

Choices for Elementary School Teachers and Parents

F. HOUSTON DAVIS



Broken Ground School in New Hampshire serves 310 students in grades 4 to 6 from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Since 1974, we have operated a flexible schools-within-a-school program. Parents, children, and teachers are all involved in selecting the best learning environment for students.

The school provides two alternative programs in one building: Conventional and Continuous Progress. The Conventional School has self-contained classrooms and teacher-directed programs. Children are grouped by grade level and engage in similar instructional tasks, primarily in large, formal groups. The Continuous Progress School is based on the diagnostic/prescriptive model of instruction with multi-graded classrooms, combining the efficiency of whole-class instruction with the precision of individualized assistance. This school uses a variety of materials and teaching strategies to accommodate a wide range of student abilities and learning styles.

We began with three alternatives, the third being the Independent Learning School. This alternative school was an open, flexible activity-centered environment where students and teachers collaborated in setting goals and learning through projects in a "holistic curriculum." Last year, this alternative passed away quietly for several reasons. The teachers were not able to develop an effective program that was distinctly different from the Continuous Progress School. Staff changes caused a lack of continuity and contributed to an identity crisis. Finally, there was very little parental support to continue the program; parents were simply not selecting this school.

Each spring, parents complete a

Learning Style Survey for their children and indicate to which school they would like their children assigned during the coming year. Teachers complete a similar survey and make recommendations for placement. The groundwork for placement decisions is made during the school year through parent-teacher conferences, evening presentations, newsletters, brochures, and parent-child visits to the schools. When parents realize they play a part in the placement decision, their interest in the school in-

creases, as does their desire to make the best decision for their children. Usually, if there is a discrepancy between parent requests and teacher recommendations, parents are willing to accept the teacher's recommendation. At times, a "trial and error" approach is used to see how well the child adjusts to a particular school. A change in school assignment may be made for a substantial reason and if it is in the student's best interest.

Our goal is to provide a choice of teaching strategies and structures that meet the different ways students learn. In each school unit, we have identified and established teams of teachers whose philosophies and teaching styles are similar. But most teachers don't fall into one-dimensional categories; they use a variety of strategies and skills to accommodate different learning styles and student needs. Thus, we have conventional teachers doing unconventional things and "individualized" teachers doing conventional things. We have developed our own Learning Style Survey and have used Renzulli and Smith's Learning Styles Inventory to measure student preference for instructional techniques. A growing body of research has provided us with a practical basis for analyzing how students learn and for producing instruments for identifying learning styles.¹

We make sure, in plain and simple terms, that parents understand what their choices are. We continually clarify our language so that both parents and teachers have a common basis for understanding the characteristics of each school and our expectations of the students. But we also try to remain flexible, fitting the environment to the student rather than conditioning the student to the environment. ■

¹Student Learning Styles (Reston, Virginia: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1979).

F. Houston Davis is Principal, Broken Ground School, Concord, New Hampshire.

Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.