

Enterprise High: Helping School Dropouts Become Self-Supporting Adults

A unique curriculum begun in Michigan simulates life outside school to show students how education affects their ability to earn a living and manage life.



An Enterprise High School student and teacher frame a wooden storage shed that the student will sell on the open market.

His counselor described 17-year-old Tracy's previous school behavior as "aimless." Tracy was absent 51 times last year in regular high school. This past year Tracy had perfect attendance in an Enterprise High program.

Twenty-year-old Becky had been in a special education program for the severely emotionally impaired. She was removed from that program because of her violent outbursts. At Enterprise High, Becky became so amiable that her former school psychologist called the transformation "miraculous."

Rosetta, 41 years old, was an alcoholic welfare recipient "assigned" to an Enterprise High program where she found empathy for her initial feelings of outrage and imprisonment. These feelings gave way to excitement and engagement. Rosetta quit drinking, became editor of her program's newspaper, graduated from high school eight months later, and is currently enrolled full time in a local community college while holding down a full-time job as well.

Seventeen-year-old Carlos described himself as the "craziest and roughest hombre" in his previous high school. "It blew my mind when I came here in my heavy metal outfit and these folks treated me like I was normal!" Now normal-acting Carlos is a high school graduate who holds down a job. He is the pride of his once beleaguered parents.

Three years before, 20-year-old Michael had stolen his father's car and fled from his troubled home. When he was arrested in a southern state, his father picked up the car and left Michael in jail. Today Michael is a happily married high school graduate, managing a successful pizza franchise in the Detroit area.

Enterprise High is an educational program for those who have given up on school. It opened its doors in 1982 in Macomb County,



Young entrepreneurs repair computers for a company conceived in an Enterprise High School.

Michigan, where the dropout rate is roughly 25 percent, about the national average (National Center for Education Statistics 1980). Supported in part by the U.S. Department of Labor (first CETA, then JTPA), it began serving economically disadvantaged 16- to 21-year-old dropouts. In its first three years, Enterprise High expanded to ten programs in three Michigan counties serving over 500 students each year.

The Enterprise High Approach

Dropouts complain that school seems irrelevant to them. They can find no connection between the things they are being asked to learn in school and the so-called real world. Yet the social, material, and spiritual costs of dropping out are high (Levin 1972). The Enterprise High curriculum centers on two issues that are intensely relevant to those students who hunger to be through with school and on their own: how to earn a living and how to manage life.

The Enterprise: How to Earn a Living. In this program, students engage in business ventures, making products or providing services that the students market. After returning the costs of supplies and materials to the school, the students divide and keep the profits from sales.

Producing and selling products to complete strangers who "aren't just trying to be nice" is a tremendous ego boost for students accustomed to failure. Virtually all of the students in Enterprise High programs report feeling more successful and able at Enter-

prise High than they did in their previous schools. That's when plans for finishing high school and perhaps entering college are brought out of the locked closets, dusted off, and reexamined.

The Simulation: How to Manage Life. Students can earn up to ten points for each hour of their involvement with the Enterprise High program. For example, students typically spend four hours each day in classes, for which they may eventually be awarded four credits by earning 70 percent of a year's possible points in English, math, social studies, and prevocational arts. These points convert to a simulated wage. Everyone begins at minimum wage. As students accumulate more and more points (equivalent to earning more and more credits), their simulated wage rate (value per point) increases. If Marie, for instance, attends every hour of every day and earns every point possible, her simulated wage would be about \$20 an hour by year's end.

Students tie costs of housing, food, clothing, transportation, and entertainment to the lifestyle they would like to adopt. They receive simulated paychecks, deposit them in a bank checking account every two weeks, receive bills for their lifestyle choices, and pay these bills by check. Students also take a spin on the wheel of fortune, which adds the realism of unexpected life events such as illness or car repair. (Those who invest in insurance suffer less than those who want to "save" money by not buying insurance.) There's also a small claims court for those who play but don't pay. Advanced play includes marriage and children. Most accept the rude reality that \$100 a week take home is *not* enough to support a desirable lifestyle. Many remark, "If I want to have a decent life, I have to make more than minimum wage!" They conclude, "If I want to make more than minimum wage, I have to get more education!"

Basic Academic Skills Embedded. The Enterprise curriculum offers hundreds of opportunities for students to engage in basic skill practice. For example, calculating the cost of production or budgeting projected income to cover projected expenses involves addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of whole numbers, decimals, and fractions. Writing advertising

copy, writing stories, poems, and news articles (for the newspaper each site publishes, in which their advertising also appears); writing "how-to" articles about Enterprise ventures; and writing for publication in *The Dream Weaver* (a magazine jointly published by all Enterprise High programs) involve many language arts skills including spelling, vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph structure, organization, and sequencing. As students repeatedly engage in these life-based activities with new material—making a new product, calculating a different paycheck, budgeting a new income, writing a different story, solving a new problem—they become more sophisticated and their proficiency and mastery of the component skills improve.

Group Problem Solving Embedded. As with basic academic skills, group problem-solving opportunities are embedded in the curriculum. At Enterprise High, as in the world outside of school, people do much of their work in groups. What to build, what to charge, how to split the profits, how to change the plan, what the costs of living are, what rules of behavior are agreed to are all problems that are solved in meetings—daily business meetings, frequent classroom meetings, and regular schoolwide meetings. Students learn to work together, learn that they can accomplish more together than alone, and develop a sense of community that also improves their social functioning outside Enterprise High.

Trust: The Most Basic Program Component. Over the years program developers and staff members have learned that before we can expect students to make curricular gains, we must create an emotionally supportive and safe environment that allows students to risk failing and succeeding. Developing trust begins with the teacher (Rogers 1969). This unconditional empathy between teacher and student appears to strengthen the social ties between the student and the school, then between the student and the larger society that the teacher and school represent. The personal relationship may be a causal factor in the development of "social bonding" (Farnworth et al. 1985), which may abate delinquency.

At Enterprise High, staff members are trained to suspend judgment, culti-

vate friendship, honestly share feelings, and to confront from a position of caring. Only when the teacher-student relationship is characterized by trust can we expect students to mature in positive ways.

The Need for Long-Term Professional Development

When Enterprise High began, training amounted to telling the staff what to do. Like all persons who are students, staff members didn't want to be told what to do; they wanted to know what principles were at work so they could make their own decisions about their own behavior. In early 1983, with Oakland University, the program developers began the complex task of program explication and staff development.

Program initiators were influenced by two important and related works. The Rand corporation (Berman 1975) found that long-term success of educational programs depends on local ownership and staff development. The University of Texas' Concerns-Based Adoption Model (Hall et al. 1973) explained that staff development takes place over time. In weekly concerns-based staff meetings, staff and initiators wrestled with the problems associated with educating the disenfranchised. As this group solved their immediate problems, they began to develop a shared understanding of the principles underlying their work and of more appropriate use of the Enter-

prise curriculum and of new teacher practices.

In late 1983, when the program grew from one site to four, the staff rescheduled students' instructional hours into four days. This arrangement freed up one day each week to collaboratively develop curriculum and instructional practices. This collaborative professional development (Snell et al. 1985) is crucial to program success and is now a regular feature of all Enterprise High programs.

How Enterprise High Is Different

After seven years of program development, we have identified three areas in which this educational program tends to differ from traditional practice: the nature of the teacher-student relationship, the content and order of presentation of the curriculum, and the structure of school.

In our teacher-student relationships we strive to develop and maintain trust—prizing empathy and honesty. Our curriculum has four constituent parts: (1) the enterprise, (2) the simulation, (3) embedded basic academic skills, and (4) embedded group problem solving. Our structure is characterized by three component parts: (1) an ungraded, points-based grading system (engagement- and competency-based, where mastery, not time, is the terminating factor); (2) weekly collaborative professional development opportunities; and (3) democratic in-

volvement in policy making and administrative decisions of those having an investment in the social order (teachers and students).

These eight components (the teacher-student relationship, four components of the curriculum, and three components of school structure) constitute what we call the "eight basics" of Enterprise High. They have become the foundation of our current training for those who want to operate an Enterprise high program.

Each program site limits enrollment to approximately 50 students. A staff of five—one academically certified professional, one industrially or vocationally certified professional, and three paraprofessionals (one from each of three occupational areas)—work with these 50 students. Each program's \$200,000 cost is supported by state aid that returns to school when the dropout returns to school, and by a grant through the federal Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA).

Our most successful Enterprise areas have been woodworking, foods, and crafts, in which students focus on creating products. Data and word processing, computer repair, and graphic arts have also been good Enterprise areas. Students have had less satisfying results with performing arts, auto mechanics, small-engine repair, and boat repair where the focus is on delivering services.

Students must be out of school for at least 91 days (unless referred by school officials) to qualify for admission and may attend an Enterprise High program for two or three years. Students don't graduate from Enterprise High. Enterprise High is a four-credit curriculum that is adopted by local schools. Students earn their credits in Enterprise as well as other credits offered through regular or community education.

Program Impact

About four out of five entering students (all former dropouts) complete the year's program. About two-thirds of them go on to graduate. About this same number of students enter unsubsidized employment. Roughly half of those who graduate go on to college or trade school. For about one student in five, Enterprise High is a catalyst to a major life transformation—from alcoholic drug user to drug-free living.



Computer students created a "credit union" supported by account maintenance fees paid by fellow students

The Enterprise Basics

- I. **Teacher-Student Relationship**
Trust—Through unconditional positive regard.
- II. **Content**
 1. *Enterprise*—How to earn a living.
 2. *Simulation*—How to manage life.
 3. *Embedded Basic Academic Skills*—From the whole to the parts.
 4. *Embedded Group Problem-Solving*—All problems are group problems.
- III. **Structure**
 1. *Points-Based Credits*—Reinforce curricular engagement by allowing the student enough time for mastery.
 2. *Democratic Share of Authority to Staff and Students*—People "buy into" solutions of problems they help resolve.
- IV. **Professional Development**
Weekly Collaborative Staff Development—Staff and students grow through problem solving with colleagues.

—Richard Benedict

from criminal to a crime-free life, from welfare dependence to independent employment and success.

Problems remain, however. Not all staff members embrace the beliefs that underlie the Enterprise High program. They cannot practice well what they do not believe in. We cannot test what is not practiced. Staff development takes time. Sometimes time is on our side; sometimes it is not.

Our students come to us with horrible "school-and-work success" behaviors. At first their attendance is atrocious, and their time on task is nearly nonexistent. It's tempting to try to legislate changes in their behavior by setting strict standards for program inclusion. But these strict standards only hasten exclusion and lose us the opportunity to teach positive behaviors. Over the course of the program year, students' behavior changes dramatically. Similarly, our students come

to us with reading and mathematics scores well below the mean. They make statistically significant gains in reading and math at Enterprise High.

We wonder, though, if their gains are large enough to catapult these students into the highly competitive world of college—where many of them must succeed if they are to have their life-of-choice. The jury is still out on this question. Our optimism is based on the strong shift in self-confidence our students experience at Enterprise High, which should influence them to set their sights on their higher aspirations.

Whether or not schools adopt an Enterprise High program for dropouts or potential dropouts, our experience suggests that the existing school program can be more successful with these students by (1) developing facilitative trust relationships between teachers and students; (2) engaging students in whole, personally meaningful, life-based activities that help

them experience the desire to master the activities component parts; (3) providing students with an ungraded, engagement- and competency-based credit award system, which allows them all the time they need to master the curriculum; (4) giving staff regular opportunities for collegial professional development; and (5) giving staff and students a democratic voice in policy making and administration. □

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Richard R. Benedict is Founder of Enterprise High, and he and **Richard Snell** are Codirectors of Enterprise Programs and the Center for Studies of Alternatives in Education as well as educational consultants for the Macomb Intermediate School District, 44001 Garfield Rd., Mt. Clemens, MI 48044. **Donald Miller** is Associate Dean of the School of Human and Educational Services, Oakland University, and Chair of the Center for Studies of Alternatives in Education, School of Human and Educational Services, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48063.



Staff members cultivate students' friendship, confronting them from a position of caring.

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