



School Options in Philadelphia: Their Present and Future

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DURING the 60's a growing number of educators, especially those in the urban setting, became aware that their schools were not fulfilling their purpose for a large number of pupils. At the same time, the number of young people and their parents expressing dissatisfaction with the educational institutions in their communities grew to alarming proportions. Concurrently, along with this awareness and dissatisfaction, came a varied array of literature criticizing the nation's schools. These commentaries asserted that schools were grim and joyless places where little, if any, meaningful education occurred for a vast number of students.

As a result of this awareness, dissatisfaction, and criticism, federal and state legislatures, local school boards, universities, community and civic groups, and educators were urged to find solutions to the problems of providing appropriate learning experiences for the various life and learning styles of their large number of students. The search for solutions led many school districts to explore the role of alternative schools as a strategy for constructive change within the system. Innovative alternative schools opened in Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, Berkeley, and Atlanta, and many more cities soon followed their lead.

Perhaps, the Philadelphia Office of Alternative Programs had its beginning in 1969 when 143 high school students took to the streets of the city without really leaving school. They were the first students of a new model of high school, the Parkway Program, which challenged many traditional concepts of secondary education. There were no grades, no dress codes, and very few rules. There was not even a school building. Instead, students found their classrooms, their curricula, and some of their teachers from among the plentiful resources of the city. Students went to learn where the action was.

Parkway Tested These Principles

The Parkway Program tested many long accepted principles of educational organization. While Parkway was not the first to test these principles, it had three important features that set it apart from other experiments: Parkway was a public program—fully accredited and supported by the School District of Philadelphia; its students were chosen by lottery, without any special admissions criteria; and it was committed to operate at a cost equal to, or less than, that to run a

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traditional school for a comparable number of students.

Parkway kept group sizes small. Student-teacher relationships were more casual and more humane because of the informality encouraged by the staff. Students were allowed to study in the community and this greatly increased the learning options available. Students were given more choices as to how to meet state mandated curriculum requirements and were encouraged to devise their own schedules. Curricular flexibility increased at Parkway, not only by providing many alternative ways of studying each subject, but by allowing students to change their courses several times a year through the "mini-course" approach. There were no grades. Detailed written evaluation of student progress, completed both by the teacher and the student, replaced them. The Parkway Program now numbers over 1,000 students, equally divided among its five semi-autonomous "units" or "learning communities."

The constant evaluating and refining of Parkway's process during its first five years have proved helpful in the development of many new alternative programs in Philadelphia and across the nation. Philadelphia's new programs came about as part of the School District's reordering of its educational priorities. One priority of the

New methods and ideas tested in the Parkway Program have lent courage and support in the establishment of other alternative schools.

highest order was the need to develop educational programs designed to meet the needs of disaffected students who for some reason are unable to adjust to, or are dissatisfied with traditional schooling.

In July 1972, Matthew W. Costanzo, Superintendent of Schools, announced the establishment of the Office of Alternative Programs in Philadelphia and appointed Leonard B. Finkelstein, the former director of the Parkway Program, as its head. Since that time, the Office of Alternative Programs has been responsible for the establishment of over 80 secondary and elementary alternative programs. These programs have patterned themselves after schools without walls, mini-schools, open classrooms, learning centers, drop-out centers, and magnet schools. These programs are "alternatives" because they are designed to offer public school youngsters educational experiences different from those that have been offered traditionally and those that are currently provided in ongoing school district programs.

Each of the programs contains some of the following features:

1. The students and their parents have the freedom to choose between educational options.

2. The program or curriculum is significantly different from the conventional or regular program.

3. There is a total program, not just a short class or a part of the school day.

4. The program has its own location—in a separate building, wing of a school, community facility, or designated classroom—so it can be identified geographically from the regular school program.

5. The program clearly defines the school population to be served.

6. The program design evidences a creative perception of learning and instruction.

7. The program uses community, parents, cultural and social institutions.

8. The program has an evaluation design that provides for formal monitoring and evaluation by the Board of Education's Research Division, as well as continuing internal evaluation and feedback.

In addition to providing the thrust and leadership for the development of more alternatives within the public sector, the Office of Alternative Programs has as another main function: the monitoring, supervision, and evaluation of existing programs. The Office also collects information, prepares reports, and conducts staff and leadership development workshops for alternative program staff members.

The Office of Alternative Programs encourages the development of alternative programs based on the needs assessment of school districts and those designed to help in the areas of student alienation, basic skills improvement, human relationships, motivation, career development, and attendance.

The broad goals for these alternative programs include:

1. Encouraging the retention of youngsters who might otherwise relinquish an opportunity to continue their formal education

2. Developing optional ways for students and teachers to relate

3. Increasing opportunities for students to manage their own learning experiences



Photos courtesy of the author.



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4. Enabling students to explore new ways of gaining knowledge
5. Allowing teachers to use innovative techniques in their interaction with students
6. Shaping the learning environment so that it intentionally functions as a setting suitable for many educational purposes
7. Addressing personal problems of youngsters that may directly or indirectly interfere with their ability and desire to learn.

A Proving Ground for New Ideas

Philadelphia's alternative programs are valuable as a proving ground for new methods and ideas which have become useful on a much broader scale. Once curricular innovation or a particular element of a program has been widely accepted as useful and valid by teachers, administrators, students, and parents, it becomes potentially feasible for other school districts and communities. While some districts and communities are not as quick to try innovative alternatives as others, most are more than willing to implement alternatives that have proven worthwhile over a period of time.

Not only do students profit from these programs, but from the system as well. The system recognizes the need for a consistent

statement of educational objectives, but it is only beginning to recognize that these objectives can be met through a diversity of environments, instructional methods, and organization. Educational options are being provided through a network of alternatives that make it possible for students and teachers to choose an educational experience that they feel is most appropriate for them. Establishment of more public schools of choice is the direction in which Philadelphia is heading.

While there are many advantages to the system associated with alternative programs, there are also some problems that have emerged. Those of us connected with alternative programs over a period of time have come to realize that these programs have not proven appropriate for all students who have elected them, nor for all teachers who have sought refuge from the problems associated with traditional schools. Some students and teachers need more structure than is found in most alternative programs and ask to return to a more traditional school. Some alternative programs suffer from a lack of effective leadership and this sometimes gets in the way of adequate services to their students.

Another problem that often surfaces is that of locating suitable off-site facilities for the growing number of alternative programs. The sharing of space with a regular school can have its drawbacks, also. Some administrators and teachers take a dim view of the concept of alternative education, and see openness and informality as a basic defect in the educational process. This leads to conflict and detracts from the positive aspects of a shared space program. A few programs have had to be modified, restructured, or eliminated, but the majority have been retained or expanded. More district superintendents, principals, teachers, and communities are becoming increasingly aware that alternative programs might be, at least, a part of the solution to the problems facing educational systems today, that of helping youngsters lead satisfying lives now and preparing them for productive futures in a rapidly changing society. □

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