

The John Dewey High School Adventure

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After a decade of experimentation in urban secondary education combining flexible modular scheduling, cyclical programming, learning for mastery, independent study, action learning, an eight hour day and a broad array of course offerings, John Dewey High School remains an innovative educational magnet. This New York City Public School System high school located in the borough of Brooklyn continues to be an adventure in education for a population of 3,500 students, their teachers and their parents. It has become the prototype for several other high schools that have been created or re-designed during the 1970s. Additionally, many of its features have been incorporated into the make-up of traditional high schools. Why does John Dewey High School work?

THE DESIGN

Since it opened in 1969 John Dewey High School has been very different from the traditional New York City high school. John Dewey High School does not have grade levels or the Carnegie Unit as a measure of progress. The five-period per week lock-step has been broken and there is no distinction be-

tween major and minor subjects. Instruction is provided in practical arts for college bound as well as for work-oriented students. Extra class activities are incorporated into the curriculum and students are engaged in learning on off-campus settings. These elements of the blueprint for this school represent the best thinking of a group of New York City educators with unusual educational wisdom and foresight. The design has been continuously supported by the city's Board of Education in spite of a severe financial crisis. That support is essential to making John Dewey High School work successfully.

Inherent in the educational program of the school are the following goals:

1. Enabling students to learn at their own rate.
2. An array of course offerings designed to meet the needs and interests of students of all ability levels.
3. Individualization of instruction and a serious attempt to avoid the impersonalization of large, overcrowded schools.
4. The development of a sense of self-reliance and independence among students and an ability to learn on their own outside of the formal classroom.
5. Teacher and student involvement in the development of the educational program.

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IMPLEMENTING THE DESIGN

The goals and ideas are lofty. To what extent has the philosophy been translated into program?

Visitors to this school find students to be highly visible. They are seen strumming guitars, playing frisbee, and otherwise relaxing. They are also visible in locker areas reading and in resource centers or the library doing independent study or availing themselves of the assistance provided by teachers outside of the classroom. Students enjoy the school's relaxed and open atmosphere. At the same time they benefit from classroom instruction which involves assignments, projects, tests and concentration. Additionally, much learning takes place outside the formal classroom.

All students *elect* to attend John Dewey High School. There is no special examination for admission into the school. Students need only apply for admission. Every effort is made to maintain an integrated school (approximately two-fifths of the students are black and Puerto Rican) and to have a broad spectrum of student ability levels. The school population is typical of Brooklyn academic high schools.

The teaching staff is relatively stable and enthusiastic. Initially, by agreement with the United Federation of Teachers (the union has been superlative in its cooperation with this experiment) 50 percent of the staff was chosen by the principal without regard to seniority status. Now teachers are appointed as they would be to any New York City school from a Civil Service list. New teachers participate in orientation sessions to foster an understanding of the school's philosophy and its implementation in the educational program.

From an organizational point of view the essential ingredients in the Dewey program include the following:

1. *An Eight-Hour Day.* Teachers and students alike have an eight-hour day to enable students to learn at their own rate. Approximately 25 percent (varying with the daily schedule) of the student's day is spent on independent study. Students can accelerate in all subject areas by taking DISKs: Dewey Independent Study Kits. DISKs are self-contained courses taken outside of the formal classroom. Department advisers are available to help and guide students working on DISKs. Students can get course credit by passing examinations (written, oral, or laboratory) designed to determine mastery in a DISK.

2. *Independent Study.* The independent study program is nondirective. That is, the student need not account for his time. Students have the option of going to department resource centers, using the school library (generally packed to capacity), involving themselves in club activities (built into the school day), or relaxing on campus grounds. Resource centers are a vital focal point of the independent study program. The centers are equipped with all sorts of software and hardware related to individual subject areas. Moreover, teachers are always available at the center to help students having difficulty or to assist those who are advancing more rapidly than the average. Each teacher spends approximately one hour and forty minutes a day in his departmental resource center.

3. *Flexible Modular Scheduling.* The eight-hour day is broken into twenty-minute time periods, better known as modules. Courses can be programmed to meet for two, three, or more modules. For example, social studies classes generally meet on a 2-3-2-3 basis four times a week. That is, they meet for forty minutes on Mondays and Wednesdays and for an hour on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

4. *Cyclical Programming.* The Dewey year is divided into five seven-week cycles. Students are reprogrammed every seven weeks. (The school programming is done in affiliation with a computer center.) A Dewey term generally ends on a Friday, and on Monday students receive their new programs and start the new term. Despite the fact that officials are very liberal with program changes, a total of fewer than 2,000 changes (out of a possible 22,000) were completed in three days. The efficiency of the programming system is astounding. Courses are designed to last for one, two, or more cycles. This "mini-term" concept has enabled Dewey to help students avoid the "long corridor of failure" associated with annual or semiannual organization.

5. *A Broad Array of Course Offerings.* The mini-terms facilitate the development of an unusual number of course offerings in all subject areas. By way of illustration, the English department offers well over seventy-seven courses to students, e.g., Introduction to the Novel, The American Dream (an interdisciplinary course), The Bible as Literature, The Generation Gap in Literature, Literature of Protest, Literature of Science Fiction and Fantasy. Thus a student can select, cafeteria style, those courses of interest to him. To assure a "balanced

diet." Dewey students must meet the minimum requirements established for all New York City high school students. However, Dewey has one of the highest curriculum indices (number of subjects taken per student) in the city; most students take between seven and eight subjects in each cycle. This means that students will graduate early or will be in a position to take additional electives. A Dewey student's program might include: transportation (the automotive shop is one of our six shops), sculpture, the modern novel, consumer economics, brass ensemble, typing (all students must show proficiency in typing), marine biology, and algebra.

6. *An Extensive Guidance Program.* There are four full-time guidance counselors and six part-time guidance counselors for 3500 students.

7. *Learning for Mastery.* Dewey students do not receive numerical grades, inasmuch as an underlying concept of the school program is that students learn to achieve mastery. Students receive four basic grades: M (for mastery), indicating sufficient mastery to move into the next phase of work; R (for retention), indicating need to repeat the course due to failure to achieve mastery; MI (for mastery in independent study), indicating mastery in the DISK program; MC (for mastery with condition), indicating marginal mastery with specific areas of weakness. This grade enables us to provide for "prescriptive teaching." All students receiving MC or R have an educational prescription form sent home which explains specific areas of deficiency. These prescriptions are available to the new teachers and are also available in the resource center. Teachers can help students overcome deficiencies in both the classroom and resource center. The language department requires students to take supportive DISKs (with teacher assistance) where a student has received an MC.

The question most frequently asked concerning the John Dewey grading system is, Will it permit students to be admitted to the colleges? Extensive meetings and communication with college admission officers have yielded an overwhelmingly favorable response. College admission represents no serious problem for our students. Thousand of our graduates have been accepted by public and private colleges.

8. *Instructional Innovations.* Regular classroom instruction utilizes modern teaching methodology emphasizing discovery learning, audio-visual instruction, role playing, as well as developmental lessons. The marine biology program (an

extensive and exciting one) makes full use of the surrounding beach areas and the Coney Island Aquarium. Interdisciplinary courses have been developed. For example, "The American Dream" combines English and social studies learning. Women's studies include science, math, English, and social studies.

A recent development at John Dewey has been the institutes in areas having a career orientation such as the Law Institute, the Science Institute, the Foreign Language Institute, and the Journalism Institute. Participation in an institute requires a concentration of courses of study coupled with a field experience. The 4-N-1 Program, one of the more exciting programs at the school, facilitates the field experience. This involves students in a learning experience outside of the school for one day a week or one entire cycle of the five cycles a year. Sponsors include hospitals, law firms, newspapers, and corporations.

ELIMINATING THE GENERAL TRACK

"Tracking" or homogeneous grouping does not exist in John Dewey High School. In English and social studies, students who receive an R can opt for an alternative course, thereby avoiding the failure syndrome associated with repeating courses. In sequential skill subjects, such as mathematics and foreign language, we have provided for a series of attenuated courses. That is, students can take algebra in the normal five-phase span (one year), in a seven-phase span (one and one-half years), or in ten phases (two years). There is frequent movement within the 5-7-10-phase courses, depending upon teacher-counselor recommendations.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

It is obviously difficult to evaluate the success or failure of the Dewey program definitely. Ongoing formal and informal evaluations will continue. Yet there are certain basic indications of apparent success and problems.

Do students use their independent study time productively? While one can quibble over the meaning of the term "productively," there is evidence that most of the students do use their study time in an educationally positive manner. The school library is generally filled to capacity (a beautiful sight when one considers the under-utilization of many

high school libraries), and the resource centers are used on an average of 85 percent of capacity. The sight of teachers working with students on a one-to-one basis or in small groups is a delight to an educator's eye.

The DISK program is extremely popular. An average of over 7,000 students sign up for DISKs each year. The completion ratio averages approximately 50 percent while approximately 40 percent of the students receive credit for courses on DISKs. Our experience indicates that the highest rate of passing (in the DISK program) is among those who have taken out multiple DISKs. There have been obvious problems with the DISK program, however. As might be expected, the overwhelming number of subscribers for DISKs are advanced students; relatively few students who receive R's are involved.

"Coming to Dewey was moving from a prison to freedom," remarked one student. While he was doubtless overstating the case, nevertheless his comment reveals a problem. Students coming from traditionally structured school environments often find it difficult to adjust to the large blocks of independent study time. A relatively small percentage of students spend too much time in the cafeteria, failing to avail themselves of the school's superb facilities. Continued counseling, parent consultation, and ongoing orientation have led to some limited success with these students.

Has the generally relaxed atmosphere led to an improved student-teacher and student-student relationship? We believe it has, although atmosphere is hard to measure. Nearly all the visitors to Dewey cite the "excellent tone" within the school. The frequent reprogramming of the school has led to an improved teacher-student relationship. During the course of a year, teachers meet many students and form strong educational associations. A very small percentage of the students can still be classified as alienated, but the overwhelming number get along quite well.

A long list of pluses and minuses would, at this point, serve little purpose. For most students John Dewey High School works. Unfortunately, it may not work for the student who needs a more structured school environment. While many of the "innovative" educational programs that were tried in the last decade have either fallen by the wayside or been incorporated into traditional high schools, John Dewey High School remains intact. It represents one of the answers to the problems of large urban school systems in the development of an increasing number of educational alternatives for students. When students can *elect* to go to the school of their choice, a major step forward will have been taken. We look forward to the creation of additional John Dewey High Schools located in all of the five boroughs of New York City.