

# A Personal View of "ALPHA"

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**M**Y association with ALPHA (Alternative Learning Program for the High School Age) began in June 1972. I was asked, along with two other high school teachers and a counselor, to spend whatever time was necessary during the summer months (with pay!) to write a proposal for submission to the board of education detailing a plan for an alternative high school.

The impetus for our work was the impending adoption by the school board of a more restrictive attendance policy that recommended the creation of alternative programs for students who were dropped from their high school classes because of excessive absenteeism. The administrators who called our planning group together recognized the opportunity for development of a program that could serve a broader spectrum of students than just those who were experiencing truancy problems.

I believe that the four of us who formed this team were selected not only because in the past we had been vocal about some of the things we disliked in the policies and practices of our respective schools, but because

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we had proposed remedies for some of these problems. The charge given to us in June 1972 was "to think outside the box," and hopefully to develop a proposal which could be implemented during the 1972-73 school year.

During the summer months our team met regularly. We found it useful in our thinking and planning process to put aside the conventions and traditions that are commonly part of the typical high school—letter evaluations, structured classes, graduation requirements. While we knew that ultimately our proposal would be confronted with the

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realities of community and board of education scrutiny, we attempted to include in the ALPHA proposal only those things that were consistent with what we believed to be true about the learning process, personality development, and sound mental health practices. After extensive reading, thinking, and discussion, our proposal was finalized and approved by the board of education a week prior to the opening of school.

### **Target: The Dissatisfied Student**

The ALPHA proposal contained the following basic points. First, because the impetus for ALPHA came from the newly adopted attendance policy, the program's design had to allow for the enrollment of students who were experiencing truancy problems. However, we believed that a heterogeneous student population was a prerequisite for the type of interpersonal learnings that we hoped to promote. Therefore, the number of students attending ALPHA after having violated the provisions of the attendance policy is limited to fifty percent of the entire ALPHA enrollment. The remaining students are selected at random from applications submitted at the beginning of the semester by those youngsters to whom the program appeals. Once enrolled, students may elect to remain in ALPHA until graduation, or, they may choose to return full-time to the regular high school at the beginning of the next semester.

ALPHA students are required to meet the same diploma requirements that are stipulated by the board of education for all high school graduates. These credits can be earned by community volunteer work, work experience, classes in the regular high school, the ALPHA Workshop, and independent study. Credit for independent study is based on learning contracts negotiated between the teacher and student, and letter marks are not given other than for classes taken in the high school. Students receive frequent feedback through conferences, written evaluations, and informal contacts.

Attendance at the Workshop is required of all ALPHA students. The Workshop meets

for two hours a day, five days per week, with the amount of credit to be awarded based almost entirely upon attendance. Enrollment in each Workshop is limited (twenty students in 1972-73 and twenty-five in 1973-74), with emphasis being placed on communication and interpersonal skills. Values clarification, goal setting, personal and group problem

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solving, and work on selected basic cognitive skills comprise most of the Workshop activities. In the Workshop groups, an attempt is made by the staff to develop an atmosphere that is informal, warm, and trusting.

ALPHA's primary target group is students who are, for whatever reasons, dissatisfied with the traditional school. Because we thought it important to develop among the students and staff "a feeling of family," ALPHA is located in the school district's Instructional Materials Center, a site apart from the two high schools from which ALPHA draws its students. The total enrollment is deliberately kept low, with sixty students and the equivalent of three full-time teachers in 1972-73, and fifty students and two teachers in 1973-74. Students who graduate from ALPHA receive diplomas from the high school that they initially attended. ALPHA operates on a per-pupil cost to the school district that is only ten percent greater than that for the district as a whole, which is partly due to the fact that ALPHA staff members function as teachers, counselors, and administrators.

ALPHA has been the subject of an extensive assessment design that has measured various student outcomes as well as the program's congruence to its original objectives.

Improvement was found in students' attendance as compared to past semesters and also in their self-esteem. The overall response of students to the program has been overwhelmingly positive. Parental feedback, both formal and informal, was supportive. There are some students who have said that they would not have continued in high school if it were not for ALPHA, and a number of ALPHA students have gone on to colleges and universities.

### **A Sense of Freedom and Trust**

The relatively objective description of ALPHA provided here is simpler for me to relate than the impact this program has had on my personal and professional growth and development. Throughout my association with ALPHA I have felt a sense of freedom and trust that I did not feel as a regular classroom teacher. The treatment we received from administrators during the early planning and implementation stages seemed to reflect their respect for our professional understanding and skills. Even in our second year of operation we were still directly involved in not only the day-to-day management of ALPHA, but in the broad administrative decisions that affect it. I know that my input counts, and that my experience, knowledge, and values can find direct expression in my work.

Because of the nature of the ALPHA Workshop I have come to know my students in a way that I could not come to know them in the regular school. I am more aware of their goals and ambitions, their problems and their strengths. I have met their parents, and in almost all cases we have established relationships that I find to be comfortable and helpful. The quality of relationships that I have seen develop at ALPHA between students, staff, and parents is of particular significance to me.

I now believe, more than ever, in the value of structured, interactive group experiences for students that are designed to increase awareness of self and awareness of others. I have seen students change and grow as a result of the insights and personal

learnings that were products of these activities.

The ALPHA Workshop has become the core of this program; the group experience it provides has been useful in many ways. Students in it are assisted in making the transition from the regular school to an environment in which they proceed at their own rate and in their own directions. The Workshop provides a structure and a laboratory in which students are able to try out new behavior, and receive useful feedback from their teachers and peers. The student's school day revolves around this two hour block, and for many of them, the Workshop exists as a kind of oasis where their feelings are accepted, where they are treated with respect, and where they may drop their defenses and come to grips with some of the more significant problems of their lives. Our efforts to raise the interpersonal skill level of students, as well as the emphasis we have placed on personal responsibility for behavior, have helped many students approach problem situations in a more effective way.

### **To Make a Difference**

There have been times when the problems seemed almost insurmountable, and I seriously questioned whether our efforts were really making a positive difference. In addition to my personal doubts, I have felt the pressure of making ALPHA successful so that other teachers and students in this school district would also have the opportunity to explore new options.

In spite of these uncertainties, or because of them, I believe that we are moving in the right direction. I have seen students struggle with complex human relations problems and come through them with new confidence and skills, as well as tremendous feelings of group spirit and cohesiveness. Many students who would otherwise have left school or who were turned off by it, have found learning to be exciting and rewarding. Not only have we seen progress in the interpersonal realm, but development in the cognitive skills as well.

In retrospect, the following conclusions regarding our experiences at ALPHA stand out:

1. Optional programs should be preceded by adequate amounts of thought, study, and planning. Whenever possible, the teachers who are likely to be involved in the program should be members of the planning team.

2. The importance of administrative support, encouragement, and advice during the developmental and initial implementation stages cannot be overemphasized.

3. Alternative schools are not panaceas for students or educators, but have important contributions to make to the solution of a variety of educational problems.

4. Schools need to have expectations that are academic, intellectual, and behavioral. ALPHA students have found a source of pride and a sense of adequacy in their ability to meet the learning objectives that they have defined in cooperation with a teacher: Some students who have read little

or not at all are now reading regularly, and others are succeeding in academic areas where they previously had known failure. We have not artificially divided the cognitive and affective aspects of a student's school experience.

5. Important interpersonal and academic learnings are promoted in a school atmosphere that is characterized by trust, friendliness, and cooperation. Letter marks are not needed to motivate students who are motivated by a sense of competency.

Optional programs should not be perceived as threats to the offerings of the regular schools. The program of the traditional school has much to offer a large number of students. However, large comprehensive high schools, by their very nature, cannot be responsive to the needs of all students, nor to all the needs of society. As a result, society is deprived of the untapped talents of many of its citizens. Alternative schools and optional programs have a vital role to play in promoting the actualization of this unrealized human potential. □

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