

# Students Help Plan a Life Adjustment Program

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The Life Adjustment Program at Byers Junior High School, Denver, Colorado, is an effort in all classes and subjects to guide pupils as a group and as individuals in meeting their personal, social, civic, and economic problems—now and in adult life. Ruth Irene Hoffman, dean of Byers Junior High School, reviews the study that helped teachers, students, and parents identify vital interests and needs.

A LONG-RANGE STUDY of the problems and concerns of junior high school boys and girls was undertaken at Byers Junior High School in Denver last year, the results of which determined the content of the present general education program.\* The study was launched because teachers, making a sincere effort to accomplish meaningful group guidance, found themselves handicapped in several ways. The matter of locating the vital interests and needs of students was a time-consuming job, and even then the results were sometimes vague. Even if an interest was decided upon it was often found that the study resulting therefrom was duplicating work done previously, or that being carried on in a social science or home economics class. Then after these interests were located, getting appropriate materials and setting up challenging procedures for developing the unit were so difficult that it made successful group guidance very rare.

## Faculty-Students-Parents

A faculty guidance committee, set up for the purpose of attempting to

\* The general education program consists of a period each day devoted to a special emphasis of the vital interests and needs of boys and girls, a study of the units based upon them, and the resulting group and individual guidance.

attack some of these problems, decided that if the program was truly to represent the interests and meet the needs of boys and girls, two other groups should be consulted—the students themselves and the parents. Toward this end a student sub-committee was organized consisting of a boy and a girl from each of the half grades, 7B to 9A inclusive. This full committee determined to make a systematic study of the real problems of adolescents in order to make the general education period more meaningful and worthwhile for the students and more unified and better organized for the teachers.

## A New List of Units

A beginning was made by asking every general education class to report to the student committee the title of the unit they were studying. The members of the committee, working with a teacher member of the guidance committee, who was also sponsor of the Student Council, and a representative from the Department of Instruction from the central office, studied and discussed these units, and then added subjects which they felt were of concern to pupils but had not been included in the original list. This new list

was then classified according to the areas of interests and studied in relation to the ten "imperative educational needs of youth" as given in *Education for All American Youth*.<sup>1</sup> Each life experience area (such as health and home and family living) was considered, one at a time. Pupils were asked to indicate problems in each area, and the individual problems which were along similar lines were combined to form units. This reviewing process was a lengthy one since there were duplications and overlappings, and some broad topics had to be analyzed further. At last a tentative list of units was ready.

### A Questionnaire Study

During this time the faculty guidance committee had been working to smooth out some of the difficulties which arose from the mechanical organization of the class period, to locate materials for teacher and student use, and to clarify the philosophy and scope of the life adjustment program. The student group now brought back the results of their work to the full committee and discussed the units they had listed, item by item. They took the changes and modifications suggested by this group, and finally arrived at a list of forty-four units.

The committee decided that these units should be presented to the entire student body in the form of a questionnaire in which each unit would be marked by every student in one of three classifications—great importance, some importance, little or no importance, and each pupil would encircle

the five which he considered to be the most important of all. The committee also felt that a thumbnail sketch should be given for each item, not detailed or exhaustive, but merely a guide and a sampling of the possible content of such a unit.

### One Unit on Trial

The student committee at this point had become so interested in how these units might be developed, that they chose one of them, "Boy-Girl Friendships," and studied it. They started by asking questions of all kinds. At first the students were formal, but soon the questions came so rapidly and freely that the teacher writing them on the board could not keep up with them. Although they showed little reticence in this procedure, they devised a method by which questions could be asked anonymously, by having every student turn in identical pieces of paper, blank or with a problem on it, as they wished. These were added to the list.



The questions were then classified under such headings as dating, getting along together, personality, parent approval, and others. They then discussed methods of arriving at answers or opinions. They decided on several techniques, such as panel discussions, inviting older students from high

<sup>1</sup> *Education for All American Youth*, Educational Policies Commission, Washington, D. C.: National Education Association, 1944.

school and college to come in and discuss these matters with them, inviting parents to give their opinions and points of view, setting up committees to consult materials in the library concerning these matters and then reporting back to the group, and inviting authorities on the problems of young people to speak to the group. The student committee felt that they now saw how such a unit could be developed for study by a class.

### Informing the Faculty

The entire faculty had been aware in a general way of the work the committee was doing, but now that this stage

in the development of the study had arrived, a faculty meeting was devoted to a presentation of the study and its possible use. The students told of the proposed questionnaire, how they had arrived at the list of units, and reviewed their work in developing the one unit. They also presented possible techniques for carrying out the development of the unit and arriving at solutions to problems.

### Assembling the Questionnaire

Finally the questionnaire was ready for mimeographing and for presentation to the student body. A few of the items were as follows:

	Great Importance	Some Importance	Little or no Importance
Boy-Girl Friendships: dating money—parents' permission—we teen-agers			
Getting Ready for High school and College: money—best elementary schooling—choosing a college—planning a career			
Making Friends: getting along with others—personality—choosing the right friends			
Building a Strong and Healthy Body: health habits—rest—food—growing up			
Improving Personal Appearance: health habits—cleanliness and neatness—proper things to wear at certain times and places			
Understanding One's Self: thinking it over—looking at both sides of a question—considering other's opinions			

There were other topics including sports, family problems, understanding other races and religions, entertaining in the home, making our world organizations succeed, world communications, leisure time in the home, success at Byers, making Denver a better place in which to live, getting the most for your money, living in an air age,

appreciation of fine arts, prejudice, and others.

The students of the committee then asked for three assemblies, one for each grade. At these assemblies they again reviewed their work, why they had done it, how the school was sincerely interested in setting up a program to meet student concerns and

interests, how the questionnaire was to be marked, what use was to be made of the results, and how a topic could be developed once it had been chosen. The students were then given the questionnaires and asked to mark them after careful thought. The marking was done in the general education classes, and the tabulation of results was done by the Student Council.

### Teachers and Parents Participate

In the meantime, some teachers who felt insecure in developing units for study in this manner were released from their classes two half-days to work with representatives from the Department of Instruction in actually developing one of the units in the manner which would be used in the classroom. A special form for planning and developing an instructional unit had been worked out by the Denver Public Schools, and this was used for the framework. Two faculty meetings were also devoted to carrying out the same procedure with the entire faculty.

It had been planned to have the parents participate more completely in the setting up of interest areas, but since that phase of the program had not been worked out, a sampling of parents was sent the same questionnaire the students received and they marked them according to their ideas of the interests and concerns of boys and girls. All teachers had done this same thing. When the three-way results were compared there were some differences, but not completely divergent.

### Compiling the Results

As an outcome of the questionnaire results, the units were listed in the

order of the student preferences for each half grade. These lists were studied by a committee of teachers to decide on placement when there was a duplication of the greatest interests, and to study the choices to see that they included all important areas as viewed with mature, experienced, and professional judgment. They found that all areas were adequately covered by the choices.

The top five preferences for each half grade were thus determined, and a committee was set up to devise meaningful and appealing names for these units. Some of the outstanding choices might be noted. "Getting ready for high school and college" was the first choice in the eighth and ninth grade and among the top five in the seventh grade; "making money for yourself at junior high school age" and "boy-girl friendships" were rated high in the eighth and ninth grade; while "making friends" and "success at Byers" ranked among the first five in the seventh grade.

### Results of the Study in Practice

These units are now the basis for study in the general education period at Byers. The student committee at first offered its services in helping to set up and develop a unit as they had experienced it. Teachers worked cooperatively in small groups, when their classes were studying the same unit, and did their pre-planning and setting up of objectives together. (This began in the pre-planning period before school started in September and is a continuing process.) The materials committee, now supplied with a list of specific topics more or less uniform

for a grade, has been able to secure a great deal more materials on the subjects being studied.

A plan has been worked out with the Visual Education Department whereby many films and other visual aids are available. The teachers seem to feel more secure in their work, and are getting more concrete support from each other and from the committee. The students are participating with more enthusiasm, and evidence greater interest in the general education period.

#### Advantages of the Program

The units developed in this manner seem to have several advantages:

- They are based on the expressed in-

terests and concerns of the boys and girls studying them

- The units retain the spontaneity that is often lost when they are worked out by one group, put in cold print, and then followed methodically by others
- The units are developed systematically, first by pre-planning by the teacher or a group of teachers, then by pupil-teacher discussion within the group, and then by using techniques for its development as decided by the group and determined by the nature of the unit
- Each pupil has an active part in the development of the unit and in the techniques used in arriving at conclusions
- The units that are considered to be satisfactorily worked out by the teachers are filed in a central office and are available to others teachers for suggestion and inspiration.

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