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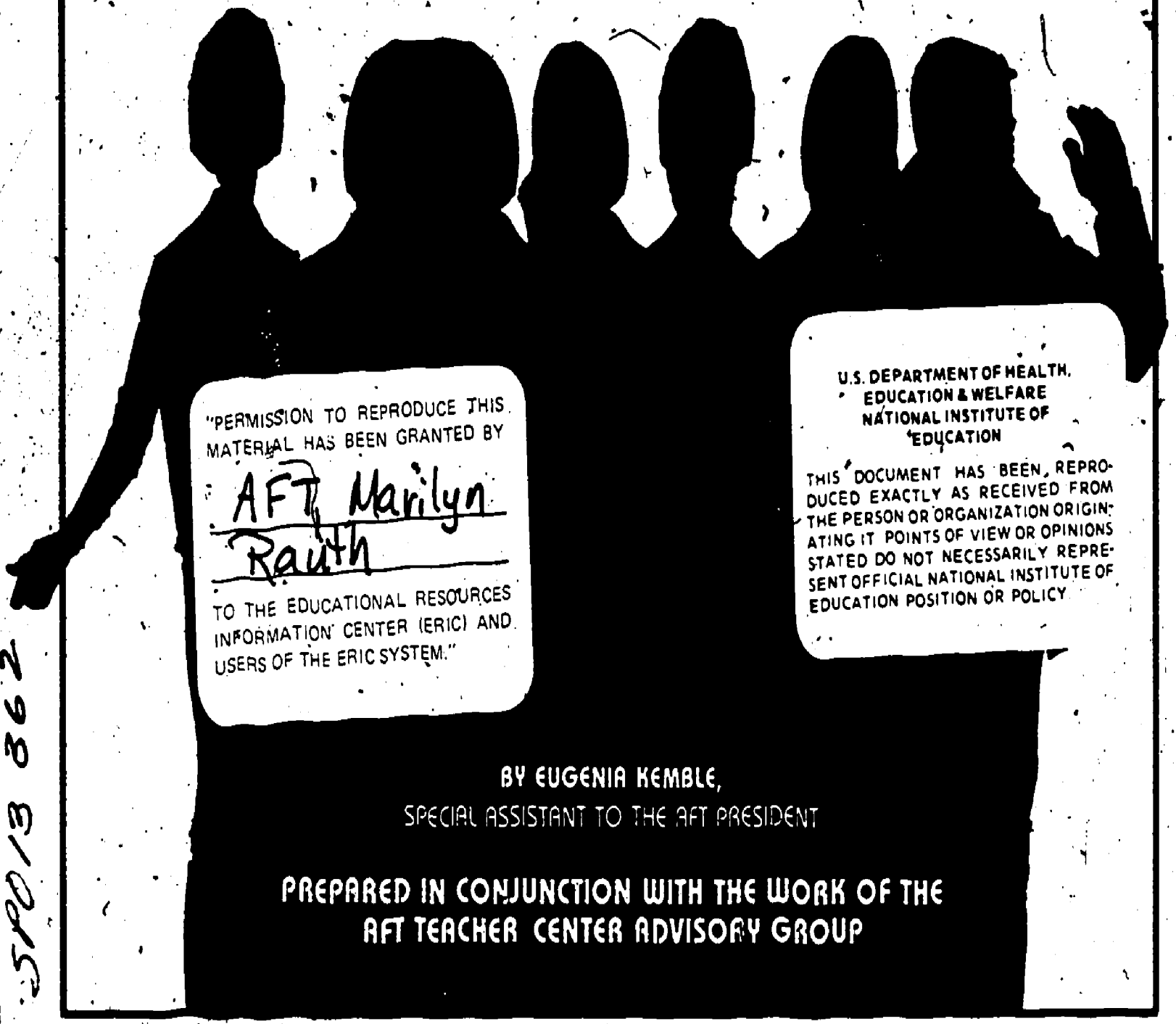
ABSTRACT

This report reviews the new teacher center legislation, points out problems the existing centers have encountered, examines how the centers can meet many educational needs, discusses the relation of teacher centers to preservice and internship programs, and outlines how a teacher center could be set up. It is emphasized that the legislation can be an invaluable tool in educational reform. (DS)

AT LAST, TEACHER CENTERS THAT ARE REALLY FOR TEACHERS



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PREPARED IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE WORK OF THE AFT TEACHER CENTER ADVISORY GROUP

The AFT Teacher Center Advisory Group was created by the American Federation of Teachers Executive Council in February of 1977. The group is composed of key leaders from various sections of the country who have expertise on the subject of teacher centers. They serve as a resource to locals working on the development of teachers centers and offer advice and information to the Executive Council on the subject.

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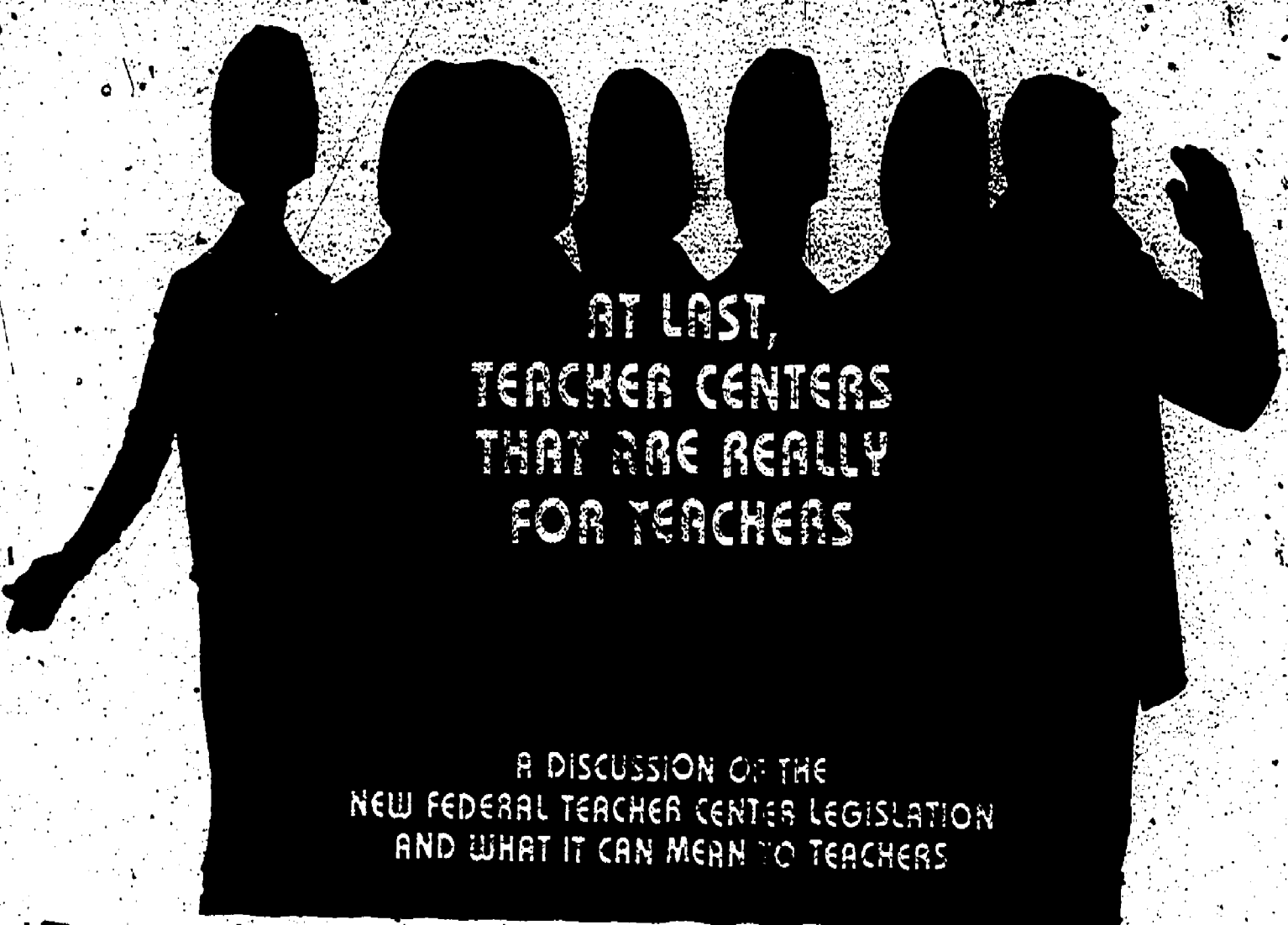


AT LAST, TEACHER CENTERS THAT ARE REALLY FOR TEACHERS

A DISCUSSION OF THE NEW FEDERAL TEACHER CENTER LEGISLATION AND WHAT IT CAN MEAN TO TEACHERS

The essential nature of teaching has not really changed very much in the last century. The conditions are different, thanks to unions. There is also a wider variety of teaching technologies to choose from—new math or old math, for example. But teachers still live an isolated working life. Their professional time is spent almost entirely with students. They learn what works primarily through trial and error. And, only they have any real sense of their most important successes—successes with individual students that can rarely be measured.

That first terrorizing day of total responsibility for a class, *alone*, is one that is well known to every teacher. To succeed at teaching is to come through a rigorous trial in which the chief witness also happens to be the judge—the school principal. Having passed the initial test the teacher faces only more of the same. Freedom to work privately is highly valued because it minimizes the threat of observance and provides the greatest leeway for personal fulfillment. There is nothing in teacher education that forestalls these developments. There is nothing in the structure of schools and their administration that will encourage these conditions to change.

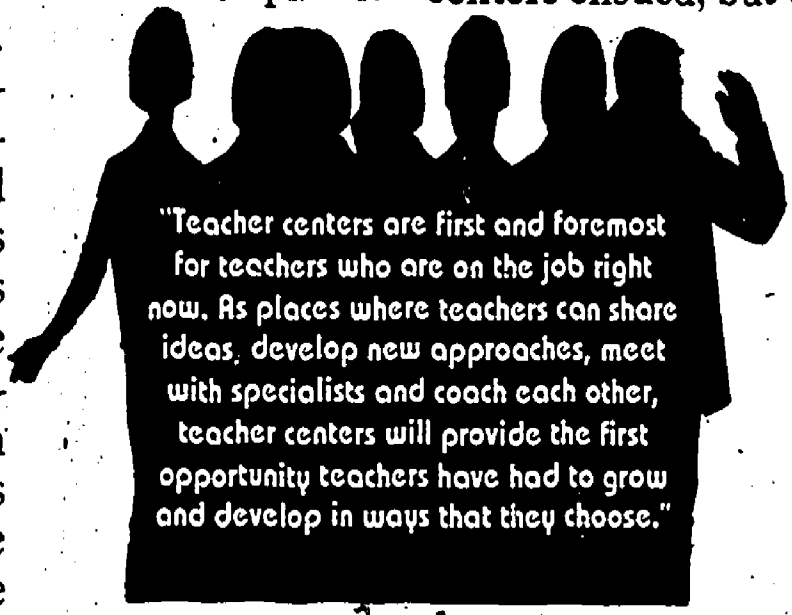
None of the reforms that are periodically dreamed up by education schools or government officials have taken this aspect of the teacher's life into account. Most have come in the form of pressures on the

teacher to produce more, such as performance contracting or performance-based teacher certification. Or, they have represented basic shifts in the substance of materials teachers have to work with, career education, environmental education, aesthetic education, and many other curricular fads. Because all of these have failed to examine the essence of teaching—or even to fairly take it into account—they have either remained both innocuous and ineffective, or have been quickly abandoned as irrelevant failures.

Teachers know these things. Some of the better education studies have documented them. Robert Dreeben's *The Nature of Teaching* and Dan Lortie's *Schoolteacher* thoroughly discuss the lack of collegiality among teachers; the ways teacher preparation establishes this pattern; and the picture of the individual classroom as an isolated "cell." A major study by the Rand Corporation, *Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change*, found that innovations only took root in school districts where teachers were most involved in their development and implementation. It is really surprising, then, that reforms have managed to ignore these issues until now. Perhaps it is because none of them have really emerged from teachers' demands for change. Nor have they accepted the basic logic of teachers' defensive posture against reform—the vulnerability that comes with isolation.

One difference with teacher centers as a reform idea is that teachers have asked for them. Another is that one of their essential characteristics is teacher sharing, which goes to the heart of the teacher isolation problem. Last, and most important, is that teacher centers are by definition an innovation that is controlled by teachers themselves. As long ago as 1971, American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker wrote in his *New York Times* column that teacher centers modeled after their British counterparts could greatly enrich the professional lives of teachers by enabling them to share skills and experiences with one another. Other American educators, enamored of the open education approach to learning in the early grades, also picked up on the idea. But in their minds the centers could serve as a vehicle for proselytizing open education philosophy.

A flurry of activity focusing on teacher centers ensued, but teacher organizations were effectively relegated to the periphery of the movement by those in control of money sources. Proposals for funding model teacher centers, submitted by the union to major private foundations like Ford and Carnegie, were



turned down. A report to the Office of Education from the Teachers National Field Task Force, which included many teacher organization representatives, recommended that federally-sponsored teacher centers be teacher-controlled. But when the Office of Education finally decided to support some centers, the entities that were created were dominated by state and local administrative bureaucracies.. So, even though the American Federation of Teachers was instrumental in popularizing the idea in this country, without outside money it was not in a position to play a leading role.

EXISTING CENTERS HAVE MANY PROBLEMS

With the help of the same foundations and the same federal bureaucrats that had ignored the union, teacher centers began springing up around the country. Before long the National Institute of Education was supporting something its staff called "networking." NIE enabled centers to keep in touch with each other through a central clearinghouse operation called the Teachers' Centers Exchange located at the Far West Regional Laboratory in San Francisco. The problem was that these earliest centers lacked any representative teacher control. They did not really reflect what the profession at large wanted. As a result many of the centers that have emerged out of this early stage of teacher center development suffer from common problems. Among them are:

- A heavy emphasis on the needs of elementary school teachers, in particular, activities concentrated on making things by working with materials. Secondary teachers have rarely shown much interest in these centers and their programs generally offer little at that level.
- Creation of the center by individuals who have a particular educational philosophy and therefore tend to constrict center programs to meet their biases. The result is service to a limited number of teachers who tend to have a similar point of view.
- Instability growing from insecure funding.
- Lack of effective needs assessment mechanisms that might enable centers to draw up programs that service broadly varying groups of teachers.
- Failure to implement effective evaluations that might show some concrete evidence of the importance of their work. As a result many school districts in which these centers operate remain unconvinced of their value.
- Insufficient staff due to funding shortages.
- Governance mechanisms that are more exclusive than inclusive. Very few operating centers have working relationships with the union representing teachers in their area and few have bothered trying to establish them.

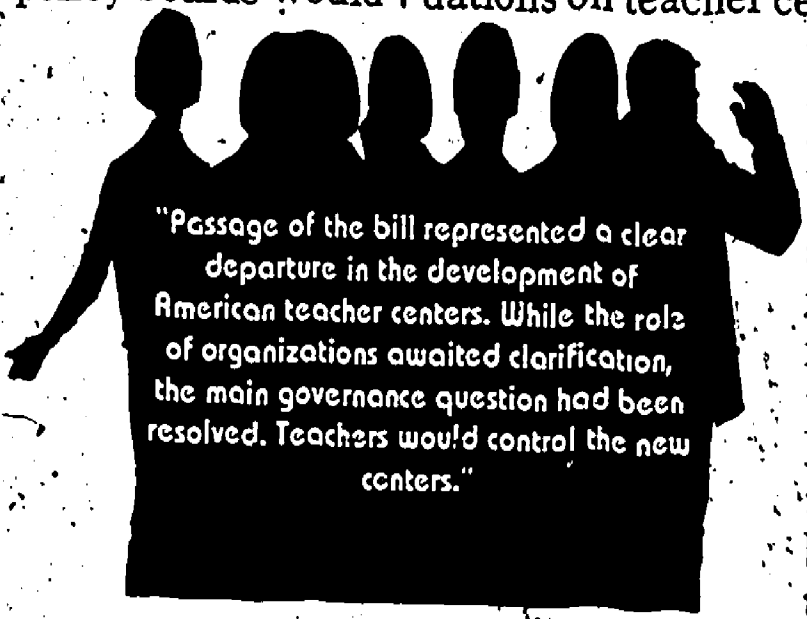
In the fall of 1976 the work that the AFT and others had done to press for a federal teacher center bill finally won success. As part of the Education Amendments of 1976, Congress authorized a new teacher center law that provided up to $60 million in federal funds for centers run by policy

boards composed of a majority of teachers. A last-minute effort by representatives of teacher colleges, who believed that the bill represented a political threat to their turf failed, and a new and potentially large source of federal funds for teacher centers was created.

Passage of the bill represented a clear departure in the development of American teacher centers. While the role of organizations awaited clarification, the main governance question had been resolved: Teachers would control the new centers. The hodgepodge of establishments calling themselves teacher centers—many of which simply amounted to extensions of state departments of education or universities—were faced with a strong new definition of teacher centers. Teacher centers that received funds under the new bill would be places where teachers had the majority voice. Most centers would be funded through local education agencies, though up to 10 percent of appropriated funds could go to institutions of higher education. But all centers would be run by policy boards and all policy boards would have a majority of teacher members.

Unfortunately the new bill was not warmly greeted in all quarters that might be expected to have an interest in it. Not only were the colleges wary, but many of the new centers that had received life from foundations and the Office of Education were worried that they would have to turn their centers over to teachers in order to get funds. In something of a last gasp on the subject, the Ford Foundation sponsored a conference that collected a large number of activists from these centers at the University of Chicago in June of 1977. The atmosphere among participants was largely despondent. Most seemed to view the new bill as a threat rather than as the basis for major reform of inservice education for teachers. Rather than figuring out how to adapt to the requisites of the new bill, most had come to the conclusion that they were not going to be part of the action and had written the whole enterprise off their slate of interests.

The American Federation of Teachers began developing its response to the bill shortly after it was passed. The Executive Council of the AFT named a ten-member Teacher Center Advisory Group composed of teacher leaders from around the country experienced with the issue. The group's purpose was to develop policy recommendations on teacher centers; to monitor the federal regulations drafted to accompany the bill; and to generally act as a source of expertise for locals interested in establishing centers. Unfortunately a low appropriation for the first year of the bill's implementation, accompanied



by general chaos in an Office of Education reorganized by a new Administration, has slowed the momentum for establishing new centers somewhat. But the first year will still be key, since basic directions and purposes will be determined by the earliest centers funded.

Directions and purposes might well be based on the history of British teacher centers. While the term teacher center can be applied to almost anything, as the experience in this country demonstrates, the major purposes set forth by the British centers fall into two broad categories: curriculum development, and a more general professional growth and inservice education emphasis that could take many forms. The curriculum development function was really the basis for the establishment of many of the earliest British teacher centers. The idea was to teach British teachers, through centers, about newly developed Nuffield Math materials. Curriculum-oriented centers were also set up in conjunction with Britain's new comprehensive schools. According to Robert Thornbury, who heads the Sherbrooke Teachers' Centre in London, centers were also established for the more general professional purposes of attracting teachers to difficult urban teaching, and supporting them once they got there. Revitalizing teacher education was still another, all-encompassing purpose.

So far, talk and action on teacher centers in this country have not focused much on curriculum development. At this stage in our experience, lack of movement in this area is probably advisable since the focus of attention might easily become diverted into imposing particular curricula on teachers, rather than allowing the initiatives to come from them.

HANDICAPPED, TESTING— MAJOR AREAS OF NEED

Yet, teachers have immediate needs that demand the specialized attention teacher centers could provide. Basic skills in the areas of reading and math are obvious firsts. In the fall of 1977 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act goes into effect. And, necessary as it is for our schools to educate handicapped children, provisions of the law requiring placement of children in "the least restrictive environment"—which, for the most part, will mean regular classrooms—and requirements for the development of individualized education plans for each child, will tax teachers and school systems greatly. Teacher centers could provide an invaluable source of support and shared information for teachers as this new law is implemented.

Another issue of concern is the minimum competency movement which seems to be sweeping the country, state by state, along with an emphasis on tests and accountability plans. Teacher centers could devote program and consultation time to the subject of tests—how they can be used; how they are limited; and what constitutes a misuse of tests either for individual children, for school systems, or for states.

Problem areas like these are ones in

which all educational personnel, whether guidance counselors, paraprofessionals or subject area specialists, will want to participate. Centers should be open to all of them so that insights can be shared across functional lines. In fact, centers might be viewed as agencies of consolidation when it comes to educational training for federally funded specialties—handicapped, bilingual, and vocational education as well as education for the disadvantaged (Title I, ESEA).

These are the immediate problems and everyday practicalities that teachers need help with. But they should not draw attention away from the second area of importance—teacher centers as agents of reforming inservice teacher education. To begin with, teachers themselves want inservice education programs changed. And, such reform may be even more possible now, given current characteristics of the teaching force. For one thing, the declining enrollment in our nation's schools has meant a decline in teaching jobs as well. This, together with high unemployment among the general population, has meant less teacher turnover; a slightly older teacher work force than previously; and greater likelihood that teachers will remain in the job for longer periods of time since fewer other jobs are available to them. A stable and experienced teaching population is likely to be even more demanding of quality inservice education than one undergoing continuous shifts and changes. Certainly teachers who have plans to stay on the job for longer periods of time will be more concerned with their own professional renewal than transient teachers—provided they are not threatened by vindictive evaluations or accountability schemes. Such teachers not only want teacher centers as a better source of inservice education, they are also more likely to be receptive to the new ideas that teacher centers produce.

Geraldine Joncich Clifford develops the argument relating reform possibilities to teacher stability in her book, the *Shape of American Education:*

- ". . . those disposed toward educational innovation *cannot* exercise influence unless they are retained in teaching . . .
- ". . . it is unfair and unrealistic to expect *perpetual beginners* to initiate and sustain the burden of professional development. It would be better if the most creative and innovative teachers were retained and given the seniority and recognition that would allow their efforts to gain exposure and influence outside their own classrooms, to affect teaching generally.
- ". . . brief careers militate against the consumption of research on teaching, and against *systematic* efforts to improve education. They also limit the pool of potential leaders . . ."

Luckily, teacher centers are beginning to gain popularity at a time when the teaching population is stable and when the demand for quality inservice teacher education is surpassing that for preservice teacher preparation. Federal programs like Teacher Corps have reflected this by shifting their emphasis toward inservice training. But these pluses are somewhat neutralized by the fears of the teacher colleges. Some education schools have ventured into new concentrations on inservice programs, but the process of changing emphasis has been slow, and less than in-

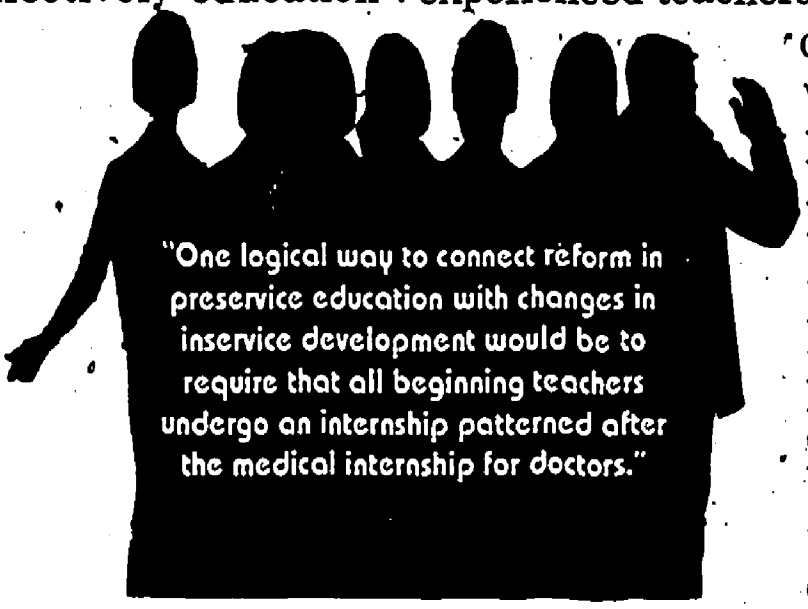
spired. Since teacher centers are an outgrowth of the demand for inservice reform, and because teacher control is an inherent part of their definition, the response of schools of education to the new idea has been unenthusiastic—the common reaction being one of suspicion that teacher organizations and their stress on inservice education will combine to put colleges out of business. This is an attitude that needs to be changed if teacher centers are to succeed.

It is true that while colleges of education have been foot-dragging even as they lethargically bemoan the declining enrollment picture, teachers have moved in to take a leadership role. But the colleges' fears are really unwarranted. To begin with, if teachers' isolation is to be one focus of attention, the preservice role of education schools in encouraging this will require examination as well. Ideally, teacher centers will be a catalyst for reforming inservice staff development in relation to preservice preparation. One really cannot be changed without the other. To do this effectively education schools must be a part of the enterprise. Dan Lortie pinpoints the problem in his book *Schoolteacher:*

"Their (teachers) professional training, in short, has not linked recurrent dilemmas to available knowledge or to condensations of reality (e.g., cases, simulations) where such issues are delineated. The repudiation of past experience conjoins with intellectual isolation (a historical feature of teacher training) to produce curricula which extoll the highest virtues but fail to cope with routine tactical and strategic problems. It is small wonder, then, that teachers are not inclined to see themselves as sharing in a common "memory" or technical subculture. Since they have not received such instruction, they are forced to fall back on individual recollections, which in turn are not displaced by new perspectives. Such a pattern encourages a conception of teaching that is individualistic rather than a collegial enterprise."

TEACHER CENTERS, INTERNSHIPS GO HAND IN HAND

One logical way to connect reform in preservice education with changes in inservice development would be to require that all beginning teachers undergo an internship patterned after the medical internship for doctors. Prospective teachers would obtain preliminary certification and then spend their first years of teaching with a partial workload. The rest of their time would be spent in consultations with experienced teachers and in maintaining course work and advisory ties with their preparatory colleges. An internship for teachers requires that colleges provide key transitional support. It is a role that could be played out best on the neutral territory of a teacher center.

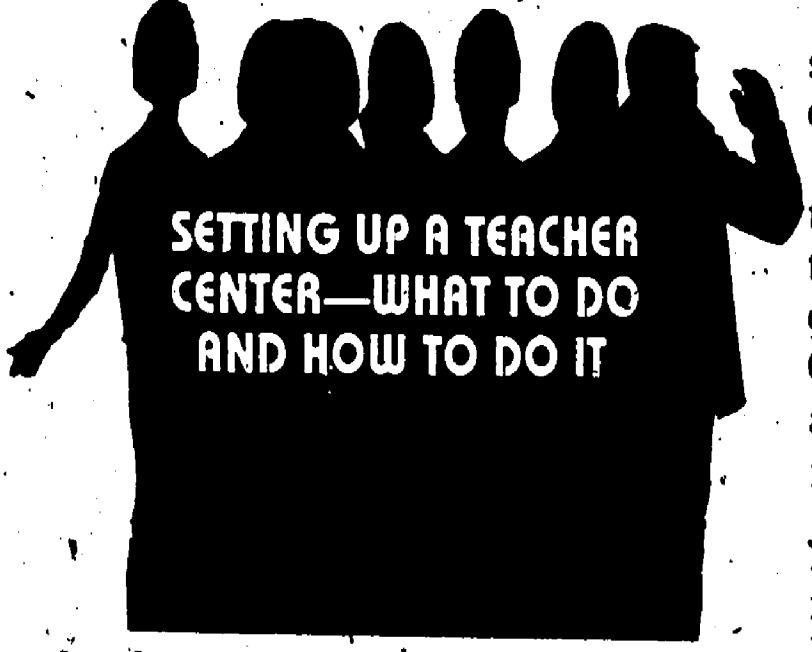


Institutions of higher education are central to the functioning of teacher centers whether or not internship is involved. Their staffs can give workshops in the center and act as advisors to teachers who request such services. Arrangements can even be worked out where university credits are awarded for work done in centers. To put it simply, universities can build their own work into the new centers in ways that will expand, rather than diminish their current services. They can and should be part of a reform that sweeps from preservice through inservice development.

The world of research is another that should recognize the potential of teacher centers. Teacher centers will provide a new arena for the work of researchers as well as a vehicle for disseminating their results. The attitude of disdain most teachers feel toward researchers might be modified somewhat if teachers and researchers used teacher centers as a meeting ground—a place to explore research needs as well as discuss research results. Worthwhile findings could be introduced directly to teachers as one way of translating usable research data into real practice.

While reforming teacher education and disseminating research are important byproducts of the growth of teacher centers which may be unwelcome to teacher educators or go unnoticed by researchers, they are not the most important aspect of the concept. Teacher centers are first and foremost for teachers who are on the job right now. As places where teachers can share ideas, develop new approaches, meet with specialists and coach each other, teacher centers will provide the first opportunity teachers have had to grow and develop in ways that they choose. Since teachers themselves will have the controlling voice, centers will be viewed as nonthreatening and supportive. The beginning teacher who is floundering can go there to seek advice and know it will not become a part of his or her professional record. Groups of teachers who want to try something new can thrash it out at the center, asking for help from whomever they choose. If a teacher is curious about a new reading approach he or she may be able to find out about it at the center. The prospect of mainstreaming a number of handicapped children into a regular classroom may seem impossible until one can go and see where another teacher has done it. The center can help teachers with special needs and talents find each other.

What could emerge from this process is a common understanding among teachers of what the knowledge and skill base for their profession really is—that thread of shared experience that can unify teachers and instill pride in teaching. Teachers have never had either the freedom or the opportunity to do this before. It will give them the kind of professional control that now exists for other professions, and the self-respect that goes with it. If teacher centers succeed, teaching may no longer be as isolated and as anxiety-ridden a career as it now is. There will be a place to go where problems can be solved—where those developing new ideas have the teachers who make them work in mind.



A Teacher Center Advisory Group was established by the AFT's Executive Council in February of 1977 and met that spring to develop strategy and recommendations for AFT locals in implementing the new bill. Its advice follows:

If yours is a local that decides to work on setting up a teacher center you may want to take these steps:

■ Obtain agreement from your board of education that all planning in relation to teacher centers will be done in consultation with the union and that teacher representatives to the policy board will be nominated by the union.

■ Contact institutions of higher education you can work with and make the same points. Encourage them to participate, and make clear to them that they have a role in center activities.

■ Develop some clear notions of the best ways for teacher centers to service teachers in your area given the existing patterns of inservice teacher education, the particular problems of the school system in which they work, the composition of the teaching staff and the special needs of students in the district.

■ Make contact with all of the officials at the local and state level who will be involved in developing and approving the plan. Under the law, all proposals must be approved at the state level before they are sent on to the Office of Education.

■ Obtain a copy of the federal regulations for the teacher center bill from the Office of Education and study them carefully. Proposals will be judged in terms of a point system outlined in the regulations.

■ Proposals are submitted by local education agencies. Make sure you have played a role in developing whatever is submitted and that it meets the needs of teachers. You may want to survey teachers to find out what kinds of services they really want.

■ Try to obtain agreement from your board of education that teachers will get released time for participating in center activities. Policy board members should be released for their work on board activities.

■ Try to avoid a war with either your school board or the colleges the center may want to draw on. It is more likely that centers will get funded in places where relationships are stable and communication is good.

Remember that a limited amount of funds will be provided in the first year of the bill's implementation. Make a careful assessment of what your chances for funding are before you start. Every school system that applies will not be funded. If you have any questions, call the AFT National Office.