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Causes of Absences in the Rural Schools of Grayson County, Kentucky

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1934

CAUSES OF ABSENCES IN THE RURAL SCHOOLS
OF GRAYSON COUNTY, KENTUCKY

BY

EDWARD SCOTT ROBINSON

A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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Approved:-

Major Professor
and
Department of Education

Minor Professor

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For many years the writer was fortunate in having the opportunity to be a student under the late Professor A. C. Burton, Professor of Rural Education in Western Kentucky State Teachers College, Bowling Green, Kentucky. It was in his classes that the idea of this study germinated and later grew into a reality. He assisted in making the data sheet and gave valuable instructions about securing the necessary information so that the study might be worth making. The writer is very grateful to Professor Burton for his invaluable help and guidance.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This study has been an undertaking for the purpose of finding the real causes of non-attendance in the rural schools of Grayson County, Kentucky. This study applies only to those children who have become members of some particular school. Grayson County is principally rural with the interests of the people practically the same the county over. It has had access to the outside markets for a half century or more, being fairly well divided by the Illinois Central Railroad, which enters from Hardin County, crosses Grayson the long way, and goes on through Ohio County. The type of farming on either side of the railroad is about the same.

In Grayson County can be found practically all of the farm crops. Some sections of the county, perhaps, raise more of one thing than another; but wheat, corn, hogs, tobacco, cattle, and poultry are found in every section of the county. It would be hard to say which is the principal crop. The topography of the county is particularly rough in many parts, which perhaps might, in a way, account for the extensive practice of diversified farming. The causes which were found that kept children out of school in

Grayson County might be a barometer for determining the causes of absences throughout the entire state, since it might be considered a representative county. The interests of Kentucky and the interests of Grayson County are the same in general.

Public schools are being maintained at public expense for specific purposes, and, to achieve these ends in a satisfactory manner, it becomes necessary to get and to hold our pupils in school. Teachers are confronted every day with from a few absentees to a great number, as this study has shown. This produces a loss of time on the part of the pupil absent, and a loss of time on the part of all when he returns. If teachers could find out the real causes of non-attendance and had some means by which to remedy each cause and to make the child school-minded, the schools would be in a much better position to serve their purposes.

This study has not been complete by any means, for there were several handicaps. The teachers who kept the monthly reports were not acquainted with the idea well enough in the beginning to make these reports show what they meant for them to show. Then, again, it developed in many instances that it was difficult for the teacher to ascertain the real cause of absence; however, in most cases, if she were very well acquainted with the community, this difficulty did not obtain. It was discovered in many

cases that the child would not give the real reason for his absence when he returned. But the study was as accurate as it would have been under any similar circumstance.

This study has been an attempt to make some contribution to the teaching personnel, so that it may become better equipped for directing the schools to accomplish their aims. Teachers must have most of their pupils present every day if the rural schools are to meet the demands of the new ruralism. When it is possible to diagnose a case, it becomes a subject for treatment, and many times the disease may be cured. It is hoped that this investigation may serve as a guide in aiding the teachers to treat better the malady of non-attendance in our rural schools.

CHAPTER II

SET-UP AND EXPERIMENTAL TECHNIQUE

Method Used to Obtain Data

At the beginning of the school year in July, 1931, the teachers in Grayson County were given a data sheet on which to keep a record of daily absences during the first month. Instructions about how it was to be done were on each sheet. Each teacher was provided with a data sheet at the beginning of each school month, thereafter, making a total of seven sheets for the school year.

On this data sheet were listed nine causes of absences. They appear as illness, work, indifference, poverty, weather, roads, habit, visiting, truancy. Three blank spaces were provided so that the teacher might write in the cause in case it was not any of the above named. Many causes were written in during the year, such as quarantined, afraid of the health doctor, afraid of mumps, diphtheria, hunting, gone to church, and illness in home. There were numbers of causes written in, but the number of days of absences due to these causes was too insignificant to be of any consequence in the final totals. All of these written-in causes amounted to only .32 per cent of the sum total. This sheet contained also the grades from one to twelve, which made it possible for the teacher to check the grade from which the child was missing.

However, the record kept beyond the eighth grade is too limited to have any definite meaning. Then again, thinking it would be interesting to know the ages of the absent pupils, the author listed the ages from six to eighteen with checking space, or small squares in which to record the age of the absent child. Realizing that there might be a difference in the number of absences caused by boys and girls, or that boys might be absent more than girls, there was a space in which to list the number of each. When the totals were made by each teacher for each month, she found that there was a total for days of absences and also a total for pupils absent on which very few blanks ever corresponded. On these data sheets were four different types of information: causes of absences, grade of the absentee, age of the absentee, and sex of the absentee.

This blank was made with the idea of the child in mind, and each cause of absence as listed means that the child was absent because of his own situation or condition. Absent because of illness means that the child was ill, and not some member of his family. Absent because of work means that the child was at work, absent because of indifference means that the child was indifferent, etc. It is true that sometimes a child might have been absent because of conditions he could not control, but the number of these cases would have been entirely negligible. There were spaces in which to write the cause when it was out of the child's control.

A child was not counted absent until he became a member of some school but was counted as absent when he did not attend, so long as he remained a resident of that school district. This limits the study to actually enrolled pupils. In the aggregate number of districts reporting for the year there was an aggregate total of 11,340 pupils in the census, but this study has dealt only with the pupils actually enrolled in school.

TABLE I

COMPARISON OF ABSENCES BY GRADE GROUPS WITH AGE GROUPS

Grade	Absences	Age	Pupil Absences
I	736	6	275
II	581	7	366
III	525	8	464
IV	515	9	478
V	328	10	439
VI	424	11	401
VII	222	12	380
VIII	330	13	332
IX	29	14	269
X	35	15	211
XI	22	16	100
XII		17	8
		18	34

Table I shows that the greatest number, 736, of grade absences was from the first grade, but the greatest number, 478, of age absences was age nine. This might be interpreted to mean that retarded pupils are absent more than those who are properly placed. Out of the 736 who were absent from the first grade, only 275 of that number were six years old. This same condition is found in the first four grades, which might indicate that retardation of pupils is found more in the elementary grades than any other places.

TABLE II

RELATION IN PER CENT OF CAUSES OF ABSENCES AND PUPIL ABSENCES
TO TOTAL DAYS ABSENT AND TOTAL PUPIL ABSENCE

Causes	Absence by Causes		Individual Pupils Absent	
	Total Days	Per Cent of Total	Total Number	Per Cent of Total
Illness	3299	11.25	705	18.80
Work	15,340	52.35	1540	41.09
Indifference	5008	17.08	606	16.17
Poverty	398	1.28	54	1.44
Weather	1849	6.31	346	9.33
Roads	116	.39	30	.80
Habit	2150	7.33	255	6.80
Visiting	718	2.45	143	3.81
Truancy	345	1.18	54	1.44
All Others	95	.32	14	.37
Totals	29,318	99.94	3747	99.95

Table II shows there were 3,299 days of absence because of illness, which was 11.25 per cent of the total days, and there were 705 pupils absent because of illness, which was 18.80 per cent of the total number of pupils absent. Then again, it should be noted that 41.09 per cent of the pupils absent caused 52.35 per cent of days of absences, which was for work. For the remainder of the causes the percentages remain practically the same.

TABLE III

COMPARISON OF GIRLS ABSENT WITH BOYS ABSENT FOR EACH CAUSE
AND THE PER CENT OF THE TOTAL

Causes	Number	Number	Total	Per Cent	Per Cent
	of Girls Absent	of Boys Absent		of Total Girls	of Total Boys
Illness	428	277	705	60.70	39.30
Work	549	991	1540	35.64	64.36
Indifference	273	333	606	45.04	54.96
Poverty	30	24	54	55.55	44.45
Weather	191	155	346	54.04	45.96
Roads	23	7	30	76.66	23.34
Habit	100	155	255	39.21	60.79
Visiting	80	63	143	55.94	44.06
Truancy	14	40	54	25.92	74.08
All Others	9	5	14	64.28	35.72
Total	1697	2050	3747	45.20	54.80

Table III shows that girls were absent more than boys in six out of the ten causes. The total number of boys absent exceeded that of the girls by 356. Of all absences 54.80 per cent was caused by boys. It was found that boys were more indifferent, formed a habit of being absent, and caused more days absence because of truancy than did girls. Work, the greatest cause of all, called more boys from the school room than girls. This is a natural thing to expect in a rural section.

TABLE IV

NUMBER OF ABSENCES AND CAUSES FOR EACH SCHOOL MONTH DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

Causes	July [#]	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Total
Illness	392	435	480	539	584	598	271	3299
Work	3465	3560	3473	2423	1338	762	319	15,340
Indifference	425	500	512	758	792	1006	1015	5008
Poverty	25			105	87	66	115	398
Weather	15	25	21	43	406	588	751	1849
Roads	3	4	5	3	1	87	13	116
Habit	105	308	314	264	294	355	510	2150
Visiting	170	175	117	117	63	57	19	718
Truancy	32	48	39	20	78	88	40	345
Others				20	45		30	95
Totals	4632	5055	4961	4292	3288	3607	2083	29,318

[#]The school term did not begin until July 20, 1931, and ended January 29, 1932.

It can be seen at a glance from the totals for each month that the greatest number of absences occurred in the months of August and September. This, no doubt, is due to the fact that these are the busiest school months of the school term in the rural districts. After the busy season is over, there is a gradual decrease in absences for each month up to and including January. Another condition which might be expected is found in the first two causes. The number absent because of work is found to decrease very rapidly after the first three months; whereas the number absent because of illness increases gradually up to and including the sixth month. The seventh month does not show as many absent for illness as might be expected. Perhaps this might be accounted for in the weather conditions, as the month of January was an unusually healthful month that year.

CHAPTER III
INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Figure 1 is a bar graph showing the number of boys and girls absent and the reason for such non-attendance. The reasons given are in order of their importance: work, illness, indifference, weather, habit, visiting, truancy, poverty, and bad roads.

This figure shows that work causes almost as many absences as all other causes combined, and of these the boys outnumber the girls almost two to one. The next most prevalent cause of non-attendance is illness. Here we find the case reversed and the boys outnumbered by the girls in about the same ratio as the girls were outnumbered in the first case. Indifference accounts for the absences of about one-sixth of all who are absent. In this the boys and girls are more nearly equal, the number of boys being slightly in excess of that of the girls. Weather and habit also cause much absence. In each of these causes also the numbers of boys and girls are about the same, with the girls slightly in excess in the former and the boys in the latter. This graph also shows that the total number of boys absent is considerably in excess of the total number of girls absent.

A comparison of Figure 1 and Table II tells the same story, but in different language. Table II carries the same

idea a little further by showing the percentages in each case.

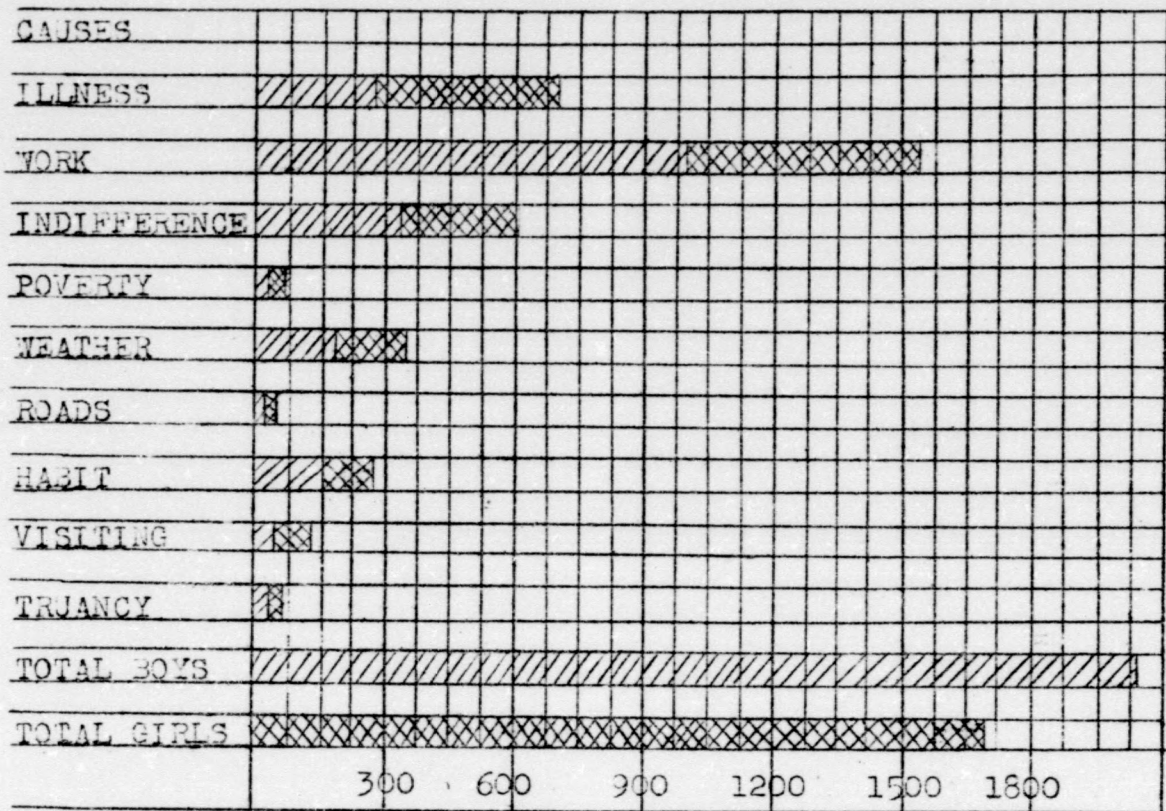


FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL PUPILS
ABSENT AND CAUSES OF ABSENCES

Figure 2 shows the number of individual pupils absent by grade groups. As might be expected, the first grade shows the greatest amount of non-attendance, and there is a gradual lessening of the number from the first grade up, except that the seventh shows fewer absences than the eighth and the fifth than the sixth. This may possibly be accounted for because of the manner of organization of the schools and the method of alternation as it is used in the schools. This was the year for teaching the sixth and eighth grades, while the fifth and seventh grades were not taught this year. This plan usually has the effect of causing more than the normal amount of pupils to be put into these grades.

The conditions which are shown in Figure 2 can be seen easily by referring to Table I. In Table I both grade absences and pupil absences are given in relation to grades and ages. Table I is a combination of Figures 2 and 3.

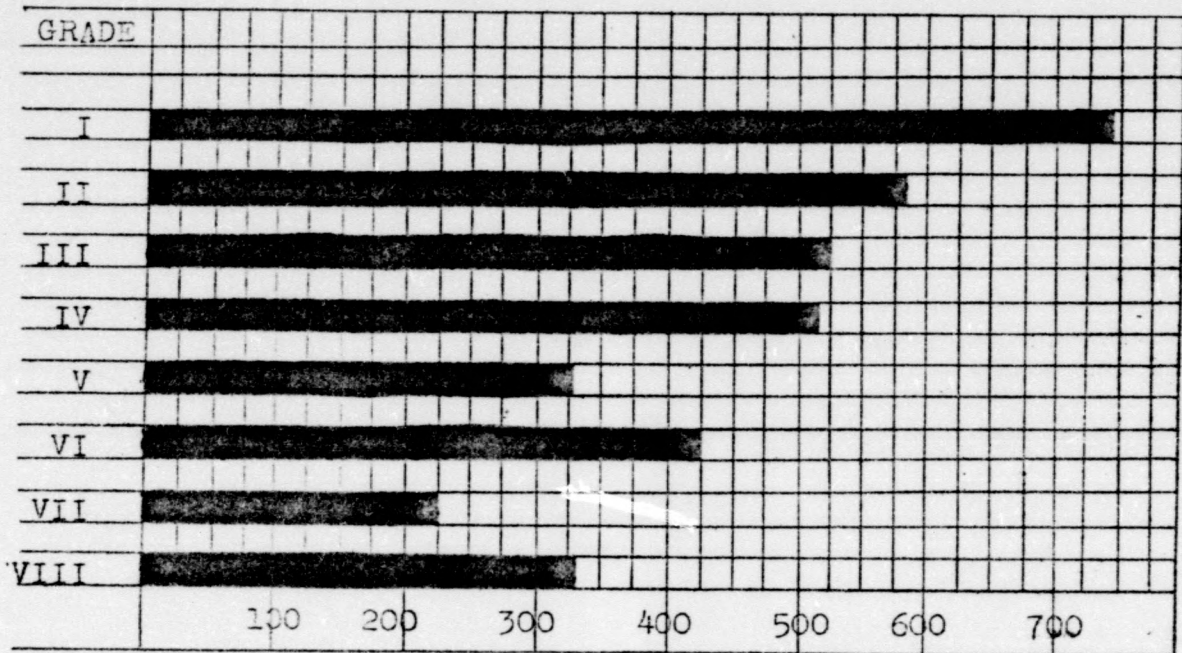


FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL PUPILS
ABSENT BY GRADE GROUPS

Figure 3 shows the number of individual pupils absent by age groups. Here the greatest number absent is found to be nine years old. There is a rather uniform increase in number absent from school from age six up to and including age nine; there a uniform decrease in the number absent as the ages of the pupils increase. A comparison of Figure 2 with Figure 3 indicates that the most persistent absentees are those who are retarded and are now eight, nine, or ten years old and in the first or second grade. The decrease in absentees from the tenth year on is very probably caused by the smaller number enrolled in these classes.

Figure 4 is similar to Figure 1 except that the values are given in percentages of the whole number absent instead of the number of absences. This same condition is shown in tabular form in Table II.

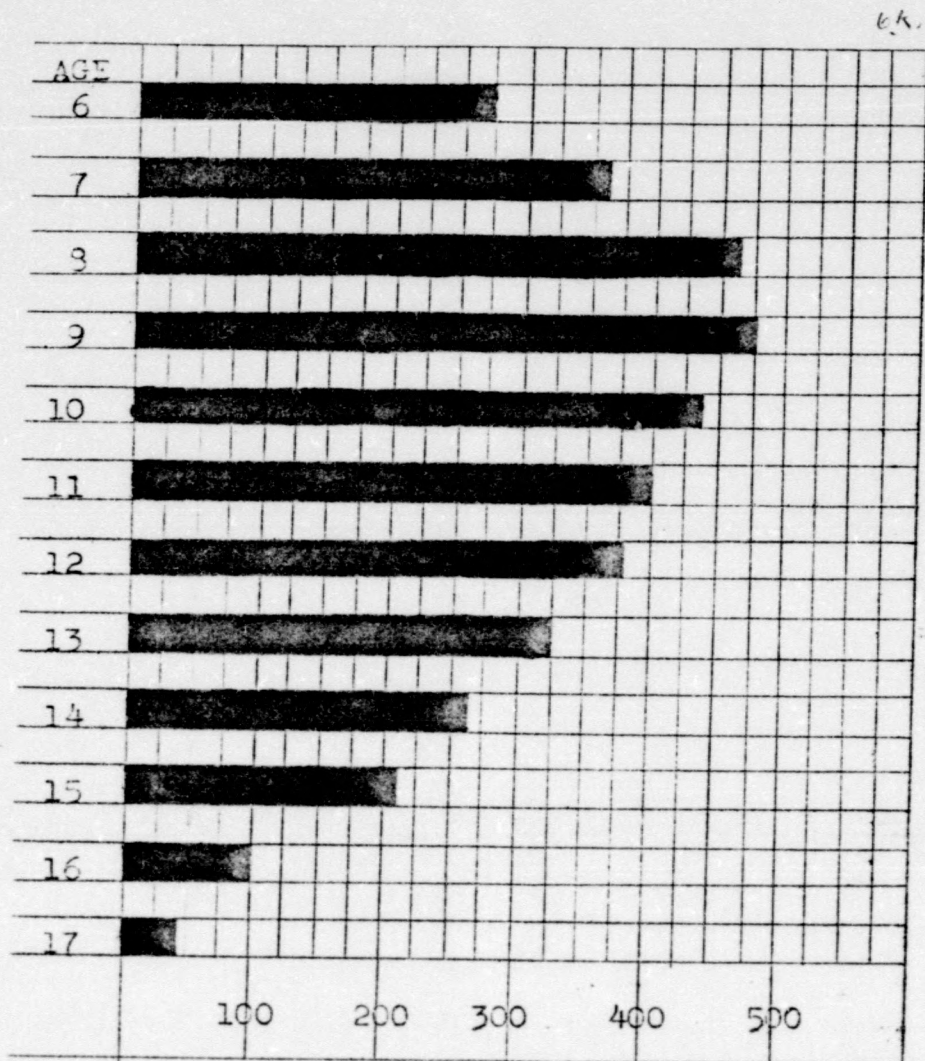


FIGURE 3. NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL PUPILS
ABSENT BY AGE GROUPS

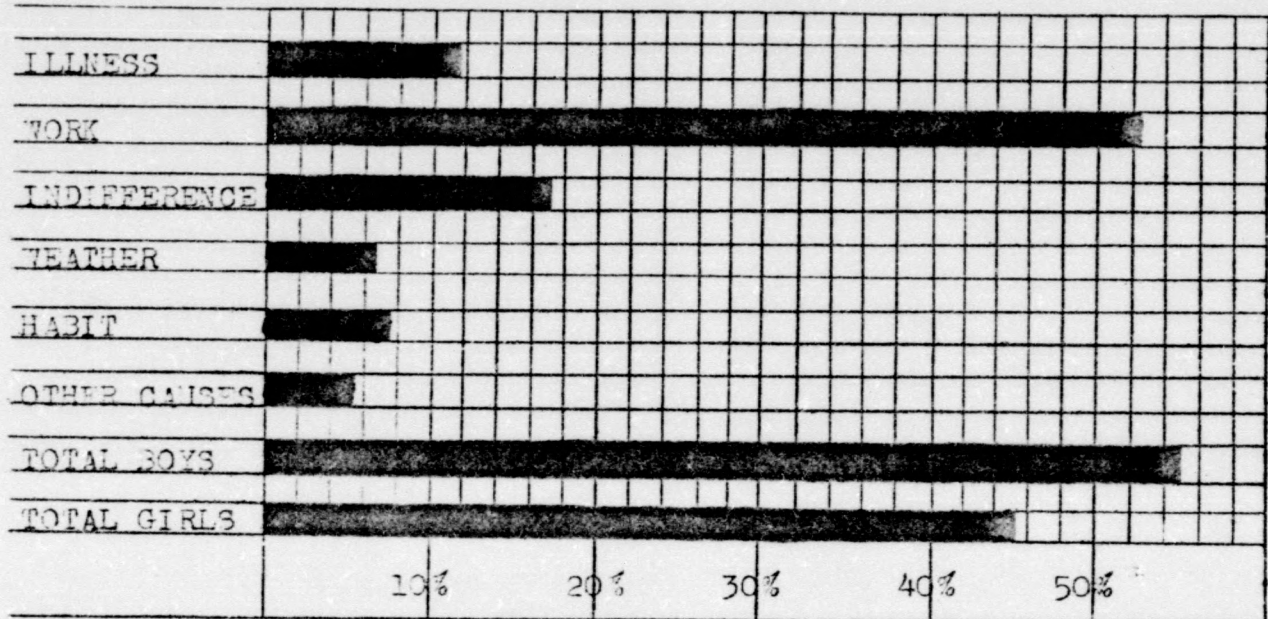


FIGURE 4. PER CENT OF ABSENCE DUE
TO VARIOUS CAUSES

Figure 5 is a line graph, beginning at the end of the first month (when the first reports were made) and continuing from month to month to the end of the seventh month of school. Here again it is seen that work is the greatest single factor in non-attendance. It is interesting to note the high place it holds during the months of July, August, and September. It is equally interesting to note the rapidity with which it falls away as the autumn work on the farm is completed, until at the end of school only illness, of the four other major causes of non-attendance, is below it. This same situation can be seen easily with reference to Table IV, which shows the number absent from each cause for each month during the school year.

Other causes of non-attendance are more nearly uniform throughout the school. Indifference, weather, and habit increase slightly toward the latter part of school, while illness and all other causes show a slight decrease at the last.

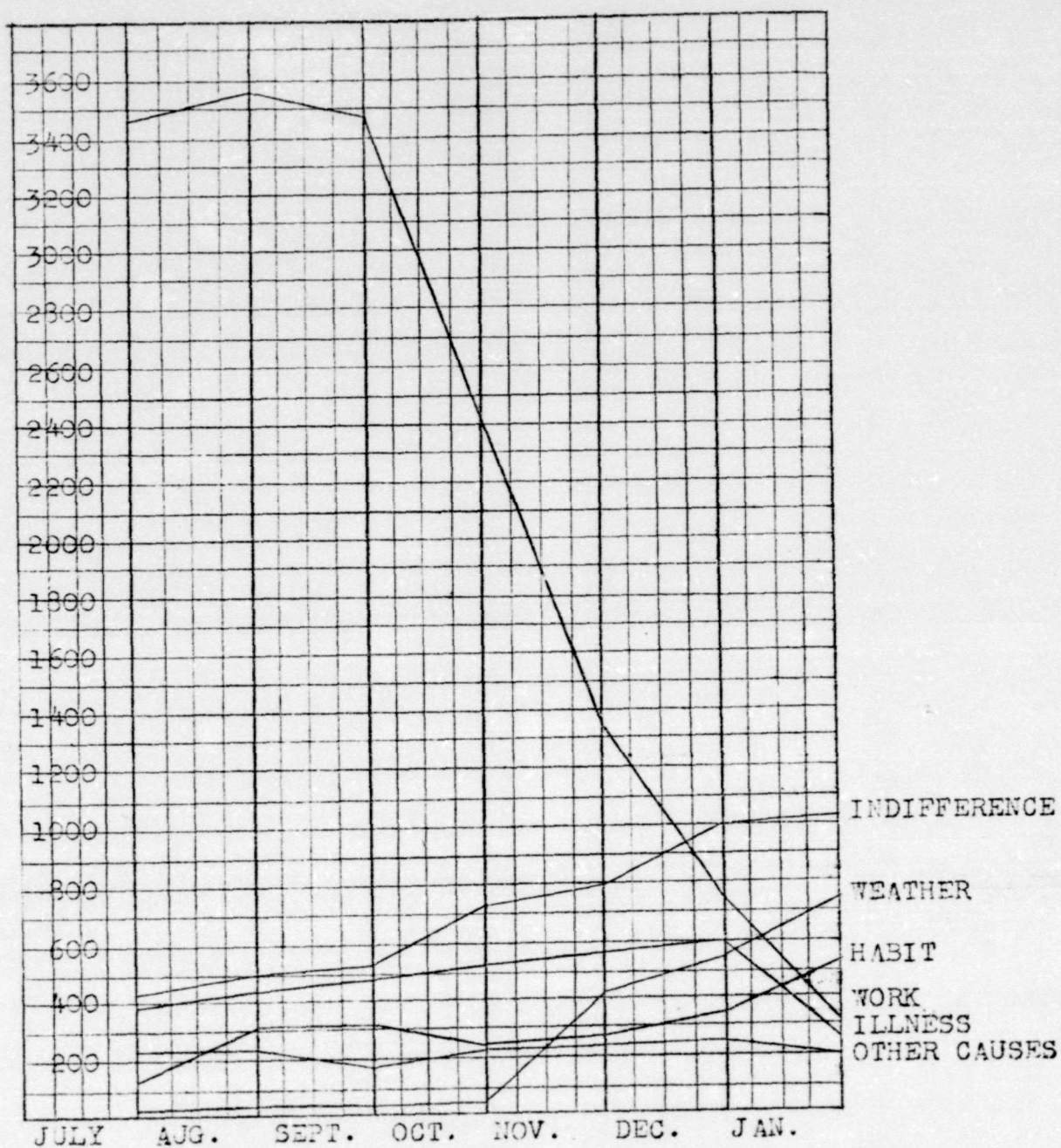


FIGURE 5. CAUSES OF NON-ATTENDANCE WITH
VARIATIONS FROM MONTH TO MONTH

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATION

Summary

From the data presented in this study it can be seen easily that there is a great waste of time and money because of non-attendance in school on the part of the pupil. There was an aggregate total of 3,747 pupils absent during the school term. These 3,747 pupils caused 29,318 days of absences during the school year, which was an average of 7.8 days for each pupil that was absent. It is shown in Table I and Figure 2 that there were more absences from the first grade than from any other, and that there was a gradual decrease up to and including the eighth, with the exception of grades six and eight. This was possibly due to the organization of the school system as explained in Chapter III.

There were 736 pupil absences from the first grade, but only 275 of these were of pupils six years old. If all pupils had been properly placed as to age distribution, there would have been 736 pupils absent who were six years old. There was a greater number, 473, absent out of age group nine than from any other group. Illness and work caused 59.89 per cent of the pupil absences, the former being responsible for 13.80 per cent and the latter for 41.09 per cent. The four major causes of

absences were illness, work, indifference, and weather. The four causes represented 85.29 per cent of all pupil absences. The other six causes: poverty, roads, habit, visiting, truancy, and all others, caused only 14.69 per cent of pupil absences.

The data upon which this study is based included only the first eight grades. There were only three high schools in the county, with a total enrollment of 118, that kept this record; so that there were not enough pupils involved in grades nine, ten, eleven, and twelve to have any significant meaning.

Conclusion

The kinds of roads, thrift of the people or parents, drawing power of the school, interest of parents, and quality and kind of school buildings have an important bearing upon attendance. This is especially true during the working seasons and in bad weather. These conditions could affect very materially the number of absences that might be listed under any cause. It is no doubt true that if we had good roads, thrifty and interested parents, modern school buildings, and alert, enthusiastic teachers to produce the proper drawing power of the school, our attendance would be a great deal better. In all cases of absence it was considered that the child was responsible for such absence, and not the parent. Work was responsible for more cases of absences than any other single cause; in fact, it caused 52.35 per cent of all absences, but the child, in most cases, preferred staying at

home to work to going to school. This certainly indicates that the child is not altogether at fault when he is absent from school. The school must improve from within if pupils and parents who are negligent are to have the correct attitude toward school attendance. It might be possible to eliminate 75 per cent of the absences if the schools were to make such changes as would make it possible to teach the child what he needs to know now and allow him to be successful in his work. Of all absences 77.76 per cent was due to three causes: work, indifference, and habit. It is possible to eliminate most of these absences. It is the writer's opinion that possibly 50 per cent of all pupils who are absent from school would not be if teachers were enthusiastic and maintained at all times the proper attitude toward their work. As the teaching force improves and an attempt is made to direct pupils to do better those activities which they like to do, non-attendance will practically vanish among those pupils who are physically able to attend.

Recommendations

The schools have been organized by society for the children. If they are to get the greatest benefits from these schools, the length of session and time of operation should be such as would give the child the best possible opportunity. It was found in this study that pupils missed most days from school in the months of July, August, and September and that the greatest cause of non-attendance was work. This is an

indication that the schools begin too early in the rural districts of Kentucky. As the initial reform, the writer would recommend that all rural schools begin in August and continue through February. The next step forward would be to open all rural schools in September and continue through May.

The teacher should keep her own record from day to day and know why pupils are absent. She must be interested in those pupils absent if she is ever to get them back to school. Children want and have a right to expect teachers to be interested in them. There should be concerted action on the part of school authorities, teachers, parents, and patrons to increase attendance. Most or all cases of absences could be removed with proper action. It is believed that most pupils are absent because they want to be, and not because parents insist on their staying at home and working, or for some other reason. Parents should be educated to the necessity of keeping children in school, and the teacher must operate the school in such a way that children will not want to be absent after they once enter. Every teacher should use her own method of attack in trying to bring her school up to its highest point of efficiency which the patrons and parents of the community would appreciate and have a right to expect. Teachers will find parents and citizens ready and very anxious to assist in any move that will improve their community school. There is no better way of bringing about this desired

improvement than to increase the daily attendance to the point where the daily absences will become negligible.

Several studies should be made on the question of attendance, working at it from different angles, using different methods of attack, different environments, and different sections of the state or nation. If many experiments had been made and all pointed in the same direction and had consisted of uniform results, a more definite conclusion could be drawn.

A study should be made as to the proper time to begin the rural schools. If schools operated during February and March would weather and road conditions cause more absences during those months than work causes during July and August?

Another interesting study, and possibly a very profitable one, would be to make a comparison of attendance in the one-teacher rural schools with that of the larger rural schools.

A survey should be made as to teacher qualification, equipment of schools, physical appearance of school buildings and grounds, and their effect on school attendance, if any.

Another interesting study would be to find the relation which might exist between distance and school attendance.