

The Alternatives Route



to School Renewal

by Mary Anne Raywid

Someone has said that "progressive education" is not a movement with a distinctive program — but a phenomenon that surfaces periodically to protest whatever it finds stultifying about the education of its day. Sometimes it arises to plead the case of compassion and a genuine caring about children; sometimes to complain about the school's distance from life and "the real world;" and sometimes to urge the case of quality and dedication to excellence. In this sense, if not others, alternative education has been the contemporary version of progressivism. And indeed, in the several phases of its short life span, it has

represented all of these disparate concerns.

The first alternatives — those emerging in the mid to late sixties — were much stirred, and perhaps even articulated, by compassion and a desire to recast a bureaucratized function in more humane terms. Although there were two quite distinct strands from the start — the free schools attended largely by middle and upper class Whites, and the freedom schools designed for Southern and inner-city Blacks — the two were linked in their struggle against oppression. Of course, they had different kinds of oppression to deal with — but in both cases, the

school was the immediate agent of the oppressor and thus required refashioning. Whether the oppression took the form of grim, joyless classrooms held together by fear — or the racism and systematic "destruction of the hearts and minds" of minority children —

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liberation was the crux of the solution.

A few years later, a new theme began to gain prominence: an insistence that schools so separated the young from the world — and so artificially presented that world for study and analysis — that education reform lay in restoring closer education-to-world connections. Accordingly, some alternatives began devising such now-familiar approaches as action learning programs, extended public service activities, and city-as-school programs in which the learning is directly in and from the world instead of being pursued primarily in classrooms.

More recently, the headlines about falling test scores and achievement levels, along with other allegations about academic decline, have led many to a concern with enhancing quality, and they have looked to “basics” or “fundamentals” alternatives as a means of institutionalizing their concerns. A few public school systems are even sporting military schools as options within their districts.

Full Circle?

Does this mean, then, that in its 15 years alternative education has traveled full circle, from liberal to conservative, rebel to reactionary? No. Alter-



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natives of each of these three types, and the many shades between, still flourish in communities across the country. In fact, the development of public school alternatives has been little short of phenomenal, with only a hundred or so existing in 1970, and an estimated 10,000 in operation a decade later — a remarkable growth in an institution not noted for its ability to change. Several explanations seem important in accounting for this kind of spread, which has proved far more extensive and durable than most of the education innovations of the sixties and early seventies.

First, as the diversity of the above-cited programmatic changes suggests, alternative schools and programs provide flexibility within systems where that has been hard to preserve. The alternatives concept brings with it the machinery for setting up new programs as needs and interests warrant — and of discontinuing existing ones when interest wanes. Thus, alternatives provide a built-in mechanism whereby the system can inform, and then reform, itself.

A second reason for the burgeoning of alternatives in the last decade is that they have apparently supplied a *context* yielding success. As the programs described above show clearly, there have been few constraints so far as substantive directions are concerned. But there *have* been some conditions which seem to be constants in alternative after alternative, irrespective of time and place. One thing is smallness. Most alternative schools enroll fewer than 200 youngsters, and many are programs of 40 or 50. But note that it is *school* size not *class* size that is stressed — the idea that the dimensions of the institution as a whole are important. Many feel that size has a lot to do with the success of alternatives. But there are others who claim, with considerable plausibility, that size merely

supplies the conditions for the essential ingredient, which is climate. One of the hypotheses which developed out of the failures of so many of the programmatic innovations of the sixties was that perhaps the environment or climate of the school is an even greater determinant of student achievement and satisfaction than the programs the school offers! Whether or not one is prepared to go that far, there is little doubt that the atmosphere — the total “feel” of the alternative school — differs considerably from that of most others. And whether the alternative’s atmosphere be casual or formal, a positive contrast with other schools is experienced almost as soon as one sets foot inside the door.

Another explanation for the rapid burgeoning of alternative schools is that they have constituted the direct institutional expression of the national commitments to equality and pluralism which have dominated the decade. How can we more reasonably apply a commitment to pluralism within the school than by differentiating education programs? How can we more feasibly pursue equality for all youngsters than by providing programs specifically tailored to helping each of them realize it? Thus, an important concomitant of the growth of alternative schools has been a move away from the century’s previous conviction that there is a “one best system” of education, a one best way to keep school.

Finally, but by no means least, some have attributed the spread of alternative schools simply to the choice they extend. At a time when all sorts of societal problems are attributed to widespread feelings of powerlessness, an arrangement inviting the individual to choose among real options is bound to appeal. Moreover, the choice arrangement guarantees that one does not first have to convince a majority of

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neighbors, or school officials, that the individual's choice is the *best* one. Minority choices can be honored, too, in an options system — even while recognized as the choice of only relatively small numbers.

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Alternatives are Responsive

So as an institutional form or arrangement, alternative schools have proved highly responsive to the concerns of the past decade. They have responded to the times in other ways as well. Recall our opening assertion that progressive education is a periodic phenomenon taking its particular shape in each instance as an outgrowth of the context of its time. This does not mean that alternatives become frozen and fail to change over time. Nevertheless, in overall conception they are likely to be fashioned very extensively in terms of their dates of origin. See, for example, some of the things that can be said about the particular character of many of the alternatives going back to the early seventies. They reflected some clear contrasts with the practice and the rationales of the comprehensive high school of the day.

Perhaps the most pervasive matter pertained to human interaction. The comprehensive high school had built into its very structure a minimal concern for interpersonal relationships — reflecting the assumption that these are peripheral to the school's proper concern in ways such as assigning teachers to more students than they could possibly come to know in any meaningful sense — and in making no attempt to provide student continuity from class to class. The comprehensive high school was seen by both advocate and critic as a model of the larger society in which most relationships are fairly remote and impersonal single-

purpose interactions. These circumstances were a particular target of the “compassionate critics” of the late sixties, and many of the early alternative schools set out quite deliberately to create a setting marked by strong

emphasis on interpersonal relationships and a warm, supportive environment for all within the school. One of the most visible features of many of these alternatives became the mutuality of relationships between students and teachers: if students were to be encouraged to be open and self-disclosing, then teachers must be also — in order to create a climate of genuine trust.

The results were often very positive, but they created predictable difficulties for teachers. The expectations of the alternative school with respect to relationships threw open the matter of teacher role. Obviously the teacher became something more and other than an introducer to, and representative of, the world of knowledge. But

needed and sought different kinds of alliances with their teachers — and it was not uncommon to find some alternatives where many student-teacher associations were marked by a shared rage at the world's ills, and others where the relationships were largely articulated by a shared search for self-esteem and positive regard. In each case, the nature of the human relationships within them went a long way toward lending each alternative school a distinct personality of its own.

Since many of the early alternatives saw themselves offering a freeing from constraints, there was considerable emphasis on individual choice and decision, as well as on collective decision making. Attempts at participatory democracy were common among these programs — although sustaining interest in the time-consuming processes was often difficult. It appeared that when adolescents were offered expressive freedom — with respect to clothing, language, posture, personal style — and a fair amount of significant choice-making opportunities for themselves as individuals, they were not so concerned after all with participating in all the decisions. But the right to make decisions of one's own was no insignificant matter, since one of the protests against prevalent school practice was the amount of control it

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there was considerable variation in the kinds of student-teacher alliances that were formed. Since alternative schools have tended to attract similar kinds of students — and have been encouraged, in fact, to identify particular target populations similar in some educationally significant way (such as learning style, or need for structure) — particular kinds of relationships often came to be associated with particular schools. Different kinds of students

exerted over students. Students in these early alternatives were not without adult control. Indeed, it might be argued that the elimination of the barriers and animuses between adolescents and adults left the young far more amenable to adult control than more prevalent education arrangements made them. But in the alternative school, the control came informally, growing out of the student's acceptance of a particular adult's

leadership, rather than out of a rule structure of formally imposed regulations and responsibilities.

Alternatives getting under way a bit later tended to define themselves in somewhat different ways — although it is easy to overrate the importance of the time dimension since programs of most types have been started throughout the decade. But one of the ways in which alternatives differ from one another lies in just which dimensions of a school they select as most critical — or, in the terms we used earlier, which features of contemporary prevalent practice they find most stultifying. Those whose complaints relate to educational content and the way it is presented quite understandably design different schools from those most concerned about the quality of human interaction within the typical school.

A number of alternatives have been planned to feature a particular approach to content. For instance, the Learning Co-op in Fairfield, Connecticut, adopts a different theme each year — “The Good Life” one year, “Hometown” another — and much of the learning is linked to pursuit of this broad theme. The magnet schools of Houston offer another case of defining an alternative and articulating its program largely on the basis of content: * a student chooses a curriculum in the Aerodynamics Program, or the Foreign Language Academy or the Petrochemical Careers Program.

Other alternatives have selected learning environments and methods for greater emphasis, and their major points of departure from prevalent practice focus more here than on content. Alternatives where students learn from extended service activities in the community — or from functioning as assistants, aides or apprentices to researchers or government officials or businessmen or craftsmen — have been fashioned by the search for new instruction methods. And a number of fairly novel methods have emerged in consequence, with perhaps the most widely acclaimed the oral histories that became the *Foxfire* series. (The sixth *Foxfire* volume has now been published, detailing the life and lore of

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rural Georgian Appalachia. Several of its predecessors have been best sellers.) One of the very first public school alternatives was Philadelphia’s Parkway — which introduced the concept of learning in and from businesses and public institutions and activities, rather than in schools and from teachers.

Back to the Basics

The most recent type of alternative to emerge has been the back-to-basics school. Here it is insufficient discipline, lack of hard work and lack of seriousness of purpose that have been found stultifying about prevalent education arrangements. The concern is for proficiency and its ideals include the rigor and excellence that also inspired some of the curricular innovations of the sixties. The curriculum in back-to-basics alternatives is likely to differ from the sixties programs, however, in looking to more traditional fare than “modern math” and the innovative science curricula represented. There is likely to be an emphasis on imbibing and accepting the cultural heritage — including its loyalties and traditions. Thus, patriotism, moral standards, courtesy and respect for adults are frequent emphases. As the John Marshall School tells its students, it stands for “traditional education, order, quiet and control.” Such schools are very much concerned with student conduct, and with the personality and character traits which underlie that. These, according to some, loom even larger than learning in the aims of the fundamental school. Very clearly, a number of the features we have attributed to earlier alternatives would be anathema to

*Magnet schools are, of course, one type of alternative. In fact, as the label is used most typically, magnet schools are alternatives designed for the purpose of accomplishing desegregation.

fundamental school advocates. But these schools have, of course, been shaped by their complaints against prevalent education practice and conviction, not the practice of other alternatives — which, in the nature of the case, can never be forced upon youngsters whose parents have not chosen them. Thus, it has been prevalent school practice and outcomes that fundamental school advocates have found wanting. To date, not enough of these schools have appeared at the secondary level to facilitate the kind of penetrating look it is now possible to give earlier alternatives. And they have not yet developed a very extensive literature. But since programs of this general type are currently among the fastest growing alternatives, such an examination soon may be possible.

It would appear, however, that substantive generalizations about alternative schools will continue to prove difficult. One can identify systemic or organizational constants — most notably the optional or choice basis that is so fundamental to the alternatives notion. But so far as programs are concerned, the only sure statement is that alternative schools represent institutionalized diversity. Perhaps therein lies their strength and major contribution. Ideologically they represent a way to render public schools continuously responsive to those most directly affected by them. Organizationally, alternatives have introduced, into an otherwise inflexible system, a mechanism permitting continuous change. In the terms with which we began, they have set in place the procedures whereby any education found stultifying can be amended quite simply and directly by those finding it so, with the introduction of a new program.