

Brooklyn's Dewey H.S. Is More Like a College

By ANNA QUINDLEN

There is something strange going on at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn.

It is not only that the principal gazes, grinning, out of his office window at a grassy campus full of at-ease students, flipping Frisbees during regularly scheduled class time, or that the school is run, at least partly, by an odd student council composed of the leaders of all the class cliques.

It is not the absence of graffiti on the walls, or the fact that that absence is often pointed out by visitors from as far away as California or Japan. It is not even that a chunk of the student body does not show up one day a week, having scattered with the administration's blessing to offices, museums, hospitals and community centers throughout the city.

The strange thing is the students. It seems they like it there.

"I do," said Steven Zelin, a freshman who travels 45 minutes from Brighton Beach to get to school. "It's like college because you can go outside, do what you want, take what you want."

Standing beside him Beth Yedwab, another freshman, nodded. She likes Dewey at least partly because of Auto Shop, one of her electives. "By the end, you start working on the engine," she said shyly, brushing her hair.

Temptation Resisted

"Sure, it can be an invitation to goof off, but the people who come to this school don't want to goof off that much," said Pat Manning, who is one of the three-member council that heads the student government because "three is more democratic than one."

These are all reasons why Sol Levine, the principal of the experimental secondary school, smiles as he looks over the 12-acre Bensonhurst campus on Avenue X at West 12th Street, near the Bensonhurst-Coney Island line, and says, "Amazing—it really works."

The totally unsupervised independent study program, the absence of grades, the "4-1" program, which lets students work one day a week on school time—it does all seem to work.

Naturally it does not work in some

ways as well as it did in 1969, when Dewey was new. Every city institution has paid its dues to the budget crisis, and the innovative school, which was designed as the city's major experiment in public education as well as a model for future programs in other schools, was not immune.

The school week, with an atypical eight-hour day—8 A.M. to 4 P.M.—had to be cut back from five days to three. There are now more students in every class—from enriched vector algebra to "The American Dream," a history course that uses film scripts, song lyrics and magazine stories, as well as more standard teaching fare, and that has recently been turned into a textbook.

Some Courses Curtailed

Anthropology offerings have been curtailed. Advanced ceramics is out. There are scarcely enough épées for all who wish to take fencing.

If this does not exactly sound like a ravaged curriculum, it may be because while Dewey has taken the standard budget cuts all the more schools have been handed, it had more to begin with. And it knows how to use what it's got to get more from sources other than the city coffers.

The school's marine biology program, for example, housed in a classroom filled with the greenish glow of aquariums and some of the ugliest marine specimens that have ever crawled in Brooklyn waters, gets some funding from the National Science Foundation. One class has done water-quality tests for several nearby coastal communities on a commission basis and then reported its findings at environmental hearings.

The music department, too, combines the theoretical and practical perspectives in courses given by young composers and arranged by the New York Guild for Composers.

There is a Law Institute and a Science Institute, catering to a younger and younger yen for a professional definition and offering the kind of courses—"Supreme Court and Civil Liberties," "Human Physiology"—



The New York Times/Barton Silverman

Students at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn enjoy the good weather and study English in this informal class

usually found in college catalogues. They, too, receive outside support, from the judges, lawyers, doctors and scientists who let Dewey students observe and work with them.

"We try to simulate as much as we can the college atmosphere with a good deal of independent decision-making," said Mr. Levine, who has been at the school, which has an enrollment of 3,200, for seven years. He has seen two of his department heads become principals at other city high schools.

"We meet all the city regulations, but at the same time the students have a good choice of subjects," Mr. Levine went on. "An art student can take painting, drawing, jewelry-making, environmental design, sculpture, print-making, photography—and courses in

most of those on an advanced level. We have no tracking system. I am happy to say, but of course, the strong science student is going to wind up in microbiology or biophysics."

Or perhaps in college at age 16, as the flexible Dewey program allows. Because about a quarter of the school day is devoted to independent study, and because there are five terms, or "cycles," in the school year, a student can take courses during independent study time with Dewey Independent Study Kits (DISKS), double up on requirements and graduate early.

Some seniors stay on at the school, even though they could graduate, continuing with school activities, extra courses or just familiar society, but about 15 percent of Dewey students graduate before they have finished a

full four years of high school. In School District 21, a largely middle-class Brooklyn area that has top priority over the rest of the borough in Dewey admissions, the reason for graduating early is often money.

"I have to work—the supplies are so expensive, and it's time I helped my parents a little," said Alice Fernandes, an aspiring graphics artist who is graduating next week, one cycle early. Her schedule this term includes the "History of Jazz," an English literature course called "Generation Gap," and something cryptically entitled "Individual Projects in Two Dimensions."

"Oh, that's advanced advertising graphics," she explained. "I wanted originally to go to the High School of Art and Design, but I wasn't ready to

travel all the way to Manhattan. My art teacher in junior high told me about Dewey, and she was right, the art courses are really good. And I really like the independent study time."

Mr. Levine is adamant about the fluidity of the Dewey program. "Independent study is the heart of it," he said. "It's also the reason why some students shouldn't come here and can't make it."

He swiveled his chair around to the window again, looking over what seemed like hundreds of girls and boys armed with reflectors, cigaretes and school books.

"But if they just want to sit out there for their independent study and talk, that's their choice," the principal said. "The last thing I want to do is to tell them what to do with their time."



The New York Times

Auto shop is an elective. By the end of the course, students can start repairing automobile engines.