

# Schools' English Electives:

## From Sublime to Ridiculous

By MARY BREASTEL Mrs. Kelvin's "Psychopere to the "Literature of  
"O.K.," Renee Kelvin of Literature" class had Chess." Their experience is  
facing her students from started Dr. Theodore I being repeated by thousands  
corner of the classroom Rubin's short novel "Jo of students all over the city.  
Eastern District High Sc the story of a schizop According to the Board of  
in Brooklyn, "what are slittle boy. Her class wen Education's Bureau of Eng-  
symptoms of measles?" to describe Jordi's sympt lish, there is hardly a high  
Hands shot up everyw with a thoroughness school in the city that does  
"Frank," she called oshowed they had clearly not now offer its students a  
boy in the back of the rtheir homework—and s variety of English courses. A  
"Big rashes," he said thing more — they cl recent bureau survey indi-  
assurance. loved the class. cated that 62 of the city's 71  
Mrs. Kelvin accepted Through her quest academic and comprehensive  
answer. Swiftly she a Mrs. Kelvin was attempt high schools and 14 of its 25  
for symptoms of muto teach her students ho vocational high schools now  
and chickenpox. The ans analyze the book for its are offering at least 780 dif-  
came back as swiftly: chological lessons and fo ferent English electives.  
throats, more rashes, fe literary form. Under  
"All right," Mrs. Ke brisk, cheerful direction,  
asked, "What is a sympto students soon became  
Psychological and Liter gaged in arguments over  
A chorus of voices, author's intentions in a  
eager, told her a symp age that was half dream  
was a sign. She wrote on half reality.  
board: "Symptoms — s Juniors and seniors  
(visible, can be detected) Eastern District are fre  
"Now," she said, tur fulfill their English req  
to the class again, "I vments for graduation fro  
to know some of Jo wide selection of ele  
symptoms." courses ranging from Sh

### Student Needs Cited

The courses range from the sublime (Shakespeare, Joyce) to what some English scholars might call the ridiculous (best-sellers, mystery and detective novels and rock poetry). What they all are designed to do is to impart English skills to high-school students through the use of

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# English Electives A Handcuff

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materials and methods that really interest them.

"It's part of the philosophy of the day," said Anita Hill, head of the Bureau of English. "There is a greatest interest in student needs. We do not believe that one can become an educated person without having read books and having developed certain skills. Content and ideas are more important now."

Mrs. Dore explained that the Bureau of English is encouraging city high schools to offer English electives geared to student interests. In the spring of 1970, when the program had grown to 22 schools in the city, only one English course focused on the Bible.

Other popular electives include creative writing, study, journalism, play production, public speaking and science fiction.

The course selection does not always exclude the standard English courses often merely supplementing required courses in writing skills. At its best, Mrs. Dore said, it combines student interests and strengths.

Mrs. Dore said that the statewide Regents examination in English still determines course content to a large extent. Four years of English, whether in electives

or required courses, are necessary for graduation from high school. And John Dewey and Hillcrest High Schools, where more than 50 English electives are offered, students with problems are encouraged to take sometimes required courses emphasizing writing skills.

According to Mrs. Dewey and Hillcrest, only two high schools offer English electives for their entire years of study. At the High School of Science, for example, only about one-sixth of the students take elective English, while the majority still take the comprehensive, traditionally required courses.

At many schools, English electives appear to frustrate the teachers as they stimulated the students, producing a variety of teaching techniques.

Students in a combined English-Social studies course at Hillcrest in Queens, for example, are enrolled in a year program that is designed as a simulated world. They recently conducted a mock Inquisition, putting their teachers on the part of their "visit" to a visit in which they read the poetry of Federico Lorca and portions of Cervantes's "Don Quixote" translation.

When they "entered" ancient Greece, a number of students were taken into custody because they failed to show proper identification. They were then assigned to read the Sophocles "Oedipus Rex," Euripides's "Philoctetes," Aristotle's "Poetics" and translations of Greek mythology. Now they are "visiting" Russia, discussing Dostoevski, Tolstoy and Katherine the Great.

## Grammar Is Offered

But Hillcrest students feel they have not mastered the simpler writing skills to elect to take courses in English grammar. And students who are far below that age in performance, however, are required to take "the Annex," a small-rate school where reading skills are taught.

At John Dewey School in Brooklyn, students can study individual authors or periods of English literature entirely on their own, an independent study

program supervised by the English department. Or they may choose to take a course on the "Mystery and Detective Novel" or one on Shakespeare or both.

John Dewey which opened five years ago as the prototype of the elective system, requires each student to take a certain number of introductory writing and literature courses and requires each to take a total of 20 English courses to graduate. But a "course" at John Dewey may last only seven weeks. The schedule is changed at the school five times a year.

The Bureau of English lists 56 categories of courses being offered by the high schools and 28 additional courses in the category of "miscellaneous," which includes such offerings as "Body Language" (James Monroe High School), "Chaucer" (Hillcrest), "The Literature of Madness" (John Bowne) and "Edgar Allan Poe" (Alexander Hamilton High School).

But the as yet unanswered question in this new movement toward electives is: Will the new course succeed where educators believe the old ones failed?

According to Mrs. Dore, no one really knows the answer to that. She said that the state will be evaluating the city's English electives in 1976, trying to discover whether the standard reading and writing skills are being developed in the new courses.

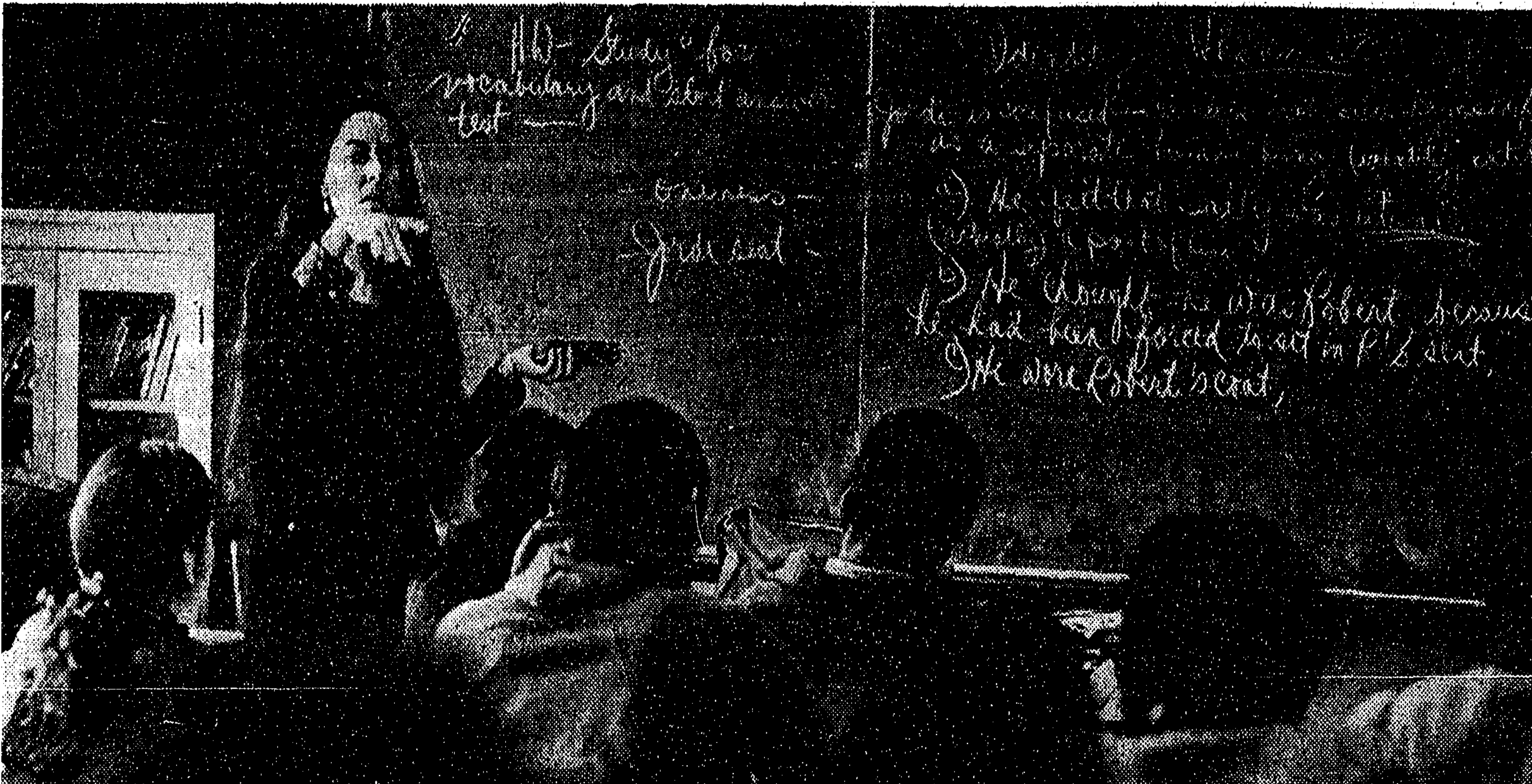
## 'Drawbacks' Are Noted

"We've had as yet no report to say whether students are doing better or worse," Mrs. Dore said.

Joseph Zogby, the chairman of John Dewey's English department, said he felt "there are certain penalties" in the elective system, however. He said he thought the formal skills had been somewhat neglected under the elective system and that this showed itself in the students' poor spelling and by sloppy organization of essays.

If this sort of weakness is confirmed in the state's evaluation, what happens at John Dewey, where the elective system was first established on a wide scale, may eventually happen in the other city high schools—a reversion to an old-fashioned grilling in skills.





Mrs. Renee Kelvin teaching "Psychology of Literature," an elective for juniors and seniors at Eastern District High School in Brooklyn

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