
Bishop Healy School, in St. Louis, has taken heroic measures in order to serve better its inner-city clientele. An "open aggregate social systems" model has assisted in this effort.

CAN THE URBAN PAROCHIAL SURVIVE?

TODAY, many educators and general observers point to a virtual certainty—the demise of our urban schools. These people believe that the state of urban education has deteriorated so much that no longer can incremental changes be counted upon to revitalize the schools. What is called for is a complete restructuring:

All evidence at hand indicates that the existing educational systems cannot educate masses of socially disadvantaged, politically impotent children. A decade of publicized searching has discovered no way in which the challenge can be met. Only in a few schools and few isolated classrooms have disadvantaged children obtained an education.

Close observers agree that schools must be changed if the child and society are to be served well. Successful programs are almost always characterized by changes in normal procedures. Textbooks and curriculum grades are eliminated. Unorthodox teachers, such as uncertified ones or neighborhood aides or junior high school tutors, are used. The school is opened to greater student and parental influences. The classroom

is moved into the community, or still other unorthodox approaches to teaching and instruction are taken. All of these approaches violate traditional institutional taboos. All require new conceptions of what will educate a child. Building curriculums for educating disadvantaged children should be a process for building social institutions, for the child is educated by daily interactions with all of the institutions that affect him.¹

The purpose here is to describe one attempt in what Morris Janowitz calls "Institution Building in Urban Education."² Specifically, the article speaks about Bishop Healy School in St. Louis, Missouri. A brief background is given of the setting and establishment of the school. A social systems model is then presented which incorporates

¹ William W. Wayson. "Educating for Renewal in Urban Communities." *The National Elementary Principal* 51 (6): 6; April 1972. Copyright 1972, National Association of Elementary School Principals. All rights reserved.

² Morris Janowitz. *Institution Building in Urban Education*. Hartford, Connecticut: Russell Sage Foundation, 1969.

SCHOOL

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various components and their interrelationships, within which the design of the school is being viewed. Each component is briefly discussed and evaluated. Finally, a brief word of prognosis is given and mention made of how the experiences of Bishop Healy School might be generalized to and utilized by other schools.

A Look at the Alternatives

In the spring of 1971, two Catholic parish schools, Most Blessed Sacrament and St. Edward's, were each faced with a major problem. With a steadily declining enrollment and a mounting financial debt, each school was unable to "go it alone" for another year. The options appeared to be: (a) to officially close; (b) to merge (wherein a school officially closes and its students are sent to another Catholic school); (c) to consolidate (wherein two or more schools

officially close and join together to form a new district school, with a new name, operating structure, program, and student and faculty composition).

Since the Most Blessed Sacrament and St. Edward's parishes were contiguous within the city of St. Louis and somewhat similar as communities (Most Blessed Sacrament parish being, on the average, higher in socioeconomic level than St. Edward's), the two parish councils voted to explore the third alternative—consolidation. Families whose children currently attended the two parish schools were asked if they would be willing, at an increased expense, to send their children to a new district school. The response was overwhelmingly affirmative. The St. Louis Archdiocese indicated it was willing to make financial commitment for scholarship monies to needy families and for building improvements.

Having received support from both families and the Archdiocese, the two parish councils voted to establish a new district school to open in the fall of 1971, at the Most Blessed Sacrament School site. A Board, comprised of lay members elected to represent each parish, as well as the parish priests, would make policies governing the operation of the school and would employ a faculty and principal.

The new school opened under the name of "Bishop Healy," in honor of the first Black Bishop in the United States. This name was especially appropriate since the Bishop was known for his special love and devotion toward children and because the school was located in a Black community.

The author of this article assumed the principalship of Bishop Healy in the fall of 1972, the second year of the school's existence. By that time, the Board, in its commitment to providing a high quality Christian and secular education, had established a number of major policies. They included: (a) mandatory membership and participation in the P.T.A.; (b) a nongraded academic curriculum; (c) departmentalization in the intermediate and advanced levels (fourth through eighth years); (d) a parent involvement program coordinated by a teacher given some

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released classroom time for this purpose.

The principal decided that, in order to make some sense of a continually expanding and more complex educational program, it would be necessary for him to develop and utilize a conceptual model as a continual frame of reference. He chose an "open aggregate social systems" model. Basically, a social system is "a complex of elements in mutual interaction."³ An "open" systems model views this complex as existing in and interacting with an environment (community suprasystem) and having within it various subsystems.⁴ An "aggregate" model focuses on potentialities and a totality (organizational climate, institutional milieu, operational doctrine) within which change and effective teaching can occur. This is in contrast to a "specialization" model which focuses on the specific program, procedures, personnel, and the piecemeal addition of new ones.⁵

Research seems to indicate that organizational effectiveness (achievement of predetermined goals) is most likely to be achieved through utilizing the "open aggregate" model and thus this model was adopted for Bishop Healy School (Figure 1).

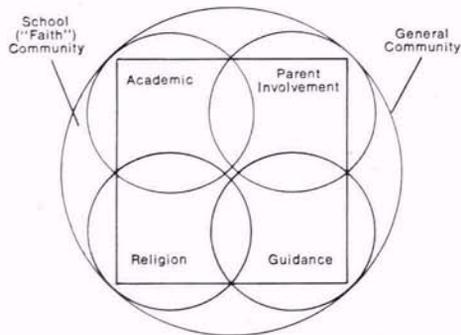


Figure 1. The "Open Aggregate Social Systems" Model

³ Daniel E. Griffiths. "The Nature and Meaning of Theory." In: Daniel E. Griffiths, editor. *Behavioral Science and Educational Administration*. The Sixty-third Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964. pp. 116-18.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Janowitz, *op. cit.*

Strengthening the Academic Program

Bishop Healy, in its two years of existence, has been involved in "Project Effect," financed under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and administered through the St. Louis public schools. The basic purposes of "Project Effect" are: (a) to build effective faculty teams for participative decision making in their respective schools and (b) to develop exemplary educational programs. At the beginning of the 1972-73 school year, the Bishop Healy faculty defined the following four priority objectives for itself:

1. Eighty percent of the students who scored below the national norm in reading on a standardized achievement test will gain at least 8 months in reading comprehension within one school year.

2. Eighty percent of the students who scored below the national norm in math on a standardized achievement test will gain at least 8 months in math comprehension within one school year.

3. Home and school communications will be considered improved if not more than 10 percent of the parents responding to a parent survey indicate this is the school's greatest need.

4. The faculty will work to attain a "Faith Community"—a spirit of unity among parents, students, and faculty.

The end-of-the-year evaluation indicated that, during the 1972-73 year, three of the above objectives—improvement of reading achievement, math achievement, and home and school communications—had been achieved. The "Faith Community" objective achieved the least gains, if any.

Participation in "Project Effect" provided the Bishop Healy faculty with an incentive to further consider (a) how a nongraded academic program might be best operationalized (consultants were brought in); (b) what possible alternative reading programs would be appropriate for the school (a reading committee was organized and made preliminary recommendations); (c) in what ways teachers could be more effective in their

relationships with students (one faculty member received training in teacher effectiveness techniques, and would in turn, help to train colleagues); (d) how faculty members could better communicate among themselves, make decisions more effectively as a group, and begin to build a spirit of unity (discussion periods were set aside for such purposes). Even though gains were not so evident here, it must be remembered that the principal and a number of the faculty members were new to the school and that clear basic differences existed on the faculty with regard to religious and educational philosophies. (Three communities of nuns were represented on the faculty.)

Based upon involvement in "Project Effect" and several faculty discussions, academic plans for the 1973-74 year included (a) adding additional personnel in reading and math (the school would be receiving Title I assistance in the form of one teacher and one teacher's aide in remedial reading and math for eligible students; (b) dividing the students into smaller instructional groups for reading and math; (c) reorganizing the Primary Department to include fourth year students; (d) selecting a new reading program which would lend itself more to non-grading and leveling than the present program and which would be fully implemented in 1974-75.

The Religion Program

The Religion Program is the hub of Bishop Healy School. The purposes of the program are to devote special attention to the internal spirit and values of every student and to develop a "Faith Community" environment for students, parents, and teachers. Toward these ends, the Religion Department (headed by one of the parish priests) has three major components: (a) classroom instruction, as provided by members of the Religion Department, who are qualified for their tasks; (b) worship in the classroom and sanctuary; (c) regular themes (such as "Uniqueness of the individual" and "Sacrifice") to be implemented by the school for the purpose of building a sense of spirit and

unity.⁶ One teacher has been given the responsibility and released classroom time for coordinating the Religion Program in the primary; another, in the intermediate and advanced departments (fifth through eighth years).

In order to adapt the Religion Program to the Black culture, the Religion Department has decided to launch a special long-range project. This project will involve a community survey to define and describe the community and secure perceptions toward the school; provide resources to the Religion Department for building a curriculum more relevant to the Black culture; assist teachers of religion in their teaching of religion from a Black perspective. The project will eventually be linked to a larger one involving all teachers and the application of the curriculum-as-a-whole to the Black milieu.

The Guidance Program

The need for a Guidance Program arose because of a faculty feeling that many of the students lacked self-awareness, positive self-concepts, and the ability to work and play together in groups. In the spring of 1973, a "pilot" course in "personal growth" was taught to fifth year students by the school principal and a teacher. Based upon this experience, the School Board approved a full program of guidance throughout the school for 1973-74. A faculty member would be freed one period per day for the job of Guidance Coordinator. The Guidance Program, itself, would consist of group guidance taught by all primary teachers and members of the Guidance Department for fifth through eighth year students, and a program of individual counseling. A peer counseling program might also be attempted, which would involve older students working with younger ones. All faculty members would receive assistance in implementing the Guidance Program, as well as in developing teacher effectiveness skills.

⁶ Marvin Beckerman. "An Elusive Educational Objective: Achieving the Faith Community." *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 9 (4): 97-99; April 1973.

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The Parent Involvement Program

Related to the Guidance Program is the Parent Involvement Program. During the 1972-73 year, one teacher was released half-time from classroom duties to work as Home-School Coordinator on three types of programs:

1. Regular P.T.A. educational programs
2. Home visitations
3. Small parent education groups.

Because of the innovative nature of the parent involvement program, it was difficult at first to explain and justify the role of the Home-School Coordinator to the rest of the faculty and to enlist their support. However, the Coordinator's efforts were significant, in that she visited over 45 homes and initiated and led several parent education groups. During 1973-74 it was envisioned that the Coordinator would continue serving as staff person to the P.T.A., assisting that organiza-

tion in planning its educational programs (the programs this year would focus on guidance). The Home-School Coordinator would also initiate a program to train parent and teacher leaders for the parent education groups and expand the number of such groups. The Coordinator would also strengthen the systemic relationships among the Religion, Guidance, and Parent Involvement programs.

In conclusion, the experiences of the first two years of Bishop Healy School have demonstrated the promise of building a viable inner-city educational institution. Such an institution can be established if an "open aggregate system" is utilized and if the institution receives full community support. What the future portends for Bishop Healy School, no one knows for certain. However, it is felt by this writer that a successful beginning has been made and it is envisioned that in subsequent years continuing gains will be achieved and hopes realized. □

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