

COMBATTING TRUANCY IN THE FIRST WINCHESTER SCHOOLS

By Ellen Knight¹

Attendance-taking it has started the school day probably since school itself started, and improving it has been a care of the School Department and Committee just as long.

In 1856, for example, the School Committee reported that the average attendance for 5 to 15 year olds throughout state was about 70 percent. "It is certainly a fact which ought to arrest attention," the committee wrote, "that so many ... absent themselves day after day and week after week, and often times for the most frivolous reasons, from the public school."

The first remedy, the committee said then and repeatedly over the years, was in the power of parents. "In almost every example of juvenile delinquency the parents have been recreant to their trust," the committee reported in 1858. "If you want to enfeeble the authority of a teacher, and render the most earnest and judicious efforts fruitless; if you want to break up all habits of order, punctuality, studiousness, energy, obedience, and reverence in your children, and foreclose all prospect of their future honor and usefulness, you can easily do so by sustaining their ex parte complaints; by condemning the rules and discipline of the school; by disparaging the labors of the teacher, and by neglecting home education and control."

Why would parents keep their children from school? "To gratify the love of gain, or to minister to their personal convenience," the 1858 committee wrote, "some parents will detain their children from school for days or for weeks."

Of course, life in the nineteenth century was different from today. Many youths went to work at an earlier age. Many, including all girls, were not expected to go on to college and thus did not need that preparation. But that actually increased the value of a high school education since it gave young men "a thorough business education" and trained young women "to fit them to become teachers," to quote from the 1851 committee report.

What methods were employed to improve attendance? One, still familiar, was to keep records of unexcused absences and tardiness and record those on the students' report cards, which parents had to sign.

A report card from 1863 in the collections of the Winchester Archival Center shows that students received points (not grades) for correct lessons and also for correct deportment and punctual attendance. Points were deducted for unexcused absence, tardiness, and dismissal.

In the winter term of 1863, this card shows that 10-year-old Nellie Wellington, daughter of Oliver and Ellen Wellington and a student at the Mystic School, did well in arithmetic, geography, reading, and spelling, earning either 9 or 10 out of a possible 10 points each. Her card also shows columns for absence, tardiness, and dismissal, and that, for these lapses, Nellie never diminished

her total lesson points by more than 3 during any week. Of a possible high of 40 points per week, her score ranged from 35 to 40.

WINCHESTER, MYSTIC SCHOOL.
Winter Term, 1863.
Record of Nellie Wellington
Grade: Fourth

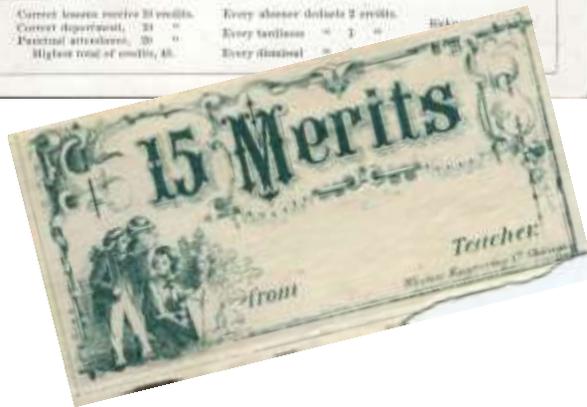
Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Parent's Signature	Week
10	10	10	10	10	10							<i>[Signature]</i>	1
9	10	10	10	9	10							<i>[Signature]</i>	2
10	9	10	10	9	10							<i>[Signature]</i>	3
10	10	10	9	9	10							<i>[Signature]</i>	4
10	10	10	9	9	10							<i>[Signature]</i>	5
				4									6
10	10	10	10									<i>[Signature]</i>	7
10	10	10	10	10								<i>[Signature]</i>	8
10	10	10	9	9	10							<i>[Signature]</i>	9
10	10	10	10	10								<i>[Signature]</i>	10
9	9	10	10	9	1			1	9	10		<i>[Signature]</i>	11

Correct lessons receive 10 merits. Every absence deducts 2 merits.
 Correct deportment, 20 " Every tardiness " 1 "
 Punctual attendance, 20 " Every dismissal " 1 "
 Highest total of merits, 40.

Accompanying the card is a small envelope in which are slips of paper for deportment, punctuality, and lessons merits. These merits, along with the card, document a good student at a school which, according to the 1863 report “maintains a good reputation, and occupies the front rank in every thing which makes up a model school.”

Yet, in 1864 the School Committee still complained that “irregularity of attendance and tardiness are evils which greatly afflict some of the schools. There is scarcely a subject connected with our system of Common Schools which has been more frequently mentioned and widely discussed, or one which so little effort is made to remedy, or if made, has met with so little success. These evils are chronic, and seem to challenge every antidote; we regret they have fallen upon us, and earnestly request that due effort be made to correct them.”

The committee continued to appeal to the parents. “It is in the power of parents to create and maintain a sentiment that will lead the pupils of the town to be constant and punctual in their attendance at school.”



This committee also decided to try a new incentive. “It is proposed to publish in the next report the names of all such scholars as the registers shall show have been neither absent nor tardy during the coming year.” And so in 1865 a list of such students in the high school was published, and lists for all schools appeared in subsequent years. Nellie Wellington’s name, for example, appeared on the “honor roll” for the Mystic School in 1867 and in 1869 when she was at the grammar school.

That practice was discontinued over time, but taking attendance continued, for the value of being in school and combating truancy has not changed.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Nov. 28, 2001. This revision supersedes all previous articles.