

Wages in the Schools

HISTORY DOES NOT REPEAT itself; people merely repeat mistakes, because they know no better.

During World War I the lure of higher wages so depleted the teaching force of the New York City schools that the head of the educational system publicly scolded those teachers who "neglected their duty."

A few weeks ago the National Education Association sent an SOS to school boards throughout the country urging them to raise teachers' pay. Rural schools face a shortage of 50,000 teachers in the coming year. The average salary of rural teachers is \$900 a year; more than half of all the teachers in the nation get under \$2,000.

Let us imagine that the lure of higher wages were a constant condition—in peacetime. What would be the effect on all public servants, and public service? What quality of workers would we employ to do the things that can best be done socially; how well would these things be done?

It is a notorious fact that positions in the public service are sought after more during times of depression than when jobs are plentiful. It is the certainty of income rather than the reward for services rendered that makes public work attractive. Since salaries are fixed and have little relationship to effort expended, the incentive that makes competitive enterprise attractive is gone. The only spur to improvement is the occasional examination for a position that pays a higher salary. Holding on by political "pull" is an essential technique.

When the promise of greater remuneration in private enterprise for greater skill presents itself, the security—and deadening fixity—of public employment ceases to be attractive to the more ambitious. Who, then, are left on the public payroll? Those least able to meet the demands of competition.

If the general level of teachers' wages were high, which would mean that jobs were plentiful, there would be competition between public and private schools for the better qualified teachers. Parents would buy education just as they buy medical or legal services; they would seek the best.

Under such conditions the public school would be in constant competition with the private school. And, unless the public were willing to meet this competition with higher remuneration for better teachers, its school system would be neglected, perhaps would cease to exist.

The basic concern, then, of the N. E. A. ought

not to be the present flight of teachers to the better paying defense jobs, but the problem of wages as a whole.

That is the basic concern of society.

F. C.