

Opinion

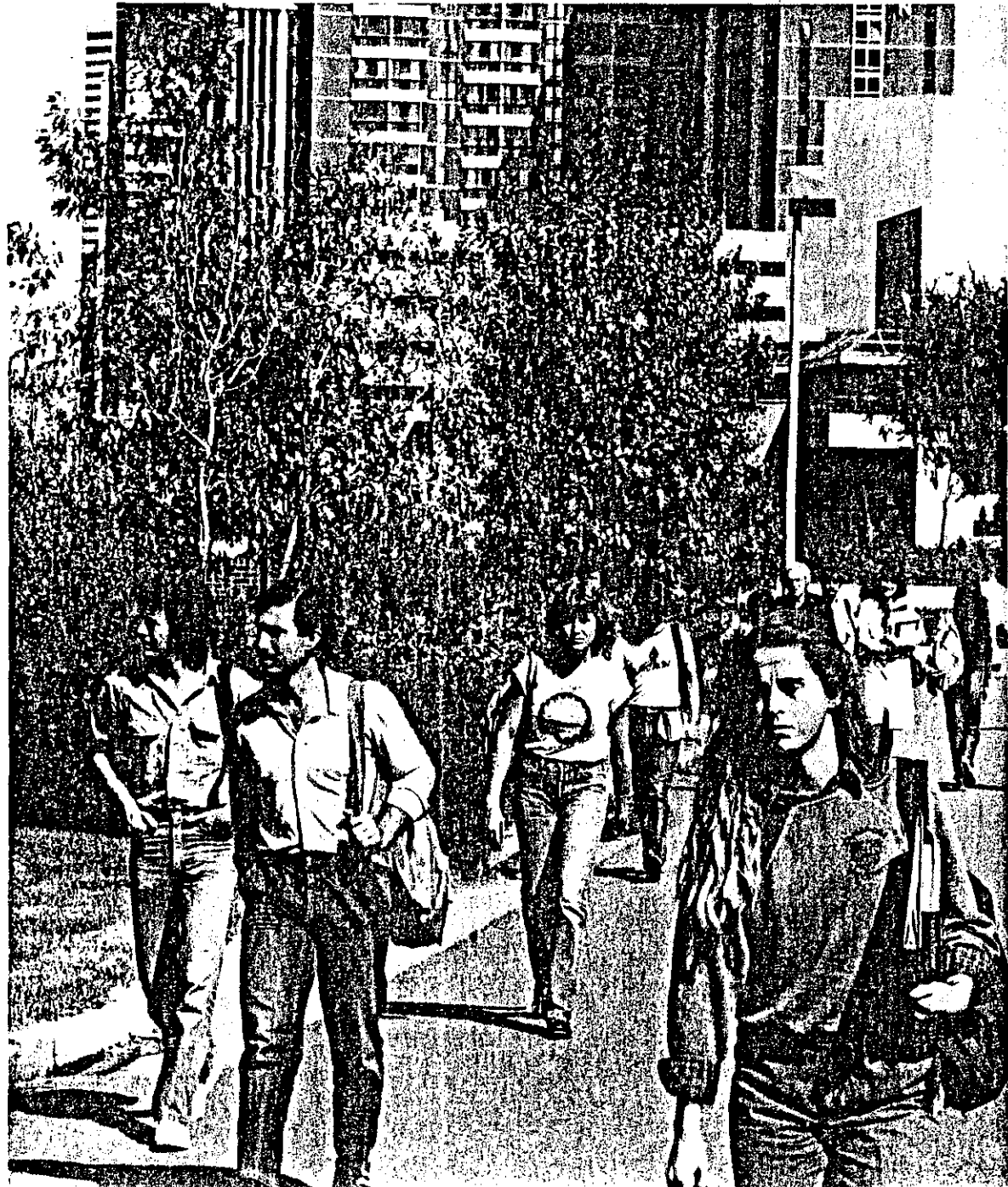
Keeping At-Risk Youth in School

by Mary Anne Raywid, School of Education, Hofstra University, New York. Condensed from her speech to the first annual meeting of the Florida Association of Alternative School Educators.

Efforts to deal with the dropout problem have been growing over the past several years for an assortment of reasons. One has been the desire to improve both the substance and the image of urban education. The city schools, where the dropout problem has been most obvious, have been the nation's weakest and most troubled schools. Another impetus has been the need to deal with the "social dynamite" situation created by the jobless dropouts of the inner city. If such youngsters could be helped to finish high school, and to become better employment candidates, then a major current social threat could be alleviated. Still another reason has been declining school enrollments, which have spurred interest in keeping even difficult students in attendance. And impetus has come from the spotlight public interest has put on schools, which makes it less and less possible to obscure the facts about the numbers leaving.

Essentially three strategies or broad approaches to the dropout problem have evolved: a punitive approach, a remediating strategy and an environmental design approach.

Punitive Approach



The *punitive* approach is the oldest and least successful strategy. It consists simply of punishing the truant or rebellious student. The most popular applications of this approach are in-school suspension programs, but there are also arrangements known as "crisis intervention centers" and "cool-out rooms." Such programs have been judged by critics as nothing less than "soft jails" to which students are sentenced. Despite puzzling talk of "positive programs," no one is really sent for educational purposes. On the basis of what both research and theory tell us, removing a youngster from the classroom for punitive reasons is tantamount to a concession of adult failure; it is an interruption of the educational process in the interests of gaining control.

I am not saying that stringent methods are never necessary. When we begin to talk, however, about hundreds of thousands of kids in school or out-of-school suspension programs, who may be subjected to corporal punishment and refused promotion as well, don't such staggering totals indicate that the system is breaking down and a different strategy must be sought? The punitive approach might add up to just blaming the victim. As we exonerate ourselves, we divest ourselves of responsibility for very much further effort.

Remediation Approach

The *remediation* approach to dealing with marginal students appears far more positive, humane and accommodative. It formally recognizes that not all school failures are willfully malicious or morally defective. It recognizes that there are youngsters who need extra help in arriving at adequate levels of academic achievement and cognitive maturity, or of emotional and social growth and stability. Thus, it provides for compensatory education such as the federal government's massive Head Start and Follow Through efforts. Or, it provides for remediation efforts or counseling programs.

Although success rates for this approach vary with the adequacy of the particular program undertaken, its potential appears far greater than that of the punitive approach. A very substantial number of remediation programs, however, produce gains or benefits that tend subsequently to fade out and disappear. Thus, students reading several years below grade level

may, in a good remediation program, gratifyingly narrow the gap, or even eliminate it. Or the previously "acting-out" student may become much less volatile and the chronic truant far more regular in his attendance. The trouble is that once the program has ended, the problem tends to reappear: the reading starts slipping or the volatile behavior begins to emerge again or the absence rate starts climbing.

The problem lies in the assumption that with sufficient help we can enable all youngsters to adjust to the school's way of doing things — its patterns and structures and tempo. The adjustment goal shapes the remedial effort and makes of it a beef-em-up-and-send-em-back project. But the impermanence of the gains seems to demonstrate the limited effectiveness of the approach. It may well be that the remediation program changes *youngsters* rather minimally; but for its duration it changes the *school environment* sufficiently to elicit quite a different behavior from them. Once returned to the original environment initiating the problem, the sequence begins to repeat itself and the problem blossoms anew.

Environmental Design

And this, of course, leads to the third approach, *environmental design*. This one attempts to adjust the school to the student, instead of insisting that it be vice versa. It assumes that lots of youngsters can learn well — if we just don't insist that they all do so in exactly the same way. It assumes that lots of young people can behave themselves and act responsibly in some environments even though they fail to do so in others. And it assumes that it is the responsibility of the school to discover or invent the kind of environment each youngster needs. This is not a matter of a thousand different environments for a thousand youngsters — but it might well prove a matter of six or eight different environments within a district. Is that really too much to ask of an institution with a guaranteed clientele delivered by compulsory attendance laws — an institution that stands as the gatekeeper to life's chances for all of our young people?

I want to add a different sort of case, too, for the appropriateness of redesigning school environments. Experts do a lot of talking about how organi-

zations defeat themselves with many of the structures and regulations they impose. Some have begun to talk about "confrontational" schools, which actually encourage bad behavior with the very rules they formulate to prevent it! Such results are known to organizational researchers as "counter-intuitive effects." Let me give you an example: In a desire to keep marginal students in school and at work, some districts have adopted stringent attendance policies denying credit to anybody absent more than, say, five times in an eight-week grading period. The policy may scare some into compliance. But I suspect that it convinces an even larger number that there's no percentage at all in showing up for the other seven weeks, once the limit has been reached. Thus, the "counter-intuitive effect" of this demanding attendance policy may well be to increase truancy.

The environmental design approach presupposes that there is no one best way to keep school, no one best curriculum in the sky, no one best way to teach reading or anything else, no one best way to test for or measure education accomplishment. Given a single set of education goals for a large and varied population, curricular and instructional diversity are not only permissible, they are imperative! So if we really want to enhance the education efforts and accomplishments of large numbers, we are going to have to be receptive to the idea of a lot more routes to education excellence.

Excellence doesn't require sameness; in fact, it necessitates diversity. Substantial evidence supports this approach. It comes from an array of experiences with genuine schools of choice designed for disruptive and truant and underachieving students, as well as for successful ones. It comes also from a massive study of magnet schools completed last year by the U.S. Department of Education, and from the studies of effective schools that are succeeding with just the inner-city populations that have proved the most education-resistant.

So it can be done. And we now have a growing body of evidence regarding just what works best with difficult students. It is the environmental design approach, not the punitive or the remediation strategies. And what has this approach taught us about

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designing environments for the students who have not succeeded under conventional school circumstances? There are some clear messages, indicating features that ought to be part of any program designed to reclaim dropouts or prospective dropouts, and to retain them long enough to enable them to finish school. Eight broad components in one form or another appear in successful programs.

1. At-risk youth, more than others, need a cohesive school community that generates a strong sense of affiliation. They must almost look like "membership" organizations that one has elected to join. The impersonality of the comprehensive high school is one of the features dropout-prone youth find hardest to take. A personalized environment is essential, and the school or unit with which each student is affiliated must be small enough to accommodate and sustain such personalization.
2. Choice — the opportunity to choose one's school or program — is likely to hold special importance for at-risk youngsters. By the time they have reached the stage where total withdrawal is a real possibility, they are likely to have had their preferences ignored or overridden so many times that the opportunity to choose holds strong appeal. Moreover, there is a kind of mutuality and respect that goes with choosing, which can contribute substantially to the often battered self-concept of the youngster who is at risk. Additionally, if there are options, at-risk students have a greater chance of finding things of interest, challenge and benefit.
3. Almost by definition, the marginal student is likely to be very short on motivation. Multiple efforts are needed to provide the stimulation and challenge that obtain engagement — and the variation of pace and topic and activity important to sustain it. While teachers are not entertainers, they must recognize that unless they can motivate these students to substantial efforts, they will have set the stage for just one more round of failure.
4. Work must be designed and arranged so that students can meet with frequent, real successes — not phony rewards for nonchallenges — important to help these youngsters develop confidence in their own capacities to do academic work.
5. Dropout-prone youth need to study content they can recognize as germane and important. This need not restrict their curricula to "life-adjustment" fare, but it will probably dictate curricular organization and require the arrangement and presentation of material in topics, issues or problems, rather than as a series of unconnected disciplines. This means that the curriculum of their programs will differ from that of traditional programs. And this, in turn, means that students in these classes will not have been prepared for the same examination questions that students in other classes have been readied for.
6. Marginal students have become marginal because traditional pedagogical methods are inappropriate for them. Successful learning will demand instructional methods and activities other than the traditional approaches. Opportunities for action learning should be available in connection with most, if not all, courses. And most should provide for small group and individual learning as well as for whole class instruction. Both instructional activities and evaluation arrangements should minimize competition and provide ample opportunity for cooperative, interdependent learning.
7. Marginal students may well need developmental programs — in cognitive development and in learning to function as responsible members of a group and in becoming autonomous, self-directing adults. These crucially important processes of growing-up need very direct attention for at-risk youngsters. This means a different proportion of developmental to substantive learning.
8. Finally, the evidence strongly suggests that district support and backing are important to effective schools and programs. A critical ingredient is enough confidence in the program and those who operate it to permit them to depart from procedures and practices marking other schools. Unless the staff of the new programs have sufficient leeway to design and maintain *different* climates, curriculum, activities, etc., they can only replicate the conditions of failure.

These, then, are the elements and qualities that research has found central to effective educational programs for prospective dropouts. The way we understand the dropout seems critical to the way we deal with him or her, and our treatment of dropouts is likely to set the limits of our success. ★