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# EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL



## TASK FORCE ON:

### SCHOOL DROP-OUTS

The Task Force on Drop-outs found that children from poor families tend to drop out of school in greater numbers than children from middle and upper-class families. Because of their low educational level, they then earn less money and as a result, more frequently need public services such as welfare.

We concluded that this process could be stopped by the introduction of a program to reduce the number of poorer children who drop out of school. A number of proposals are contained in this Task Force Report that are directed toward that end. We felt, however, that programs must be implemented at an early point in the child's schooling. In order for this to happen, a re-examination of priorities has to be made so that resources are allocated before problems get out of hand.

If attention is paid to many critical areas in elementary grades, the child's feelings about school can be changed for the better and he can be equipped with certain skills that will help him to succeed in the higher grades. We could then expect to see a reduction in the drop-out rate.

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THE EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL  
10006-107 STREET,  
EDMONTON, ALBERTA, T5J 1J2  
PHONE: 424-0331

## TASK FORCE ON SCHOOL DROP-OUTS

During the past year, The Edmonton Social Planning Council has been involved in researching the factors that combine to create a 'decent standard of living'. We found that most of these variables could be classified under two broad headings - income level and access to social services. Under social services we included, among others, access to health care, financial assistance, consumer services, day care, legal services and adequate education. While expanding on the area of education, we found much evidence pointing to the importance of an adequate level of education as far as obtaining a decent standard of living is concerned (Poverty in Canada, p. 112).

In exploring this area further, we became aware of the substantial number of young people dropping out of high schools across Canada. It is our belief that education is a basic social service to which we are all entitled; we therefore attempted to discover how many Edmonton high school students are losing out in this regard. The rate of withdrawal from Edmonton Public Schools suggested to us that a significant number of children are not receiving sufficient education to enable them to maintain an adequate standard of living as adults (Early Withdrawals from High School, p. 4). A decision was therefore made to explore the area further and the Task Force on Drop-Outs was formed. To aid in our study, we adopted the definition of 'drop-outs' used in another report, namely they are "pupils who leave school for any reason except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school" (School Drop-Outs, p. 6).

Using this definition, the Task Force began its investigation. Immediately, a very disquieting fact came to light concerning high school drop-outs. These students are not evenly distributed throughout society's social strata; the lower class is over-represented among those who drop out of high school.

The factors that contribute to their dropping out are often numerous and complex but the picture might appear somewhat like this: As these children progressed through the grades, their parents likely had little or no interest in what they were learning in school or if, in fact, they were learning anything at all. They therefore offered them little encouragement. As the children were members of a poor family, little money could be allotted to purchasing books and supplies, clothes, sports equipment, and other 'extras' so important to any child wanting to be accepted by his peers. Finally, coming from the lower class means possessing somewhat different standards and values than those commonly accepted in school. Therefore, the children did not think in terms of long-range goals, pride in education and ambition to succeed (Poverty in Canada, P. 116-118). As a result, their ties with school became progressively weaker and in the end, they completed their psychological detachment from school by making it a physical one as well.

After dropping out, they became more dependent upon the services of various social agencies. This dependence was revealed to us through statistics which correlate low educational background with frequent need of public assistance, health, probation, counselling and other social services (School Drop-Outs, p. 34-37).

The picture which emerged was grim indeed. If these youngsters could have found school a more satisfying experience and remained until they obtained a higher level of education, chances are that some of the problems resulting from their dropping out could have been prevented. It would therefore appear that means of increasing the lower-class child's ties with the school system need to be found. The aforementioned problems would then be reduced, at least as far as their association with low levels of education is concerned. \*

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\* We are not particularly concerned with a recent trend which sees a greater number of middle and upper class young people leaving school. Students in these groups often see their withdrawal as temporary, giving them an opportunity to travel or explore the work world. Such students are provided with many advantages that would make it relatively easy to return and complete their education (Social Bases of Education, p. 41).

In order to achieve this end, we surveyed the various programs for drop-outs and potential drop-outs in an effort to find out what would give these students a more meaningful school experience. Several possibilities emerged and it appears that a number of them can be readily integrated into the Edmonton Public School system. We therefore put them together into a general 'program', and sought an Edmonton high school into which our proposal might be incorporated on a trial basis.

We decided that our primary criteria for the high school would be that it has a large proportion of lower-class students. Our data concerning social class and high school programs suggested that children from poorer families are concentrated in vocational programs. Since non-matriculation programs have also proven to be the ones from which students tend to withdraw in the greatest numbers, a school with a vocational orientation was sought (School Drop-Outs, p. 24).

W. P. Wagner school, noted as being a trade or vocational school, was therefore selected for the focus of our project, although we did realize that the school was originally intended to serve disadvantaged and problem students. Indeed, preceding its establishment much research was done in an effort to ensure that the school would meet the needs of these students, many of whom were considered potential drop-outs (W. P. Wagner, A Successful Alternative). Despite this fact, we did feel that there remained a drop-out problem which might further respond to part or all of our program.

Thus, because W. P. Wagner had a number of characteristics which suggested it would be serving a large proportion of lower-class students, we approached the school with our proposal. Our intention was to ascertain whether they could, in fact, be adapted to this particular school and provide some course of action to respond to the needs of students from poor families.

Discussion of the proposals with administrative and counselling personnel

at W. P. Wagner however, led us to the conclusion that most, if not all, of these suggestions were already in effect. A tour of the school showed even more definitively that the administration is attempting to meet the needs of the students. Obviously then, if the school is already utilizing available information concerning programs for potential drop-outs, then our approach needed re-examination. If the end results of a well-thought-out program is that many students are still withdrawing, then the root of the problem would seem to lie elsewhere. Was it with the programs, which were believed to be valid by the school and suggested as valid by our research? We set out to review our research information once more.

During our initial study, evidence had repeatedly come to light that the best time for meeting educational problems of children from lower-income families is during their first years of schooling (Lowering the Odds on Student Drop-Outs, p. 39-41). In spite of this fact, many programs have been implemented at the high school level. At this point in a child's education, his dissatisfaction and inability to cope with the school system are at their most extreme and become manifest in ways that cause problems for his school's administration. Since these problems are most obvious at the senior high level, the solutions being instituted are of a remedial nature.

Here we find extra facilities, personnel and effort introduced, but their impact is somewhat diluted due to the combined effect of the child's previous unsatisfactory school experience. In our project too, we reflected the prevailing trend in many institutions to deal with problems in a remedial rather than preventative manner; we intended to do battle in the most obvious setting, the high school. But our experience with W. P. Wagner, a school making all possible effort at the high school level, re-emphasized the necessity of earlier intervention with students from lower-class and disadvantaged backgrounds. There are, in fact, programs of action that could effect a change in the child's school experience at an earlier point. We must take the available information

and make extensive use of it in elementary and junior high schools, as well as at the senior high school level.

The climate of opinion within the present school system suggests that now can be the time for such action. New efforts, in fact, are possible within the framework of a report presented to the Edmonton Public School Board Education Committee in February 1974. Our proposal, which includes changes which range from alterations in curriculum to modifications in the counselling system, is consistent with the philosophy and conceptual guidelines of the report. The report states that the concept of 'alternative' places an increased emphasis on the matter of student-parent choice and on an accelerated development of programs and delivery systems to meet the diverse, individual needs of our student population (Alternatives in Education, p. 3). Certainly, our proposal does emphasize choices and delivery systems to meet needs of the population which has our greatest concern, namely children from the lowest socio-economic level.

The report then follows up with characteristics of an alternative program. The two major characteristics to be used in providing a framework for the outline of our 'alternative program' to keep lower-class students in school are:

- A. CURRICULUM - Under this heading is included what is studied, the sequence in which it is studied, and the emphasis that is placed on the material.
- B. CLIMATE/TECHNIQUE - This considers the tone of the classroom or school and the instructional techniques employed in this regard.

Variables that may be somewhat less relevant in identifying 'alternatives' are:

- C. SPACE/LOCATION - This looks at where the learning takes place.
- D. ORGANIZATION OF THE SCHOOL DAY AND YEAR - This poses a consideration of when the program is presented.
- E. STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS - Included here is a look at whether the program is designed for specific target groups.

As we now use this framework to outline our program it is with the understanding that each part of the program may not be suitable or even desirable for implementation in all grades. Certain segments may be more effective at only one or two points in time. Others, conversely, may be desirable at all three levels - elementary, junior high and senior high school. In light of this fact, we will indicate what we consider to be the appropriate setting for each part of the program.

A. CURRICULUM

- Alternate courses should be provided for students who have failed a subject. Requiring a student to repeat the same course, where he has no choice but to take it brings that student to class under exceptionally poor circumstances. The process amounts to coercion and can be circumvented by the provision of alternatives (Lowering the Odds on Student Drop-Outs, p. 31) (Elementary, Junior, Senior High).
- The traditional marking system in elementary schools should be changed. Currently, a child faces a competitive situation upon entering school. He learns that unless he betters the performance of his peers, he is not a success. In an even worse position is the child from the lower-class family - he is in a below average position at the beginning of the competition, as he comes from a background with many problems. Not surprisingly then, failure to compete successfully with others characterizes many unhappy potential drop-outs by the time they reach high school. If, however, provision is made for recognition of the young child's achievements in relation to how far he has progressed rather than in comparison with the rest of the class, an early foundation for feelings of self-worth is provided (Lowering the Odds on Student Drop-Outs, p. 41). The resulting confidence in his ability will then stand the student in good stead throughout the rest of the grades. (Elementary).
- Increased priority should be given to reading, writing and communication skills during the first years of schooling (Lowering the Odds on Student Drop-Outs, p. 31). This means that our school system must be prepared to allocate funds and resources to facilitate an emphasis in these areas. Currently, intensive remedial effort at the high school level is required if students are to pick up these skills; a surprisingly high

proportion of pupils now are able to complete their first eight or nine years of school without obtaining a solid background in these basic skills. Their high school courses then often leave them frustrated and unable to cope with the material. If, on the other hand, we commit ourselves to ensuring that all students possess a certain degree of competence in reading, writing and communication skills in earlier years, the result will be greater satisfaction on the part of the students and less need to help them pick up these skills in high school.

The present Educational Opportunities Fund is a beginning response to this great need. The year-old Resource Room program, set up under the Fund to provide help to elementary school children, has been shown to be of great value in aiding them in the language arts area. In fact, it has even been suggested that the program has the potential to reduce the number of students in Adaptation Programs by 50% (Evaluation presented to Education Committee, Edmonton Public School Board, September 3, 1974).

The present limited financial support, however, means that the program can reach only a small segment of the pupils and schools who require it. Surely the positive results coming out of the program indicate that we should be devoting more resources to our elementary school children. We therefore urge that attention be given to securing more government funds for efforts such as the Resource Room Program.

As students pick up these skills, they will be able to take advantage of the wide variety of courses currently available - there will be more 'alternatives' for a number of students who do not possess these skills and are consequently discouraged from enrolling in courses requiring them. (Elementary School).

- The operation of a successful work-study program at the high school level has often been under-estimated in combating the drop-out problem (School Drop-Outs, p. 41). It provides an alternative setting, a different environment for learning that can counteract the often alienating surroundings of the school. To quote from Alternatives in Education:

"It must also be recognized that there is a variety of means (processes) for achieving the goals of public education. ...A broad range of program offerings is necessary if our educational system is to reflect the diversity within our society and provide the variety of means of achieving the goals of public education. A major purpose of alternative education is to ensure that this need is met."

(Alternatives in Education, p. 11,12).



Are work study programs, which have been proven important in meeting the needs of potential drop-outs, operating to the fullest extent possible within Edmonton Public Schools? (High School).

B. CLIMATE/TECHNIQUE

- Of primary importance here is the attitude of the administration toward teacher experimentation. Sufficient flexibility must exist so that teachers feel free to explore various ways of imparting the necessary material. Teaching techniques that reach children from lower-class backgrounds may not necessarily be useful with middle-class youngsters. Thus, modified instructional approaches which can include alternate learning experiences must be encouraged. This could be relevant, for example, for pupils having low verbal ability, where traditional approaches may fail. Teachers must therefore feel that they are sanctioned to explore all possibilities in areas such as these,

"However, if it is believed that the individual reacts more positively under certain learning conditions, then a sincere effort must be made to more clearly identify and develop alternatives in climate and techniques and to match these with the needs and personality of the individual student."

(Alternatives in Education, p.5).

- Another area which relates to the climate or tone of the school is the level of social acceptability possessed by teachers and counsellors. Do students view them as having something to offer, as being valuable people to know? Teachers and counsellors must be seen with a certain degree of positive regard if they are to be effective. They must be seen as approachable.

One means of achieving these ends is to increase the amount of contact between students and their counsellors and teachers. This can be done by having teachers and counsellors participate in and sponsor co-curricular activities. The result is an increase in interaction; a high frequency of contact has been shown to be advantageous in increasing student regard for teachers and counsellors (Social Bases of Education, p. 73).

With this resultant increase in positive feeling, the student finds himself in a situation more conducive to learning and he can better utilize services offered by the school, for his own benefit.

When the lower-class child encounters such a program early in his school experience, a precedent is set for improved student perception

of 'school' - the feelings will carry over into junior and senior high school. (Elementary).

- There is yet another area where some innovation in role could have productive effects, this time in 'opening up' various closed systems within the school. We are speaking here of a change in the counsellor's sphere of activity that may permit him to be a greater source of help. This would be facilitated through his entry into the classroom, where periodic observation of student-teacher interaction and patterns of student behavior could yield a wealth of information useful in dealing with the problems. Difficult classroom situations can be examined first-hand; the counsellor can gain increased knowledge about difficult or problem students.

Another advantage of extending the counsellor's role is that he would then be better able to function as a consultant to the teacher. The fact that his professional training is different from the teacher's means that he can examine situations from a different perspective. Having a closer liaison with the classroom, then, means that teachers would feel freer to meet with counsellors in order to work out new approaches to problems and vice-versa.

Of course, the movement from office to classroom necessitates a sufficient number of counselling staff in any one school. Even though the counsellor may choose to visit the classroom fairly infrequently, enough counsellors must be provided to make possible an expanded role. (Lowering the Odds on Student Drop-Outs, p. 35). Here again, an examination of priorities must take place in light of the increased information flow and more open communication that would result from the implementation of this proposal. We feel that the increased cost of adding to the counselling staff would be offset by resultant benefits.

Lastly, it should be noted that any program of counselling, whether it adds the kind of role expansion detailed here or concentrates exclusively on the student-in-office approach, cannot be instituted too early. A more successful conclusion to the interventive process, particularly with lower class children, is far more likely if begun when problems first develop. Ideas presented in this section are best begun early and continued into high school. (Elementary, Junior and Senior High Schools).

### C. ALTERNATIVES IN TERMS OF SPACE AND LOCATION

- Today, students are being transported to schools outside their own neighborhoods in increasing numbers, particularly at the high school level. The need to bus students from different points of the city results in weaker home-school ties; when students attend a facility within their own neighborhood, this is far less likely to happen. Because this situation has recently been revealed as contributing somewhat to a drop-out problem in high school, it warrants our attention (School Drop-Outs, p.22). What can be done to increase contact between the home and the school in light of the trend to provide an increasing number of 'alternatives' at a few specialized locations?

Beginning in the elementary grades, certain activities should be directed toward this end. Letters from the school which explain programs and provide parents with information about the student and the school program are one answer.

Another approach to the problem can be seen in the form of after-school and evening programs to develop parent and student participation. Participation of the parents, in particular, can lead to an improvement in parental attitude toward the school and in turn, will foster an increased interest in the child's school work (Lowering the Odds on Student Drop-Outs, p. 48).

Alternatives in Education recognizes the problems raised by the fact that schools now have more specialized offerings. The report suggests that the relative ease of transporting ideas rather than people should be kept in mind and cities developments in the field of communication technology that can make this possible (Alternatives in Education, p.7). The fact that decentralized schools are a factor in greatly weakening the ties of parents and students with schools and in the resultant drop-out problem adds emphasis to the need for investigating such possibilities. (Elementary, Junior and Senior High Schools.)

- Sufficient use of home-school liaison personnel is essential. Too often, great distances between home and school mean that contact between counselling personnel and the family experiencing difficulty is limited or non-existent. As the home is the environment to which the student returns each day, the interaction of family and school-related problems should not be overlooked. Often, the intervention of a social worker or other qualified person can be beneficial during crucial periods. Here again, the powers-that-be must make decisions in terms of priorities - an

overburdened counselling and social work staff cannot do an adequate job. The need for far more intensive counselling in high school years can be a result of little attention to problems in the formative stage of their development. Particularly when working with disadvantaged students, sufficient staff must be provided. (In our analysis of the W. P. Wagner school operation, it is in this area that we feel some improvement could be made. A full or part-time social worker could serve a very important function at this school which serves more students from distant points of the city. (Elementary, Junior, Senior High Schools).

D. ALTERNATIVES IN TERMS OF ORGANIZATION OF THE SCHOOL DAY AND YEAR

- This is a relatively minor area as far as our 'alternative' is concerned. It is possible that in some cases, allowing a student to work part of the school day could help to maintain his interest in school.

Other variations in terms of organization of the school day and year were suggested in Alternatives in Education. These include the offering of high school courses on a ten-month, semester, trimester, quarter system or year-round basis. These kinds of ideas should be examined in more detail to see if, in fact, an experimental program might be possible. (High School).

E. ALTERNATIVES IN TERMS OF STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

- This component considers whether the program is designed for a specific student population. One main value of our proposals to reduce the drop-out problem concerning lower-class students is that no enrollment in a special program is required; hence, these students need not be segregated. The changes that take place within the school can be meaningful to all students.

In the elementary grades, the greatest benefit would be to those children whose backgrounds will leave them dissatisfied and unable to cope with a traditional approach to their education. Hopefully, the kinds of problems that are now appearing in such great numbers at the high school level can be forestalled.

At the junior and senior high school level, programs would be most relevant for the potential drop-out, students who most often come from the lower class. In this case too, even though the programs were designed with this group in mind, their usefulness and benefit is not restricted to them.

Ours is not a program which is offered by a school, one of a number listed in a school calendar. Even though the latter is most often suggested by the term 'alternative program' we feel that ours will mean changes in a

wider sense. It will affect the over-all operation of the school and, as was just pointed out, can benefit many, if not all, students.

The alternative provided could be thought of in terms of the difference between forming a positive or negative attitude about school, between having the skills and self-confidence to enroll in exciting and useful courses that might be brought into the school under other 'alternative programs'. We have even gone so far as to conclude that the success of our proposal could mean the difference between staying in or dropping out of school. All factors are so very significant in determining the student's future. (Elementary, Junior and Senior High School).

Before anything of this nature can happen, once again it should be noted that an examination of priorities must be carried out. At what point in a child's development does he need the greatest number of resources devoted to him? Are we trying to overcome problems as they surface or merely to contain them until they burst forth at a later point in time? For children whose roots are in poverty, much of their ability to flower will depend on how much and what kind of sunshine their school can provide. The programs to help them exist, they are relatively straight forward and they include:

1. Provide alternate courses for those who have failed rather than have them repeat the same courses.
2. Change the traditional marking system in elementary schools to give recognition of the child's achievements in relation to how far he has progressed - eliminate the destructive element of competition.
3. Give increased priority to reading, writing and communication skills during the first years of schooling.
4. Investigate the possibilities of expanding the work-study program.
5. Provide an atmosphere of flexibility which encourages teacher-experimentation with various instructional approaches.
6. Encourage teacher and counsellor sponsorship of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

7. Encourage and sanction the entry of the counsellor into the classroom. In conjunction with this, increase the number of counselling staff as much as possible.
8. Increase ties of the home and school through letters explaining programs and through the implementation of after-school and evening programs.
9. Provide sufficient numbers of home-school liaison personnel to enable these professionals to do an adequate job. The present situation which sees a number of schools sharing the services of one individual is woefully inadequate.
10. Consider a partial attendance program for students who would benefit from this revision in the school day.

Unfortunately, time did not permit us to approach another school in hopes of working with them on a trial program. We therefore recommend that a department within the school board organize such an effort, particularly as records of drop-outs are now being kept, which would be useful in assessing the results of our program.

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