

Individual attention goal of Academy

By KAREN KANGAS
Of the Emerald

'Magic in education' essential

The school mascot is a dragon — not a fierce, fire-breathing dragon, but a cherubic, wooden marionette dragon. It dangles from a hook above the teacher's desk in the house-turned-school.

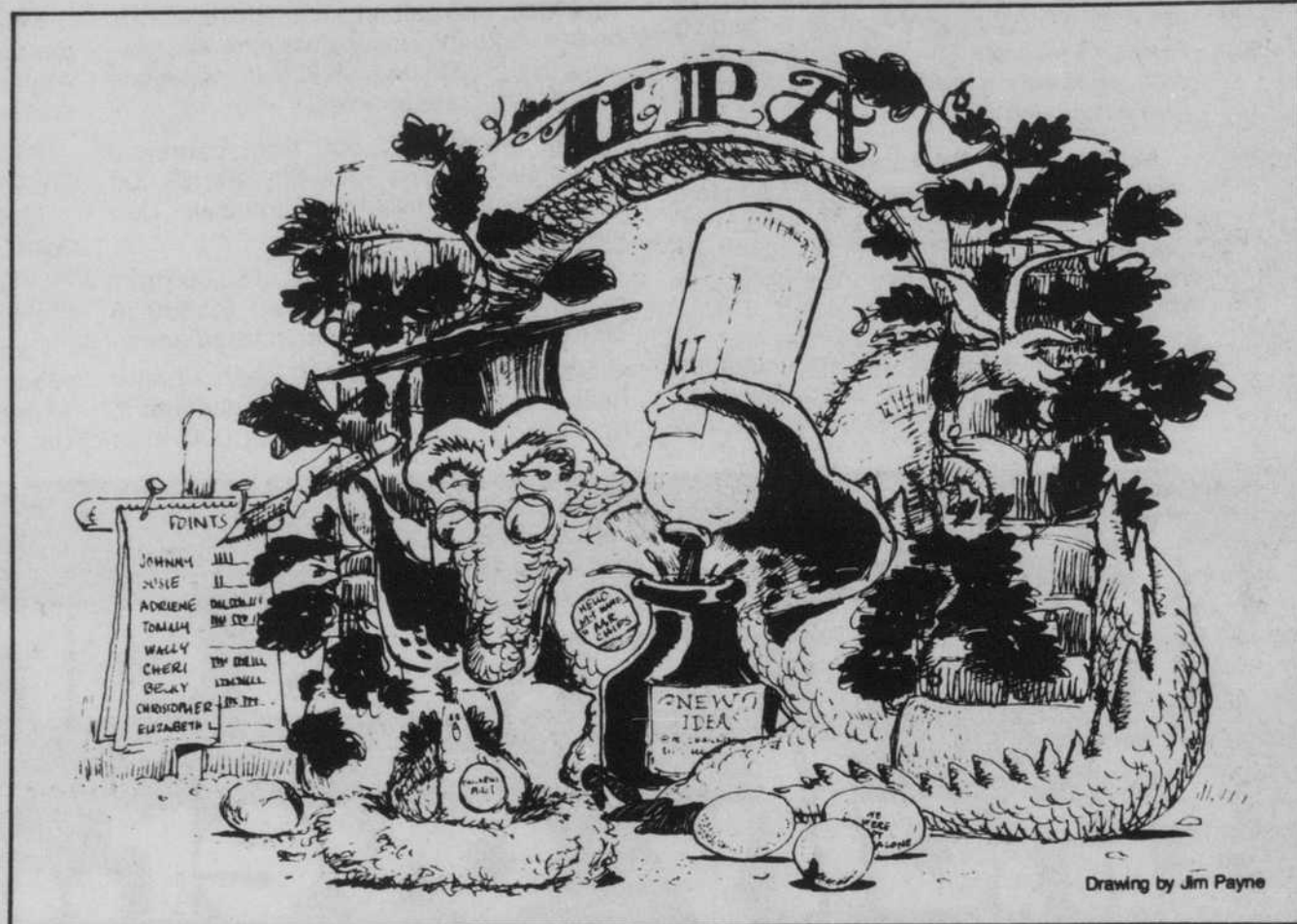
"We chose a dragon because dragons are magic," explains Polly Storr, the school's teacher and principal. "If we forget about imagination and magic in education," she continues, "we are lost."

Imaginative education is definitely a key theme at Union Point Academy, a small alternative school in West Eugene. The students are encouraged to devise ideas which incorporate their lessons with something they want to do: their classroom chores include caring for the seven rabbits, one baby goat and one chicken that live behind the house. Also, they are soon to get a "live-in" grandmother.

These opportunities and experiences are designed to provide students with practical and academic skills and the desire and ability to learn on their own, Storr says.

The founders of the school, Dan Davis, John Howard, and Neal and Venetia Holland, organized Union Point Academy because they were not content with Eugene's public school system. Their children had all attended an alternative preschool until last fall, when they passed the age limit.

"We looked for a program with the same kind of spirit, but we



Drawing by Jim Payne

couldn't find one," explains Davis.

That spirit seems to have been one of sensitivity to parents and students as individuals.

Davis explains it as "having, as parents, control of the situation in which we put our children, and having the ability to discuss a problem with the teacher and have her be responsive."

Davis says he feels very few teachers today are dedicated to

the education of their pupils, but are more concerned with keeping order and with "feathering their own nests."

"The situation is generated by the fact that in the public school system, education is democratized," Davis says. "The identity of the individual is being lost because of the increasingly corporate nature of the schools."

Students at Union Point have little chance to lose their identity in the classroom: the school currently has five pupils enrolled, ages 8 to 12.

"The students receive a lot of individual attention because of the high teacher-student ratio" Storr points out. "... a slightly higher ratio than we'd like," she chuckles. The founders are hoping to achieve an enrollment of 30 to 40 pupils by next year.

Until then, the students are all working at individual levels on individual projects. Each week they make a contract stating the amount of work they plan to complete. Their progress is recorded in a log book and the students advance at their own rate.

Storr explains that this system prevents students from becoming bored with a subject by working on

a set number of exercises, even after they've mastered the subject.

"In public schools, students may waste 80 to 90 percent of their time working on repetitive exercises," Storr says.

For this reason, Storr says she would expect students from Union Point to be academically ahead of students from public schools.

During the day, the students are given free study periods in which they can work on any assignment they choose. This doesn't mean, however, that the students always use their time as intended.

Reprimanded by Storr for having accomplished little in the past hour, one student looked pained and explained he had spent the time catching a pesky rabbit, which had mysteriously escaped from his cage.

Storr uses contingency management to give her pupils incentive to use their time wisely. The children are given points for good work or behavior and after they've all earned a certain number of points, they receive a reward. The class is currently working on a trip to the zoo.

Storr also uses contingency management to deal with discipline problems. Davis explains they

try to avoid "giving the squeaky wheel the grease."

"Hard as it is, we try to ignore bad behavior and encourage good behavior," he says, adding that they haven't encountered any "hard rock" problems yet.

Problems are also dealt with at the school's daily meeting. The children and the teacher spend time together discussing problems, exciting experiences or ideas for projects.

One of the projects the group devised was class "cubbies": a set of cubbyholes for the students' books and utensils. A parent brought in the cut lumber, and the students designed and constructed them.

"We are concerned with competency — academic competency and life skills competency," explains Storr. "I try to choose projects specifically designed to improve competency and knowledge."

Another method Storr uses for improving competency is small group field trips. She arranges with community members to allow one or two of her students to spend the day in their store or office, learning about the job.

"Instead of taking a group of 20 kids on a tour, I'd rather see two kids have 'hands on experience' in something and coming back and talking about it," Storr explains.

She also brings community members and the students' parents into the school to share their experiences.

When one parent brought the school an egg incubator, he explained the art of nurturing eggs.

One of the students says the parent had offered \$5 to the student who best answered the question: which came first, the chicken or the egg?

"I'm going to argue that the chicken came first," the student says.

Why's that?

"Because someone had to lay the egg."

"Parental involvement is of tremendous importance," Storr says. "This has to be OUR school. We have to work on it as a group."

Parents, as well as incubators and field trips, are all part of the students' education at Union Point Academy, but according to Davis, they are only a small part.

"Education never starts and never stops," he contends. "It is an on-going process, and this," he waves his hand about the classroom, "is only a component of education."

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