

A New Approach to Humanistic Education

The Guidance-Administration Team

ELEANORE FISHER*
JAMES B. VAN HOVEN

IT IS very common in the educational parlance of 1971 to speak of teaming. One reads of team teaching, team planning, teaming by subject area, and so on. The concept, while worthwhile and educationally sound, is hardly new. One makes a determination to organize a staff into teams, and proceeds in an orderly fashion from there.

Not so in our case. We did not know we were going to be a team. We knew as we started to work together that we were thinking alike. We recognized that we had the same philosophical goals for our students. We began to sense that we frequently heard the same drummer. But we did not really know we were a team until the students began arriving in school in September.

It was then, after two summer months of planning and discussing and theorizing and trying to create a new school environment for our 350 middle school students, that we realized if we were going to put some of our ideas into practice, the principal and the guidance counselor were going to have to function as a team.

We agreed on certain fundamentals: The young adolescent is in search of his identity. He is plagued by the fear of subjection by his parents, his peer group, his school. His feelings of self-worth are shaky.

His self-image is frequently vastly different from his actual appearance.

He needs help in developing values. He needs exposure to multiple life styles. He needs to recognize the universality of his fears and his feelings. He needs a comfortable place where the significant adults in his life are concerned with promoting his personal growth as well as furthering his academic excellence. We wanted our school to be that kind of place.

We started even before the first day of school. Late in August, we sent a letter and small handbook to each of our students. These included the kind of information they would need to know—class assignments, schedules, etc. The content was not original, but the tone was. There were no negatives, no “don’t’s.” There were invitations to do things together, some pictures (done by students), lots of references to the good year ahead. For the new students entering our school, there were arrangements for student guides to act as “buddies” and a preschool orientation including an informal picnic on the lawn with the principal.

* Eleanore Fisher, Guidance Counselor, and James B. Van Hoven, Principal, Briarcliff Manor Middle School, Briarcliff Manor, New York

We borrowed from the McLuhan concept that the medium is the message. In this case the environment was the message. Through appeals to local residents and inexpensive purchases on our own, we refurbished the guidance office. We decorated it as a living room. Sofas, soft chairs, a bright orange rug, "groovy" posters, colorful paper flowers, live fish, lamps, mobiles, and books. The message was loud and clear and received immediately. Kids flocked (and flopped) into the office from the first day. Some offered to add favorite posters, some took immediate charge of the aquarium, some even offered to dust.

To Reduce Tension

Traditional school practice dictates that the principal is the "captain of the ship" and that his primary function is to maintain the operation of the institution. In our case, the principal viewed his primary role as providing an atmosphere which recognized that learning takes place through one's feelings, emotions, and affect as well as through one's intellect. We felt that it would benefit the children if together we could offer a supportive atmosphere in which all students in the school felt at home, and were free to use their energy and enthusiasm to pursue their education with as little anxiety as possible.

Within the framework we reexamined our daily schedule, we revised school rules to a few important ones (and then insisted that these be obeyed), we eliminated study halls and detention. We tried to talk to students without an exclamation point in our voices. For example, one teacher dealt effectively with the problem of chronic tardiness when she said, "We have so much to accomplish in our 40 minutes together it would really be helpful if everyone could try to get here on time," rather than, "You are to go to the office for a blue pass before I admit you late into my class!" We moved from class to class without bells ringing.

In all, we tried to reduce the institutional atmosphere. Whenever possible we would eat lunch with the students, greet them by name, be available during break times. Al-

though we frequently had regular appointments with students and staff, we more often had drop-in conferences. The open-door policy meant that a troubled child could seek the open door of the principal or the open door of the guidance counselor and perhaps find satisfaction before he went home that day.

We experimented with an unassigned block of time for 90 minutes in the middle of the day. Students were free to have lunch, join a club (there were 31 manned by the school psychologist, the nurse, teachers, and parents), watch a movie (selected and shown by fellow students), go to the gym or the game room (where the student might challenge the principal or a teacher to a fast game of ping-pong), or the library or a quiet room to study or meet with the student council, or join a rap session in the guidance office or a jam session in the music room, or you name it.

Another departure from the customary was the way in which we handled scheduling.

We both felt we could play a role here, and in doing so those traditional lines between "administration" and "guidance" got blurred again. First, the principal felt that the counselor would be unnecessarily burdened by assuming primary responsibility for student scheduling. This activity was turned over to the teachers themselves, and the principal and counselor contributed their perceptions on individual students after most of the detailed effort was done. This freed the principal to be more of an instructional leader and freed the counselor to devote much more energy to coordinating group counseling activities and to individual conferencing.

Probably the most dramatic example of our rewriting of our job descriptions became apparent in the area of discipline.

How did this process work? Some examples of how problems common to most schools were handled in ours should illustrate the team concept in operation.

Dealing with school discipline is one of the most important and most distasteful parts of the principal's job. In most school settings at least once a day he sits as judge and jury over a child's actions in school. Teachers

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and parents expect both consistency and fairness. Yet in accepting our premises, we found that you cannot have both; consistency in disciplinary action is impossible if you truly believe in treating each child as an individual. Accepting this idea also implies that the principal cannot act alone, since he is of necessity not as fully aware as the counselor of each child's problems and attitudes.

As we worked together on disciplinary matters, we found that similar problems required widely varying responses. Sometimes a "hard-line" approach would work best, given the student's own and his parents' backgrounds. Most times our assessment of the problem would result in a different approach, involving a lot of talk, with the counselor and the student, perhaps group discussions, and slow progress toward a behavior change. In a few rare instances we knew that nothing we tried would work (usually after we had tried everything). Then our job became one of educating the staff to this fact and finding ways of minimizing the problem.

It is our contention that the guidance program and attitude should permeate the school and that each staff member is involved with the whole process of education. With this in mind we set certain specific goals. We felt it was our duty: (a) to help students identify their true interests, develop decision-making techniques, and develop a capacity to live with and deal with change and diversity; (b) to counsel students, to help them realistically appraise their achievement and potential (through tests, grades, conferences, etc.); (c) to refer students to specialists both

in and out of the school system; and (d) to plan to increase a student's sensitivity, creativity, and feelings of self-worth.

Both of us felt we could contribute in our own ways to providing this kind of guidance to individual students. Much time was spent by the principal in discussing with students their problems and seeking solutions. In some cases he was better able to reach a student than the counselor, and vice versa. In such cases we agreed beforehand on our strategies and shared together in planning further steps.

Privacy and Commitment

The counselor also used the technique of group discussions. Generally this method was employed to introduce a new idea, to clear the air, or to handle a problem. The results of these sessions were shared with the principal, and further actions were decided jointly. Sometimes the sessions resulted in the group's airing a concern with the principal; often he became the "heavy" in saying no to demands or recommendations. This was often accepted as part of an overall continuing program to develop an awareness of social constraints on individual or group behavior.

Group counseling and individual counseling in which confidentiality is an inherent factor presented a challenge to our team approach. Students needed to feel secure that their personal affairs remained private. Particularly in group counseling, a technique we used with much success, the participants

rely on a sense of privacy and commitment to the group.

Knowing this, we agreed that the counselor would not share content material. Whenever possible, the counselor shared a sort of progress report on the counselees with the principal and the teachers who had originally identified the students to be in the group.

Whenever possible, the principal also joined the weekly meeting of the pupil personnel team. During those sessions, case conferences were presented about individual children, plans for placement, guidance, testing, etc. In this way, the principal was constantly apprised of the decisions being made about the children.

These modes of operation are both difficult and frustrating to the team as well as to teachers and parents (students are less uncomfortable). There is constant ambiguity, regarding both the principal's and counselor's roles, and regarding appropriate courses of action. In dealing with students' feelings, attitudes, and behavior on an individual basis, one quickly becomes aware that there are no "pat" answers, and that the possibility of error looms large. Sometimes only the conviction that past practices have not worked provides the impetus to proceed. Yet the rewards from success are exhilarating.

A Lot of Hard Work

The principal must swallow hard and let go, or slide, some of that authority that he traditionally possesses in the minds of parents, teachers, and students. Oftentimes the strict authoritarian stance is the worst to take. Almost always decisions about individual students are better made jointly. We must be prepared on occasion to be wrong; at times dead wrong and in public exposure as well!

The whole process requires a lot of plain hard work. Almost constant discussions occur among the team members about individual students and parents. This informal and constant communication is absolutely essential to keep abreast of developments. The stream of students to be seen is endless,

and even a walk through the corridors may produce four or five vitally important interchanges with students. The need for voluminous record keeping also becomes quickly apparent. Each contact should be written up (this year most were not) in order to improve decision making and follow through regarding each child.

Ironically, the program was too popular. That is, there were always so many students in the guidance office, there was such constant and frequent interchange, that some few, shy, introverted students were discouraged. We must be more vigilant in seeking out those quiet, retiring students. The school must help and encourage them to seek their own maximum self-fulfillment. We are now discussing procedures whereby we can reach each other.

This mode of operation, particularly in the case of the principal, departs so radically from traditional community and staff expectations that misunderstandings can often arise. In the case of staff, increased communication on courses of action taken and more involvement in these processes themselves are necessary. The concept of inconsistency is not lightly accepted, nor is the increased attention required to focus on the humane as well as academic purpose of the school.

In the case of the community, the task is even more difficult. Schools are thought of as orderly, efficient places where rules and regulations are obeyed. Social reality dictates that schools remain so for the good of all. However, the approaches we have enumerated often can be misinterpreted as overly permissive and as reducing standards. The only way to rectify these misconceptions is through constant discussion with the community about the broad purposes of education and a clear translation of the reasons for particular courses of action consistent with those purposes.

The guidance-administrative team we have described must overcome these difficulties for the simple reason that such a team approach is more humane, more sensitive, more functional than past arrangements—and it seems to work! □

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