

How To Start an Alternative School and Where To Go From There

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THE school was a Junior High School¹ in an area of the Bronx from which Jews and Italians had fled and which now had a student body composed of 65 percent Puerto Rican and 35 percent Black. I had been its principal for six years. When I arrived I had found the school floundering and shaky because it had not adequately coped with the great change in its school population. Most of the staff members had been there for quite some time and they were doing what they had done when the school had been very different five years before.

I spent the first two years working with some of the excellent school people I found on the staff and with a very supportive superintendent² to achieve order, system, quiet, and a sense of standards and a sense of purpose. As a result of our efforts, even after only two years we had reversed our neighbor-

A step-by-step account of how to set up an alternative school in a large urban system.

hood reputation so that some parents and guardians were falsifying addresses and lying about home situations in order to get their youngsters into our school or not be transferred from it because of changes in address.

Although I found this most gratifying, I felt very uneasy in that we had order and system and purpose and appreciation on the part of students, parents, and teachers but we did not seem to be making significant headway in producing youngsters better equipped to deal with one of the major demands of first class citizenship—the speaking, writing, and reading of standard English. Therefore I spent the next four years in two

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major directions: (a) building a staff of persons who would feel dissatisfied with conditions as they were, and (b) educating and encouraging the staff to try new ideas of motivation within our usual constraints of lack of funds and of much overcrowding.

Building the staff was extremely difficult as we were living in the days of acute teacher shortage and our school was comparatively so unattractive, inaccessible, and uncomfortable for teachers. We handled this problem by working closely with some local college professors³ to make our school itself the place for the college classroom and to use our own young teachers as recruiting agents to bring in others who were interested in trying to change things.

We also involved ourselves, myself actively included, in the teaching process. We took the young teachers we had already invested so much time in and the recruits they brought and the student teachers as our staff so that eventually one-third of our faculty was acquired in this way. A considerable portion of our more experienced teachers also elected to join us in trying many alternatives to the traditional program—exchanges with a suburban school,⁴ securing full scholarships and support for our eighth and ninth grade pupils in private preparatory high schools,⁵ teaching through drama,⁶ a bilingual school-within-a-school,⁷ consumer education,⁸ bringing New York City's first-class music, art, and ballet into our school,⁹ citizenship voting education,¹⁰ Hunter Friend

³ Professors Lilyan Ruderman and Charles Banks of Lehman College, Bronx, New York.

⁴ Great Neck North Junior High School—the exchange lasted seven years.

⁵ A Better Chance (Rockefeller Foundation) and Exeter.

⁶ Phoenix Theatre Project using Niles Junior High School.

⁷ Science, math, and social studies taught in Spanish.

⁸ Ninth grade social studies made Consumer Economics.

⁹ Harkness and Metropolitan Opera Ballets, New York Philharmonic.

¹⁰ Using real voting procedures to conduct school government elections.

program,¹¹ training in inquiry and research writing,¹² Career Days,¹³ graduation exercises that would reflect the accomplishments of youngsters and the "warmth" that existed between teachers and administrators with students, values clarification as a teaching tool,¹⁴ open classroom techniques, four consecutive half-day teacher-run workshops every January, cluster teaching, more concentrated time spent on science and art, planning a way to make all industrial arts a center of curriculum for both sexes on an equal basis.

Adapting Ideas to Needs

These are some of the things we did and these years helped to give a good segment of our teachers as well as some of our administrators the experience and security needed to be open to try new ideas and to adapt these ideas to our needs. I was continually looking for teachers who would say, "I have an idea!" or, preferably, "We have an idea!" When these statements finally began to come, it was important to treat them with respect, consideration, and proper planning, and to get them launched—even if they were to fail. None of them really failed (some ended when the interested teacher left the school) but we did manage to convey that it would not matter if they did.

Finally in the early spring of my sixth year as principal, four teachers came to see me to express their dissatisfaction with everything we had already tried and to say they wanted to do "more" and that they would like to work as a group. I had been interested in the alternative school development in the white affluent suburb of Great Neck, New York. After describing this development to the four teachers, we went to visit it along with the assistant principal who was put in charge

¹¹ A "big sister" or "big brother" coming every day from Hunter (now Lehman) College.

¹² Three-year development program through social studies classes.

¹³ Bringing the Bronx community into the school to open the world of jobs and careers.

¹⁴ Workshop conducted on school time with volunteer teachers, demonstration classes.

of the program.¹⁵ The six of us then spent several "talking sessions" with the idea. One of the four teachers was made leader¹⁶ and from then on the teachers met by themselves to draw up their purpose, methods to accomplish it, and evaluate what they had done. We were all aware that the project could not depend upon any more teachers or facilities from the local board of education. This meant that my job was to reallocate existing resources and to get support from the community for extras that would develop in the initial stage. The teachers decided to make their purpose better school attendance and more excitement about going to school on the part of youngsters who they already knew had the potential to be educated for a better life than the one for which they seemed to be headed.

I agreed to their purpose and made it clear that they were in charge of which youngsters entered and stayed in the program and how to go about selecting these students and getting them in. The curriculum planning they were to do with the assistant principal in charge of the "school-within-a-school." On their own they approached the rest of the faculty for nominations, interviewed all suggested, conferred to make their selection, and visited each home of a child who wished to try the new type of school, taking the child with them for the conference with the parent. In this way they got their enrollment of 45 with a waiting list of 10. They then planned to meet over the summer, to participate in some summer workshops, to visit more alternative schools, and then to survey our own building for a location.

The assistant principal and I helped with all this. We decided on a school-within-a-school where 45 youngsters would have their entire day with the four teachers who represented the disciplines of math, science, social studies, and English. The rest of the staff was reallocated to make this pupil-

teacher ratio possible and the decision was made to close down one home economics foods shop that was next to a smaller room that had once been a family living room. Both rooms were located at the end of a hall near a back stairway of the school that went down directly to the lunchroom and backyard.

All of these decisions were made by May. Over the summer I prepared a statement of purpose and means of accomplishment within our resources and plan of evaluation for our superintendent and community board of education. I did ask that the superintendent's staff help us with the evaluation and with funds for supplies, transportation, and that, if we were successful, he consider asking Albany to help us get located outside the regular school the following year. The teachers were assured that they had the right to fail and that they would not be evaluated by reading and math tests in June.¹⁷

The assistant principal and I met with the four teachers before school opened the next fall to assess what we had done over the summer. The teachers decided to present the problem of room arrangement and decoration (the main room was filled with antiquated cooking equipment) to the students who, in turn, made decisions, painted, built furniture, and brought things in. The students also decided on a name—Camelot—as an expression of what they felt the school could mean to them. They helped the teachers make initial plans for such things as individual diagnostic testing in each subject area,¹⁸ how to structure their day, how to group, how long to study something, and what "rules" of behavior to follow.

The teachers ate lunch together, spent many Sunday afternoons together, and met with the assistant principal at least once a week and with me once a month. They quickly adjusted to the idea of counseling individual pupils and flexibly grouping the

¹⁵ Mrs. Claudia C. Macari who also taught the values clarification workshop with me.

¹⁶ Eugene Scher was trained in sociology and also had the temperament needed to lead. The others were Susan Fauer, Richard Acosta, and Paul Bablove.

¹⁷ I knew, of course, that should we subsequently get a grant from Albany we would have to be evaluated by reading and math tests.

¹⁸ The students themselves asked for such tests and for periodic testing so that they could "see" their progress.



pupils for better instructional purposes in different subject areas. It was not long before they were excited, too, about the idea of pursuing subjects never before in our curriculum: anthropology, ancient history, photography, guitar playing, newspaper reading, TV analysis, ceramics, model building, gourmet cooking, etc. These ideas came from the students and then our Camelot teachers began to invite in various members of our own faculty who could help in these areas.

A Continuing Assessment

Staff members had much more of a problem in adjustment in getting used to the lack of the usual teacher structure, a curriculum to follow, and the idea that they were free to ignore bells and could use any place in the entire City of New York as their classroom. It really took the entire first year to get them to begin to use the freedom they really had. During the second year they began to leave the building and build a richer, more flexible curriculum. During the school year certain youngsters were dropped from the program either at their own or at their parents' request, or because the teachers felt the program was not doing enough for the pupil. Substitutions were then made from the waiting list.

The teachers did not wait until June to evaluate and neither did the students. They were constantly evaluating and continually

excited by the progress they saw. We knew we had accomplished our stated purpose—better attendance and enthusiasm about going to school—by daily observation. Even as early as November, an evening meeting was held to which parents were invited and to which they came in unprecedented numbers. Camelot students were the speakers and answered any question posed by the audience. One not-so-friendly parent said, "I simply do not believe that these students could have been 'turned on' like this in so short a time! This must have been rehearsed!"

No one wanted to stay home even when he was really sick. Parents who never came to school before took time off from work to come and see what was "going on there." Students would never be absent even if the parents insisted that they mind a younger child. Youngsters who never read began to read; those who had never spoken up before adults began to do so; those whom we thought could not express their ideas and feelings in writing began to do so; some who were rated as "Grade 4" in math were doing Algebra; and those whom we had thought never could be interested in anything not directly connected with their own lives were enthusiastic about such things as Greek history, anthropology, and architecture.

We did not need standardized tests or evaluation teams to tell us that Camelot was a success. (Maybe these instruments would have "failed" us.) The teachers and the par-

ents knew these children "before" and "after" and I have found these judgments to be most reliable. I knew personally, too, because I held values clarification sessions with Camelot once a week and could therefore watch growth. I was able to get a local department store¹⁹ to contribute money to get the whole group to the country for a winter weekend along with the exchange group from the white affluent suburb.²⁰

We also spent this second year persuading our new superintendent²¹ to support our idea of getting funded to establish ourselves in a separate building with money for more transportation to move to areas of learning inside and outside of our city. The assistant principal and I wrote the proposal and, with the Camelot teachers, we combed nearby areas in the Bronx and were able to recommend several sites. The superintendent supported our proposal and Camelot did receive operational funds during its third year although it was never able to move to a separate site.

What We Learned

At the end of Camelot's second year I left to become a high school principal and this decision naturally caused me to put together what I had learned from my eight years at Niles Junior High School and also what I had learned about alternative programs. I felt confirmed in my feelings that:

1. The teachers should volunteer to be in such a program, and those selected should be experienced as really good teachers in the traditional program who are dissatisfied with their results and want to try other methods. They should also be people who have empathy and sensitivity to pupils, who know what they believe about teaching, and who are apt to be self-revealing persons. It is also essential that there be no "prima donnas," no matter how good they are. They must be able

¹⁹ Alexander's Department Store.

²⁰ This was a unique venture in the State of New York and is a tribute to the trust the alternative school and the exchange had already inspired in both sets of parents.

²¹ Dr. Theodore Weisenthal.

to plan and work together and they must also like and admire and respect each other. Without the "right" teachers it is best not to have a program.

2. The teachers selected should be allowed to make the decisions regarding the student body and together with their students on the curriculum to work toward. The latter, however, must be done cooperatively with the administration so as to provide for continuous growth for the pupils and for the teachers in the program. For example, if the Camelot program in Niles Junior High School as I knew it in 1970-72 was essentially the same in 1972-74, I would say it was a failure. If a child is going to be in Camelot three years, his or her learning must grow sequentially in these three years. The same must be true of the teachers in the program.

3. Until the beliefs of the rest of the staff change to accept the reasons and understandings for alternative schooling as an option for some students, it is better to have the alternative out of sight and out of close contact with the rest of the school. Otherwise teachers feel threatened either that they are not doing as well or that they are "next" whether they like it or not and this can lead to sabotaging in subtle but quite devastating ways.

4. Alternative schooling is not for all students—so many are doing well in traditional methods and programming—but there is a significant percentage of students and parents who need and want options.

5. Alternatives can take any purpose from more rigidity to less rigidity, from emphasis on the "3 R's" to making street life the curriculum, from less freedom to more freedom. *The important thing is for the alternative school to know why it exists and what it is trying to do.*

6. Alternative schooling opens new vistas such as the value of giving school credit for what pupils learned outside of school and using community resources as extensions of school. Our school systems are not yet ready to accept such ideas but we can be thinking about them. □

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