

Don't fear metrics—they're simple, logical

Just as the battle of Waterloo, we're told, was won on the playing fields of Eton, so America's guarantee switch to the metric system will be won in the nation's classrooms.

Girls and boys in the elementary schools today will graduate into a metric nation, as well as a metric world. The National Education Association points out. Schools are preparing to help get them ready. Over the shorter haul, adults must engage in metric education too—playing catch-up ball. America, spurred on by the Metric Conversion Act of 1975, the government's gift to the nation last Dec. 23, is finally—and now fairly rapidly—"going metric."

The week of May 10 has been designated National Metric Week, a time for drawing special attention to this new way of life that soon will invade every home and office, affecting every person every day.

Broad-scale involvement of groups and individuals in the conversion process is the goal.

BUT METRICS isn't something to dread. NEA stresses. The education's instruction will, in a recent publication to help teachers keep a few matters ahead of the game, reprints this statement which was first published more than a half-century ago:

"While any intelligent child can learn and carry in his mind the whole metric system in three lessons, and any adult can master the same in one hour or less of serious study, no man ever has, and probably no man ever will, master the United States system of weights and measures."

(In case you think you have, how many pints make a peck? Square rods in an acre? Cubic inches in a cubic foot? Metrics is so simple and logical, it's not surprising that its use is almost universal. Everything is built on blocks of 10, 100, and 1,000. To multiply or divide, you merely shift the decimal point. As an example of simplicity, the Celsius temperature scale uses zero as the freezing point, 100 the boiling point. Metrics will take a lot of getting used to—for instance, for the woman whose dress size jumps from 12 to 40—but it won't take long.

In contrast, our present English system is characterized by complexity and illogic. For instance, our foot ruler represents the length of King Edgar's foot, and the yard was the distance from the English king's nose to the tip of the middle finger of his outstretched arm. And an acre was the amount of land that could be plowed in a day by a yoke of oxen.

NEA POINTS OUT that these ancient measurements which we still use are costly and time-consuming to teach than metrics. The present anecdotal system has been a formidable barrier to international trade and a nuisance to American travelers abroad.

Continued use of the English system was making us "an island in a metric sea," said the president when he signed the Metric Conversion Act.

Well over 90 per cent of the world's population now uses the metric system, which has been around since 1790 when the French Academy of Sciences created it. Besides the United States, only a few small nations, such as Yemen and Brunei, still use the English system. Even England has been in abandoning the cumbersome system.

NEA's recent involvement in the metric conversion issue was highlighted in 1969 when the 9,000-member policy-setting representative assembly called for "a carefully planned effort" to convert.

The resolution declared that the metric system "is essential to the future of American industrial and technological development and to the evolution of effective world communication." It urged that metrics "be taught at all education levels to ensure the orderly transition to metrics as the primary system."

NEA stresses that the conversion period should provide opportunities for teachers of all subjects and grades to become sufficiently familiar with the metric system to allow them to use metrics in their instruction.

And although the burst of switching to metrics falls on the educational community, all adults will also get into the act. Metrics authorities emphasize that the conversion shouldn't be as difficult as many imagine, partly because of the relative simplicity of metrics and also because our society has been "teaching" into metrics for a long time, despite lack of federal encouragement or initiative.

Noting this continuing creep toward metrics, the House Science Committee in 1973 emphasized there was no choice in respect to adopting the metric system—only the choice of conversion in "an entirely uncoordinated fashion" or on a coordinated basis.

Major pharmaceutical manufacturers and photographic companies have long been on metrics. Auto manufacturers, wine producers, office equipment manufacturers and many other industries are switching. Metric figures are popping up in such places as weather reports, canned goods labels, and highway signs.



Area visitor

Dr. Arland F. Christ-Janer, president of Stephens College in Columbia, Mo., will speak at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 19, at a reception sponsored by the Stephens College Alumnae Organization of Detroit. The event will be in the Bloomfield Open Hunt Club, 405 E. Long Lake, Bloomfield Hills.

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Five new ballets will be performed, all added to the company's repertoire: "Barabajan," "The Porter and the Prince," "Pas de Trois," "Western Episode," and one as yet untitled.

Evelyn Kresson is the artistic director of the theatre which draws its members from the entire metropolitan area.

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