

## WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED "DEWEY"?

A little more than 27 years ago, John Dewey High School opened its doors to a group of faculty and students who began a journey which has brought us to where we are today. Many, many times, throughout the course of the years, the question which serves as the title of this article has been asked and answered. The answer, as you can well imagine, has evolved and changed, as have the faculty and students of the school. Today's dilemma in answering this question is how much do we really know about the history of this thing called 'Dewey'? Who were we and who were our students? How much do we really know about who we are today, and where we can expect to be going tomorrow?

The original mission of the school, as envisioned by the planners and outlined in the pamphlet, *THE NEW HIGH SCHOOL, A School for Our Times*, was to provide a non-traditional educational experience to the students who, upon information and notice, would opt to attend a school unlike any that existed up to that point in time. Dewey students were provided with opportunities which were unheard of at that time. They were asked to be responsible for the selection of their courses across the curricula offerings. So too were they asked to be responsible for attending to resource center assignments and seeking the assistance of teachers in their instructional areas of need. They were assisted in gaining new understandings of other students with whom they previously had little contact, and they were encouraged to gain and exercise self-respect and esteem. Perhaps most importantly, they were guided toward the acquisition of skills, knowledge and abilities that would allow them to become mature, productive members of the school community as well as the community at large. The degree of our success was underscored by the regular, positive interaction between and among students and staff. Additionally, there was a sense of pride among our students about the school they attended and the education they received. So, what is this thing called 'Dewey' today? Is it so different from the school of the early 90's, of the 80's, of the 70's, of 1969? The easy answer is that the students have changed and conditions aren't what they used to be. So, what's the answer?

Perhaps the most over-used response is that schools just aren't what they were "When I was a student." And they are not the same. But, in truth, who we are and what we are is affected by several issues. Do we believe that our students are incapable of learning? Do we feel that we can no longer 'reach' our students? Are the external pressures applied on us getting in the way of providing a meaningful experience for our students? Are we getting tired, bored, 'burnt-out'? Do we care? Do they care? Does anyone really care anymore? I don't know. I just don't know. Who knows? Do you know?

The biggest problem, as I see it, is that we just don't have the time to get to know one another and to get to know more about our students. Who was that who just left the cafeteria? What department is that tall guy in? Who are we: As a faculty, as a staff, as a school, as a 'family'? We need to know. We need to identify who we are before we can assist our students in finding their own identities. And we need to help them to mature and accept responsibility for their actions. Our students are not much different from the students who preceded them at Dewey. They are immature; they are too mature. They care too much; they don't care enough. They miss classes; they come to class late; they get to class before I do. They hang out in the halls; the locker bays are overcrowded; there are too many kids in the school. We need to do something; what can we do; will it do any good; how will they react; will they react at all? Why should we waste our time; why can't we get through to them; how can we do it, **when can we start?**

Some of the issues that have been raised should serve as departure points for greater conversations and interaction. I know that identifying solutions to the issues that face us will be more difficult. I am convinced that we have to try. We must find our own answer to the question, "What is this thing called 'Dewey'?" We need to find our own answer and not simply accept the answer provided by others who are not as directly involved with the students as we are. We must find the time to do this before time runs out for us. Both we and our students deserve it. In fact, it is our obligation to do so in order to demonstrate our dedication and commitment to this thing called 'Dewey.'

Alan Siegel

# TOUCHSTONE

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