

High Schools: 'We're Saying That the Shackles Are Off'

In New York City, beginning next fall, 450 teen-agers will skip school for a week at a time, on and off for the entire year. And when they do go to classes, it will be without setting foot inside a school building.

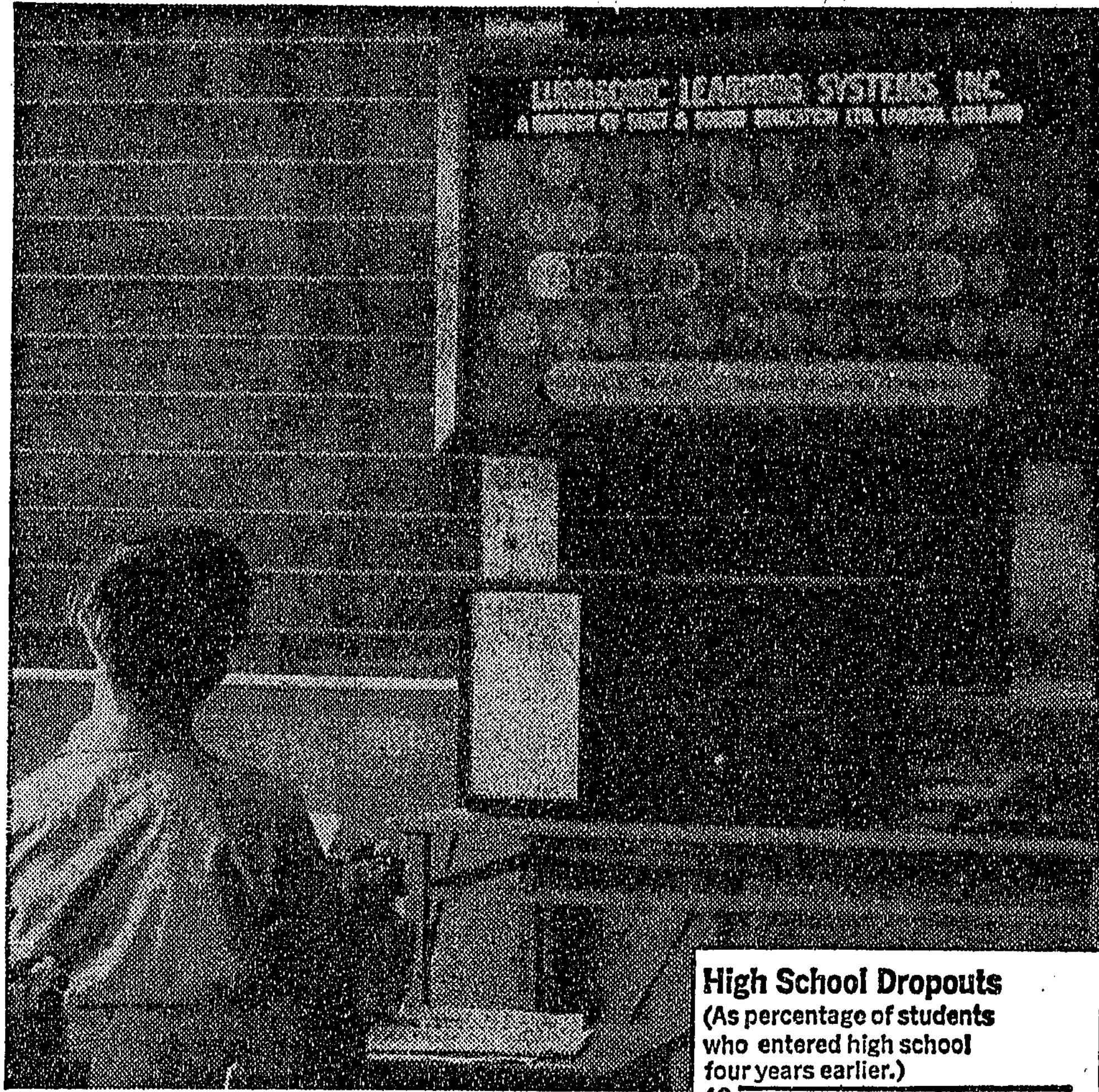
These youngsters will attend non-high schools to be known as satellite academies. Their classes will meet in office buildings in neighborhoods in which the young people will be working at jobs during the alternate weeks they do not go to class.

Details for the project are being completed now by public school officials in cooperation with the City Planning Department and the Human Resources Administration. One group of students will work at banks and insurance companies in midtown Manhattan; another group will have jobs downtown at brokerage houses and at the New York Telephone Company and the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, and third group will work at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx.

Satellite academies will be part of what city school administrators say is an attempt to develop "alternative" forms of secondary education. Many of the alternatives were discussed in an imaginative report, "Toward the 21st Century," which was released recently by a committee of 27 New York principals and other administrators, teachers, parents and students designated the Task Force on High School Redesign. The report, six months in development, was prepared under a grant from the United States Office of Education.

The study is a reaction by city school officials to some of the questions being asked increasingly by educators and parents around the country: Why are high school youngsters turned off by school? Why do they feel unmotivated? Why does more than one of every five of them in the United States—and an even higher number in New York City—drop out of school before graduating?

A major answer is that too



Typing instruction by machine is one of the innovations at the experimental John Dewey High School in Brooklyn. A new report calls for other innovations in the city's high schools to make them "more exciting places" and reduce dropouts. While the annual percentage of dropouts from the nation's high schools has been decreasing, it still represents more than one out of five students (see chart).

many young people find the formal high school program boring, uncreative, unchallenging, unsuited to their abilities, irrelevant and even uninformative.

It is to this multifaceted problem that "Toward the 21st Century" addresses itself. Dr. Harvey B. Scribner, the city's school chancellor, and others requested the study because they think that high schools should try to do more to reach youngsters whose needs have not been met by traditional approaches.

"We're saying to the principals that the shackles are off," said Oscar Dombrow, an assistant school superintendent and chairman of the task force. The shackles in question are the ones that progressive educators say have impeded the adoption of reforms which, they argue, could make high schools more exciting, challenging and relevant. High schools: the schools that Charles E. Silberman in his incisive critique of American education, "Crisis in the Classroom," called "the worst of all."

Six premises underpin the city report:

- The high school needs to become more "humanized," less impersonal.

- The development of new ways of delivering instruction is essential.

- Each student is deserving of every possible chance to gain the basic skills without which he cannot become a successful learner.

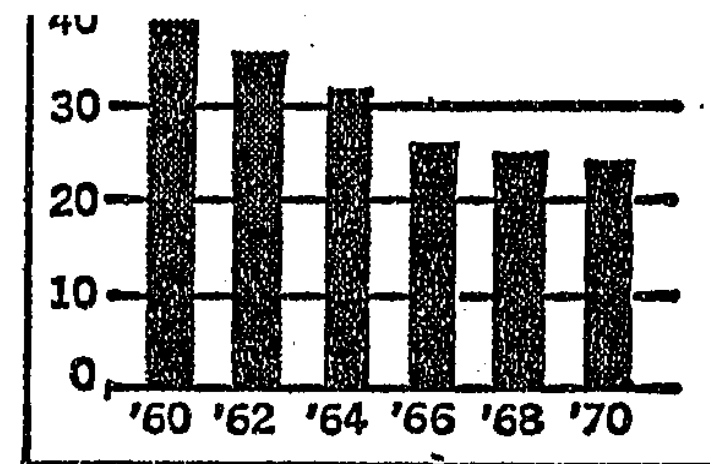
- Much education takes place outside the walls of the high school.

- The school should endeavor to instill within each student a sense of obligation to others and a sense of responsibility.

- A student must be equipped with an education that will help him adapt to an unpredictable future.

To these ends, the report advocates such innovations as the satellite academies, "minischools," independent study, new courses and class periods of varying length. Some of these ideas are already in the experimental stage, some will be tried in the fall, some are merely be-

High School Dropouts
(As percentage of students who entered high school four years earlier.)



The New York Times/Robert Walker

ing talked about.

The report calls for the establishment "as soon as possible" of 12 new kinds of high schools: For example, one is an institution—an "open campus"—that would be open from 7 A.M. to 10 P.M., another would use the agencies of the city government as its classrooms, and another would serve as a resource center for students pursuing independent studies. These concepts look to the future.

One idea now being planned for nominal implementation in September is the splintering of an entire school, Haren in Manhattan, into 16 intimate minischools. Each of the 16 self-contained units of 100 to 120 students will have its own faculty and its own classrooms. A student who chooses to enroll in the minischool concerned with the performing arts, for example, will pursue an interdisciplinary course of study in which each subject, whenever possible, will be related to the performing arts.

Another of the report's

proposals, independent study, is not now used on a wide basis in the city's schools, but is at the heart of a thriving program at two-year-old John Dewey High School in Brooklyn. A student at Dewey might receive an "independent package"—a list of books to read, questions to answer, papers to write. He works at his own rate, and upon the successful completion of each package, is given a more demanding one.

Another student studying independently might leave school for a month or two to examine a particular urban problem and then write a report. Presumably, his completed paper might earn him credits in several courses—in social studies because he has studied a social phenomenon, in history because he has placed the problem in its historical context, and in English for the composition of the paper.

Not all educators or parents are prepared to accept independent study as a worthy addition to the program; some consider it no more than an unexcelled opportunity for teen-agers to goof off. As for other alternative approaches, critics contend they are simply a euphemistic way of watering down the curriculum and lowering high school standards.

It is presumed that some of the basic "3 R's" work would be mixed in with the new courses, but the report did not deal with the effect the reforms might have on a student's meeting the present requirements for a high school diploma. Nor did the study discuss the question of students being ready for state Regents examinations.

One who disagrees with critics of the new approach is Chancellor Scribner.

"Our focus," he says, "ought not to be on a student's ability to pass the Regents examination by the time he has been in school for 12 years, but in creating in him an attitude of wanting to continue learning after he leaves school."

"You must put the 12 years of formal education in the context of a life of 70 years. Then ask whether it is worth getting him to the point that he is able to answer some questions on a standardized test after 12 years at the expense of sacrificing a favorable attitude toward learning or if it is more profitable to get him to want to continue learning for the next 50 years."

"The approach until now has turned off kids on education and marked as failures those who didn't reach that point in life by 18 that they might reach by 21."

—GENE I. MAEROFF