

University of Maine

From the Selected Works of Kimberly J. Sawtelle

November 16, 1988

Open Doors: Alternative Education

Kimberly J. Sawtelle, *University of Maine*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kimberly_sawtelle/22/

OPEN DOORS:

Alternative Education

Statistics are a black and white reality and that reality is now showing that high school drop outs across the state of Maine are on the rise. A battle is being waged against the trend, by Gov. John R. McKernan's educational appointees, zeroing in on increasing student aspirations. Unfortunately little headway has been made toward that end since Gov. McKernan announced his interest in the advancement of state public education.

Utilizing the University of Maine system, studies of the issue are underway; surveys are being taken and charts graphed. In the meantime, the state's legislature has issued another in a line of educational mandates for the 1980's: the creation of Alternative Education programs in public school systems by fall 1990.

Administrators at Dexter Regional High School began looking into the implementation of such a program prior to the statehouse vote. Following the same trend as school districts around Maine, the DRHS drop out rate has been increasing with over eight percent of the student body dropping out in 1987-88, according to Principal Robert Liebow.

The impact of that figure was lessened, however, said Liebow, when then Principal Raymond H. Poulin, Jr. working with SAD 46 Adult Education Director Patsey Smith, began creating an alternative education plan.

Drop out students who qualified, where given a chance to enter the Adult Education program to complete needed high school credits or participate in the GED program to earn a diploma. Nineteen students took advantage of the offer, hitting the books instead of the street.

Building on the success of that year-long pilot program, Smith along with Kathryn Thompson, an Adult and Alternative Education instructor, put together a formalized alternative education program for SAD 46 this past summer. The philosophy of that program is to meet needs of students in danger of not completing their education by providing "more personalized and defined teaching methodology than is generally offered in a traditional high school setting."

With approval of SAD 46 Board of Directors in September, an Alternative Education school was established in the Town Hall building on Pleasant Street in Dexter. Cooperation from the municipal government has kept rental costs low for the program which, as with most currently mandated educational programs, receives few state support dollars.

The present setup accommodates 10 students who had been failing for a long time in the traditional school setting or had dropped out of school altogether. Facilities are small with two rooms serving as both classroom and administrative space. Following the curriculum established by teachers at DRHS, students utilize the same texts and complete the same programs as their counterparts at the high school, while earning credits by objective.

According to Thompson, who teaches at the school, the purpose of earning credits by objective allow alternative students to work at their own pace to complete course requirements. "Before receiving their credit for the course they have to prove they know everything (the curriculum) requires of them," she explained.

Ridged control over student talents in a traditional classroom; failure to take into account abilities of individuals to work ahead of the pack, has been cited as one of the reasons that high I.Q. students, overwhelmed by frustration and boredom, drop out. One such alternative student, who had been flunking out of school, completed more than half a semester-long course prior to the end of the first quarter ranking period, said Thompson.

Although students currently enrolled in Dexter's alternative program have proven to be bright, well spoken and talented, with average reading abilities at or above twelfth grade level, the general picture of dropouts is not so rosey. In nearly all cases students are under extreme emotional stress as they struggle against background and social perception to come into their own as individuals. Students qualifying for Alternative Ed. are considered at risk, another in a long line of labels with which each has had to cope.

According to Liebow, at risk students tend to be below grade level in reading, math and English abilities, perhaps in need of Special Education. They are frequently truant, skipping classes and rebelling against authority. Social maturity levels of at risk students range from well below normal to advanced. The students are shunned, isolated or alienated by their peer group, leading to low self-esteem and little or no participation in extracurricular activities.

Some at risk, are exceptionally gifted or talented students who are bored with school, but more often than not they are students who feel life is spinning away from them while they, like Alice free-falling down the rabbit hole, run an off balance treadmill, struggling to catch up and stay in control.

At risk students also share common home or family backgrounds, according to conclusions drawn by researchers. The majority come from low-income homes or single parent families, with poorly educated parents and a history of dropouts among older siblings. Other common home backgrounds include child abuse and/or substance abuse among parents and older siblings.

Dexter's alternative school, dubbed Options by its student body, provides an element of caring and acceptance not found in a traditional school of 400-odd bodies racing to classes, club meetings and sporting events. Walking into the classroom is a little like stepping into a scene from *The Breakfast Club*, a movie depicting five high school students from diverse social backgrounds shut into a school library for Saturday detention. At first mistrusting and hostile, the group battles wills until each begins to understand the other, discovering along the way that, while different, they share some of the same hopes and feelings.

When students were first thrown together, arguments and hostility at Options ranged widely, according to Thompson. In the three months since school started students have learned to deal with personality conflicts in adult ways, using "verbal agreement" to resolve problems rather than physical means or negative behavior.

Although at the end of each day students go their separate ways, Thompson said while together the group adheres, providing an added bonus of positive peer pressure. "They support each other," she said. When a student begins to slip out of the alternative program, the others are there, willing to help stop the fall.

Thompson said social acceptance and individualized educational programs have worked to increase self-esteem among the students. In many cases, Thompson said, parents and friends outside the school system have seen changes in behavior. Behavior and attitude changes that students admit to seeing themselves.

While defenses are beginning to drop among one another and at home, a stranger walking into the classroom can virtually hear emotional doors slamming protectively shut; a conditioned response to nervousness and uncertainty.

To gain entrance to Options candidates must complete an application and interview process. "It's considered



RECOGNIZING THEIR OPTIONS students at the new Alternative Education school in Dexter have named their program aptly. Among the students attending the school are (l-r down the fire escape) Amy Stone, Brian Perkins, Andrew Clukey and Jason Jette. Teachers and program supervisors include (far right) Kathryn Thompson and Patsey Smith and (far left) Ed Hummel. (Sawtelle)

to be a privilege to get into Alternative Ed," said Thompson, although the road to get there is a long and bumpy one.

"I was flunking out," said Andrew Clukey, a junior, who has struggled with teachers and peers during his freshman and sophomore years in high school. "Down here (Options) the teachers show that they are concerned. They can show more attention. Up there (DRHS) when you want attention you have to wait for it and it takes forever," said Andrew, who is also enrolled in some night adult education classes.

"I don't miss nothing (about high school)," he explained, stating that he prefers adult education classes to traditional daytime school. "Adults are more mature than adolescents, and the intelligence factor is a lot of difference. They aren't rowdy and disruptive in class."

Conflict and authority struggles between teacher and student seem to be a common theme among nearly every person studying at Options. The conflict in many cases seems to fall on both sides of the fence: the teacher for lacking patience and understanding and the student for failing to recognize instructors as "people," who suffer from frustrations as well.

"I was always getting in trouble," Jason Jette stated

bluntly: "I don't like teachers. I like to have freedom." Trouble for Jason translated to teacher aggravation when he came to class late or failed to give his full attention to the issues at hand. "They'd say something to me, put me down and...I don't know, I couldn't just sit there, I had to say something back," Jason explained.

At Options "it's a better atmosphere. My whole attitude has changed. My biggest problem was getting in trouble. I think here, I have a better opportunity," he said.

The one-on-one contact between Options' teachers and students is helping to lead to such conclusions. "I can tell you from my interactions with the students that this here is a very normal human situation rather than the stifling, repressive situation you find in a normal high school," explained teacher Edward Hummel. "I know I act different when I'm facing a class of 30 kids. Here you're on the same level as the students and it's a two-way street. You bring something to them and they have something to offer you."

"We have to work our problems out here," said Brian Perkins. "There's no, 'Go to the office.' We take things as they happen, like the real world. If you're out in the real world and you're talking to a cop he doesn't say, 'Go to the town manager.'"

Alternative Education and Options school is giving 10 kids in SAD 46 a second chance that won't be ending as the students walk out the door the day before graduation. Career counselor Beth Lee, who works with the SAD 46 Adult Education program will be meeting with students later in the school year, according to Patsey Smith, to discuss the options offered beyond high school in college and vocational training.

For now though, the important work is going on routinely. "I promised myself that I would graduate doing my four years," said Jason. It's a promise that comes closer to happening for each alternative student with every passing day.

'The nice thing about options is that they represent bright and shining promises on the horizon.'

Photo and Text by Kimberly Sawtelle

CHRISTMAS PRESENCE.



Deck your halls with products from our new Christmas Shoppe.

Decorations, trees, lights, wrapping paper—we've got everything you need to get your home ready for Christmas. All at one convenient location. For a Christmas just like the ones you used to know, come to Agway.

November 16th - 19th
4 days only
Warm Insulated Jackets
Reg. \$39.95 SALE \$29.95

Toys - Farm Animals
 30% OFF Bird feeders & houses
 Hearth Mats Snow shovels
 Amaryllis Bulbs Bulbs for forcing
Boots - Books
 15% OFF items listed that are not already discounted.

AGWAY, INC.

76 North Street, Dover-Foxcroft, Maine
 564-2730



AGWAY Your Country Values Store

pre-Thanksgiving Specials

CELESTIAL SEASONINGS TEA

- Chamomile
- Raspberry
- Sleepy Time
- Almond Sunset

\$1.49
 box
 24 bags

BOB'S HARDWARE

13 Lincoln St., Dover-Foxcroft
 564-2581 Open 8-5 Mon.-Sat.

BULK FRUIT & NUT SPECIALS

- Raw Almonds \$2.69 lb.
- Apricots \$2.99 lb.
- Prunes \$1.89 lb.
- Pistachios \$3.99 lb.
- Raisins \$1.19 lb.
- Walnuts \$2.69 lb.
- Chocolate Bits \$1.69 lb.
- Popcorn \$.60 lb.
- Pecans \$3.99 lb.
- Cocoa \$2.59 lb.

