

from the TEACHERS' LOUNGE

In our "Special Focus" we made mention of the fact that Jon Huisken is a former school Board member. More than that, he's also been a teacher, having taught for a year in Edgerton and then for another five in Hope School in Grand Rapids. When he left teaching, back in 1969, he didn't leave the business of education. He's been at Hope College, in Holland, Michigan ever since that time, serving most of those years as Registrar. So, though he's not currently a school teacher, we'll extend to him anyway the double honor, not only of appearing twice in the same issue of Perspectives, but also of speaking from the Teachers' Lounge.

Actually, of course, it's more correct to say that Mr. Huisken does us the honor. As one who has for many years had first-hand knowledge of the products of a good number of Christian high schools (including our own), he is well qualified to speak to the strengths and weaknesses of our graduates, and to give good advice to the college-bound students of our junior and senior high schools. We were delighted therefore that he agreed to do that for us, and that in the writing of his article he threw in a little advice for parents and teachers too. We all do well to listen closely to Jon's assessment of how "our students stack up as high school graduates," and to consider very seriously the remedies he proposes for the deficiencies he perceives.

An Assessment

Jon J. Huisken

"Education is one of those rare fields in which everyone is an expert. After all, everyone has gone to school. We all know a good teacher when we see one, and we all know, like our parents before us, that our kids aren't getting as good an education as we did.

What's more — nearly everyone knows what ought to be done about it."

From *Focus*, 1987
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When asked to give my opinions on the preparation of to-

day's high school graduates for college-level work, the above quotation caught my eye. It pretty much sums up the current debate on the state of American education — from elementary school through graduate school. To say that American education is getting a thorough going-over is probably an understatement — at least it is getting a thorough going-over verbally. Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, is a current bestseller and is critical of American education, particularly its loss of moral absolutes in favor of cultural relativism. Earlier reports such as "A Nation at Risk" caused a furor amongst educators. Fact is, the United States has gradually, but surely, slipped in its effectiveness to educate. Countries such as Japan, the Soviet Union, West Germany, and the Scandinavian countries have supplanted us as leader in developing a literate populace. All of this evaluation and discussion should also give us pause to consider our own educational system as well. We often boast of superior education, but have we ever had the courage to test our products? Are we really being as effective as we claim to be?

As background for my assessment of the products of today's high schools, consider some research findings from ETS (Educational Testing Service). Research

at such places as ETS has demonstrated that several things have happened over the last twenty years: 1) 17-year-old students are reading at a slightly higher level than before, but only five percent of this group have developed advanced reading skills and strategies. Most, in fact, read only at a superficial level and rarely get to the deeper meaning of an article or a piece of literature. 2) Results from writing assessments are very disheartening. Few students can write analytically. Only 25% of eleventh graders can write analytic prose adequately. Further, only 22% of eleventh graders can do an adequate job in persuasive writing. Students are generally unable to develop logical arguments and support them with facts. 3) Critical thinking and reasoning skills are not very highly developed. Few are able to write original material. 4) The arts, specifically the visual arts and music, are given short shrift in the budgeting process and therefore most students leave high school with very little aesthetic sense and little idea of the creative process.

Doesn't sound very positive, does it. Well, what about us? How do our students stack up as high school graduates or nearly graduates-to-be? Have we the courage to hear an assessment, unscientific though it may be?

You must bear in mind as you read this that what I have to say is opinion. But let me qualify that. For nearly twenty years now I've sat in the registrar's chair at Hope College. Now, not many people understand what a registrar does; nor do most who have gone to college have much desire ever to see one or deal with one. But, critical to my position is dealing with the academic standing of students. I have the onerous task of telling young people (and some older ones these days) of how they're progressing toward a degree and what burners need to be turned on if they ever do expect to get one. (I also do, by the way, have the joyous task of placing people on the deans' list and of seeing those who had fires lit under them cross the stage at commencement time.) I've seen nearly twenty classes of freshmen enter and progress through the college, including two of my own daughters. My own experience, coupled with discussions with numerous college professors who deal daily with current high school products, will be the matter upon which I draw in this article. You must also remember that what I present are generalizations. So, if it is in your character to rustle up an example or two contrary to what I have to say so that you can in that way avoid consideration of the prob-

lem, I hope you will soon settle down and consider the issue. Now, with all that qualification stuff out of the way, we get to the issue.

My sense is that what the likes of ETS are finding is true, although not as dramatically as what a national sample indicates (we get the better students and therefore the national sample data does not fit our students). I'm speaking now of high school graduates, including my own children, that enter college.

Let's begin with reading. In the first place, most students are not used to a lot of it. I've talked to lots of students, good students according to high school reports, who are totally overwhelmed by their reading assignments. Secondly, many students have difficulty reading at the level required, in regard, now, to both meaning and difficulty. Many students find it difficult to get beyond the obvious points made by an author to the real "meat" of a piece. Subtleties of presentation — satire, irony, etc. — are often missed. The author's philosophy or perspective is often not detected. Vocabulary is oftentimes not very highly developed in these students. (I was tempted, in this regard, when asked to send notice to incoming freshmen that they needed to buy a standard handbook for English writing as well as a

(a dictionary, to include a recommendation that they buy a thesaurus, too, so that instead of saying "he goes" they might be able to use "say" or "said" occasionally.) This says nothing yet of the breadth of reading desired for college-level students which in the minds of most faculty is seriously deficient.

Secondly, there's writing (yes, we'll get to arithmetic). I realize that it takes a lot of time and effort to teach and grade writing, but there's simply not enough required. Professors regularly complain not only about the lack of good mechanical skills but also about the lack of clear thinking (which, by the way, goes back to good reading skills — the two, reading and writing — are most directly related). The ability to reason, the ability to use an advanced vocabulary are skills which, in the judgment of most faculty, are lacking in today's college students.

Then there's arithmetic. In far too many cases, basic arithmetic skills — fractions, decimals, percents, etc. — are lacking. Algebraic equations have been known to cause near hysteria. To say that quantitative skills are lacking in today's students is not an exaggeration.

And, then, what's happened to the good, sound geography courses that used to be taught in the middle grades? Social studies

courses just don't do the job. A case in point was a history professor's question recently about the location of the Persian Gulf. Not many knew where it was. Few could locate Iran let alone Iraq and Afghanistan. Strange, isn't it, that in a world where "global" concerns are the norm, most of our high school graduates don't know the globe very well.

One more item, and that perhaps is the most frustrating one to me. I am concerned by the lack of historical sense and the lack of appreciation of history demonstrated by our own high school graduates. I relate this item particularly to our own high school graduates (and to many young adults, as well) because I am particularly concerned with the well-being of our own community. Christians *must* have a sense of history and of God's hand in it. Christians *must* be alert to current events so that they can read the signs of the times. But, it doesn't seem to be there. That, to me, is a shame. God speaks every day through history, and we ought to perk up our ears a bit so that we have an understanding (not just knowledge of) what's going on in the world today.

This says nothing yet of a student's understanding of the metaphors of nature, God's elegant book. But that could be the topic of another article.

So far, my assessment, except for the instance of history, has taken into account college freshmen from all over the country. But, I want to make one more comment specific to our own high school graduates and that is that not enough of them are continuing their education beyond high school. The percent going on to college is below that of similar Christian high schools and, I would dare say, is below that of many public high schools. Something, I think which ought to concern us.

A pretty negative assessment, don't you think? Let me end, then, on a positive note. Today's students are oftentimes proclaimed to be brighter and smarter than those of any previous generation (this is quite often said by politicians looking for the "youth" vote), and, in a sense, this is true. Certainly they know more about the advancements in science and technology. Certainly they know more about the human body and the human mind. The advancements in medicine and space research are ample testimony of this increased knowledge.

But, I believe the rest of the assessment has to stand as stated. Students today need to read more, write more, compute more, think more.

Any solutions? Several which come readily to mind. The first

involves our homes. Attitudes must change toward education (not only college education but all levels) and its worth. To ignore the necessity (almost) of education or training beyond high school is to have a myopic view of today's society and today's workplace. To believe, further, that higher education is only for preachers and teachers, and therefore no encouragement or help is given to those who want to enter other professions or vocations is to deprive our young people, and eventually you and me, from having Christians in those professions where they are desperately needed — medicine, law, psychiatry, to name just a few. Secondly, the faculties of our schools, along with our school boards, need to assess *what* they are doing and *how* they are doing it. I realize, having been there, that there is tremendous frustration in trying to get students to do more in school when there appears to be so little motivation to learn anything at all. The easiest thing to do is follow the path of least resistance — back off and be content with not doing as much as you know you need to do. But, I hope that our faculties don't do that. Insist on reading; insist on good writing. Take the time to assess your methods of teaching. Is there too much regurgitation of material? Is there time for the development of

analytical and critical thinking skills, and, possibly, for the development of reasoning skills?

Well, what do you make of all this? Chalk it up as an assessment of a middle-aged academic who's lost his enthusiasm for young folks, or probably one who has seen his 25th high school class

reunion come and go and doesn't remember where he was at that age? I hope not. There's too much at stake here. The future of our schools and churches depends upon these young folks now coming through our system. We need, and ought to insist upon, the best. ■■■

Did you find the teacher "old-timers" in "The Good Ol' Days" picture in our Fall issue? Here they are: Top row, 6th, 7th, and 8th from left are John Kalsbeek, Harry Langerak, and Mary Beth Engelsma Lubbers, respectively. The teacher is Miss Jess Dykstra, and the young man standing to her right is now the pastor of our South Holland congregation, Rev. David Engelsma. And front row, 2nd from right, is Gerald Kuiper. How did you do? The picture, incidentally, was taken in Hope School's first year of operation. Hope's enrollment was low in those early days, as is evident from the fact that Miss Dykstra found herself in charge of four grades: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th. Her four future teachers were all 1st graders at the time, and Rev. Engelsma was one of the "big kids" (a 4th grader).