

Portland's Personalized EDUCATION PROGRAM

RICHARD BOSS*

MANY critics of contemporary education claim the secondary schools of America are too highly structured, inflexible, and too much like college preparatory institutions. Some claim the high schools are completely out of tune with the times. They say that the courses taught are not relevant to a modern space-age world.

In Portland, Oregon, the Board of Education and chief school administrators have tried to do something about such charges. They decided to set up alternate routes for completing the educational requirements for the high school diploma.

The district made an extensive study of the "student with special needs," and a variety of programs have been started to provide services that will more suitably and appropriately educate the children of *all* the people.

One of these exciting alternates in the Portland Public Schools is the "Personalized Education Program" (PEP). This program tries to design opportunities for an educational experience for each student that will take into account his or her needs, interests, and potential. The central idea of PEP is to shape the school to fit the students' needs instead of fitting students to the school.

Some of the more important concepts

of PEP took shape in the development of the Vocational Village, a school for dropouts, and the Residential Manpower Center (RMC), a modern Job Corps. The author of this article was the chief administrator in both schools. It was determined at the beginning of each program that the goals of secondary education needed to be brought into focus for each student. Each student needs a PEP plan which spells out his personalized goals for employability, further education, or other specific needs.

A road map needs to be designed that will show each student how he can achieve these goals through education. Once an adolescent can be shown how to identify personal goals, and to see methods of obtaining these goals, half the problem has been solved. The remaining half deals with procedures and student-teacher relationships.

Motivating Young People

The author's experiences with the Portland PEP philosophy have been primarily with high school dropouts and disadvantaged

** Richard Boss, Director, Portland Residential Manpower Training System, Portland Public Schools, Portland, Oregon*

youngsters. Many procedures were utilized to free teachers so they could actually teach and have more time to spend with individual students. Other practices were tried to motivate young people to accept school and learning as a meaningful and worthwhile experience.

It is important to note that both the Vocational Village and the Manpower Center operate with facilities outside the structure of the regular schools. The Village is housed in a storefront business-warehouse facility. The RMC is housed in three separate buildings, including a former private junior college and hotel downtown, and a former seminary 20 miles outside Portland, in a rural area.

Alternative forms of schooling can and should permit students with special needs to attend classes in facilities separate from the regular school. The able and ambitious youngster has just as much right to an appropriate educational experience as the disadvantaged. Far too many educators believe that one must change the "establishment" to accommodate all young people at the same school building.

There is no real evidence to prove that one needs to "water down" or change what is well done to start something one does not now do at all. In other words, why ruin a perfectly good high school which is efficient,



Adolescents seek knowledge and skills that help clarify personal goals.

effective, and by all accredited standards doing a good job with 75 percent of the eligible enrollees? Can the American high school be all things to all people?

Alternate Forms of Schooling

The phrase "alternate forms of schooling" means that other programs, curricula, activities, and/or educational experiences should be designed to educate appropriately the student with special needs. Some of the procedures which have worked well with, and have been made a part of, the Portland PEP philosophy are the following:

1. No grades or grade levels are identified. Students commence work at their proficiency level, and proceed at their own rate. Performance evaluations are made periodically to determine achievement.
2. Courses are not required. Students are encouraged to come to grips with their own deficiencies and make rational decisions about corrective measures.
3. Positive reinforcements are used as often as possible to give the students awards for success. It is more fun to be a winner. The students feel good about themselves, and miracles begin to happen.
4. Teachers are taught to be managers of the learning environment as opposed to being a source of knowledge. They become less fright-



PEP teachers demonstrate skills rather than lecture about them.

ened about the fact that they do not know everything; they loosen up and become real people.

5. Students in this age group (ages 14 through 21) are given greater responsibility to make decisions which will determine their destiny. They sometimes make mistakes—so what? They need practice in making decisions and living with the results.

6. Classrooms are operated with maximum flexibility. Many times no two students are working on the same project, problem, or lesson. Small class size should be maintained so that each student will receive personal attention.

7. The more advanced student can and should become an effective aide in reaching the student having the greatest difficulty. Many times the advanced student can accelerate learning this way.

8. Teachers are taught to demonstrate and to show students how to do something rather than simply to lecture.

9. Teachers are encouraged to utilize the community as a learning laboratory; to take the student to "where the action is."



Positive reinforcement gives pupils confidence in their own growth.



Each student receives needed attention in the Personalized Education Program.

10. Teachers are taught to identify and teach only those things which relate to behavioral outcomes. Performance evaluations are made indicating achievement. When the student can learn and do, he is maximizing his benefits at the school.

Administration of Discipline

Probably the most important element of the PEP philosophy is not a procedure so much as a frame of mind. This deals with the administration of discipline in the school setting. As shown above, students and teachers alike are given greater latitude to establish a learning environment. The misguided administrator is the one who does not know one cannot give freedoms unless one also holds people responsible. The student and teacher can do as they like, but they must do something, and this something must be constructive.

Tied to discipline, and equally important, is the element of acceptance. Unless the adult can really accept each and every youngster for what he is, nothing else really ever works. The student must be able to approach an adult who can "say it straight," be warm and understanding. This means every employee from the custodian to the school administrator must be selected as a person who loves or cares for young people, and feels comfortable in working with them. □

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