts to connect the content and the methods of social studies teaching to the styles of learning familiar to historians and social scientists.

Each of these curricular excitements has been accompanied by significant changes in the standard of high school work as well as in the content. More and more high school classrooms have moved from an undue concern with life adjustment education to a growing interest in a quality of learning that places the teenager in "Scholars' Country," even though on the periphery of it.

The most significant development of the decade in this respect is the Advanced Placement Program. A very short time ago this was a narrowly based, experimental venture in a few very specialized public and private schools. In ten years the number of students taking Advanced Placement Examinations to validate college level work done in school has grown by 3,000 per cent. Some 29,000 students wrote Advanced Placement Examinations in May of 1964, and the growth continues.

This exciting development has been accompanied in the schools by new honors programs not connected with college credit but certainly connected with higher quality learning.

Taken all together, the curricular changes, the Advanced Placement Program, and the growth of honors courses, are sending a larger group of more able students to the colleges. Improved counseling and financial aid programs have swelled this number. The whole series of developments constitutes a revolution in the flow of quality students to higher education.

A paradox of this revolution is that among the initiators have been college professors whose institutions have changed relatively little in response to the dramatic alterations these professors have sparked in the schools. They have used their firm knowledge of their subjects as a fulcrum to move secondary education, but they have found no fulcrum to move the faculties of the majority of American colleges. For this reason it is important to consider the preparation of colleges for high school students.

It is a sweeping and unfair generalization to say that no colleges have adjusted. But the colleges that have been most active in redesigning their programs, in offering flexible placement arrangements, and in trying to set up a system of education that is designed to carry the student on from where the