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ABSTRACT

In spite of a widespread commitment to the comprehensive high school, the nation has long had specialty or theme schools and schools that target particular children. Magnet schools, alternative schools, and Catholic schools illustrate that the idea of specialized schools is not new. Recently, the concept has received a boost from a study by the RAND Corporation that suggests that specialized focus or theme schools would probably be best for most students. This paper examines the nature of such schools, their rationale, and their track records. A focus school has a clear, coherent mission, with a commitment both to character and academic development. It features a core of shared content and experiences and emphasizes the reciprocal responsibilities of students and adults, as it stresses student outcomes. Important characteristics of a focus school are identified as (1) having a breadth sufficient to articulate a full school program; (2) demonstrating real directive significance; (3) emphasizing logical coherence in the theme; and (4) possessing real transformative power. (Contains 59 references.) (SLD)

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Focus Schools: A Genre to Consider

Mary Anne Raywid

ERIC®
Clearinghouse on Urban Education

FOCUS SCHOOLS:
A GENRE TO CONSIDER

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MARY ANNE RAYWID
Hofstra University

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Box 40, Teachers College
Columbia University
New York, New York 10027
212/678-3433
800/601-4868
212/678-4012 (Fax)

Director: Erwin Flaxman
Associate Director: Larry R. Yates
Managing Editor: Wendy Schwartz

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FOCUS SCHOOLS: A GENRE TO CONSIDER

INTRODUCTION

Background

Despite widespread commitment to the comprehensive high school, the nation has long had "specialty" or "theme" schools, and schools targeted for particular students. Some of the most respected schools are specialty schools like Boston Latin or the Bronx High School of Science (Doyle & Levine, 1984). Beginning in the 1960s and '70s, desegregation efforts led to a new generation of specialty schools, called "magnets," which sought by means of a theme to attract a multi-racial population to a particular school or district. Also since the '60's, there has been growth of "alternative" schools, many of them designed especially for students thought to be at risk of failing to complete school. Thus, the idea of specialized schools is not a new one. Recently, however, the concept has received a strong boost from a study which suggested that specialized or special purpose schools would probably be preferable to comprehensive high schools for *most* students (Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990).

The suggestion that focus or theme schools would better serve the vast majority of students now attending zoned comprehensive high schools in New York was the conclusion of this RAND Corporation study released four years ago (Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990). The study has proven influential in legitimating the idea of focus schools, and a number of urban districts, especially, have moved increasingly to establish them. In fact, a recent study suggests that 44 percent of the nation's multi-school districts now have focus schools (Steel & Levine, 1994). This paper seeks to examine the nature of these schools, their rationale, and their track records. It the benefits of the schools, the pitfalls associated with them,

and the requisites for making them work. In so doing, it will discuss the policy questions posed by the genre, as well as the major governance, organizational, professional, and instructional issues tied to the schools' success. But since the genre itself is new and relatively unfamiliar, the emphasis here is first on describing it, then on exploring its policy dimensions.

Characteristics

Focus schools are considered synonymous with special purpose schools by the RAND study that coined the label, and they are characterized as "high schools with character" (Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990). The authors apply the term only to high schools, but elementary and junior high schools, and middle schools, can also be focus schools, and so will be considered here. The genre includes Catholic schools, as well as specially focused or targeted public schools—with the two comprising a type that differs significantly from standard, zoned, comprehensive high schools. Focus schools combine two important sets of attributes, one a matter of school orientation and program, and the other of school organization. A focus school has a clear, coherent mission with a commitment to character, as well as academic, development; features a core of shared content and experiences; emphasizes the reciprocal responsibilities of the school's students and adults, and stresses student outcomes.

Organizationally, focus schools are flexible enough to respond to emerging needs even while protecting and sustaining their distinctiveness. They are also schools that hold themselves accountable to the people most immediately affected by their performance—parents, students, and the local community—rather than primarily to the bureaucracy and central office of which they are a part.

As already suggested, the "focus" concept has a number of identifiable forebears such as magnet, specialty, and alternative schools, but it incorporates a somewhat unique assemblage of attributes—based on the RAND researchers' conclusions about features explaining success. Thus, the focus schools they reviewed incorporate programmatic chara eristics found in specialty and alternative and magnet schools, and also feature such organizational characteristics as decentralization, choice, and the form of school-based management that promotes teacher empowerment.

Hill, Foster, and Gendler (1990) studied 13 urban schools in New York and Washington, D.C. Efforts were made to include schools reflecting typical, rather than selected, urban and inner-city populations, but they looked at Catholic as well as at public schools. They concluded that the public special purpose high schools resembled the parochial schools, organizationally as well as programmatically, more than they resembled comprehensive high schools, and did so in ways that seemingly increased their effectiveness considerably. Hence the new category of "focus" schools, with its atypical combination of the public and parochial school sectors.

Inclusion of Catholic schools is a signal that "focus" is not synonymous with "theme," because parochial schools rarely if ever have themes of the sort that identify magnet schools. Nevertheless, unlike comprehensive high schools, they make no pretense of being omnibus institutions with something to satisfy all tastes. They are not neutral with respect to educational or personal direction. Instead, they reflect a specific commitment to a particular type of education (academic and college preparatory), and they project a clear character ideal for students. It is in this sense that they are focused, rather than in the more familiar sense where a school offers a specific disciplinary or occupational theme.

At the other extreme, another sort of focus or special purpose school coming to recent prominence has a most explicit theme: this is the career magnet school, which invites student exploration of a particular industry. It exists in contrast to the vocational school approach, which primarily prepares students for an entry level position. Career magnets engage students in college preparatory work as they explore a career area. For example, the Media Academy in Oakland, California, which specializes in communications, involves its students in newspaper work, radio, and telecommunications, while enabling them to prepare for college (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Students in the Academy of Finance in New Hyde Park, NY, take courses in "accounting, management, marketing, banking and credit, securities, international economics and business computer applications" (Klein, 1993).

Rationale

Research has demonstrated that several forms of specialized high schools are desirable replacements for the comprehensive high school as the model for secondary education. The old, comprehensive model has been largely unchallenged for much of the century, having emerged before 1920 as the victor in struggles against separate schools for prospective managers and for workers, privileged and poor (Tanner, 1982). The comprehensive high school has been celebrated as the institutional embodiment of the country's democratic commitment, enrolling the slow as well as the able, and the rich as well as the poor in a venerated "common school" (Glenn, 1987; Tanner, 1982).

The arrangement received renewed validation in 1959 with the publication of James Bryant Conant's influential *The American High School Today* (1959). During that earlier era demanding renewed educational excellence, Conant pronounced the comprehensive high school capable of delivering it, given relatively minor adjustments. He further stated that

small high schools should be eliminated as quickly as possible, and that additional specialty schools were contra-indicated.

In the decades since, however, the comprehensive high school has come under increasing fire. It has been denounced as more like a shopping mall than an institution offering a coherent education (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). It has been declared beset by unresolvable dilemmas and contradictions (Stern, Raby, & Dayton, 1992). It has been shown that tracking practices divide and segregate students to the extent that they hardly attend a common school at all. Worse, they are divided on bases that coincide with racial and socioeconomic class divisions, and an assignment to a lower track, once made, is rarely reversible (Oakes, 1985; Wheelock, 1992). It has also been shown that the students who fail to succeed in the comprehensive high school include large numbers of dropouts who could not or would not stay—alleged "pushouts" encouraged by school personnel not to remain (Block, 1978), and youngsters who have graduated despite evidence that they remain functionally illiterate.

The charges have been particularly severe and extensive with respect to the high school's failure to meet the needs of the non-college-bound (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990)—"the forgotten half" is one title put it (Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, 1988). Many such students are concentrated in urban areas, with the result that a number of cities have high school completion rates hovering around only 50 percent, and individual high schools where the rate is dramatically lower. (A notorious instance in New York City was the old Benjamin Franklin High School, which was closed by the schools' chancellor in 1983 when its graduation rate fell to a mere 7 percent of those who should have been eligible.)

Moreover, not only has there been evidence of extensive high school failure and inadequacy, but also of the institution's sturdy resistance

to change. Its size, fragmented units and programs, specialized personnel, and hierarchical organization combine to make secondary education firmly resistant to reform and improvement measures.

Both internal and external critics have pointed out the shortcomings of large high schools. The latter have offered dramatic accounts of the neglect and chaos in inner-city schools. But scholar-supporters of education have also concluded that "boredom is... epidemic" within classrooms (Goodlad, 1983, p.242), that even in "good" schools students are only superficially engaged in what they do (Sizer, 1984); that in many schools as many as two-thirds of the students have simply "disengaged," or tuned out on academic learning (Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986); and that in a large number of classrooms, tacit agreements between teacher and students stipulate that the teachers will not demand very much and in return the students will not get out of hand (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985).

Meanwhile, violence, drugs, street crimes, and unemployment constitute social problems that the public expects schools to help alleviate, if not eliminate entirely. Even many who acknowledge that schools cannot solve such problems nevertheless ask why they do not seem to be making more substantial inroads in reducing them.

Even such a brief rendering of school history and current criticism helps explain the present search for new ways to institutionalize secondary education and new models for the traditional high school. Focus schools are perhaps the most prominent current suggestion for restructuring the high school—with related but less extensive reforms consisting of such recommendations as house plans and Philadelphia's "charters" or schools-within-schools (see Oxley & McCabe, 1989; Fine, 1994).

Here, the examination of focus schools begins by asking just what sort of contribution a focus is supposed to make—what it is supposed to accomplish. The paper then looks at the particular types of focus schools developed to date: the benefits and pitfalls, and the desirable conditions for launching them. Concern is with the policy issues posed—issues of equity and access, school organization and governance, and diversity between and within schools.

ADVANTAGES OF A FOCUS

Current organizational literature strongly emphasizes the importance of a mission to a school's effectiveness, even suggesting that a focus plays a strong part in enabling a school to *have* a mission. The daily life of schools consists of pursuit of so many goals that a central thrust is sometimes difficult for insiders as well as outsiders to discern. Frequently over the past decade research has indicated the need for a mission, coherence, and a schoolwide consensus to support it. But it appears that not all missions embody the kind of power required to articulate a program, center activity, and inspire a teaching staff.

As already suggested, various types of foci can define a school--matters of substance, style, or target population. In some cases, the focus consists of a theme explicitly intended to assemble an interested group. In other instances, the focus is an approach or emphasis that directs staff but is not likely to rally students.

Perhaps most focus schools adopt themes designed to attract students. Some themes consist of a disciplinary focus (science and mathematics, or the humanities). Others make central a broad topic or area of presumed interest to youngsters (e.g., the aerospace school; the zoo school; and the legacy school, which stresses the heritage of African Americans). Some reflect potential career choices (law and government, aviation, international commerce). Still others comprise particular pedagogical orientations (e.g., Montessori, open, or Individually Guided Education), while another group emphasizes the context or surroundings in which instruction typically occurs (e.g., City-As-School, or outdoor and environmental programs). There are also focus schools that target particular groups (e.g., gifted and talented, pregnant teens, the dropout prone).

Still other schools reflect a clear focus or emphasis, even though it may not function as an explicit theme in drawing students. Catholic schools are probably of this last type, with their emphasis on moral values and academics. These emphases yield a distinctive school climate and ethos, which appear to lie at the core of their appeal. Thus the attractiveness of the school may not be centered in the program, and it may not be program with which their students tend to identify. The Block School in East Harlem, for instance, focuses on parent involvement, which undoubtedly creates a distinctive climate and ethos. Central Park East Secondary School, also in New York, seeks to cultivate five "Habits of Mind" which inform the treatment of all subject matter. Similarly, Manhattan's Urban Academy seeks to impart an open-ended style of inquiry that dictates the instructional mode through which all content is introduced.

Such foci guide the staff in these schools, and even though they are probably not what draws students there—and perhaps not even what students would identify as most salient about their school—they nevertheless serve two vital roles in rendering these schools attractive: First, they lend coherence to each school's program and activities, providing a pattern that relates one class, activity, or pursuit to another. And second, this type of focus may not appeal directly to students, perhaps it may do so indirectly, through the school climate it creates and the ethos it reflects.

The different types of emphasis reflected in focus schools raise the question of the contribution a focus makes to the daily life of a school. Experience suggests two major functions: first, a focus offers instructional advantages. It lends coherence to an educational program, permitting students to experience a sense of continuity and connection from one class or topic of study to another. Since the fragmentation of the curriculum, and the resulting disconnection of student experiences in school, is one of

the explanations frequently offered for the inability of subject matter to interest large numbers of students (Sizer, 1984), coherence is a valuable asset. If the theme is sufficiently linked to the content of the various disciplines, it may also serve to motivate student interest in work that might otherwise seem unpalatable.

Second, in a system permitting choice, a theme, and perhaps even a focus that is not an announced theme, can attract a group of people who are like-minded in some educationally important and directive ways. A science and math high school would presumably attract a group, teachers and students, that finds these two disciplines particularly meaningful and engaging. An aviation high school should attract youngsters and teachers who share an interest in the aviation industry. A Catholic school might attract youngsters and families for whom college attendance is a prominent goal. Shared interests inspire motivational strategies and directions as well as content.

But the RAND study suggested additional reasons for establishing focus schools, beyond program coherence and a constituency in significant agreement. Researchers Hill, Foster, and Gendler (1990) found focus schools to be strong organizations with missions supported by their staffs, and the ability to take action to carry out those missions. They found comprehensive high schools, by contrast, to be "profoundly compromised as organizations, with little capacity to initiate their own solutions to problems, define their own internal character, or manage their relationships with external audiences" (p.). This difference, they concluded, is the inevitable result of the fact that focus schools have distinct organizational advantages over the zoned schools that are "essentially franchises reflecting a standard model established by central authorities" (p.vii). For all these reasons, then, focus schools are in a far better position than comprehensive high schools to attract, retain, and positively affect students.

As a result, students in focus schools like their schools better and attend them more regularly (Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990). A typical focus school annually graduates about two-thirds of its seniors, while comprehensive high schools graduate only slightly more than half. In New York, only 20 percent of comprehensive school students graduate with a Regents Diploma, while more than 50 percent of the students in the non-selective focus schools do so. Fewer than a third of comprehensive high school students even take the Scholastic Aptitude Test; more than half the focus school graduates do. As the RAND authors conclude, "focus schools are designed to influence and change students. Zoned [comprehensive] schools are designed to administer programs and deliver services" (p.36).

TYPES AND EXPERIENCES OF FOCUS SCHOOLS

As indicated, Hill, Foster, and Gendler (1990) attribute both programmatic and organizational advantages to focus schools in relation to other schools. Also as noted, what they called "focus schools" actually consists of four distinct types—specialty schools, magnets, alternative schools, and Catholic schools—although not all embody all the characteristics of the focus school paradigm. While there are particular individual independent or non-public schools that are themed, many private schools are not, so as a type it seems that private schools do not exemplify the genre. It remains to be seen how many charter schools will become focus schools.

Each school of these four types has a particular identity in terms of focus, and each also has its own research record, discussed below.

Specialty Schools

Specialty schools comprise the oldest type in the focus genre, the Boston Latin School having been founded in 1635 (Doyle & Levine, 1984). These schools sometimes have explicit themes (like New York's Brooklyn Technical High School), but sometimes the focus is broader, such as simply intense academic emphasis across all disciplines (like New York's Stuyvesant High School).

Such schools have endured across the country, despite the press for the comprehensive high school, although they exist in relatively small numbers. Their admission standards are high, and they are exclusive institutions enrolling only the very top achievers. For instance, in 1991 New York City's three academically selective high schools had more than 46,000

applicants. Only the highest-scoring 5,500 could be accommodated (New York City Public Schools, 1992-93).

Obviously, the students attending such schools are outstanding young people and scholars. On most of the measures ordinarily applied—grades, test scores, attendance, behavior, college acceptance and completion--these selective schools prove highly successful. In fact, they count their successes not in the number of students going on to college, but in the number winning full scholarships and national awards and later, Nobel prizes (Doyle & Cooper, 1983).

As much as one might wish such outcomes for all young people, they are likely to be limited to the ablest and most willing of students. Observers report an extraordinary degree of student interest in learning at these schools, a rare willingness to cooperate with teachers, a lot of home support, and an unusual amount and quality of effort (Doyle & Cooper, 1983). Therefore, recommending the schools that work for these atypical students as a model for other programs may be unrealistic. Indeed, it may be that a part of the comprehensive high school's present difficulties stems from its failure to acknowledge and try to compensate for the rarity of this sort of motivation, support, and perseverance among the bulk of today's students and their families.

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools often resemble specialty schools with respect to theme. As defined by a recent study, magnets are schools that provide a distinctive curriculum or instructional approach, draw students from beyond an assigned attendance zone, and make desegregation an explicit purpose. Although some such schools had entrance requirements making them either selective or semi-selective, most today do not (Steel & Levine, 1994).

There are magnet schools that have been operating for several decades now. The longevity of some, plus the requirements of the funding agencies that have underwritten them, have resulted in a number of evaluations. Recently, these have been augmented by research evidence on the effectiveness of magnets. Several longitudinal and controlled studies, some with experimental designs, now testify to the positive impacts of magnets on students.

Two recent studies in particular offer impressive evidence of success (Crain, Heebner, & Si, 1992; Musumeci & Szczypkowski, 1991). The two are important both because of the substantial numbers of schools and students they examined, and because they are cleverly designed to respond to the selection bias challenge usually raised in connection with studies involving schools of choice. One longitudinal examination of almost 1,000 students in four separate school districts contrasted the achievement and school orientation of longtime magnet school students with those of youngsters who had spent only a relatively brief period in these schools. Substantial differences favoring the magnets were found with respect to promotion rates and enrollment in college prep courses. But on all 12 variables examined—pertaining to academic success, behavior and attendance, and participation in school activities—the magnet students outperformed their non-magnet (or short-term magnet) counterparts (Musumeci & Szczypkowski, 1991).

The other study, this one examining the career-oriented magnet schools enrolling almost a third of New York City's high school students, also reached positive conclusions (Crain, Heebner, & Si, 1992). It looked at how ninth graders fared in these schools, but examined the records only of weaker students, specifically those of youngsters admitted to these programs by the lottery system designed to assure enrollment opportunities for applicants who fail to meet admissions criteria. The records of lottery winners were compared with those of lottery losers who attended

comprehensive high schools instead. Results indicated that the magnet school students were less likely to drop out in the transition to high school, and that magnet schools generated more academic productivity. Their students improved more in reading skills and earned more credits toward graduation than did their comprehensive high school counterparts. But these results held only for average readers. The poorest magnet students did not fare as well, due to high absence rates, perhaps the result of staff ambivalence about receiving them, and insufficient resources for providing remediation (Crain, Heebner, & Si, 1992).

A smaller, but carefully controlled study done several years ago also found similar advantages to magnet schools. Larson and Allen (1988) carefully paired students entering magnets with others who did not, at the outset matching the two groups on achievement levels and apparent potential. The investigators found that the magnet students accomplished more, and that the longer they remained in the magnet school, the greater became the contrast between their performance and that of their regular school counterparts.

Indeed, as one team of researchers concluded, "Virtually all studies that compare magnet and non-magnet schools show that students in magnet schools have higher achievement, better attendance and dropout rates, and, overall, better school performance" (Musumeci & Szczypkowski, 1991, p.55).

Yet despite such testimony to their success, magnet schools emphasize only some of the features identified with focus school effectiveness. They are themed and thus have distinctive programs (although to varying degrees, as will be shown subsequently). In magnet schools where the theme is sharply defined (e.g., a computer magnet as opposed to one committed to law, public service, and social service), it might be expected that the program would be centripetally focused rather

than diversified and fragmented by large numbers of electives. But as yet there are no data reporting what percentage of magnets are so strongly unified. Nor do all magnet schools display the "strong social contracts" that Hill, Foster, and Gendler (1990) identify with focus schools. This is a matter of school climate and ethos, and not all magnet schools make these an object of emphasis. Similarly, not all magnets are committed to the holistic concern with student development that led the RAND researchers to conclude that focus schools show a commitment to "parenting" (1990, p.viii).

Thus, magnet schools do not always reflect all of the programmatic features of focus schools. There is perhaps even less reason for attributing to these schools the organizational features the RAND study associates with focus school success. Magnet schools and programs are typically distinctive in character, and their constituents (staff and students) have chosen to be there. In most districts they may enjoy some of the advantages of decentralization and concomitantly of increased teacher prerogatives (McNeil, 1987). Theme schools may well *have* to be exempted from some of the expectations and procedures of comprehensive high schools: teachers who must devise curricula, for instance, may have to be freed from restrictions constraining their colleagues in other schools—and to that extent, they have been empowered. The resulting circumstances may enable these schools to approach the organizational capacities of focus schools for solving their own problems than can typical comprehensive high schools.

However, there are also conditions associated with magnet schools that can compromise such advantages. A major one is that most magnet schools were established either under court desegregation orders or under the threat of such orders. Such circumstances provide an incentive for centralized decision-making and control: a certain number of magnets are specified and they are expected to reach agreed upon levels of success

with respect to ethnic distributions, if not to quality. In some systems with magnets such pressures have led to an intensification of centralized control rather than to its relaxation. There have been instances, for example, of schools summarily ordered to become an arts or a math and science magnet. There have also been accounts of magnet schools that were extended the relaxation of control necessary to planning and initiation, only to experience subsequent reassertion of centralized control in the name of reform and excellence (McNeil, 1987).

Thus, while some magnet schools have undoubtedly been sufficiently autonomous to develop problem-solving capacities, there are also some that do not seem to reflect any but the most minimal organizational changes (Metz, 1981). By and large, organizational change does not seem to be an emphasis in magnet schools. Despite awareness that "magnetizing" a school seems to improve its quality (Blank, Dentler, Baltzell, & Chabotar, 1983; Magi, 1985), magnet schools have often been launched to satisfy explicit external demands instead of to transform or restructure schools.

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools, a third variety included in the focus school genre, are distinct with regard to organizational issues. Whereas the emphasis of magnet schools typically lies in their curricular themes, alternative schools are likely to have a broader programmatic focus and more consistently to differ organizationally from comprehensive high school practice. They represent a type based on the premise that the standard school model needs revision in order to respond to the needs and interests of its constituents. Such an assumption is likely to yield more leeway in making changes, and often to produce a wider range of innovation.

Alternative schools are not ordinarily marked by a curricular theme, although a few have selected innovative substantive themes like the zoo school or the micro-society school. More typically if there is a particular programmatic focus, it is instructional rather than curricular. Thus, the "challenge school," for example, is an alternative based on an adaptation of the "walkabout" passages completed by Australian aborigines in their pursuit of adulthood; or the City-As-School program is one where a student's schedule might include sustained observation of the city council, participation at a newspaper production office, or an internship in a hospital pathology lab.

But the programmatic focus of alternative schools is likely to extend beyond traditional matters of curriculum and instructional method. There is often a concern with building the school itself as a community, and there may be trips and retreats and other activities not explicitly identifiable as usual pedagogical fare or pursuit. For instance, one successful alternative school focuses on human relations and democratic governance, while another that is more academically oriented recently made an all-school project of constructing a yurt, a one-room building large enough to accommodate the full school population.

In the terms that Hill, Foster, and Gendler (1990) used, alternative schools are strong on establishing social contracts bringing adults and students into close relationship (Raywid, 1982) and rendering them reciprocally responsible to one another. Because a holistic orientation toward young people is a fairly standard feature of alternative schools (Sweeney, 1988), they make a strong commitment to helping students become happy, healthy human beings as well as good citizens—what the RAND researchers called "parenting." They are thus concerned with outcomes, particularly with respect to the psychosocial development of students. Not all, however, are as explicitly focused on academic outcomes as Hill, Foster, and Gendler might hope (Wehlage et al., 1989). And while

a centripetal curriculum marks some alternative schools, others pride themselves in being individually oriented and more committed to helping students grow in directions of their choice than to having them pursue a common course of study.

Alternative schools probably come closer, on the other hand, to displaying the organizational characteristics of focus schools than do any other public schools. Some may be the most visible extant models of "restructured" schools. The reason is that alternatives have managed to obtain more independence within their districts than have other schools. Whether associated with the early models that explicitly sought alternatives to bureaucracy, or with the more recent programs designed for students not succeeding in the regular program, alternatives explicitly acknowledge the need to depart from the standard. This has enabled alternative schools to differ significantly from other schools. They are freer of external regulation and control and often shape themselves as extensions of the personalities of those who staff them. Most alternative school staffs reflect a strong sense of obligation to their constituents, and are reluctant to let any student fall through the cracks. Furthermore, the demands of their student populations, and of their own often marginal status within the larger school system, require alternatives to function continually as problem-solving organizations. Such demands, and the ways these schools meet them, have made alternative schools models of the professional communities now considered central to school success (Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, 1993; Raywid, 1993).

Until recently, systematic evidence on alternative schools has been scant. Their commitment to distinctiveness makes it difficult to find or establish typicality, and generalizations are difficult to frame. Nevertheless, one study that questioned students and teachers in a number of alternative and comprehensive high schools found both the youngsters and adults convinced that alternative schools do a better job of meeting student needs

than do conventional schools. In fact, even the lowest scoring alternative schools scored higher in this regard than the top-scoring conventional schools (Gregory & Smith, 1983).

More recently, a national search for schools judged most effective in preventing at-risk youngsters from dropping out identified 14 alternative schools for detailed study (Wehlage et al., 1989). One reason for their success was that these schools manage to function as "communities of support" for their students, and that the most successful of them engage students in learning they can find authentic. The researchers' conclusions regarding the most effective of these schools suggested the ways in which alternatives combine the programmatic and organizational features associated with focus schools:

> In these programs, teachers have assumed the additional roles of counselor, confidante, and friend, and efforts are made to bond the students to the school, to the teaching staff, and to one another. Course content is more closely tied to the needs of the students in these programs, and efforts are made to make the courses more engaging and relevant. Greater emphasis is placed on hands-on and experiential learning and students are given greater responsibility for their own successes. More attention is paid to the individual needs and concerns of students, in and outside of class. Teachers work together to govern the school and make critical decisions about curriculum and school policy. As a result, the programs can adapt to new circumstances quickly. A climate of innovation and experimentation is common, and teachers function as educational entrepreneurs. (Wehlage et al., 1989, p.172)

Catholic Schools

The final school type included in the focus schools category is Catholic schools. These have a somewhat different type of focus than do magnet and many alternative schools: their emphasis is simply on sustained academic endeavor of a college preparatory sort, and on developing character by exemplifying and instilling a set of values. Contemporary

Catholic schools are far less focused on religious education than they once were, and their current orientation is dictated by a commitment to the dignity of the person, to the generation of community, and to social justice—themes dominant in the wake of Vatican II, which is said to have revolutionized Catholic education (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). In many ways, these schools may exemplify the advantages attributed to focus schools to a greater degree than any of the other types.

The overarching ethic, as well as the commitment to intellectual development for all, recommends a common curriculum. There is emphasis on enabling each student to succeed, and on the obligations to one another shared by everyone involved the school, students as well as adults. The concern in Catholic schools with moral as well as intellectual development reflects a commitment to parenting, and there is strong emphasis on cultivating and sustaining community within the school.

These programmatic tendencies are supported by the organizational properties of Catholic schools, which reflect the "tight-loose" coupling that organizational experts cite as ideal (e.g., Peters & Waterman, 1982). It is an arrangement whereby the school has sufficient autonomy and independence to chart its own course, but is guided in doing so by strong commitments to the values and orientation of the parent organization, the church. As investigators have recently concluded, their freedom from external regulation may make Catholic schools the best exemplars of genuine decentralization and school-site autonomy (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). They are, of course, institutions where affiliation is voluntary, and this, as well as their ideological commitments, renders them accountable to their constituents. The varied auspices under which Catholic high schools operate (parish, diocesan, or religious order sponsorship) give them distinctive profiles, and their considerable freedom enables each to respond effectively to its own immediate circumstances.

A recent report of multiple sets of studies of Catholic schools offers substantial evidence regarding their operation and effectiveness (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). The authors include analyses of studies undertaken over the past dozen years, and they re-examine the claims advanced more than a decade ago that student achievement in Catholic schools is less determined by family background and socioeconomic circumstances than in public schools. They conclude that "average achievement is somewhat higher in Catholic high schools than in public...and that Catholic high schools may be especially helpful for disadvantaged students" (1993 p.58).

The investigators found Catholic high schools to have smaller average enrollments than public schools, with a large percentage of their students (72 percent) pursuing the academic track, in contrast to the comprehensive high school where students may be equally distributed among the academic, vocational, and general education paths. This means that many students who would otherwise not encounter academic experiences do so in these schools where learning opportunities are less differentiated. The results include an average 3.3 year gain in math for minority students between their sophomore and senior years of high school, as compared to a 1.5 year gain for this group in public schools. The effect is that Catholic schools narrowed the achievement differentials between race and socioeconomic levels that are so evident in public high schools.

Other accomplishments of Catholic high schools appear even sharper. Dropout rates approximate only 25 percent of those in public high schools, and behavior problems are less frequent. Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) attribute these differences to the strong communal emphasis in Catholic schools, commenting that all seven of the schools observed were marked by a "pervasive warmth and caring that characterized the thousands of routine social interactions in each school

day" (1993, p.275). They attributed the high engagement of students and the strong commitment of teachers to the communal orientation of these schools.

This study, as well as earlier ones (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Erickson, 1982) attribute strong advantages to the Catholic school subset of focus schools. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) suggested that the advantages are due to the functional communities of which Catholic schools are an integral part. Erickson (1982) attributed them primarily to the sort of community that can be sustained in a school consisting only of teachers and students who are there voluntarily. To these, Bryk, Lee, and Holland add two additional explanations: the autonomy and site governance of these schools, and the advantage of an inspirational ideology that lays claim to "a public place for moral norms" (1993, p.302). These authors are explicit in ruling out the possibility that the advantages accrue from superior teaching, stating that they found instruction to be "quite ordinary" conventional didactic, with neither particularly engaging materials nor scintillating presentation (1993, p.274).

CHARACTERISTICS OF FOCUS SCHOOLS

As this examination suggests, many of the central themes of focus schools bear strong resemblance to reforms now being widely urged. Here is a list of the specific characteristics that focus schools display:

1. Students are engaged and actively pursuing learning.
2. Teachers are highly committed to the school's mission.
3. The school's purpose directs its program and activities.
4. The school is distinctive, reflecting an identity or "personality" of its own.
5. There is a good deal of collegial interaction and collaboration among teachers, making staff a strong professional community.
6. The school engages in pro-active problem identification and solving.
7. Teachers have extended roles, serving students not only as instructors, but also as advisors, mentors, confidantes.
8. Most course content offered within the school is intended for all, in contrast to a curriculum divided into tracks and electives.
9. The school has holistic aims, demonstrating concern with students' personal and social development as well as with academics.
10. The school reflects self-consciousness of itself as a community, establishing expectations of its members and making commitments to them.

Here are some of the antecedent arrangements generating such characteristics:

1. The school has an explicit purpose, identifying a particular set of aims, content, instructional orientation, or target group—rather than the diffuse purpose of meeting all needs and tastes.

2. The school is empowered to set its own direction, and within it teachers participate in making central decisions.
3. All within the school, teachers as well as students, have chosen to be there.
4. The schedule permits teachers frequent and sustained meeting time to enable them to analyze and appraise how well the school is functioning and to develop new plans and make modifications to existing program together.

The two lists reflect a number of the emphases made familiar by the reform literature: on school organization as well as program, teacher empowerment, site-based management, choice, and a communal orientation for schools. But as developed by Hill, Foster, and Gendler (1990), the focus concept also includes important departures from present school arrangements and poses contrasts with other contemporary reform proposals.

First and most fundamentally, the focus school idea recommends special purpose high schools over comprehensive ones intentionally designed to accommodate all students. Second, it recommends the deliberate cultivation of difference from one school to another, in contrast to the uniformity fostered by both bureaucratic practice and equity policy. Third, although the focus school concept presupposes choice, it does not take the position that choice alone will yield the diversity or generate the theme schools desired; instead, it is assumed that the emergence of such schools requires explicit policy commitment and pursuit.

Fourth, the role of parents in the focus school is not necessarily very different from their role in most other schools—beyond the considerable empowerment of school selection. Fifth, and in sharp contrast to at least some current proposals, the focus schools concept as formulated by Hill, Foster, and Gendler (1990) has little to say about instruction. It is

important that students be committed to their school and their education, but by implication, that need not require rendering content in particular ways. School orientation and organization apparently have more to do with student commitment and effort than does the technology of instruction.

Sixth, and most broadly, the focus school concept differs from other contemporary ideas about school governance. Although decentralization and site management are recommended, they are of a special and somewhat rare type. It is not site management engaging parents and community in school governance that is sought. That arrangement would risk the unfortunate effect of simply shifting the current interest group basis of school district politics to the building level. Rather, the site policy-makers are to be the school staff, teachers as well as principal. "Focus schools are not democracies" because they cannot stand ready "to renegotiate their basic terms" (Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990, p.39). "A focus school...is built around specific educational and ethical principles, not around accommodating the interests of all parties" (p.xi). To seek to respond more directly to the constituents of any given year would preclude a stable focus, and it would move schools constantly toward moderating and compromising their direction, thus intensifying the tendency to "regress to the mean" that distinctive schools must combat. For instance, it would have the effect of moving "open" schools toward becoming more traditional, or a humanities magnet toward including the technical. It thus must be the staff operating the program who defines the school's essential profile. Hill, Foster, and Gendler reported that in the focus schools they observed, parents are not "partners in the educational process" and do not strongly influence the school (p.52). Parent empowerment rests in the opportunity to choose the school, or to select another one.

Focus school types are not all similar in these ways, however, and there are also major school-to-school differences. For instance, in the

Block School mentioned earlier, an alternative school, parent involvement is itself the focus. So it would obviously be an exception to the claim that the focus genre is not committed to any special degree of parent involvement. There are at least two other major differences among focus school types. One pertains to teacher versus principal empowerment. Alternative schools tend toward broader teacher empowerment and less status differentials than other high schools. Catholic schools, on the other hand, tend to extend more power and influence to principals (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). A second difference of at least equal significance among focus schools is the role of innovative curriculum and its presentation, and to enhanced pedagogical method. Catholic schools, and perhaps specialty schools, do not seem to hold such improvements essential, while alternative schools and the more extensively developed magnet schools do.

It is clear, then, that focus schools are far from identical as to type and substance. But their various characteristics may suggest reasons for the effectiveness they apparently share.

FOCUS SCHOOL ESTABLISHMENT

Any school or district genuinely committed to improving its impact on students might give serious consideration to the focus schools idea. The advantages noted earlier add up to three strengths central to school improvement that are often elusive. One advantage is that focus schools represent the combination of programmatic and organizational modifications necessary to substantial, durable school improvement. Over the years, efforts centering only on one or the other of these have yielded disappointing returns. The long history of attempts at curricular and instructional changes suggests the difficulty of success, short of accompanying organizational change. And findings to date about school based management—a major effort at organizational change—suggest that instructional improvement may not be realized for a long time, if at all. Thus, establishing focus schools, or converting existing schools, offers substantial benefits as an effective change strategy. It targets program change, but in the very process of creating it, the teachers involved are engaging in organizational changes.

A second strength of focus schools is their positive impact on teachers. The new roles and responsibilities, the new mode of relationships with colleagues, and the prerogatives involved in creating and sustaining a focus school, all enhance teacher satisfaction—and simultaneously, strengthen teachers' sense of efficacy, commitment, and efforts.

A third strength of focus schools is their effect on students. They generate increased academic effort and success, keep students in school until they successfully complete coursework, and make a stronger "imprint" upon youngsters than do other schools, thereby more extensively influencing the kind of adults they become (Grant, 1985).

The advantages appear substantial. There are also, however, challenges and obstacles to be met in claiming the advantages. These are of two general types: one concerns the feasibility of focus schools; the other, more fundamentally, concerns their desirability. Looking first at the matter of desirability:

We face a number of serious challenges with respect to education today, many of them posed by the failure of traditional assumptions and prior policy choices to square with contemporary circumstances and new knowledge about what makes schools successful. We have discovered that the assignment of students to neighborhood schools segregates them racially and socioeconomically. We have learned that the "common school" we sought is not truly common, but a system separating and tracking children according to alleged ability levels. We have learned that the common school's omnibus approach to accommodation yields an institution that fails to inspire and engage its constituents. We have multiple kinds of evidence that the public is dissatisfied with the schools, both with the way they operate and with their results. We also know that there are many problems with the way that schools are controlled externally, governed internally, and made accountable to the public.

Policy Issues

The many policy questions posed by such challenges include these: Should we move to focus schools in preference to schools that are allegedly comprehensive? Should we seek other means than neighborhood school assignment to assemble school populations? If so, should it be by other assignment methods or by families' own choice? If by choice, how do we assure the rights of individuals and equity for all that comprehensive high schools champion?

Although what is most central in considering focus schools differs in emphasis from what is usually primary in discussions of school choice, focus schools are a subset of schools of choice. A special theme or focus would have no point without the option to affiliate on the basis of interest and attraction. As schools of choice, the genre poses the standard policy questions of all choice systems: How can we assure equity, with respect to access and resources, if schools differ? How do we avoid impoverishing the human and other resources of non-focus schools? How do we provide all families with the information needed to choose a school and with the transportation access to implement it? In a choice arrangement, how do we make possible the assembling of the like-minded constituents (teachers, students, parents) that school effectiveness research recommends, while avoiding homogeneity based on race, wealth, or ability? How do we maintain the kind and amount of control necessary to the effectiveness of schools, while allowing them enough autonomy to implement their own visions of education?

Any school organization pattern has characteristic policy challenges and its own pitfalls to be avoided (Raywid, 1990/1991). The types discussed above apply to focus or theme schools, since they are schools of choice. Below, these issues are raised in the context of decisions specific to focus schools.

There are also other challenges and obstacles confronting focus schools that pertain to their feasibility in relation to the realities of the existing education system. For instance: How can distinctive schools be created and sustained within systems designed to assure uniformity? How can small focus schools be created, given the large school plants now in existence? How can teachers be persuaded to willingly change their roles, relationships, and responsibilities in the face of collective bargaining agreements that regulate such matters? How can costs associated with change be covered, while avoiding related charges of inequity? How can

focus schools, deliberately conceived to differ from one another, and not even necessarily in parallel ways, be controlled?

Recognition of the need for systemwide change is important if we are to overcome such challenges. Focus schools will not thrive unless there are concomitant changes at the district level to permit their success. Agreements at the top level to relax regulations, or allow exceptions, are often ignored at middle management levels—the nemesis of innovation and non-standard programs. Arrangements that involve formal petitioning for waivers from existing rules and regulations are not only time-consuming but often frustrating in outcome. Focus schools represent a considerable departure from the common school tradition supporting the comprehensive high school. Making them work requires real change in the arrangements evolved in implementing the common school model. New policies will be necessary and old structures and practices must give way. New central office and middle management cultures must be created, with new assumptions and commitments. Otherwise, the new focus schools will find themselves inundated by a continuing struggle with an incompatible system.

Practice Issues

Some are concerned that physical, rather than organizational realities, mitigate against focus schools: school enrollment is too small, rural schools are too far apart, urban school buildings are too immense to permit specialized and differentiated schools. The emphasis on smallness shared by several types of focus schools functions as an enabler in this regard, permitting the division even of a relatively small school into separate programs with different foci. An elementary school with more than one class per grade level, for instance, could create a school-within-a-school arrangement. All that is necessary to a focus program is, say, a single class at each of three consecutive grade levels, to assure a minimal

three-year continuity. Focus programs lasting a shorter time will be unable to reap the benefits of the arrangement. They may be unable to develop the community—the climate and ethos and relationships—that figures so prominently in success. As evidence from magnet schools suggests, it may take several years for the benefits to students to peak (Musumeci & Szczypkowski, 1991). At the high school level, an enrollment large enough to sustain a teaching staff spanning the major disciplines will suffice. Thus, a secondary focus school of 80 100 students and four teachers can manage nicely.

The physical plant design challenge is perhaps easiest to meet. There is no reason why large school buildings cannot be broken down into multiple mini-schools totally separate and independent of one another. This is what New York City schools have done to adapt old buildings to modern needs. They have severed the connection between "school building" and "school." Thus, a single building may house as many as five schools. This differs from the more familiar school-within-a-school arrangement whereby a new unit is created within a larger one that differs in some respects (e.g., purpose, focus, target group) from the host school. The school-within-a-school arrangement has been criticized as causing tensions and resentments when created within existing schools. It has also sometimes been difficult for schools-within-schools to gain sufficient separation and distance from the host school to sustain a distinct identity. To date, such difficulties have not been linked with arrangements housing several separate mini-schools in the same building.

The creation of such mini-schools illustrates Sarason's (1971) maxim that it is easier to start a new school than to change an existing one. Rather than divide up an existing school into several mini-schools, it might be preferable to close the old one officially and begin anew. This not only circumvents the difficulties of changing existing customs and culture, but also creates an enlarged pool of teachers for the new focus

schools if they are not limited to the staff of one building. This makes possible new combinations of people. It also increases the chances of teachers finding like-minded colleagues with whom to collaborate in forming new schools.

When teachers in an innovative New York City district were first offered the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues in designing their own programs for focus schools, they responded with skepticism. The superintendent had to bring in several outside teachers to set up shop, in order to convince the others that the offer was genuine and that they would be supported in operating distinctive schools. Once the precedent was set, however, volunteers began to come forward. Over the next ten years, a number of self-selected teacher teams developed proposals and launched their own focus schools.

The now famous Community School District 4 of East Harlem adopted this strategy of offering opportunities and incentives to the interested, instead of pressing decisions from the top. As new schools were added upon the initiative of teachers, what might have been union resistance evaporated. Once the teachers' union was assured that teachers were not being pressured to work longer hours, or teach out of area, or take on new responsibilities— but were doing so of their own volition—union concerns were satisfied. It took longer for the union to recognize that strict observance of teachers' seniority transfer rights is incompatible with the new focus schools, but official union representatives on the committees that staffed several of the new high schools opening in New York a year ago—all focus schools—seem to have convinced these individuals at least it is not possible have both. And since the union, too, is interested in the professional empowerment these schools offer teachers, the union wants them to succeed.

Equity Issues

At times, non-focus schools within a district have objected to alleged favoritism and preferential treatment for the innovative programs. There is no question that change efforts have expenses attached, and that a new school incurs special start-up costs. New equipment and supplies may be needed, and if the staff is to design a new program, the time to do so must be underwritten. Overtime cannot be treated as the staff's contribution. Moreover, for some focus schools—e.g., those whose focus is technology or computers—special costs are not just attached to start-up but may continue. It is also the case, however, the focus schools have been able to attract outside funds, corporate and philanthropic, so that their expenses do not continue to drain district funds.

Is the initial supplemental funding justifiable? Extra funds from the district seem reasonable to get a new program under way. If we are serious about school improvement, it must involve change, and, as one pair of analysts put it, "change is resource-hungry" (Fullan & Miles, 1992). So long as the additional resources are available for all who are willing to take up the reform effort, it does not seem inappropriate to make them available only as an incentive to stimulate improvement.

Administrative Issues

A final concern about the idea of focus schools is whether they will yield administrative chaos. How, it is sometimes asked, can such disparate units be coordinated and controlled, and, if control is not possible, how can they be kept accountable? The answer lies partly in the systemic reform with which we began. It would be difficult to maintain normal bureaucratic control over disparate units and permit them to remain disparate at the same time. To attempt to do so would be to blunt their distinctiveness. This means that a new administrative orientation—new

policy and practice—will be important. The need for accountability measures and monitoring abate considerably with focus schools, however, since they are accountable to their constituents. As Hill, Foster, and Gendler put it:

> Faculty and staff of focus schools are accountable to one another and to the school's immediate community—parents, students, and others who depend on their performance. Higher authorities exist, but they do not figure prominently in the school's day-to-day operation. (1990, p.51)

SELECTION OF A FOCUS

We turn now from examining focus school types and their overall qualities to looking at a number of questions related to focus school design: the selection of a focus, criteria to be met, and the development of a productive theme.

Not all foci are desirable or acceptable, and even among those that appear to be, not just any theme or focus will prove successful in guiding a school. Two broad criteria for assessing theme or focus possibilities, one a matter of principle and the other a matter of effectiveness, must be applied. These are enumerated below, followed by a discussion of additional issues to be considered when selecting a focus.

Issues of Principle

Given the national commitment to equity, a school's focus should not segregate students along racial, ethnic, religious, gender, or socioeconomic class lines. The courts found impermissible exclusionary arrangements that function to discriminate against the already disadvantaged. Thus, theme schools such as magnets for the gifted and talented that admit only the ablest or best performing students have met with increasing criticism. Various policies have been adopted to prevent achievement requirements from barring disadvantaged and/or low performing students. One solution to the challenge of assuring equity in theme or focus schools is Minnesota's school choice law which prohibits altogether admissions requirements based on students' past academic performance or behavior. Another is Montclair, New Jersey's system, where programs labelled "gifted and talented" exist, but any family wishing to enroll its children in them may do so—on the assumption that all children have gifts and talents. Another approach is New York City's, where a quarter of the seats in semi-selective high schools are saved for

students who are admitted by lottery, even though they fail to meet the school's admission requirements.

A less exclusionary but nonetheless segregative arrangement is to select themes or foci that will appeal to high performing, collegebound students but not to others. A High School of Science and Mathematics, for example, is likely to draw only such students. The segregative effects of any discipline-based theme may be considerable, since only the highly motivated student is likely to be attracted by a disciplinary focus in the first place—and only the high achieving student is likely to be confident enough to tackle science and mathematics. Such foci have understandably been challenged as inequitable (see Moore & Davenport, 1990).

Theme schools designed to serve a particular disadvantaged minority are sometimes, but not always, considered a different matter. An early alternative school for Hispanic youngsters, Casa de la Raza in Berkeley, posed problems related to both the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Appleton, 1973). Schools targeted explicitly for African American males, and excluding all others, have also been challenged in the courts (Jones, 1991). As this history suggests, schools with a theme or focus that targets a particular group to the exclusion of others are likely to be found illegal. More recently, however, the Legacy School for Integrated Studies, one of New York's 34 new small high schools, seems to have raised no questions in this regard. This school targets African American children and the poor, although it does not exclude others. Therefore, a focus that targets a disadvantaged group may be deemed permissible provided it does not bar others. This is the situation presently, but the non-exclusion mandate is being challenged by evidence that both boys (especially, perhaps, black boys) and girls may benefit educationally from schools that are segregated on the basis of sex (Jones, 1991; Lee, 1991; Shakeshaft & Libresco, n.d.).

Schools for marginal students, or programs targeted for disadvantaged or dropout prone youngsters, also raise concerns. A great many such programs have been started in the decade since preventing dropping out and functional illiteracy have been perceived a major challenge. One concern is whether grouping such youngsters according to their alleged deficiencies is a form of tracking, since, in the last decade, inequities of tracking have been made increasingly apparent (Oakes,1985; Wheelock, 1992). Tracking tends to segregate and to systematically and permanently further disadvantage students who are already having difficulty in school. Thus, it is a practice that focus schools should not extend. And programs targeted just for at-risk students clearly "run the risk of becoming...warehouses for students deemed undesirable by conventional schools" (Wehlage et al., 1989, p.198).

In their study of 14 schools effective in dealing with such students, Wehlage and colleagues drew a distinction between "matching" and "tracking." The former attempts to respond to the needs of at-risk students while refusing to compromise high aspirations and expectations for them. What is known about the importance of positive peer role models, however, and about the benefits of mixes that expose poorly motivated and low-performing students to the highly motivated and achieving, suggests that ideal school conditions do not isolate low-performing students from others (Coleman et al., 1966). Perhaps focus schools with an emphasis that is *interest*-based rather than *needs*-based might accommodate many at-risk students from the start. In any event, unless interest-based focus schools remain a continuing option for youngsters enrolled in needs-focused schools, the latter would indeed appear an updated form of tracking.

But exclusionary or segregative effects are not the only grounds upon which a particular theme or focus might be found inappropriate for public schools. Consider a school representing the perspective of a fringe and racist para-military group. Or a school whose focus is either an

integrally religion-related one such as creationism, or a quasi religion-related one such as Scientology? On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge that a major purpose of establishing focus schools is the awareness that not all themes or foci suit all preferences. On the other hand, it seems legitimate to bar the establishment in public schools of special purpose or focus programs that violate either the Nation's Constitution or state or Federal law, and/or that stand in clear opposition to state or Federal policy. It would appear that the Constitution's separation of church and state would deem a religion-centered focus unacceptable for a public school, and that state and Federal policy would oppose a para-military, fringe focus.

Issues of Effectiveness

The question of which themes or foci are acceptable in principle is different from the matter of which of them are likely to prove effective and successful. As suggested earlier, the school's focus or special purpose should serve two broad functions: first, it should attract a group of youngsters and adults sharing an interest or orientation useful in articulating an instructional program. Not all interests would serve equally well in this regard. Second, a theme or focus should promote coherence in the school's overall instructional program, enabling students (and teachers) to encounter the connections between one study or academic discipline and another. Not all themes can do this. It is important, then, in designing a focus school to consider what sorts of themes or foci serve these purposes most effectively.

Conventional schools tend to assume that ability and performance levels are effective bases for grouping youngsters in that they recommend particular educational content and treatments. Thus, ability levels become the basis for many grouping decisions. It has been thought by many that high-achieving youngsters should be separated to constitute one

instructional group, and that low-achievers should constitute another. Public Law 94-142 has strengthened such assumptions still further by suggesting that children with any classifiable disability require teachers with special preparation. Several arguments and developments now challenge such assumptions.

First are the inequities of such separations suggested previously: segregation of the most able deprive all other students of the motivation and role modeling the high-achievers would offer. The homogeneous groupings resulting from such segregation can have extensive negative consequences for other youngsters, as Coleman and his colleagues (1966) long ago showed.

Second, there is less reason to believe that what average, or even poor, students need instructionally is very different from what the ablest need. Now, in light of the educational goal to cultivate higher level intellectual processes in all students, and the belief that all are capable of such attainment, differentiating between groups on the basis of anticipated achievement is less defensible. It is not clear either that low-achievers need pedagogical treatments different from high-achievers. Possibly, the major difference between high- and low-achievers is only that the latter are more dependent on *good* instruction in order to learn. For instance, a much quoted address of several years ago, by a specialist on learning, emphasized the importance for *all* of learning that is cooperative, active, contextualized, and concretized (Resnick, 1987). These features, in fact, are those often emphasized as important for working with youngsters considered at risk (Wehlage et al., 1989). Wehlage and colleagues reached the following conclusions from their study of effective programs for youngsters at risk:

> Recommendations developed from our study...will benefit many students who may not be labeled at risk....[W]hat is good for at-risk students is usually good for other students as well; given this, we view the implications of our research as pertinent to the improvement of most schools. (1989, p.5)

Moreover, at least some of those educators specializing in the programs and environments most beneficial to the gifted have noted their similarity to those of alternative schools promoted as a model for the restructuring of all schools (J. Renzulli, personal communication, 1993). Thus the case that youngsters of different ability levels need different curricula and instructional treatments is increasingly more difficult to make.

Third, advocates of theme or focus schools suggest that student interests and orientations, and family value preferences, may offer far more practical guidance for educating than do ability levels. There is little reason to believe that just because one youngster is as bright as another the two hold any interests in common; two bright children may be interested in very different things. Thus, what may prove motivational and otherwise effective in working with one may not serve well for the other. It is alleged that what interests youngsters—or their goals and aspirations, or the value patterns of their families—may offer a lot more direction for engaging them in productive learning than whether they share similar intelligence levels or grade levels or achievement patterns. Thus, student interest in drama, technology, or democratic living, may well function to articulate a full curriculum for a group of students throughout a middle school or high school career.

Other Issues

It has already been suggested that a focus targeting a particular group of students may be undesirable in principle and contra-indicated in

practice as well. Even those who have written about allegedly "special needs" populations often assert that what these youngsters need would benefit others also, though it may be less essential for them. Thus, foci seeking to separate youngsters according to needs may not be the most productive educational practice. So, what sort of foci might prove more effective? Several types are discussed below.

Curriculum

Magnet schools, especially at the high school level, have typically selected a curricular theme (Blank et al., 1983). According to the recent American Institutes for Research study, 38 percent of the nation's magnet programs emphasize particular content (Steel & Levine, 1994). Math-science-engineering, computer science, humanities, and multicultural studies are the themes most frequently selected. As is apparent, each of these themes constitutes a particular discipline, with the exception of multicultural studies, which constitutes a topical focus instead of a scholarly discipline. Other topical themes are also popular, and Steel and Levine (1994) report that 42 percent of the nation's secondary school magnets have a career-vocational theme.

Use of a theme in a magnet school ranges all the way from simply providing extra elective courses in the theme area to elaborate efforts to infuse the entire educational program with content related to the theme to give it overall coherence (Blank et al., 1983). Apparently, however, many magnet schools have not attempted to integrate the curriculum through the theme; in many magnets the theme is reflected largely in special elective courses that treat it in depth. According to studies critical of the fragmentation of the curriculum, and urging greater coherence across students' programs of study (Sizer, 1984), magnet schools with this approach may not offer much of an advantage. They may give students the opportunity to spend more time on content they enjoy, but they fail to render the curriculum as a whole much more meaningful or engaging.

Instruction

By contrast, magnet and other focus schools selecting a pedagogical or instructional theme may have an advantage with regard to cohesion, since a particular instructional approach to pursuing content can more readily be applied across the curriculum than can a theme based on content. Such advantages have not been extensively pursued, however. The most recent magnet school study reports that most magnets with an instructional focus are at the elementary school level, and that even there they constitute the foci of fewer than a third (30 percent) of existing magnet schools and programs (Steel & Levine, 1994).

An instructional approach focus has been even more rare at the secondary level, although some alternative schools, like City-As-School and Walkabout or Challenge Education, have styled themselves according to an instructional orientation. Such a focus, though, is receiving increasing attention in at least some of the high school programs associated with the Coalition of Essential Schools. At Central Park East Secondary School in Manhattan, for instance, the theme is the cultivation of five "Habits of Mind," which are five questions to be posed about any new content or questions encountered, irrespective of specific substance. (The five are: What is the evidence? What viewpoint are we hearing? How does this connect or fit in? Can we imagine alternatives? and, What difference does it make? [Henderson & Meier, n.d.])

The focus of the Urban Academy, another member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, is the inquiry method—an approach to teaching and learning also applied within the school across the full curriculum (Raywid, 1994). In both these schools, the instructional approach focus serves to unify the school's program by tackling all content in a somewhat similar way—i.e., by problematizing it so that students must come at it similarly, irrespective of the content, in an effort to make new knowledge meaningful. This lends a continuity and unity typically missing

in the comprehensive high school, and not even always present in magnet schools.

Such an instructional approach focus seems to have advantages, despite the fact that for some students it is probably a less obvious attractor than a substantive focus. Students of Central Park East Secondary School or the Urban Academy, that is, might not respond in terms of the five Habits of Mind or the inquiry method if asked what is special or distinctive about their school. In both schools, the answer to such a question might well have to do with the way students are treated, or the interesting nature of classes—both of which relate to and result from the instructional foci of the schools.

Thus, it is likely that students will find a content theme, rather than an instructional focus, more salient. They are more able to relate to the theme, and it may be what attracts them to the school. They may be less conscious of or less explicit about a focus, although school traits important to them may be associated with the focus.

This difference is significant because it questions the salience of the content for most high school students: does content sufficiently engage most students? And, is what they study the most important thing about school? A number of educators so assume. For instance, a recent study of career magnet schools attributes their differential effects to the extent to which they have developed, and students can pursue, the announced theme (Crain, Heebner, & Si, 1992). John Goodlad (1983), on the other hand, concluded that it is not really the curriculum of a school that determines the way students and even staff respond to it. Instead, response is determined by the way their lives are daily played out there. This would suggest that the primary determinants of how people feel about a school—and hence are committed to it, and willing to expend effort in relation to it—may be more a matter of school climate and aura than of

curricular substance. This would place a premium not just on the announced theme or focus, but on the activities, attitudes, and ethos that accompany it.

Philosophy

This leads us to a third type of focus, in addition to content or method, that lends coherence to a school program and serves to assemble a like-minded group of students and adults. Its orientation is broad enough to be likened to a "philosophy" or worldview. The "free" schools of the '60s, the "open" schools of the '60s and '70s, and the "traditional" or "fundamental" schools of the '70s and '80s have all tended to be of this type. As the labels suggest, focus schools of this sort take a particular approach to instruction, but also do a great deal more. Each has a fairly distinct set of educational goals and projects a clear character ideal or model, and advocates a recognizable outlook on life and its purpose. Each of these types of schools is likely to attract a constituency that is like-minded not only about education but also about broader beliefs and values. The result is a school that reflects a genuine community of the kind James Coleman (1985) described some years ago, tracing the remarkable parallels between a school in West Virginia and a very atypical one in South Chicago. In both cases, there was extensive similarity among the worldviews of the families of students.

Those most concerned about the fragmentation and isolation of contemporary life, and about the anomie and alienation of many young people, might well be drawn to a focus school of this sort: one which could attract and reflect a group of families that perhaps weren't even a geographic community (i.e., an urban neighborhood), but that represent an identity community or reference group so far as beliefs and values are concerned. It is this kind of focus that yields the advantages frequently attributed to the best private schools and to parochial schools (Grant, 1981; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). They can foster strong home-school ties and

mutual support. A shared set of assumptions and values, and acceptance of the resulting practices, can bring coherence to the school's program and motivate students to apply themselves to it. This type of focus probably has stronger centripetal effects than the special purpose schools that are either content- or instruction-focused. And it may be a major factor in cultivating the values and attitudes associated with citizenship education and character development.

In his study of the decline of the high school and his ensuing conclusions about "schools that make an imprint," Grant (1985; 1988) offered a persuasive explanation for why a focus based on philosophy is especially unifying. The ability of a school to make much difference in the minds and hearts and character of its students depends, says Grant, upon whether it can create a "strong positive ethos." The teachers and administrators who constitute a school are, in the final analysis, "creating a world." They build an intellectual and moral order which together define the school's ethos. The strength of that ethos depends in part upon its content and ultimately in part upon the extent to which the school's various constituents—parents, students, teachers—consent to it. This places a premium on the importance of shared outlooks.

Grant (1988) also showed the virtual impossibility of creating such an ethos within a bureaucratic school organization. It is not just the often-cited obstacles of size and fragmentation and lack of agreement that make the creation of such a school difficult, he asserted; it is also the sort of moral order that bureaucracy imposes with its commitments to legalism, impartiality, and minimalist moral imposition. If we really want "schools that make an imprint," said Grant, then we must create distinctive educational communities "in which all are bound by some transcendent ideals and common commitments to an articulated sense of the public good for which public education exists" (p.187).

Now obviously, this makes for a focus of a very explicit kind. It calls for schools that both reflect and seek to sustain a community beyond themselves. It consciously takes a school in a direction different from that of a common school with a melting pot function. Those who are most concerned about the fragmentation of contemporary life and the lack of affiliation it imposes, and by the accompanying anomie and violence, are likely to see the creation of a school community as essential to an education that is to matter. Others, however, have warned of the unfortunate consequences that can result—insularity, and ideological or group domination (see, e.g., Everhart, 1988; 1993; Peshkin, 1986). It would appear, then, that there are pitfalls to be avoided with either position taken: the comprehensive, omnibus school reflects minimal commonality, leaves youngsters without much community, and the education dispensed may be minimally effective for many. On the other hand, a focus school that manages to assemble a group with high coherence carries the risks of becoming too powerful in channeling growth, and, thus, can stultify the individual. In part, the latter risk is a matter of particularity, with some themes—e.g., perhaps a fundamentalist religious orientation, or a racial orientation—posing greater risks of insularity and "turning inward" than others. Human beings have found it difficult to build a strong in-group without simultaneously creating an out-group. To the extent that a school is successful in building a strong sense of community, such a challenge needs attention.

Whether a projected special purpose school should select a content theme or an instructional or philosophical focus is itself a question deserving of careful attention. But that is not the only question to be explored in determining the direction of such schools. At least four other matters, all related to school productivity—its effectiveness and success—should be strongly considerd when selecting and elaborating a particular focus.

Productivity

First, in selecting a focus it is important to devise one of ***sufficient breadth*** to articulate a full school program, providing direction for decisions on courses and content—pedagogy, extracurricular activities, scheduling, and even school organization. The more school components the focus can drive, the greater the coherence it will supply. Thus, for example, themes such as weather or climate, auto mechanics, or learning from individualized learning packets are probably insufficient to the task.

Second, the theme or focus should have real and immediate ***directive significance***, not be merely ritualistic, superficial, or rhetorical. Thus, a school with the theme of "a variety of teaching techniques," or "developmentally appropriate instruction," or "determining each child's talents," or one so vague as "helping all children learn," is unlikely to be able to fully realize the advantages of themes or foci.

A third quality of a good theme is ***logical coherence***. A school whose theme is no more specific than "Lotsa Good Stuff" defeats the purpose of theme adoption. Teacher teams lacking fundamental agreement among their members sometimes arrive at a theme like this, constructed on an additive basis that allows each person to pursue one or more pet projects. Hence a school may proclaim its theme as something like "We have an arts project, grandparents reading to youngsters, and we take field trips." These are what the Chicago Consortium on School Research has called "Christmas tree" schools (Bryk, Easton, Kerbow, Rollow, & Sebring, 1993), and what others have suggested may reflect a malady they identify as "projectitis" (Hill & Bonan, 1991). Such schools are marked by a rich array of projects and activities and sometimes resources and materials; the branches of the Christmas tree school glitter with ornaments (Bryk et al., 1993). There are two major limitations of such themes, however. First, they cannot provide logical coherence for a school because the activities and projects are by nature disparate and unconnected. And second, as a result,

they cannot serve to assemble a group of like-minded school constituents—rather only an assemblage able to identify strongly with one or two items of interest on the projects list.

A fourth and final requisite of a good theme or focus is that it should have ***transformative power***—which is not so much a function of the theme's quality as of the seriousness with which it is taken. The advantages of focus schools pertain to greatly enhancing their appeal to constituents and their ability to provide students with a superior education. These goals can be realized only if the traditional school model is modified considerably. Far more than peripheral or narrow-gauged changes are indicated. It is not just a matter of re-doing one or two components, even such central ones as curriculum and/or pedagogy. Restructuring involves both fundamental and pervasive change in the way a school is organized. Rules, roles, relationships, and responsibilities must be reconfigured, along with such structural components as schedules, administrative units, and governance—and, of course, rethinking content and its presentation. A theme or focus school that fulfills the promise of the focus school concept is also a restructured school—or it has failed to deliver.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, New York 10027