JieS© to the NEWS

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18-YEAR OLD VOTE

The 26th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution in 1971, granting 18-year olds the right to vote. This Amendment broke all records for speed of ratification, taking only three months. It represented a collective expression of faith that universal secondary and near-universal college education has made our 18, 19, and 20-year olds smarter than ever before, and that they should therefore fully participate in the electoral process.

The ratification of the 26th Amendment has been followed by a rush to change·state laws to lower the age from 21 to 18 at which a person can buy liquor and at which males may marry without parental consent. The result of these changes in the laws has not been such as to inspire confidence in the maturity of judgment of 18, 19, and 20-year olds. Teenagers:have the highest automobile accident rate, much of which is due to alcohol, and married teenagers have the highest divorce rate.

Even in the colleges themselves, the evidence is mounting that 18, 19, and 20-year olds cannot read and write the English language as well as students a generation ago, or even a decade ago. In the last four years, the number of college freshmen at many state univer sities who must take remedial English courses, known as "bonehead English," has doubled.

At the University of California, 45 percent of freshmen are in bonehead English courses; at the University of Illinois, the figure is 80 percent. These courses are designed to sharpen writing skills that should have been mastered in high school.

Textbook publishers are finding that their books are too hard for today's students and must be rewritten in simplified language. The Association of American Publishers recently produced a pamphlet to tell incoming freshmen how to make the best use of their college textbooks. It was written on the 12th grade level. After the pamphlet was tested, it had to be rewritten on the ninth grade leve.

The decline in scholastic achievement is indicated statistically by the decline in SAT scores, used as a criterion for admission to most colleges. On a scale of 1 to 800, the number of high school students scoring over 700 has been cut in half in the last seven years. This applies to both verbal and math tests.

Some professors blame the problem on the fact that many high schools have abandoned English requirements in favor of a "do your own thing" electives program. When given the choice, a big percent age of students choose to read fiction or go on field trips rather than struggle with grammar, syntax, and composition.

If 18-year olds cannot be depended on to make responsible choices about their high school and college courses, how can we expect them to make responsible,·.choices about drinking whiskey, selecting a wife or husband, or voting for public officials? Time may prove that we did our teenagers no favor when we forced them to make adult choices for which they were not adequately prepared.