Lessons, then and now

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column, we took a continuing brief look at some of the 1911 requirements as written in the Course of Study Rules for Promotion and Graduation from Solano County Schools to graduate, in the eighth grade, from grammar school.

This week we will look at brief summaries of a few more subject requirements to advance from the early grades and to graduate from grammar school and be eligible to enter high school.

In my own experience as a school supervisor at Mare Island, the subjects included in today’s education don’t seem to measure up to the standards of nearly a century ago. I also have to question why many students being accepted by colleges today have to take special courses that were required in their earlier education.

No, it doesn’t apply to all of the students, but it does seem to indicate a serious problem today for too many.

Summarizing some 1911 courses:

Language

“The aim in Language is to give the child the ability to speak and write good, pure English. To accomplish this he must receive careful training in expression in every subject taught throughout the whole school course.

“A large vocabulary is necessary to express thought; therefore the child should be aided “and encouraged in acquiring and using new words.”

Composition

“Composition should be begun in the first grade and continued through the course.

“Composition exercises should vary in kind. There should be much practice in rapid writing under the teacher’s supervision upon subjects given out at the moment. Subjects should also be given upon which pupils are required to make investigations and to collect information.”
In the following subject, today’s world geography can be a challenge, with so many countries changing names and borders. But when some graduating students can’t even identify their own country’s states you have to wonder why.

**Geography**

“The work of geography should be carefully correlated with the other branches taught; especially is this so with reference to observation and science work on one hand and to literature and history on the other.

“Excellent results are to be obtained in geography by teaching current events. Teachers, therefore, should encourage the pupils to read the papers and magazines so as to keep informed regarding the trend of events. Those places where history is being made from time to time should be indelibly located in the child’s mind.”

**Spelling and word-building**

“For those pupils who are not endowed by nature with the faculty of good spelling, much drill is necessary. This drill should be centered upon words in common use, rather than upon uncommon words.

“Drill work in spelling can be enlivened somewhat by varying the exercise. Oral spelling may be given one day and written the next. The occasional spelling match will surely produce excellent results.

“It would be well for teachers to pay special attention to the division of words into syllables ... and see that words are properly divided. Insist upon correct spelling in all written work.”

**History and civics**

“The purpose of the study of history is to develop an intelligent interest in human institutions; in strong personalities who have influenced the destiny of the nation and the race; in progressive social, industrial and political movements, and in those events which are an index of the development of the United States of America.

“Civil Government should be correlated with history with which study it is closely connected. Every child, before leaving the elementary schools, should have a general idea of the government of the State and Nation.”

These were simpler times, but in the long run the subject rules to teach by so far in this series are even today a solid foundation for future ability to learn and think in an orderly
manner. Of course, that's my own opinion.