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Model for Change: A Rural Elementary School

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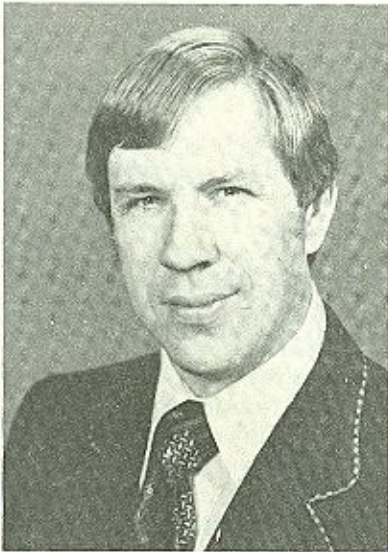
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An unusual program in a small, rural school uses individualized instruction, student self-scheduling, freedom, an outdoor classroom, teachers-as-advisers, learning centers rather than classrooms, and a library which is the true heart of the school.

model for change: a rural elementary school

by Gerald C. Ubben



A prime consultant in the development of the Oliver Springs program, Gerald C. Ubben is associate professor of educational administration and supervision at the University of Tennessee. He has also taught at the Universities of Minnesota and Nebraska. His professional background includes service as a teacher, supervisor and principal in Minnesota. He was one of the first interns with the NASSP Administrative Internship Project in the mid-1960's.

This is a story of educational change in a rural American community. In that community hums a beautiful elementary school that is an open space, open curriculum school dedicated to providing an up-to-date, exciting, educational program for its children. Individualized instruction is the basis for its program design with multi-aged groups of children and team teaching. While not yet achieving many of its goals, its instructional program is moving rapidly toward effective individualization; its staff is functioning with the principal to cooperatively reach instructional decisions within the school; and the climate among the students and staff is one of excitement about learning.

Oliver Springs is a small village located in an economically depressed area in rural Appalachia. Strip mining has provided a major economic base; unemployment is basically high; average personal income is very low (under \$5,000 per year); drop-out rates high (over 50 percent by grade twelve), and the overall educational level of the population averages around grade eight. The Oliver Springs Elementary School building is over 30 years old and built for self-contained classrooms. A few of the teachers have taught in the building almost since it opened, a few of the teachers are beginners, and a few of the teachers have yet to complete bachelors degrees. Nevertheless, the climate for learning is fantastic.

Learning Centers

The curriculum for the Oliver Springs School ranges from an outdoor environmental education center to typing and ballet. Broadly based, it draws on the many strengths of the teaching teams combined with the wide interests of the elementary student. Learning centers are operated as self-instructional, topical resource centers which allow students to interact with many more curricular areas and allow the teachers to supervise many more activities than would be possible if teacher direction were necessary for all student learning.

In addition to those subjects mentioned and the normal subjects of the elementary school, one can find at Oliver Springs such activities as sewing, dramatics, "take-a-part activities," educational games, weather surveillance, nature studies, creative crafts, and recreational reading. The full curriculum for each of the groups of students and their teachers would include approximately 20 different offerings. The great majority of the activities have been prepared and set out in advance by the teachers so the children can engage in a variety of learning activities with a minimum of teacher

direction. In this manner, the teachers are free to work with small groups of children, as well as to supervise several centers simultaneously. The materials used in these learning centers must be many and diverse including both commercially prepared and teacher-made items. However, with the shortage of funds with which to purchase materials at Oliver Springs, the great majority are teacher-made items such as task cards and learning packages.

Outdoor Classroom

One phase of the individualized program is the use of an "outdoor classroom." Trails are being constructed on property owned by the school. One trail follows the contour of a small creek. Here the children see and study the effects of wind and water on soil.

Natural springs, wildlife, trees, plants, rocks, and soil become the springboards to investigation, research, and new discoveries.

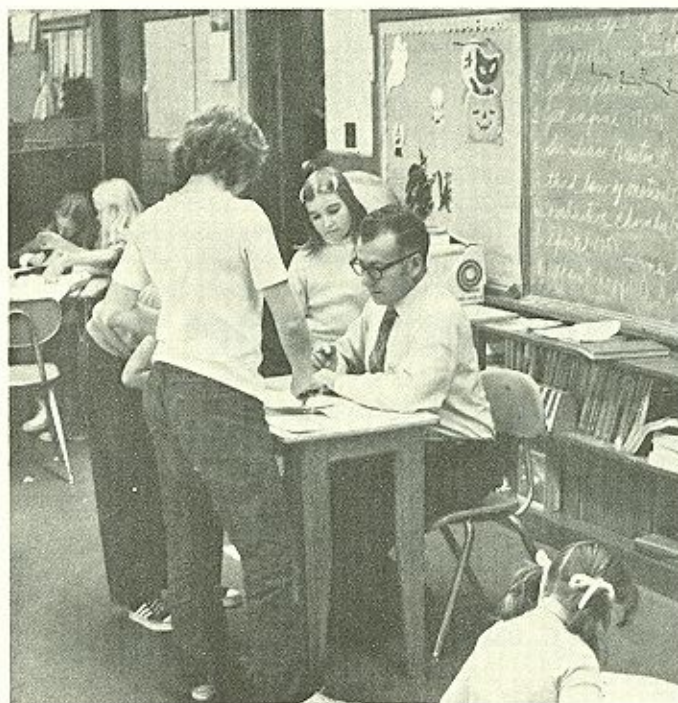
Library

The library at Oliver Springs Elementary School functions as an integral part of school, but is unique enough in its function to be worth mentioning separately. The teachers, restricted only by a team student quota to prevent overloading, use the library as one of their learning centers. A child can go to the library for recreational reading, to do research on special projects, to engage in a game of chess, to construct models for a group project in any subject area, to listen to tape-recorded stories, to receive instruction in library use, to check out materials or equipment to take back to the classroom or home, to work a jigsaw puzzle, to work on teacher-constructed games or work sheets, etc. The only regularly scheduled library class is a special story time for kindergarten and first grade; but even when this is going on, students are free to use the remainder of the library in the ways mentioned above. It truly functions as the "center" of the school.

Student Self-Scheduling

Reliance on student self-initiative and interest in learning is a major tenet of the program. The students at Oliver Springs are expected to schedule themselves into learning centers for their contact with instruction. The centers they choose to attend and the length of time they stay depends largely on the self-felt needs of the child and the professional judgement of his adviser. Student interest becomes a major tool for personalizing the curriculum. Each student in the complex, therefore, operates on his own schedule which is not exactly like that of any of his classmates.

There is teacher supervision of this student scheduling. One of the most novel features of the Oliver Springs program is the personal contact between the teachers and each student. Each student has had the opportunity to select his own adviser from among the members of the team. Each week in an individual conference the student and his teacher-adviser review the individual student's schedule, as well as the materials produced during that week by the student. These conferences take on the average of ten minutes each. The teacher-advisers quite often suggest modifications in the student's program if they feel change is necessary. The teachers have found that some students must be counseled more than once a week in order to keep them actively



Individual help is provided away from the centers.

participating in a learning program, while others could be seen less often.

The students through this adviser-student arrangement have definitely made progress in assuming more responsibility for their own learning. (This is one of the stated objectives of the Oliver Springs program). For example, when the program first began a number of students, used to the "heavy hand" of a teacher upon them, simply could not settle down to any concentrated study when they knew they were free to move to another learning center if they wished. The teachers began to refer to them as the flitters as they would "flit" from one activity to another looking for excitement, quite often creating their own. After the novelty of the new-found freedom wore off, many children settled down to their learning tasks of their own accord; however, others needed a great deal of teacher help through temporary use of a more constrained environment before they could function with self-direction as desired. The reward of freedom, something very coveted by most elementary children, became a powerful tool in bringing about the desired results.

Group Activities

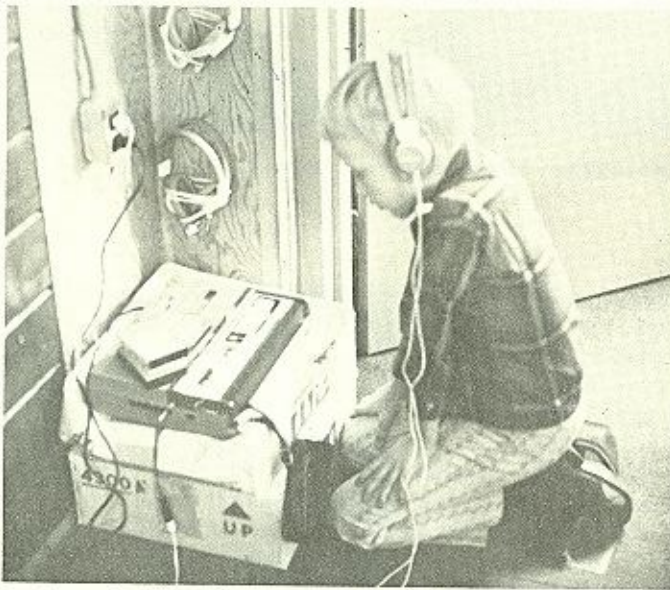
The schedule for each student really is not quite as open as it might seem at first glance. Each student participates in several scheduled group activities each day. For most, this means a reading skills group, a math group, P.E. and probably a large-group presentation, called by one of the teachers, relative to their learning center activity. These learning center presentations vary from day to day and are scheduled and announced by the teams as they feel they are needed.

Cooperative Teaching

The teaching teams at Oliver Springs Elementary vary in size from two to four teachers. No magic formula was used to arrive at team size, but rather existing spaces in an old building dictated it. Last year one team using two spaces included



A small skill group serves for reading instruction.



An improvised listening center captivates its users.

seven members, but that was found to be too large for good teacher and student communication so this year it was reorganized. A variety of approaches to the use of teacher aides have also been tried, depending on their availability. Some paid aides have been used as well as volunteers. The teachers have agreed that aides are extremely important in making a learning center program work well.

Team Organization

On most teams each member teaches five or six subjects including reading and math. Reading and math are organized around skill groups created by bringing together children for instruction who have been assessed as having very similar achievement levels on a skills continuum in that subject. These groups change in composition every few days as children move along on their own personal skill ladder. In order to keep these instructional groups small (ten to fifteen), each teacher works with two or three separate groups in both reading and math each day. The other subjects—social studies, science, health, spelling, plus many other areas as mentioned earlier are taught in learning centers through a self-instructional orientation with each teacher responsible for three to five different centers. Her responsibility is to

plan, prepare, set up, monitor, support, and evaluate each of the centers in her jurisdiction. The teachers try to change the materials in the centers at least every two weeks, but with the heavy reliance they have fallen behind that two-week schedule, particularly when they try to strive for a range of materials that will meet the children's various ability levels.

Whenever a teacher feels that a particular learning goal must be supported by a teacher-directed activity as part of the instruction in a center, she will schedule with the team several group meetings for the children, usually spaced out over several days so that all the children working in that activity will have time to build it into their own schedules.

The five to seven separate assignments that each teacher has represent fewer preparations than she would have in a self-contained classroom, but still provide her with a good opportunity to observe the whole child. This alleviates the problem that seems to plague the departmentalized programs designed around teachers teaching in only one specific discipline. A bonus feature of a team approach, of course, is the opportunity to match students and teachers on a student's choice base for the advisement function of the program.

Program Beginnings

How did a program like this get started in a small rural town of Appalachia? Many people were involved before the project really could get underway—the superintendent, the principal, the community, the teachers, the school board—but the basic idea generated from the federal project officer of the Roane County School System, Mr. Roy Bowen. Teamed with several professors from The University of Tennessee, they put together a basic proposal designed to do two things:

1. To identify and prepare the staffs of several of the elementary schools of Roane County to implement open space, open curriculum schools.*
2. To further the professional graduate training of the staffs of these two schools to a more accepted level and do it with a program tailored to the needs of their local school district.

Funding was received from the Appalachian Regional Commission ETDD to assist in the upgrading of the teachers as public employees in an amount large enough to pay for their participation in a nine-graduate-hour course through the Extension Division at The University of Tennessee. A professor from the Department of Educational Administration and Supervision was engaged as a consultant to train the staff and advise them regarding the organization of their program. He also directed the preparation of the individualized instructional materials and continued work with the program approximately once a month for a year after it was first implemented.

The Board of Education for Roane County as well as the Superintendent, Dr. Ed Williams, was behind the programs with extra financial and political support. Capital outlay funds were appropriated for necessary building

* Two elementary schools in the county, Midtown and Oliver Springs, were identified to participate in the program. Largely because of a principal who was eager to try some new ideas, Midtown is also operating today with an organization very much like that of the Oliver Springs School.



A quiet game center in the library



Two students work on their own in a social studies center.

modifications. Numerous walls were taken out of the Oliver Springs building in order to create the desired sizes for instructional spaces and each of the new areas was carpeted. The superintendent and board also provided a necessary protective shield from the small but vocal dissident community groups that did not understand or did not like the program.

The community, generally, was quite supportive of the program. Presentations were given at several PTA meetings and the principal, Richard Davis, worked very hard to be open with his community. Even so, some opposition to the new school developed. Mr. Davis found that one of the best ways to counter the opposition was to invite these people into the school for a first-hand look. He honestly shared with them some of the problems of implementing the new program and then asked if they might help him and teachers by working in one phase or another of the parent volunteer program that had been implemented. This seemed to work most of the time; however, there are still a few—

All of the problems were not external, however. A number of crisis situations developed the first year internal to the Oliver Springs staff. The largest team, seven teachers, three

aides, and 210 fourth, fifth and sixth grade students, found its size too large for good effective communication and coordination. It stayed together all year, but it was very rocky. Another team of four teachers, grades two and three, had so many personality and philosophic conflicts that by Christmas the only solution left was to split it in two. After several end-of-the-year resignations and realignment of the teams, the second year was much smoother but not totally without conflict. The third year—well, it was better.

The principal at the Oliver Springs school still has the drive and enthusiasm he had when the project began. Teachers are beginning to assume greater leadership in the implementation of the school-wide instructional goals, and the community is assuming greater involvement in the project. Best of all the staff has found vast improvements in student attitudes toward school and in many cases this is beginning to have a positive effect on student learning.

Has the school yet arrived? No, a program like this probably takes from three to five years before it starts to look good. However, when you think of the oil floors, the chairs in straight rows, the limited graded curriculum, and many unhappy children, Oliver Springs has come a long way.