

Letter from Miss Washichek

A high school English teacher writes to President Cross. The picture she paints of students with too many interests and of teachers with too much competition is a thoughtful one. No one with an interest in education can afford to ignore it.

By JOSIE WASHICHEK, '41ma

THIS LETTER is long. Will you read it carefully? You will find it interesting because some of your recent public observations indicate that you and I are concerned about the same thing, the inability of our high school graduates to handle the English language. The difference is that teachers are never asked to speak; only administrators have that privilege. Therefore I ask you to treat this letter as professional, not just that of a "crank."

Let me paint a picture of a typical high school English teacher in her situation. I am one of five enthusiastic English teachers at Shawnee High School. I have the M.A. in English from O.U. I teach senior English. First semester last year my teaching load was 190, averaging 38 to a class. I was capable of teaching them more than I taught them; they were capable of learning more than they learned. I cannot give thorough, individual instruction in crowded classes.

I can assign only two written compositions each six weeks, including during the year a short story and a term paper. For me a paper is not complete until it is handed back corrected. Then there are tests and other papers that must be checked and recorded. Want to calculate the amount of paper checking I do in a year?

Are you in agreement with the trainers of teachers in your Department of Education? I have a minor in Education from O.U. We teachers are told by your experts to pass Johnny not according to his knowledge of subject matter, but according to his effort and ability to learn. If Willie's father comes home drunk and chases his mother with a butcher knife, Willie is a "troubled" child. To fail him would add to his frustration. If Tommy dislikes academic subjects, something else should be substituted so that he can be happy and have a sense of mastery. Then Johnny and Willie and Tommy will go knocking on college doors.

Examine those trade courses for Tommy. Equipment for machine shop, printing, woodwork, etc., costs, not hundreds, but

thousands of dollars. Those teachers and the D.E., D.O., and agriculture teachers receive fabulous salaries, as the English teacher views them. *And Uncle Sam limits their class load!* I know that some English teachers over the state are just filling vacancies. They will not assign themes because they do not like to grade themes for the meager wages they receive. They look across at the inequalities which our administrators are not correcting. In the back of my mind constantly, as I teach, is the worry, "Will I ever save enough for that down payment on a home? If I have a hole to crawl into when I'm old, my retirement won't be enough to pay rent, too." Seeing the fine clothes of the trade teachers, together with their good investments, homes, and cars, does not build my morale, either.

My teaching load this year is a little lighter, 32 to a class! An extra journalism class was added. Many students dodge the college preparatory senior English by taking journalism, drama, radio, speech, debate, etc. Although they miss one-third of the English our high school offers, they go knocking on college doors. Claim is made that those courses offer an equivalent in English, but examination reveals otherwise. A journalism student who cannot write earns his credit by selling ads; drama students make costumes, etc.

Not long ago I attended a "panel" at an O.U. speech conference. High school students from all over the state were taken from a regular day of school to attend. Purpose of the panel: to persuade them to go home and build their speech departments by substituting speech for senior English.

I wish there were some way of counting the conventions held on school time. Example: D.E., where a nationally known figure like J. C. Penney extols the virtues of D.E. Similar ones are held by D.O., speech, journalism, agriculture, Hi-Y, Tri-Hi-Y, and others. Then there are the science fair, county fair, band and chorus festivals. I am sure I am leaving out some. After those indoctrinating conventions the pupils come

back starry-eyed and brain-washed, raving, "Isn't D.E. wonderful!" "Isn't agriculture wonderful!" . . . No wonder they consider English antiquated.

These conventions furnish only part of the class interruptions. The modern high school has ACTIVITY. Student council play, class plays, home coming, band, chorus, picture taking—all take students out of class. During the long preparation for some of these activities when pupils do come to class, there is a sleepiness from practicing the night before. They are so emotionally tied to coming events that they cannot think. I believe that we should have some of these activities; I know that we have too many.

I took a survey last week to see how many of my students have jobs. I have not finished, but so far it is showing what previous ones showed: 50 per cent. This means no time to browse in a library. Some have schedules that forbid reading for a book report. A few boys stated that they need their jobs to pay for their cars.

I have not overdrawn the picture of the typical high school English teacher's situation.

You are right in saying that something should be done.

I am shocked at my own temerity in writing you. I have the courage to do so only because you are important in educational circles. I am not. Your voice, if you speak out for remedy, will be heeded not only statewide, but nationally. If you attend the White House Conference on Education, please tell the people that helping the English program will be helping advance two of the "Three R's."

Thank you if you have read all this letter. I speak for many people. I am active in the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English. Although my letter sounds dreary, we are a cheerful group. We will gladly work with you if you have any suggestions for remedying this acute situation, too much illiteracy in our high schools.