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Keeping Up the Supply Of Teachers in Russia

By Norton T. Dodge

THE White House Conference on Education came to grips with the thorny problem: "How can we get enough good teachers —and keep them?"

Neil McElroy, the conference chairman, highlighted the plight confronting our expanding educational system when he said: "You can vote taxes and build a building with the money; it takes years to train a qualified teacher. And without good teachers in adequate numbers, we cannot have good schools."

Our growing teacher shortage, particularly in the fields of science, becomes even more alarming in view of Soviet advances in the training of scientists and engineers revealed by Nicholas DeWitt in his excellent study "Soviet Professional Manpower" and in recent speeches by C. I. A. Director Allen Dulles, Adm. Strauss of the A. E. C. and Vice-President Nixon.

The teacher, the unsung hero and much maligned bulwark of our educational system, occupies a preferred position in Soviet society. A professor's salary and prestige equal those of high governmental and industrial officials. Although secondary school teachers lack the high salaries and prestige of professors, they are respected and fully accepted members of their community. Eagerness to enter the teaching profession has greatly aided the expansion of Soviet education.

Because of the secondary school teachers' decisive role, the quality of teacher training provides an important clew to the effectiveness of the system as a whole. For this reason, my visit to the Rostov Pedagogic Institute, which trains secondary school teachers, proved valuable in explaining the effectiveness of Soviet scientific and technical education at the secondary school level.

The director of the institute, a big, bushy-haired, comfortable looking man, might have passed for the president of Panhandle State Teachers College here at home. The two would not have seen eye to eye on educational philosophy, however. According to the director, there is no question among Soviet educators that subject matter takes precedence over methodology. The future teacher of physics, for example, spends 60 per cent of his time on physics, mathematics and [illegible]-sciences. His coverage of these subjects will be almost comparable to that of a major in physics in one of our average colleges. In contrast, American high school science teachers are reported to have completed on the average less than a full college course in the subject they are teaching.

The institute had 3,000 regular students and 2,000 correspondence students. Women made up approximately 75 per cent of the student body. Most of the students are drawn from the Rostov area and, upon completion of their four years of training, will be sent to rural schools. Over 180 institutes, providing similar training, serve other parts of the country.

The director pointed out that the divisions or faculties at his institute correspond to the major subjects taught in the ten-year or secondary school: languages, literature, history, geography, mathematics, physics, biology and chemistry. In addition, there are faculties for kindergarten and physical culture training. Since we were particularly interested in the quality of science training, we asked to visit the separate physics building.

The physics dean explained that he has a staff of eighteen and 340 students, 80 per cent of whom are women. In four semesters of general physics, the students cover mechanics, heat, electricity, optics and atomic physics. By the end of the second year, the students have studied sufficient mathematics to begin theoretical physics. In their last four semesters they study thermodynamics and the kinetic theory of matter, electromagnetic fields and electron theory, the theory of relativity and atomic theory.

The dean emphasized that the training is general in contrast to that at the universities, which is highly specialized in the fourth and fifth years and requires independent research in the preparation of a diploma [illegible]

The formal academic training is supplemented by practice teaching in the third and fourth years totaling ten weeks so that the student will be able to step into a teaching job immediately upon graduation. All graduates are assigned to their jobs, usually in a rural area, for a three-year period.

Not all ten-year school teachers are trained in pedagogic institutes such as the Rostov institute. In non-scientific fields and languages the universities and foreign-language institutes are important sources of new teachers, but in the sciences, such as physics, we were told that close to 90 per cent of the teachers were trained in the pedagogic institutes. Drawing on these sources and special institutes for the training of primary school teachers, the number of Soviet primary and secondary school teachers increased almost fourfold in the last twenty-five years. In a like period, our teaching force increased only about 25 per cent.

With a large, planned expansion of ten-year schools scheduled for the next five years, the Soviets face a continuing problem of recruiting thousands of new teachers annually. The director told us that at his institute there were four to five applicants for each vacancy. Other institutes are not so popular, but the major obstacle to increasing the number of teachers trained in the Soviet Union appears to be a lack of facilities rather than a lack of applicants interested in a teaching career.

This is something of a paradox since a secondary school teacher's salary is little better than that of a factory worker, but prestige, greater freedom, a summer vacation, and the personal satisfactions derived from teaching tip the scale in favor of teaching. In the Soviet Union, as elsewhere, some persons simply like to teach. An underlying factor encouraging entry into the profession is the low level of real wages which forces many women to work to make ends meets.

These various factors, several of which are absent in the United States, coupled with teacher training which emphasizes subject matter, have enabled the Soviets to outstrip us in one important phase in the [illegible]