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Back to What School?

As a result in part of the recent population explosion, one person out of every four in the United States is now enrolling in school or college. Federal efforts to help the pedagogic supply meet the student demand have been estimable. Culminating in last year's National Defense Education Act, these efforts include such things as summer courses for science and mathematics teachers, purchase of laboratory equipment for schools, and loans and fellowships for college students, with special provisions for students who intend to become teachers. But despite federal assistance, the picture this year of pupils going back to, or beginning, school is not entirely inspiring.

Last month Arthur S. Flemming, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, estimated that this fall we shall be short between 130,000 and 140,000 classrooms in public elementary schools and public high schools throughout the nation. How does one arrive at this figure? One way is to start with the shortage of 140,500 classrooms for fall 1958. Add the 47,400 rooms needed to meet the estimated increase in enrollments. Add the 16,800 rooms needed to replace facilities that have become unusable during the last year. And, finally, subtract the 68,440 new rooms estimated to have been built by the states. This arithmetic gives the present shortage as 136,260 classrooms. It also demonstrates that if last year's trend continues, the shortage will be solved, but only for our children's children.

To complete the picture, Commissioner of Education Lawrence G. Derthick estimated several days later that for the coming year we shall be short 190,000 qualified teachers in public and nonpublic schools. The shortage for fall 1958 was 182,000 qualified teachers. The trend again is small, but in this case we can be thankful it is small, for it is in the wrong direction. If last year's experience continues, the teacher shortage will never be solved, but at least things are going from bad to worse only gradually. Of course, newly trained teachers keep entering the profession, but the number of pupils is also growing and the dropout rate of teachers is large. According to recent figures, the dropout rate is 10.9 percent per year.

Almost everybody, including the President of the United States and a majority of the members of Congress, favors some form of federal assistance to states for school construction. However, the concerted action necessary to pass legislation is blocked by differences of opinion over how much money should be spent and how the money should be administered. Of the several major bills on the docket, the most generous is the one introduced by Senator James E. Murray and Representative Lee Metcalf, Democrats of Montana, while the most niggardly is the bill favored by the Administration. The Murray-Metcalf bill would provide federal grants of \$1.1 billion annually for four years, with the funds usable not only for new buildings but also for teachers' salaries. The Administration bill would help local school districts pay off bonds for school construction, the bonds representing a capital outlay of \$600 million. The maximum level of payments would be \$85 million per year.

Actual school needs may be greater than Secretary Flemming's and Commissioner Derthick's statistics show. Thus, estimates of the number of additional rooms needed are based on the increase in enrollments by states. But, in any one state, a large increase in enrollment in suburban areas may be offset by a decline in enrollment in nearby cities. So things may be worse, but they could also be considerably better if additional federal aid were only forthcoming.—J.T.