

Changes Within the System: The English Program at John Marshall High School

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Modular scheduling, semester courses, elective courses, inter-disciplinary courses - all of these are being talked about, introduced, pursued, and praised - in fact, it seems that to have status one must be on the bandwagon. Because John Marshall High School has thus far not gone to some of these programs, many think of our school as a traditional high school. True, it still has a seven period day with all English teachers meeting five classes of approximately 130 students daily for 55 minutes. However, our staff recognizes that it isn't always the change as such that improves the educational process, but the enthusiasm generated in the attempt to justify the new method.

In reality, John Marshall is doing much to effect change. It has eliminated all bells; it has tried to eliminate study halls; it has no supervision of lunch rooms. It attempts to offer all the freedom the student can handle, but it believes in preparing the student for this freedom. Furthermore, the individual departments are developing the changes which they want.

The English department has been concerned about this need for change for several years. For four weeks the past four summers, twelve to fifteen English teachers in grades seven through twelve have been developing a course of study. After considerable study, they have developed a well-defined but not prescribed spiral program in composition, language, and literature. In doing this they have defined the concepts they want taught but left the teachers free to choose the methods and materials. The basic anthology has all but been discarded and an IMC (Instructional Media Center) has been built up. The eleventh grade alone has class sets (15-300 in number) of approximately 75 titles. These include classics as well as contemporary works. Titles such as The Scarlet Letter, Huckleberry Finn, Walden, A Separate Peace, Grapes of Wrath, True Grit, A Choice of Weapons, Tell Me That You Love Me Junie Moon, The Contender, and Durango Street are included.

One of the most exciting of our innovations, designed by the curriculum teachers, is the English Resource Center with a teacher aide in charge. The Center is not just another classroom or study hall. To provide an atmosphere of informality,

we have furnished it with round tables, small upholstered chairs, draperies, attractive book cases, pictures, and we hope to have it carpeted. Books and magazines are in abundance but arranged so as to give the feeling of a browsing room. There is a small adjoining room, affectionately called the cell, and another designated as a conference room. The Center is equipped with a film strip projector, a stereo record player, a four-track tape recorder, a pixmobile with eight head sets to use with any of the audio equipment, and a typewriter.

Not only is the room furnished to reflect informality but it is used in that way, too. One might find six students viewing a film analyzing Macbeth, four listening to a recording of Billy Budd, nine researching euphemisms, four making up separate tests, one creating a collage relevant to satire, one writing a satirical poem, four preparing a class presentation on semantics, eight writing themes illustrating inductive reasoning, and one sitting on the floor engrossed in To Kill a Mockingbird. The teacher aide is there to assist. There might be some buzzing, but it is purposeful.

This Center has become an integral part of the classroom and has permitted the English teacher to offer group as well as individual instruction and flexible scheduling. He can vary his instruction almost as much as his imagination, interest, and planning allow him. The Center provides him with facilities for small group instruction. With the abundance of materials, the teacher usually gives the student a choice of books on a specific theme. Those students discussing a specific book together with those interested in listening to the discussion remain in the classroom while the rest go to the Center to prepare for their discussions or to work on another project. The same plan is used for those needing special instruction. Frequently half the class is sent to the Center with composition assignments while the remainder work in the classroom. The aide is briefed on the assignment and assists the students in the Center while the teacher assists those in the classroom. The following day the groups are reversed. Students get much more individual attention this way.

The English teachers are using more and more individualized instruction. However, they realize that this instruction must be carefully planned, that it entails guidance, and that the students must be prepared for it. John Marshall has a foundation system which grants approved students a number of privileges. Using this system and the Center, teachers occasionally turn students loose for a period of two or three weeks to work on an individual or group project. Those on foundation study where they choose; those not on foundation go to the Resource Center or get permission to go to the library. During this time the teacher as well as the aide has scheduled conferences with the students individually or in groups. Frequently in composition, the entire class

meets for the assignment and pre-writing activities. Then the members work individually and come in for their composition conference. Just one conference of this kind in a month does more than all kinds of red pencil marks.

The Center has also served as an ideal place for that bugaboo "makeup." When a student is absent from a test, that test is sent to the aide with the student's name and deadline for makeup. The student reports directly to the Center for his makeup, and his completed test is turned over to the teacher. If the student is absent from a film or a record, or if he wishes to see or hear it again, he goes to the Center. All of this tends to place the responsibility where it belongs - on the student.

Students like the Center and many of them go there regularly during their unassigned time to work on English assignments. They know it is the one place they can go to get the help they need when they need it. They like the relaxed atmosphere which is conducive to creative work.

Needless to say we have a superior teachers' aide. Her education includes a BS degree with a major in library science and a minor in speech from the University of Minnesota. Her experience includes working in a children's library and serving as a teachers' aide in Ohio, but in an entirely different capacity. She does considerable professional writing. However, it is her enthusiasm, imagination, cooperation, and ability to relate to the students that has been so important.

One limitation to our varied group sizes has been our large group instruction. Generally, it has been the class size of 25-30. This year that too is being experimented with by scheduling all twelfth grade accelerated students the same hour, all basic students the same hour, etc. This will permit the teachers to bring their students together and cooperatively plan their large group instruction if and when they desire.

Too many times teachers have excused themselves from attempting innovative ideas by blaming the "system." But there is much that can be done within a traditional framework. Having a teachers' aide and a Resource Center and using it as we are does not lessen the work of the teacher. In fact, it has increased our work. Much more planning is required; much more communicating and cooperating are necessary. However, some of us feel our plan is more flexible than most other programs because we do not have to follow a specific schedule of large groups, small groups and individual instruction. Each teacher plans his own program. No teacher is forced into such a pattern. He makes the choice, though his students might lead him into it.

In another year we are sure that our program is going to be so extensive that we will need another aide and additional room, but we will have had another year of experience and should be ready to cope with the problem.

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