

CONTENTS

June 1980 • Volume 61 • Number 10

FEATURES

- | | | |
|--|------------|--|
| <i>Shirley Boes Neill</i> | 671 | Dvorak vs. Qwerty: Will Tradition Win Again? |
| <i>Daniel L. Duke and Adrienne M. Meckel</i> | 674 | The Slow Death of a Public High School |
| <i>Allan C. Ornstein</i> | 677 | Teacher Salaries: Past, Present, Future |
| <i>Martha J. Jacobs</i> | 679 | An Update: Who Would Benefit from Tuition Tax Credits? |
| <i>Jack Frymier</i> | 682 | The Annehurst System: Built on Recognition That People Are Different |
| <i>Louis P. Berneman and Carroll U. Dexter</i> | 684 | Does Matching Materials and Learner Characteristics Really Work? |
| <i>Linda H. Parrish and Marilyn R. Kok</i> | 685 | A Misinterpretation Hinders Mainstreaming |
| <i>Ira Jay Winn</i> | 686 | Turning the Screw: Higher Education in the 1980s and 1990s |
| <i>Dan Jackson</i> | 689 | Ninth-Graders Pioneer a Learning Technique: The Celebrity Interview |
| <i>Richard Kindsvatter and Mary Ann Levine</i> | 690 | The Myths of Discipline |
| <i>Eloise O. Warming and Elizabeth Coe Baber</i> | 694 | Touchstones for Textbook Selection |
| <i>Royal W. Van Horn</i> | 696 | Environmental Psychology: Hints of a New Technology? |
| <i>Jane Elligett and Thomas S. Tocco</i> | 698 | Reading Achievement in 1979 vs. Achievement in the Fifties |
| <i>James H. Lytle</i> | 700 | An Untimely (but Significant) Experiment in Teacher Motivation |
| <i>Diane Hedin and Dan Conrad</i> | 702 | Changes in Children and Youth over Two Decades: The Perceptions of Teachers |
| <i>Peter Copen</i> | 703 | Walkabout Lives! |
| <i>Robert Primack</i> | Back Cover | Why Education Flounders |

DEPARTMENTS

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 666 | The Editor's Page
Jarvis II Uncertainties, <i>Jack McCurdy</i> |
| 667 | Newsfront |
| 669 | Washington Report , <i>George Neill</i> |
| 706 | Schools & the Law , <i>Thomas J. Flygare</i>
A Threat to Accreditation: Defamation Judgment Against an Accreditation Team Member |
| 707 | Notes on European Education , <i>Michael G. Bruce</i>
Legacy of the Year of the Child |
| 710 | New & Significant
Peer Counseling in the Middle School: A Model Program, <i>Joan Butterworth Grady</i> ; Three Ingredients Bring Voluntary Racial Balance to This Rochester School, <i>Robert J. Pedzich</i> ; The Speaker-Phone: Creative Teaching on a Shoestring, <i>B. Glen Epley</i> ; A Program Based on Maslow's Hierarchy Helps Students in Trouble, <i>Mary Ruth Yates, Ron Saunders, and J. Foster Watkins</i> ; Project 60: An Accelerated Curriculum for Academically Talented Teenagers, <i>Shearl L. Edler</i> |
| 714 | Research Notes
Unions in Higher Education: The Going Gets Tougher, <i>Frank R. Kemerer and J. Victor Baldrige</i> ; Peer Acceptance for the Handicapped: Myth or Reality?, <i>Joanne E. Woodward</i> ; Attitudes Toward Desegregation in Milwaukee, <i>Gary Benedict</i> ; Teacher Preferences Shape Inservice Courses, <i>Gwen P. Yarger, Marilyn B. Brannigan, and Susan L. Mintz</i> ; Perceptions of Salient Issues Among Appalachia Educators, <i>Richard K. Fletcher, Jr., and Charles E. Golden</i> |
| 718 | Books |
| 722 | Newsnotes |
| 726 | Backtalk |
| 728 | Volume 61 Index |
| 734 | Classifieds |

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A Program Based on Maslow's Hierarchy Helps Students in Trouble

by Mary Ruth Yates, Ron Saunders, and J. Foster Watkins

Established to isolate students with severe behavioral problems, the Huntsville (Alabama) Alternative School was faced with developing an effective program for students ranging in age from 11 to 19. Because we believe that self-concept influences behavior powerfully, we decided to establish a school atmosphere that would promote positive self-concepts through acceptance, trust, warmth, concern, firmness, consistency, and humor.

Careful selection of the staff was a basic requirement for doing this. We chose teachers who had proven their ability to share themselves with students — teachers who obviously enjoyed working with young people, including those with special problems. We chose teachers who viewed students as worthwhile human beings with potential for achievement. We didn't want tough, authoritarian figures. Also, we sought teachers certified in more than one academic area and expert at a variety of leisure activities.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of basic human needs was the second component of our plan to improve student self-concepts. The Alternative School staff developed a program that recognized and attended to students' physiological needs, safety and security needs, belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs.

To meet physiological needs, for example, the staff prepared breakfast and lunch for the students and ate with them. In this family-like atmosphere students who wore hats as a rebellion against the traditional school soon came to remove them voluntarily before eating. The staff also attended to students' physiological needs by setting up a clothing bank and emphasizing personal hygiene.

We had to establish a nonthreatening school environment to meet students' safety and security needs. To do this the teachers talked with students, individually and in small groups, about things that really mattered to them. During recreational breaks the teachers joined students

in softball and volleyball games, Ping-Pong, and pool. Finally, when students boarded the bus at day's end, the teachers were outside to see them off with calls of: "Have a good afternoon!" "See you tomorrow!"

The need to foster our students' sense of belonging was also essential. They had all been outsiders at their previous schools because of behavioral problems. Now acceptable behaviors were praised and recognized by teachers throughout the day; we used both verbal and nonverbal reinforcements. Teacher-led counseling sessions also gave students and their parents an opportunity to express opinions and concerns. At least as important was the staff's expectation that students would behave appropriately, which often became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Predictably, many Alternative School students not only had behavioral problems but also had severe academic weaknesses that contributed to their poor self-concepts. To counteract this, the staff assessed each student's achievement levels in the basic content areas and then prescribed individual assignments. As a result, many students were able to realize for the first time some degree of academic success. The staff followed up with positive verbal and nonverbal feedback that, in turn, stimulated growth in self-esteem. We should mention here that many of our students — characterized by poor self-images, disadvantaged backgrounds, histories of academic failure, and repeated behavioral problems — seemed to be especially sensitive to nonverbal communication. Hence it was vital that the teachers communicated a liking both for their work and for their students.

We also identified some academically able students who had never been "discovered" and expected to perform. The staff focused on helping these youngsters to see themselves as capable.

Teacher/student contracts provided opportunities for self-actualization. Students could earn coveted privileges such as field trips or recreational breaks by accumulating points for positive behavior. The staff also taught exploratory courses in photography, leathercraft, art, typing, and woodworking, in the belief that wise use of leisure time fosters productive behavior.

The Alternative School staff *expected* the students — all of them labeled "severe behavioral problems" when assigned to the school — to behave positively and to participate actively in the school program.

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Most of them did.

We are now trying to evaluate students' progress after they have returned to their original schools. The Alternative School staff holds regular follow-up meetings with each student and his or her parent(s), counselors, administrators, and teachers. A contract has been developed that spells out specific expectations and requirements for the student. Initially, the Alternative School staff solicits weekly progress reports. Gradually, longer periods of time elapse between formal checks; this allows the student to assume responsibility for his or her behavior and to gain confidence from successful coping with school life.

This follow-up program has three major objectives. First, we hope to establish communication among the administrators, teachers, and counselors at the student's original school, as well as between

the original school and the Alternative School. Second, we hope that our students and their parents will develop a more constructive attitude toward the original school's educational objectives. Third, we hope that the original school's staff will come to realize the importance of treating each student as a worthy, capable individual and that, reciprocally, students will become more aware of their responsibilities to their school.

Ultimate judgment of the Alternative School's success will rest on follow-up data gathered over a much longer time span. Nonetheless, we are already convinced that the program is effective with many — if not most — of our students. We also believe that Maslow's hierarchy is a viable goal-setting guide for any type of school. Perhaps our program, with its emphasis on meeting basic student needs, will serve as a model. □