



An alternative to public schools

*It is the alternative
schools themselves*

by Mary Anne Raywid

Several histories already have been written about the alternatives to public schools that emerged during the 1960s. The free and freedom schools that thrived during that tumultuous decade have been liberally chronicled and interpreted. But these alternatives, which had their roots outside public education, soon inspired alternatives within it — and that history remains to be written. This article seeks to tell the story of the first decade of alternatives within U.S. public school systems.

A number of schools have been credited as the first public alternatives — Philadelphia's Parkway, which opened in 1969 after two years of dreaming and planning; Wilson Open Campus School in Mankato, Minn., which dates from 1968; and Murray Road in Newton, Mass., and Harlem Prep, both of which got under way in 1967. Since then, all of these programs have experienced many changes, and countless others have followed in their wake. The aggregate, after 10 years of steady growth and sharing, is a distinctive and fairly healthy movement. There are notable common roots, practices, and concerns.

The first alternative schools — those named above — were not alternatives in the present sense of the term. These early programs grew out of the educational humanism of the Sixties, which envisioned existing schools as cold, dehumanizing, irrelevant institutions largely indifferent to the humanity and "personhood" of those within them. Many early leaders in the alternative school movement were likely to be strident critics of government and society, as well as of education. They were opponents of the Vietnam War, or critics of America's materialism, or challengers of our scientific-technocratic ethos — or all of these. Anti-establishment sentiment and rhetoric were legion; students in many early alternative schools were associated with what Theodore Roszak dubbed the "counter-culture" and Charles Reich later called "Consciousness III."

For the most part, neither the staff nor the students in those schools saw themselves offering any mere alternative to the conventional way of keeping school; they were characteristically much less modest and guarded. Most viewed their programs as the kind of reform desperately needed by all education.

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Although the term "alternative" was used — especially in connection with Parkway — it seems to have been introduced to highlight the displacement of classrooms by other arenas for learning rather than to suggest that there might be a multitude of good ways of conducting school. This latter idea did not seem to emerge until the early 1970s, when a number of factors led to it.

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First among these factors was the bad news that followed (and dimmed) the promise of the Sixties. It is important to remember that the Sixties were not only a time of protest; they also were a period of tremendous sociopolitical optimism and of substantial growth in our expectations for education. The long critique of schooling that began after World War II suddenly gave way in the Sixties to a wide assortment of ideas, and these received extensive help — literally billions of dollars — from private and governmental sources. Team teaching, programmed learning, computer-assisted instruction, and structured curriculum were among the more specific innovations; and the open classroom, compensatory education, the middle school, and individualized instruction gained substantial followings as more broad-gauged proposals. Huge foundations — Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller — generously supported the experimental programs, and so did corporations. In New York, for instance, "street academies" were supported by the Chase Manhattan Bank, Union Carbide, and IBM, as well as by foundation funds.

During the mid-Sixties, President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program declared a War on Poverty.

Education was to be in the vanguard of the battle. Government funds were made available to schools in unprecedented amounts under several different programs of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

The Head Start program of Title I was aimed at children of the poor, explicitly to offset the disadvantages to which they were subject. The intent of these efforts was to equalize opportunity. Simultaneously, other programs such as Title III, ESEA, were introduced specifically to facilitate innovation and the development of alternatives for other populations as well; among the results were such now well-known alternative programs as the St. Paul Open School and Quincy High School II in Illinois.

Evaluation of all of these programs, however, resulted in the bitterly disappointing finding of "no significant difference." As the Ford Foundation commented in evaluating its own grant program, perhaps the biggest thing to come out of it all was the knowledge of what are not the significant variables. The foundation wistfully concluded that we really don't know how to improve schools. Several years later, an extensive analysis of education research confirmed that finding, concluding that we had yet to discover a single variable that is consistently correlated with educational success.

These lackluster findings effectively halted new efforts at innovation, with some critics demanding a complete moratorium on innovation of any kind. Instead, attention returned to the alternatives idea of the Sixties. Educators took renewed interest in alternatives and options *per se* and in alternative systems. Such systems were the express target of the federal Experimental Schools Program in 1971, which enabled Berkeley and Minneapolis to set up extensively differentiated educations to be available by choice.

The 1970s continued to give an increasing amount of emphasis to the provision of alternatives to all youngsters and their families. By 1973, Mario Fantini's *Public Schools of Choice* elaborated the concept and showed how to implement it. The National Consortium on Options in Public Education, organized at Indiana University in 1971, quickly became an international consortium. Under the leadership of Robert Barr, Daniel Burke and Vernon Smith, ICOPE soon became a major voice for alternatives and options systems.

The idea of choice in public schooling received a considerable boost with the appearance in 1974 of a new interpretive history of American education, David Tyack's *The One Best System*. Tyack's book led many

to question the assumption that there is one best way to keep school: a single best set of aims for all, an ideal curriculum, one best set of instructional methods, one best way to organize and administer schools and to prepare teachers. Tyack greatly extended the discussion of alternative forms of schooling and lent legitimacy to a fledgling movement.

Supporters of alternatives in education were quick to point out that the notion is highly consistent with the principles of a democratic society, a pluralistic culture, the need for community involvement in education, the need for institutional self-renewal in schools, and the need for financial austerity. This broadly based rationale — which appeared in the first issue of the ICOPE bulletin, *Changing Schools* — suggests something of the scope of the appeal of alternatives. They have a remarkable capacity to respond to a wide spectrum of concerns.

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From these beginnings 10 years ago, public alternative schools have grown from 100 or so in 1970 to more than 10,000 today. Alternatives are found in 80 percent of the nation's larger school districts (those enrolling 25,000 or more students), and they have begun to appear even in the smallest districts: One out of every five districts enrolling fewer than 600 students now claims one or more alternatives. An estimated three million U.S. youngsters currently are enrolled in alternative programs.

What are they like, these alternative schools that have proliferated at such a rapid rate across the United States? Generalizations are difficult because the alternatives represent institutionalized diversity. Some are clearly linked to their forebears — the free schools and freedom schools of the 1960s. Many seem marked by an informality rarely found in other schools. Alternative schools tend to rely on close personal relationships instead of rules as the basis for social organization and control within the school. Charismatic leadership tends to play a larger role than do formal principles of role and function.

The curriculum is chosen from a wider range of knowledge and life than is the case in other schools, and it may be pursued in novel ways and in unusual settings. I also must add, however, that one of the fastest-growing types of alternatives during the past five years has been the so-called fundamentalist or back-to-basics program, which relies heavily on formality, deference to authority, traditional curriculum, and such instructional strategies as drill, recitation and rote learning.

Alternative schools have changed markedly in both mood and tone within the past decade. Many of the spiritual progeny of the free schools, for example, were heavily concerned with the existential angst of all participants. There was much talk about being free to do your own thing without having someone else's trip laid on. But many other early alternatives simply emphasized some degree of freedom from standard school procedures and requirements in order to proceed with a more substantial education. Programs of the first sort tended to de-emphasize cognitive learning, but some remarkable scholarship emerged from alternatives of the second variety.

The values and goals of the early alternative schools were typically quite individualistic and private — rarely oriented toward increased group consciousness or commonality. But programs emphasizing group awareness and responsibility and seeking to build a deliberate sense of community began to appear in the mid-1970s.

The early emphasis on collective decision making via participatory democracy has become less pronounced. One comparative study of alternative school evaluations lists the satisfactory carrying out of group decision making as a common problem. On the other hand, an early sympathetic analyst — himself a director of an alternative school — suggested that, unless

alternative schools struck a compromise on participatory democracy, they probably would run into trouble. His suggestion was to limit student involvement to certain key decisions and to seek genuine involvement in those.

However, even in the absence of much collective decision making, most alternative schools share an emphasis on the freedom and authority over one's person that Allen Graubard urged in his book, *Free the Children*. It is, in effect, the power of the veto: No youngster should be forced to do what he or she is determined to reject.

In at least one respect — the commitment these schools engender from all within them, students and staff alike — the decade has not changed alternative schools, except perhaps to intensify that commitment. The devotion of the youngsters is strange and wondrous to behold. Incredible as it may seem, they are uniformly eager to testify on behalf of their school.

Because of the limited amount of systematic research to date, the success secrets of alternatives cannot yet be recounted with much assurance. There have been interpretive analyses, particularly of organizational structures and processes, e.g., interaction patterns, decision making and operative values. And there have been case studies and a number of evaluations; almost all public school alternatives are required annually to document their effectiveness. These studies and evaluations enable us to state that alternative schools typically lead to greater academic achievement on the part of their students.



At least some alternatives send a substantially higher percentage of their graduates on to college than do comparable schools in the same district; the only inquiries to date suggest that alternative school graduates may outperform the others in college. Such results assume special significance in view of the fact that so many alternative education students began as poorly motivated underachievers. A great deal of other evidence also indicates that alternative schools have a clear and positive effect on their students' attitudes toward school and on their attitudes toward themselves. Most critically, so far as success in school is concerned, students in alternative schools come to experience a heightened sense of control over their own lives.

One of the reasons for the rapid proliferation of alternative schools is surely the fact that many groups with disparate agendas have seen alternatives as the means to achieve their own purposes. Youngsters who hate school have regarded alternatives as a much more satisfactory arrangement. In Plainview, N.Y., for example, a group of high school students met for more than a year and then presented a detailed formal proposal to the board of education for the alternative they had designed.

Teachers seeking a practicable way to individualize instruction have looked to alternatives, as have

teachers who feel as locked in and restricted by conventional school practices as many students. And school administrators, leaders and policy makers have looked to alternatives as a way to effect reform in education. For some, the goal was nothing less than the humanizing of the entire system. The turbulent Sixties taught some harsh lessons about the change process, showing that would-be reformers had simply been barking up the wrong tree. They had sought substantial change by modifying a single facet of the school — curriculum or methods or teacher deployment or scheduling arrangements. They failed to appreciate the school's capacity to absorb and co-opt and defuse. Analysts began to conclude that realistic hopes for improvement would have to focus on the whole institutional structure — the social organization and its culture or climate. Many saw alternative schools as just the mechanism for introducing different institutional arrangements and climates. In fact, some perceived alternatives as the key to institutional renewal — renewal on a continuing basis, since demands for a new alternative and diminished interest in an existing one would be the means whereby the system could reform itself.

The last 10 years have witnessed an expansion of the mission of alternative schools, which accounts in considerable part for their growing popularity. Student disaffection has been evident throughout the decade in the forms of school vandalism and violence, high truancy and drop-out rates. The earliest evaluations showed clearly that alternatives are an extraordinarily effective solution to these problems. Agencies interested in delinquency and juvenile crime prevention quickly came to see alternative schools as an answer. As school desegregation difficulties intensified, it appeared that attractive alternatives — magnet schools — might draw youngsters from various neighborhoods on a voluntary basis. In the inner cities, where feelings of powerlessness and disenfranchisement were widespread, policy analysts saw alternatives as a way of bestowing immediate empowerment.

The growth of the alternative school movement was further stimulated by the growing critique of education and the increasing pressures on schools to better serve each and every youngster. Declining test scores and plummeting public confidence combined to increase the pressures on schools. Many came to see alternatives as a means of tailoring educational programs — content, approach, structure, climate — to the specific needs of different groups. Particularly in school districts with heterogeneous populations, teachers and administrators have looked to alternatives as a means of fitting education to particular sets of needs. Declining enrollments have further pressed administrators to search for programs that can deliver greater holding power and increased effectiveness in the interest of halting the flight to suburban and private schools.

The breadth of this appeal and the several distinct constituencies it creates may account for the early Establishment approval of alternatives — which began as a somewhat radical proposal pressed by dissidents. As mentioned earlier, a number of major corporations and foundations aided the early free and freedom schools. The federal government helped launch a number of individual alternatives and sought, through two different programs, to encourage the development of systems of choice.

Universities have been involved — notably through such efforts as ICOPE at Indiana University and the National Alternative Schools Program at the University of Massachusetts, which offered direct help of various sorts to alternative school staff members and students.

It would appear, then, that the growth of the last decade will continue and, indeed, has probably not yet reached its peak. The discovery phase is past, so the intense publicity given the movement during its formative years has cooled. Some alternative schools are closing as needs and interests change, but many more are opening. Last September, for example, Milwaukee doubled its alternatives for disaffected students — after just one year's trial of the program. Moreover, there are few signs that the pressures on public education are abating or that the public is willing to reduce its expectations. Indeed, with all of our talk of individualization — and our enactment of that arrangement into federal law — we may soon discover that diversified programs for all may be the only practicable way of carrying out the law of the land. □

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