

We Move Toward Options in Schooling

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MUCH about schools in the past can be characterized as uniformity and standardization based on the way teachers teach and administrators manage. The fresh breeze blowing toward the future indicates a diversity and individualization based on the way children learn.

I do not see options in schools as a reform of something that is wrong but rather as a natural evolution toward more mature and responsible educational programs. The basic ingredient of options in education is choice, but to choose, one must have worthy choices and the ability to choose. The obligations of teachers and administrators alike are obvious here.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, we have as of this writing eight optional schools as well as numerous optional programs in our conventional schools scheduled

for implementation during the 1974-75 school year: two open elementary schools, one open middle school, one open high school, a street academy, a school for teen-age parents or pregnant students, a night school, and a traditional, academic elementary school. We also have numerous optional programs within our conventional schools.

A Totally Open School

At the Irwin Avenue School, hundreds of teachers have come to see a totally open K-6 elementary school.

Irwin Avenue opened more than a year ago with an enrollment of 650 students and a staff of 25 teachers and one principal. The school was located in an old junior high school building. Summer was spent knocking down walls and repainting the building, providing in-service training to the staff, rounding up parent volunteers, and helping parents organize car pools.

The school opened only after a full year

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of planning by the principal, central staff, several teachers, and the parents who had spearheaded the movement for an open school. Consequently, by the time school opened, there was general agreement among the school community about what kind of school Irwin Avenue would be. This time for thrashing things out and developing consensus has been a vital factor in Irwin's success.

The school has also effected change beyond its walls. Parents now look at their children differently, they see them being more capable now. And visiting parents and teachers from other schools have asked, "If Irwin can do it, why can't we?" We are seeing an ever-growing interest in open education in this community.

That growing interest goes beyond a mere catch-phase. Parents and teachers throughout our county are now becoming advocates for continuous progress, for individualized instruction.

Almost from the beginning, hundreds of children have been on Irwin's waiting list.

As all school administrators know, open education can be a very controversial subject. We avoided much of the controversy by making our program optional. Teachers in some conventional schools still experiment with open education; we decided, however, to make some of our schools totally open and optional.

The only controversy we had over open education emerged in the spring of 1973, when the board of education was deciding whether to give the go ahead for Irwin. One conservative board member said at the time, "I don't want to send my child to an open school, but I don't want to tell my neighbor he can't send his child to the school he wants." The optional approach won the day. The same approach can work in other kinds of schools.

The Street Academy Expands

Two years ago, a former teacher started on her own a program for junior high school students who had been expelled from the public schools. Called the Street Academy, the program usually had about five students. The school system assumed responsibility for the program in early 1973, expanding it to include some 12 to 15 youngsters. A year ago, we opened it up on a much expanded basis. By the middle of the last school year, we had more than 100 youngsters in the program. In expanding the program, we took in youngsters who had not been expelled. Many had quit or had remained in school as spiritual dropouts. We set up a small teacher-pupil ratio, about 1 to 10, and let the principal and the staff plan the kind of program they wanted to run.

We had feared that the Street Academy might become a "dumping ground," the place for "problem children." Our fears did not materialize. The very fact that the Street Academy is optional had helped in this regard. Students are not sent or sentenced to the Street Academy. They decide to go on their own, usually with the advice of their parents or of a counselor.



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Many of the problems of young people cut across ethnic or socioeconomic lines. Consequently, the Street Academy is thoroughly desegregated in both racial and socioeconomic terms.

The excellence of both the program and that staff has provided the environment in which young people at the Street Academy can change—and they have. Rather than being called a dumping ground, the Street Academy now has a communitywide image as the place which breeds success. In the spring, we opened two satellite centers, but there still is a waiting list of 130, that is equal to the capacity of the school.

Neither this school system nor any but the richest can ever expect to be able to afford a series of Street Academies, despite the clear need. The only way out, then, is to change the regular schools, so that more Street Academies will not be needed. The Street Academy is helping us accomplish this reform. Visiting teachers have seen how science can be made more concrete, how social studies can be individualized for slow as well as fast achievers, how the embarrassment of a non-reader can be overcome—and in the process teachers are undergoing self-renewal.

We used the optional approach in another school we opened earlier this year. Students who have dropped out or for various reasons cannot attend day programs can attend school at night and earn their high school diploma. About 100 students are in the program, and nearly all seem to be well-motivated. Their fine attendance records at the night school have pleasantly surprised their former counselors.

A Chance To Spread One's Wings

In the Street Academy and in the Evening School, the optional approach has given us a chance to try out new ideas, to prove that no youngster is a lost cause. Those two schools are full of successful students who previously had known only failure. Likewise, the Irwin Avenue Open School has given bright children a chance to move faster than they ever had before, and children who learn more slowly a chance to learn more

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than anyone had previously thought them capable of learning.

The optional approach need not be confined to a whole school concept. We have started working within school options at all levels. Ranging from offering parents and children a choice between open and traditional classrooms, to our occupational mix program in high school.

The optional approach gives teachers and principals a chance to spread their wings and be a part of a laboratory for learning. They give students and parents a chance to be part of something, because they made the decision to come into the program. They facilitate the building of a school community.

Staggering changes in students and society have already made some parts of today's schools obsolete and irrelevant. These parts have an adverse effect on the total program. In a school system set up to help individuals, the whole is only as good as each of its parts.

Our problems involve more than the explosions of population, knowledge, and technology, more than the deterioration of the stable old basic units of home, church, and community, more than the expansion of large bureaucratic institutions, more than money and materialism.

Our problem is more than cop-outs, drop-outs, drugs, and communes; more than violence, demonstrations, and sexuality; more than boredom, depression, and alienation; more than isolation, discrimination, and disadvantage.

Our task is the reordering of the educational enterprise from top to bottom and, as we put our house in order, to remember that it was built for people. □

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