

"The Flight from Grammar Schools"

"It is most regrettable to find that, during last year, parents allowed 45 children to leave school without finishing the course", said Mr. R. W. Hamilton, headmaster, when he presented his report at the annual speech day of Hemsworth Grammar School on Wednesday. That, he added, represented one and a half whole forms, and was a tragedy, not only for the children themselves, but for those children who would gladly have gone to the school and who would have completed the course, if only they had been given the opportunity. By the end of the term, ten others would have left, and for no other reason than that they had reached 15 years of age, or had not the strength of character to work. They had lost interest; they found homework interfering with their play at night - such were the excuses given. "We might almost call this phenomenon the "flight from the grammar schools". Mr. Hamilton added. He called for a much firmer attitude on the part of the parents to see that their children finished the course.

Mr. Hamilton said last year he reported that the number of pupils was slowly but steadily getting less. In 1948 they had 640; in 1949 625; last year 614; and this year 610. There were many reasons for the decline, but the most grievous one was the steadily increasing number of pupils who left without finishing the course. The fault was not so much to the children, as of the method of selection. It was encouraging to know that the Education Authority appreciated the problem and was trying to find means to improve the selection.

Mr. Hamilton said that in the Fifth Forms, 60 pupils amongst them took 427 papers in the General Certificate of Education exam and 252 papers were successful, a percentage of 59.3. In the new exam, every pupil got a certificate, even if he passed in one subject only. Four failed to pass in a single subject.

The General Certificate of Education had been much criticised, and Mr. Hamilton was of the opinion that the age limit should be abolished and the practice of awarding distinctions, credits and passes in all subjects should be revived.

Turning to the school's wants, Mr. Hamilton said that for several years he had stressed the need for additional science laboratories, and they seemed to be getting a little nearer. "A few months ago," he added, "The Chief Education Officer visited the school and he agreed that we needed three additional science labs., a new gymnasium, a music room and a new domestic science room, if we are able to do justice to our 600 pupils. That we have not done so badly for our pupils is a tribute to the staff, both past and present."

Mr. Hamilton said that the Parent-Teacher Association continued to flourish and the Old Hilmian Association continued to give proof of its existence. Mr. Hamilton paid tribute for the part the late Mrs. E. L. Dooley had played in the school's development.

Guests of Honour were Mr. H. E. Holmes M.P. and Mrs. Holmes, and the Hemsworth Member of Parliament received a tremendous ovation.

Directing his speech in the main to the pupils, he said they were living in a most difficult time - a time of danger. In a few years they would be going out into the wide world - a world of problems, anxieties, perplexities, but at the same time, opportunity. There were opportunities which the older people had never had. Modern science and engineering skills were now taking rapid steps forward, and in the younger generation's lifetime there would probably be greater changes than he had seen. There was talk, he continued, of trips to the moon, and added: "My personal view is that this generation has made such a mess of this world that we ought to leave other worlds alone." Mr. Holmes expressed the hope that the young people would succeed where "we have failed."

Certificates and prizes were presented by Mrs. Holmes.

Ald. A. Flavell, chairman of the governors, presided, and said that despite changes in staff, particularly during the war, he could not recall a single year during the school's 30 year existence that could be called a bad year. That record was mostly due to the ingenuity of the headmaster and headmistress in placing and using the staff to get the best results. There were in the mining areas some of the best children in the county who were capable of imbibing the education a grammar school offered.

Appealing to parents to keep their children at school until the age of 16, and if possible 18, Ald. Flavell said children had left Hemsworth Grammar School who were capable of reaching university standard. To take such a child from school was a grave loss not only to the child but to the nation.