

# Helpful Hints for Your High School's Alternative Program

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**T**HE ESEA Title III FOCUS Project is an alternative program operating at Madison High School in Portland, Oregon. FOCUS serves a population of one hundred students, all with previously identified school achievement and/or adjustment problems. Funded jointly by Title III and the Portland Public Schools, FOCUS became operational in the fall of 1971. The general goals of the program are to:

1. Increase student participation in school activities and decrease the incidence of school absence
2. Improve student self-concept by providing an instructional program built around student inputs and stressing success experiences and positive feedback
3. Demonstrate to the educational community that an alternative program can function effectively within the overall structure of a more traditional high school program.

Two year evaluation results indicate that most of the project's specific goals—the

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*This listing of practical "Do's" and "Don't's," grew out of pioneering efforts in an urban high school's alternative program.*

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majority of which are affective in nature—are being accomplished. On the basis of evaluation data and day-to-day experience, it has been possible for the project staff to assist personnel from several other schools in their efforts to develop similar alternative models.

## **Helpful Considerations**

Many details of operating an alternative school project will, naturally, vary from one school setting to another. There are, nevertheless, several general considerations pertinent to "transportability" of the FOCUS model which should be helpful to others planning, developing, or operating a similar program.

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For simplicity, these will be discussed under two headings, "Do's" and "Don't's."

## Do's

1. Solicit faculty, parent, and community interest and support for your project early in the planning and development stages. Continue this involvement throughout the life of the project. Perhaps the best method of doing this is to request key persons in the school and community to serve on an Advisory Committee and have them monitor the project regularly.

2. Keep a steady flow of information regarding the project and its goals, procedures, problems, and accomplishments moving toward both school and general audiences. The more familiar the project is, the better its chances of being understood, supported, and extended.

3. Codify all operational procedures which are followed in the project: for example, purchasing, student selection, attendance, and curriculum development. Change is possible only when current conditions are easily identified. Formative feedback can be used only when staff and evaluators know what is happening. For example, an attendance system may prove to be unsatisfactory and revisions can proceed more easily if the staff has a document which identifies each element of the faulty method.

4. Involve the school administration in project activities whenever possible. The school principal will certainly be more at ease with too much information than with not enough information. In addition to being a professional obligation, keeping your administration well informed as to what is happening is just good politics. Remember, it is hard for the principal to defend your "space" if he does not have the data about what you are doing.

5. Involve the other members of your school faculty. There is no way that your project staff, no matter how large or talented, can provide all the resources students will need if they are really encouraged to pursue their learning interests and needs. The co-

operation of your colleagues is necessary when you want to send them a student for short-term work in a special area or when you want to borrow a room in order to provide an extra class in the project's daily schedule. Also, your faculty colleagues can provide your project with a tremendous volume of information regarding supplementary materials and services which you can obtain to use with students in the project.

6. Keep a close record on all project expenditures. We would recommend maintaining a second ledger book within the project, if only to keep a rough estimate of what money has been spent and what remains for the balance of the school year. It is also helpful, from a management point of view, to require everyone to make a written request for purchase authorization, listing items to be purchased, approximate cost, model numbers, and, very important, recommended suppliers. These requests should also indicate the relationship of each item to be purchased with the prestated goals and materials of the class for which it is needed.

7. Allow all members of the teaching team to participate in the decision-making process. There will be, of course, occasions when there is no room for "negotiation" and a unilateral decision must be made by the principal or project director. However, most project decisions can be made cooperatively and it is the experience of the FOCUS staff that the support and involvement of teachers and students on any issue increase in direct relation to the proprietary feelings they have toward the solutions and procedures eventually followed in dealing with that issue.

8. Keep files of interesting pictures, articles, gadgets, etc., which may someday be useful to students. When the curriculum is open, based primarily on the interests and concerns of students, the demand for new materials is tremendous and previously stored materials can be extremely valuable.

9. Utilize student and parent inputs when planning daily, weekly, and monthly class schedules. Problems current in many high school classrooms never occur when students feel they own a share of the action.

10. Encourage students to take part in school activities, sports, drama, music, etc. A primary objective of any FOCUS-type program should be the involvement of students in new activities which allow them to observe, meet, and relate to peers in a variety of settings.

11. Encourage students within your project to plan and present at least one "service" activity for the entire school. This may be an all-school dance, play, variety show, or lunch hour motion picture series.

12. Utilize the resources of the entire community when planning learning activities. A truly magnificent variety of skilled resource persons, interesting places to visit, and "turn on" things to do is available within most urban communities. Also, bring outside people into the classroom as resource speakers, teachers, and consultants. People like to feel valuable and will go to extreme lengths to do something for students when they believe their contributions are appreciated and valued.

13. Maintain an up-to-date list of all visitors to the project and keep them informed of what is happening. (This is a good project for students, particularly those who enjoy writing and dealing with "the public.")

14. Try to keep a feeling of "family" among students and staff members. The project is theirs and they must be encouraged to maintain a strong esprit de corps. This pride will eventually carry over to other areas, particularly feelings of positive identity with the school in general and the community.

15. Keep project rules and regulations at a minimum. A project goal should be to have students learn to proscribe their own behaviors. This is not to say that an "anything goes" attitude should be fostered, but it should be obvious that students do not learn to be thoughtful, independent citizens by being told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. In short, allow students to make errors and do dumb things—then help them analyze their behavior and recognize that they must live with the natural consequences of their actions.

16. Appoint one member of the team, not necessarily the director, to serve as "resident grantsman." This person should keep on the alert for new sources of financial support. The same type of monitoring should be done in other specialized areas—instructional materials, community services and resources, volunteer personnel, and important professional writings. Try to keep these secondary appointments within the range of the individual's normal interests and activities.

17. Share the goodies. When one member of the team comes up with something that works with a class or an individual student, it should be shared with other staff members. Nurture of the "we" is critical. (It is also a good idea to share new ideas and materials with colleagues on the regular staff of the school.)

18. Acknowledge the contributions of everyone. Students and team members appreciate the support, it may be the only positive feedback they receive during the course of a given day. Additionally, make it a must to acknowledge the assistance given by personnel outside of the project. As has been stated, make people know that their efforts on your behalf are important and valued.

19. Adopt a philosophy which says, in effect, "teachers shouldn't do anything that a student can do." There are limitations, of course, but it is amazing how many things teachers do each day that can be done as well (or better) by students. For example, FOCUS has discovered that students make excellent teachers of other students, that students generally handle sophisticated media-ware better than teachers, that students can "scrounge" materials very nicely, and that students can deliver some very "straight" messages regarding project procedures and practices. One hundred students create a resource bank much too valuable to be ignored.

20. Maintain close contact with the homes of students. Calls on attendance are effective when carried on in a constructive manner. ("Is John sick? We wonder if there is anything we might be able to do.") Similarly, casual contacts, in person or by



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phone, with parents are effective when approached from a "Let's chat" point-of-view. ("I've been wondering if there is anything you would like brought up at the next parent meeting," or "Have you any observations which might help us make FOCUS a better place for your child?") School becomes a more creditable place in the eyes of parents if they are approached as people with ideas and resources which are valued by the school.

## Don't's

1. Avoid selecting staff personnel on the basis of academic credentials alone. Seek out teachers with a variety of interests and skills. A teacher's knowledge of local archeology or his ability to fly an airplane can be more beneficial to a student than his understanding of the principal causes of World War I.

2. Resist all efforts to remove your special project from the school. It may sound great to be offered your own facility, a place where you can operate apart from the constraints of the regular school program. However, it is no service to students when they are isolated and made to feel, again, that they don't fit in with the "others." On the contrary, every effort should be made to integrate the project's population with the general school student body.

Students should be allowed to pursue their own interests and concerns, but they must also become aware that they do live in a larger society and that the society requires some accommodation skills of its members. In a word, "displacement" should be avoided. Don't let your students get shuffled off where they can't be seen and where they can do their annoying things without bothering anyone. Keep them visible and help them to learn the skills that will allow them to enter into viable, productive relationships with the people around them. This *can't* be done if your program is split apart from the mainstream of the school.

3. Never foster the concept of "elitism." Students and staff members must avoid the natural temptation to "overdo" themselves and your project and, by implication, "put down" the other students and programs in the school. Any impact your program makes by way of being a "change agent" in your school must accrue from example rather than from constant reminders to others that they must change. (You may have a good thing going, but don't be ostentatious.)

4. Avoid acting on the spur of the moment in implementing program changes. What you are doing is probably the result of experience or preliminary planning. While changes are always necessary if your program is to be vital, revisions in procedures and methodology should come only after very careful consideration and evaluation. Don't exchange one devil for another. Use some planned method of attacking program problems—force field analysis. Make sure you stay abreast of current literature and use input from other programs and research.

5. Avoid the assumption that a program that is working well for you and your students will work equally as well for all teachers and students. Whatever you are doing probably will not work any better for *all* students and teachers than the system that made you want to establish your type of program to begin with! FOCUS has found it wiser (and more honest) to talk in terms of a variety of program options for students

rather than to advocate mass adoption of the FOCUS model.

6. Resist the temptation to “forget the whole thing” when the program seems irreparably snagged and the staff is overwhelmed by physical and emotional fatigue. Based on the FOCUS experience, it would not seem likely that major accomplishments will be attained on a day-to-day basis. Staff members must become skilled in recognizing the small “victories” that occur and learn to “recharge” their professional and personal batteries from the inch-by-inch progress they can observe in their students and in the program’s workings.

7. Don’t allow your colleagues in the regular program to accept your program for the wrong reasons. Many teachers will support your program because they recognize the need for educational options for students with particular learning needs. There undoubtedly will be others, however, who will deny the philosophical and educational legitimacy of what you are doing while at the same time blessing you for taking the biggest classroom problems off their hands. Perhaps it is realistic to say that support is support, no matter what reasons prompt it, but every caution should be taken to prevent your program from being seen as an educational junkyard, a “fix-it” shop for the school’s ne’er-do-wells. (A solid dissemination and PR effort is important, even critical, if your program is going to be accepted and integrated into the normal structure of the overall school program.)

8. Avoid the temptation to bite off more than you can chew. An open school environment provides a variety of new and exciting activities, but it is possible to overextend the resources of the program and wind up in a position in which nothing is done very well. In the long run, it is possible to accomplish just as much and get just as far by “wiggling” as it is by taking huge leaps. (But don’t be intimidated by challenges. It is surprising how receptive most administrators and colleagues will be to change if your professional homework is well done and your requests are presented logically.)

9. No matter how sorely pressed, never adopt a defensive stance. The very fact that your project is there makes it creditable. If there are people with objections to your new educational program, let them object. Give them information, invite them to make on-site visitations, listen to their concerns, and acknowledge their right to question and object. If you have done your homework and can cite research and example to substantiate the validity of your efforts, you are on solid ground. You may never win the objectors over, but it is better to have them objecting and friendly than objecting and antagonized by your solid, rational, and fruitless defenses.

10. Never forget the chain of command in your school and district. Spend a few cents more and send copies of all your curriculum materials, brochures, attendance reports, test scores, etc., to every station above you in the district hierarchy: vice principals, principal, curriculum supervisor, assistant superintendent, superintendent, school board members. As has been stated previously, these people can’t work for you if they don’t know what you’re doing. Give them the tools they need to protect your “space.”

11. Avoid the pitfall of familiarity. The close student-teacher relationships which develop in your project and on which your program ultimately depends are essentially adult-child relationships. It is very easy to move into a “buddy, good guy” mode of operation which overlooks the important “modeling” role of the teacher. Your project staff consists of intelligent, well-trained *adults* and there is no need for any teacher to view this as a problem to overcome. Warm, effective interpersonal relationships can extend across generation gaps!

12. Work hard to share the power with students. Only when teachers refute the traditional “I teach, you learn” system can a FOCUS-type program achieve real success. This is not to say that teachers should abdicate their leadership role and professional responsibilities; however, it is to say that a program which is built on the concept of self-directed learning can’t function with-



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out students having a major share in determining what will be taught, who will teach it, and who will evaluate progress and accomplishment.

13. Don't panic when events take a terrible turn. If the staff can maintain a calm, orderly attitude under conditions of duress and crisis, even the worst disaster can be made to appear part of an organized learning activity.

14. Never expect 100% productivity from either students or staff members. A FOCUS-type program which deals principally with the affective realm has to allow room for the weaknesses, shortcomings, and periodic physical and emotional "drains" which affect all human endeavors. The FOCUS staff operates from a philosophic base which says that learning (and teaching) does not progress on an even, steady plan but is, rather, sporadic, alternating between periods of intensity and dormancy. (The trick is, of course, to manage events in such a manner as to keep these periods from occurring at

the same time, much as a juggler has three balls going up at the same time as three others are coming down.)

15. Don't think that "team spirit" will compensate for day-to-day resentments and hurts which occasionally crop up between staff members. The sheer intensity of the many expectations and personal agendas which project teachers bring to the program almost guarantees that there will be instances of friction and conflict. FOCUS has found that the wisest thing to do is let the stress situations flare up, handle them as effectively as possible, and then wait for staff equilibrium to return. Honest confrontation in which one person admits and owns his negative feelings is perhaps the most effective way that FOCUS staff members have found to deal with the relational hangups which appear on the project scene. Additionally, it is helpful for the staff to adopt some "model" for conflict management, a process which the whole group can fall back on when dealing with interpersonal discord. □

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