

The Center for Open Education: A Center Without Walls

GEORGE B. DRUMM*

By decentralizing and becoming on-site consultants, the staff members of the Center for Open Education have initiated a variety of programs that have effected large scale and sustained change in several Connecticut schools.

THE Center for Open Education of the University of Connecticut began operations in 1971 as a conventional teachers center which offered a variety of activities for the educators of the area. The Center is funded by the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation to promote open and humanistic practices in the schools of Connecticut. Under the leadership of Vincent R. Rogers, the Center was an exciting environment with a multitude of valuable and rewarding experiences for teachers.

However, because of the location of the Center in the rather remote town of Storrs, and, more importantly because of growing perceptions of how educational change is enhanced, the Center made a major change in its format in 1973. Rogers and his staff decided to decentralize operations and to become on-site consultants in several elementary schools in Connecticut. This decentralization has resulted in a variety of programs

which have effected both large scale and sustained change in schools in the area.

Center-School Partnership Program

A letter was sent to each elementary school in Connecticut inviting them to be in-service partners with the Center beginning in September of 1973. The philosophy of the Center was made specific and the school clearly had to be moving toward an "open" or informal approach to education. The response from the schools was overwhelming, and participating schools were chosen with extreme care.

Center staff members were assigned to schools in consultantship roles. The entire faculty with its principal was involved in the planning and implementation of all Center-related activities. From their previous experience, the Center staff members felt strongly that for curricular and attitudinal change to be meaningful and sustained, in-service programs must be conducted with the school as the basic unit. All too often, a teacher or principal attends a workshop and returns to school bubbling with enthusiasm over a new teaching approach or program.

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However, forces within the school stifle this enthusiasm and before long that valuable workshop is soon forgotten. What happened to this enthusiastic teacher? The forces of administrative and peer indifference and suspicion and/or the realities of the classroom probably dimmed his or her enthusiasm.

In the Center-school partnership all personnel are involved in the planning of the in-service program. When even the best ideas meet frustration, the teacher can find support in his or her peers and the principal because all were involved in the planning process.

The Center for Open Education concluded the first phase of the school partnership in June of 1975. In all the schools, the impact of the Center participation is manifested in a positive manner. The vital ingredient is the school working as a unit as it moves in a common direction.

On-Site College Courses

Because of its affiliation with the University of Connecticut, the Center was in an ideal position to provide college credit courses for participating schools. With the support of the University, the faculty members of the school became the architects of the course and even selected speaker consultants for the designated topic. In many cases local teachers with a particular expertise were selected to teach sessions dealing with their strengths. The result was a graduate course which was relevant to the needs of teachers as perceived by the faculty members of the participating school.

The on-site courses have certainly been among the most popular activities undertaken by the Center. Courses have been developed on individualized instruction, creativity, open education, classroom design and management, middle school theory and curriculum, and teacher effectiveness training.

The Regional In-Service Program

In September of 1975, the Center embarked on a new venture. Using Public Act 74-331 as a catalyst, the Center in conjunc-

tion with Cooperative Educational Service began a program in six Fairfield County school systems (Trumbull, Stratford, Monroe, Easton, Westport, and Wilton). Public Act 74-331 allows a teacher in cooperation with the local school board to obtain standard

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certification through a variety of professional activities including workshops, seminars, educational travel, and college courses. These activities must be approved by the local administration and State Certification Board.

The Center assigned a consultant to each of the six towns. The initial objective of the consultant was to conduct a responsive needs assessment in direct contact with teachers and administrators. This resulted in a regional workshop series which was based on the expressed needs of teachers and principals. The unique aspect of this program was the possibility for a school system to engage in activities on a regional basis, while at the same time developing with the Center consultant a local in-service program based on the particular needs of each school. Teachers are in the position of utilizing these activities toward their standard certification or, in some cases, for local in-service credits. It has also been made possible for a teacher to receive college credits for these workshops from several area colleges.

The Center for Open Education recognizes the value of regional in-service programs as a rewarding avenue for interaction among participating towns. However, each town and, indeed, each school has unique needs which must also be met. The Regional In-Service Program believes this is the foundation of its efforts.

The Greater Hartford Workshop Series

For the past two years the Center in cooperation with the Hartford Public Schools has offered a series of workshops for the teachers in the Greater Hartford area. These are after-school sessions which are attended on a voluntary basis and supported by the participants. These sessions are general in nature and do not have all of the elements of the other programs, yet they also apparently meet various needs. These sessions have become forums for contemporary issues. The fall series focused on "Back to Basics—Back from Where?" This is a series of workshops in which we attempt to place open education and the back to basics movement in proper perspective. These are times when we must give support to creative and innovative teachers. It is felt by the Center and the Noyes Foundation that this workshop series provides this support and must be continued.

All of the Center's workshops and activities are publicized via a newsletter published three times a year. Subscribers to the Newsletter also receive monographs on topics of current importance. The Newsletter is sent to educators throughout the United States.

In addition, the Center continues to offer a number of special summer programs and workshops dealing with topics such as the design of school and classroom environments, the work of Piaget, and the creation of individualized learning materials. The Center also offers teachers and administrators opportunities to take part in on-site studies of British schools during its "spring seminar" in England.

In summary, the Center for Open Education is literally a "center without walls." By decentralizing, the Center was able to form relationships with individual schools which resulted in greater impact on these schools. The Center is also conducting regional activities while, at the same time, respecting the uniqueness of each school within that system. The result has been a Center that is truly involved in the day to day operations of Connecticut schools. ☐

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