



## Commando Academy: From Clashes to Classrooms

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and Jules J. Modlinski**

*How do you reinterest a teenage parolee in attending school when he/she dropped out after a long history of failure? Commando Academy shows one community's answer to this question.*

During the early 1960's, the Commandos, as they called themselves then, were in the streets marching for a variety of causes ranging from open housing to equal rights and opportunities. The Commando street experiences led to the formation of Commando Project I, a unique organization that has been active in Milwaukee's inner city for the past nine years.

Under the guidance of Jesse Wade, the organization's director, staff members, who are primarily black ex-parolees, have compiled an amazing record of counseling youthful and adult ex-offenders and preventing their return to penal institutions.

An "alternative school," opened in 1974, was created specifically to reach youthful parolees who were more at home "hustling" on the streets than they were in the classroom. The school called "Commando Academy" has served local 13- to 17-year-old parolees for the past three years.

Commando Academy's goals are rather straightforward. First, there is the specific goal of helping to prevent

young parolees from returning to jail. Second, there is a direct attempt to get these parolees reinterested in education by providing the "basic" skills to go along with their "street" skills. Third, the school hopes to help young parolees come to appreciate the value of working for pay rather than "hustling" for "street money."

The Academy receives funding from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Division of

headquarters. Because of increasing enrollment and to ease space problems, the Commandos purchased a building adjacent to their headquarters and remodeled it into a large open classroom.

### Pupils and Programs

Parolees are referred to the school by the Division of Corrections through a parole agent. Some of the current students who are not parolees have been sent to the school by parents who must sign a waiver to place their youngster in the school rather than the public school. Some students simply walked in and asked to be accepted into the school because they liked what they heard about it.

Because of space and funds, enrollment is limited. The Academy has grown, however, from 33 students in 1974 to 75 students in 1976. No student is accepted unless he/she (there are two males to every one female) is interviewed, agrees to take the required tests (attitude, reading, math, and so on), and is willing to abide by school rules. Of the 75 currently enrolled (at least 15 additional students are trying to get into the school), 33 were referred through the Division of Corrections, 6 from the Division of Family Services, 10 from the Youth Service Bureau, and the rest by parental request.

Many of these students, who would be in the 10th or 11th grades in the public schools, enter with test scores at the lower-elementary level. Although the range on pretest data from the Wide Range Achievement Test shows reading to be from 1.1 to 11.9, spelling from 1.9 to 8.1, and math from 1.9 to 7.7, the median in spelling and reading is around the third-grade level, while the math median is slightly higher.

The value of the school is



*Young parolees receive instruction from one of the Commando Academy's certified instructors.*

Corrections, the Division of Family Services, private foundations, and local business and industry. The school is guided by a Board of Trustees that includes parents, business representatives, representatives from community groups, and educators. Commando Academy is administered by one of the co-authors of this article who is also employed as an assistant to the director of Commando Project I. There is an instructional coordinator who also serves as a mathematics teacher, along with four other fulltime teachers, three teacher aides, and one parttime teacher. All teachers are certified and are employed under contract for ten months.

The school began three years ago in a remodeled truck garage in back of the Commando Project I

reflected in its attendance rate. For the past three years the average daily attendance rate has been 72 percent, well above the rate when these students were attending public school. The attendance rate is higher for students (parolees) referred to the school under the supervision of the courts (77 percent) than for students referred by parents or the Youth Service Bureau (62 percent).

As Jesse Wade put it, "What we are trying to do is compete with street life, to relate to things these kids understand so we can develop the basic skills of reading, writing, and math." That means, according to Wade, that the teachers have to use innovative techniques like "using dice to teach probability or our pool table to teach geometry." He states that the school's success is a result of its emphasis on rebuilding the self-confidence of the students.

Another reason for the success of the school, according to Wade, is the fact that "we insist upon a very important ingredient often lacking in public schools—tight discipline. We tell them that this school is operated for them. It's theirs so they better behave and take care of things. And, if they are going to learn to 'make it' they had better learn self-discipline."

Utilizing an open classroom concept, teachers emphasize a problem-oriented approach—how to apply for a job; how to read a newspaper; how to compute finance charges; how to be interviewed; how to write a business letter; and so on. Each skill area (math, reading, writing) is scheduled for one hour of direct instruction four days per week. These skills are then incorporated into electives (sewing, cooking) and social studies for the remaining three hours per week. The social studies curriculum focuses upon the black experience, ghetto living, how to reduce hostility, ways to cope with

frustration, black history, and black leaders, and includes a variety of field trips throughout the community.

The students have been to plays, sport events, musicals, newspapers, publishing companies (*Ebony* magazine, for example), governmental agencies, local businesses, and industrial plants. The school has its own basketball team (with uniforms), a student council, and the usual proms and parties.

The students are also involved in a work-study program where many of the basic and social skills learned in class are applied in a work situation. One half of the work-study day enables each student to earn \$2.30 per hour for 15 hours of work per week in a variety of work opportunities, under supervision, with continuous evaluation.

In essence, then, the program is one that combines education in an

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open classroom setting, recreation (basketball, dancing, swimming, camping) utilizing the resources of the community, and work for pay in a variety of local businesses and educational and social agencies.

Teachers work with the students on an individual and small group basis with a specific emphasis on improving the skills identified by the

achievement test. Each student is also assigned to a Commando Project I counselor (who is, in most cases, an ex-parolee). These counselors serve as the link between home and school as well as attendance officer, therapist, and confidant. In addition, each teacher serves as an advisor to a specific number of students.

Although Commando Academy does not award diplomas, its classes count for credit at the local high schools (up to five credits per year) should the student wish to go back to the public school. Two students returned to the local high school after attending the Academy for one year and both graduated.

### The Future

Success has brought problems: space is one, limiting enrollment is another, funding is the third. But Commando Academy is not an alternative school that is likely to close because of lack of interest. The school has demonstrated its value to the local community, the courts, and the educational community. This value was brought home to the other co-author of this article at the November Board meeting. A mother came to the Board meeting and, with

tears in her eyes, told the Board that she wanted to become involved in this school because her son, who has been in the school for two months, has attended almost every day, is doing his work, and, for the first time in years, has not been in trouble.

How do you reinterest a teenage parolee in attending school when he/she dropped out after a long history of failure? Commando Academy administrators and staff are not sure they have the complete answer to this question, but they are trying, and there is some evidence of success. *EL*



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### Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1977	March 19-23	Houston	Civic Center
1978	March 4-8	San Francisco	Civic Center
1979	March 3-7	Detroit	Cobo Hall
1980	March 29-April 2	Atlanta	Georgia World Congress Center

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