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CONSERVATION EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN ILLINOIS HIGH SCHOOLS[1]

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Progress in conservation education has been hampered by lack of public interest and understanding (Calhoun, 1951). In attempting to present what are believed to be sound programs, the conservation interests have been stymied by the public's lack of support and reluctance to accept a philosophy so important to our nation. As with any program, without an informed and understanding public, there is little chance of success regardless of the merits. An uninformed public will often give priority to undesirable and unsound programs which have been promoted for the selfish interest of pressure groups. Lack of public support, both financial and other, makes it possible for such groups to inaugurate policies favoring individual interests at the expense of better, more beneficial conservation action. Doubtlessly the only adequate answer to these and other similar problems in better public education.

Several years ago, John W. Studebacher, United States Commissioner of Education, stated (Missouri Conservation Commission 1940, p. 9):

> It is more and more recognized that we need intelligent action toward a nationwide, effective, permanent program in conservation. Organized public education offers the best, if not the only, means of ultimately and fully accomplishing this purpose.

Our best opportunity for effective "organized public education" begins in our schools. It is in school that children begin to learn the first principles of citizenship and become acquainted with some of the problems and situations to be faced in later life. An essential of good citizenship is a proper attitude toward conservation of our natural resources. (National Committee on Policies in Conservation Education, 1949). Schools are obligated to assume leadership for the adoption of the philosophy and practice of conservation.

In spite of the easily recognizable place of conservation in any school curriculum, it is evident that our present conservation education program is largely inadequate. Even in the high schools, which often offer the final opportunity for impressing proper attitudes of citizenship upon our youth, the topic is too often neglected or even ignored. To remedy this situation is, admittedly, a diffi-

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cult and slow task, but the seriousness of the problem allows little delay.

The initial step in the improvement of any program is to obtain a knowledge of the existing status. This enables an evaluation of both strong and weak points in order that time and effort are not wasted. As a step in that direction, an attempt has been made to evaluate the current status of conservation education in southern Illinois high schools.

Much of the information was obtained by questionnaires mailed to the principals of 156 schools in the southern 34 counties of Illinois. These were limited to a few short-answer questions so that time and effort in completing them would be minimum. In addition, approximately 40 individual school administrators and teachers were visited for further evaluation of the information supplied.

Of the 156 questionnaires, 113 (78.8 percent) were returned. Seventy-five percent of the total returns were received in the first week, the remainder being received at a decreasing rate over a three-week period. Those received the first week were some indication of the extent to which this group was interested in conservation. Returns sent after the initial week might be considered representative of principals mildly interested, whereas the 21.2 percent not returned were those having no particular interest. Such an evaluation is entirely arbitrary and is hardly a valid index of conservation interest. However, it does serve the purpose of giving an overall approximation of attitudes.

With one exception all principals believed that high school graduates should have a fundamental knowledge of conservation. Approximately 84 percent were of the opinion that current graduates had an inadequate concept, whereas only about 2 percent felt that sufficient understanding was attained. The remainder (14 percent) believed that only a few of their yearly graduates were properly trained. However, most (97 percent) of the administrators indicated that conservation was a necessary part of high school curricula.

The majority (64 percent) of the principals felt that conservation should be integrated into specific courses and about 25 percent thought it best worked into all courses. Only about 10 percent were of the opinion that separate courses were desirable. One percent wanted it taught in special courses and also integrated in all others possible.

Thirty-two percent of the schools admitted no conservation in their curricula. Another 10 percent claimed only partial emphasis; 58 percent believed that they do emphasize conservation. Of this latter group, 26 percent answered merely that it was taught in course work. Of the remainder (74 percent), 52 percent listed specifically general science, 49 percent vocational agriculture, 45 percent biology, and 26 percent social studies. Four principals reported health as related to human conservation, while six indicated that conservation was taught either in specific courses or as a unit of some other course. Other courses listed were geography, home economics, chemistry, and coal mining.

Extracurricular activities which gave some emphasis to conservation were indicated by 37 percent (42) of the schools. Of this group 60 percent had FFA clubs, 14 percent FHA clubs, and approximately 12 percent conservation clubs. Other activities were nature clubs, hunting and fishing clubs, field trips, camping, conservation projects, audio-visual aids, and lectures. Few schools felt their activities met desirable standards.

Approximately 56 percent of the principals thought that all high school teachers should have conservation training; 44 percent believed it necessary for only specific teachers. Of 48 principals favoring specific teacher training, 88 percent included instructors in natural science, 66 percent in agriculture, and 48 percent in social studies. Others recommended were those in physical sciences, home economics, and health.

The majority (66 percent) of the principals felt that teachers in their school systems would be interested in conservation education if it were made available. Eighteen percent said there would be no interest, and others were doubtful and apparently had made no effort to find out. The data indicated that approximately 290 teachers in 67 schools would like to obtain training in conservation. Only 17 schools reported that none of their instructors would be interested. Twenty-nine of the schools, however, did not answer this particular question.

It is gratifying to learn that principals almost unanimously agree that a fundamental knowledge of conservation is a necessary part of high school training. Further, they recognize that current graduates have an inadequate concept. The lack of factual knowledge is probably not at fault, but rather it is the absence of the proper attitude toward conservation. It seems imperative that all teachers should strive to develop this attitude. Schools seem to emphasize information only on specific resources rather than to stress an understanding of the balance of the natural environments, or the many controlling interrelationships under which the environment operates.

There is considerable disagreement as to how conservation is to be taught, despite the fact that the majority of the principals believe it an essential part of high school curricula. A substantial majority, however, indicate that integration into specific courses is best. Most educators agree that conservation should not be taught as a specific course, but rather as an integrated subject. Special courses will likely have a limited enrollment with only a few students benefiting. The conservation problem is too important to permit any students to graduate without some concept. It is agreed that conservation is most directly related to the natural and social sciences, but it is also an inseparable part of most subjects when they are presented in a practical and objective manner.

The majority of the schools apparently have some kind of conservation emphasis, mostly integrated in natural science courses. This information on emphasis may be of small value, for some principals, realizing the inadequacy of the little conservation in their schools, may have given a negative answer. Others wishing to defend their teaching

methods are probably unwilling to admit that conservation is neglected, and therefore if there is any semblance of it taught in their schools they report it as being emphasized. Examples of these are many of the schools that encourage science projects, camping, outdoor education and clubs. Unless there is careful planning and adequate supervision, the time is largely wasted.

Individual teachers, no matter how capable, are generally inadequate in coping with the problem of conservation (Eckelberry and Johnson, 1949). Because it is a part of so many areas of living and learning, high schools must be organized with conservation as one of the major objectives. In other words, it must be a cooperative responsibility of the entire school staff. A major cause for failure in southern Illinois and elsewhere is the tendency to shove it off on the science teacher instead of recognizing that it is a duty of all members of the staff.

Many principals feel that current teachers are overloaded and have little time for special preparation of conservation material with which they are unfamiliar. The dominant feeling is that conservation training of every teacher is the ideal situation. This can be most quickly and effectively obtained through making it a requirement of teacher training. The large number of teachers who desire conservation training is a strong indication of deficiencies in their background which are recognized when on the job. It is generally agreed that anything other than extension classes will probably be unsuitable for those now instructing.

It is apparent that many of the schools are missing an opportunity to stress conservation by their lack of well-planned extracurricular activities. The chief activities now being pursued are FFA and FHA clubs. It is not too much to expect that each school should have at least one such organization. The Junior Academy of Science offers an excellent outlet for some activity. The small number of schools now active indicates a serious deficiency in an important phase of education.

This survey of secondary schools in southern Illinois seems to indicate that our high school programs are inadequate in the field of conservation instruction. The major problem appears to be in the training of our teachers. These people not only lack a basic understanding of our resources but also the tools with which to present conservation fundamentals in their courses. It appears that our present programs put too much stress on methods and too little on understanding of the basic problems of living. A single course in the natural or physical sciences will not suffice as the fundamental training of high school instructors. Additional work is necessary in order for them to recognize fully the importance of conservation to the welfare of our nation.

It is well recognized that school administrators are often narrow in their perspective. Numerous teachers repeatedly complain of lack of support. Administrators fail to give the proper encouragement and do not feel it their duty to see that conservation is integrated into their school system. As a result, they have largely placed the responsibility on

the shoulders of science teachers, if they have given any thought to it at all. It is imperative that in the future our teachers be adequately trained so that they may fully understand and be able to present conservation in its fullest. Further, those going into the administrative field should be properly acquainted with all important phases of teaching other than just those on how to promote and administrate a functional school system.

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