

No "Dumb Boys" With No Grade

Part III in a series on
Bush Schools

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Increased interest in local community control of schools has often led to looking for ways to make the schools better. Even under the presently common advisory board system, when enough parents and community members take a real interest in the schools, it usually leads to new and better programs.

The nongraded, individualized elementary school at Tanana last school year was a very successful

example of the improvement community interest can make.

Last winter, the children at Tanana were placed in levels, not grades, grouped by reading ability. There were 16 levels in the first six years of school. Each child worked through the levels at his own speed. He went to a new level just as soon as, but not before, he had learned all the skills in the old level. Reading, language skills, and math were taught in levels at each child's individual rate.

This system has several advantages. One is that no one ever fails. Some go faster than others, but everyone "passes" from level to level when he's

ready. Another advantage is that every child is doing work that he is able to do. No child is "lost" in a class doing work too hard. No child is bored by work too easy. A third advantage is that the levels are very systematic: the teachers and the children all know exactly what they must learn and in what order. There are no "holes" in what is learned.

The nongraded system at Tanana was the result of continued community interest in the school. Three years ago a large school committee of about 30 parents, teachers, community members and older students was formed. The committee met once or twice a month to discuss ways to make the school better. No one was satisfied with the school program the way it was. The nongraded idea was one of the committee's suggestions for improvement.

The following year, the school staff spent the entire year planning and preparing for the non-graded school. It didn't happen overnight. It was a lot of hard work for the teachers and administrators-but they did it because the community wanted it. The advisory board strongly supported the idea also, and granted the teachers planning time and other help as needed.

When the nongraded program was started, standard report card systems were also discarded. The new way was a longer report form, which told exactly what the student could do and what his weaknesses were. There were no A, B, C, D, and F grades. Parents came to the school to talk to the teachers several times during the year, and especially any time a child had difficulty learning a new thing. The parents were always told exactly how each child was doing, and often the parents gave the children a lot of help.

It took a little time for the students, teachers, and parents to get used to the new way. Some were not too happy with it at first. But the school board kept supporting the idea and by the end of the year every teacher felt it was a success. Most of the parents really liked it because the children were learning more, and seemed happier. The achievement test scores showed improvement.

One little boy who had spent four years in school and failed to learn to read summed it up in an essay at the end of the year: "I am nine years old and I have been in school four years. This year I learned to read and write better. I am not a dumb boy any more. I am a smart boy now."