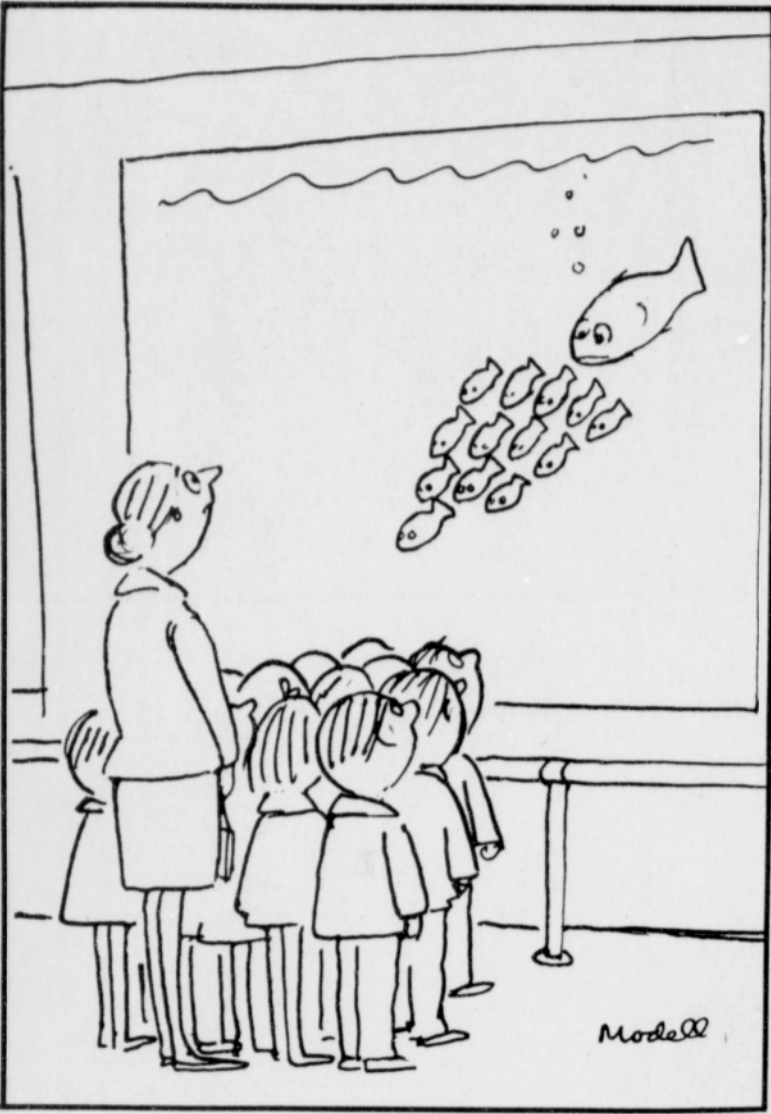


Defeated Learners

FROM PAGE FIVE



Students were involved and motivated because we knew their strengths and weaknesses, as did they. We identified causes for their behavior and their academic skill levels. That was only possible because the school was small enough for us to get to know them.

We say education as teaching the young to negotiate their environment and as demystifying their culture so they could optimistically anticipate becoming participants. Because we were committed to that, and demonstrated it, we quickly gained credibility with students and parents. We had enough holding power to get down to the sweaty tasks of daily skill development.

These schools have positively touched the lives and self-confidence of many young people. In many learners, victory is being snatched from the jaws of defeat.

Focus is still working on it. Quincy is gone (as is Adams High School itself), the result of the clever in the wrong hands. (Another school-within-a-school, Adams Extended Day School, has been transferred to Grant High School.)

We can do more. We have to care about people experiencing learning defeat. In the mid-1970s only seven of fifty state departments of education had data on youth out of school. Only fifteen had conducted any studies on causes of school dropout. This lack of data on a subject that is not difficult to research is outrageous.

In spite of Oregon's dropout rate, close to the bottom in comparison to the other forty-nine states, we do gather information. We have a remarkable law on the books that passed the legislature and became law in October 1973. It spawned "Oregon Project Childfind", and I dearly wish every state would follow the lead. This law required that "... school districts are to report on the number and needs of children who are not attending school..." The needs! Hear, hear! I wish we even were good at identifying the needs of children who are in school.

The law also requires a report on "all children not attending school... this includes the so-called 'dropout' pupil..."

"Childfind" with that lovely directive —

needs — was, however, a one-time only requirement, and was not mandated to be done on a yearly basis. But the law is there, and schools are free to make these reports to their own school boards and parents.

According to one writer, a "typical response" from twenty-three of fifty states when asked for dropout information has been: "... we regret to inform you that the state department of education has very little data about children out of school... especially who, what categories they represent, where they are, or why they are not in school."

We can get better? Sure we can. We can:

- Get outraged. (Quincy teachers always attributed part of our success to our finely developed sense of outrage.)

- Get schools to report on the "needs" of children not attending school.

- Get the state to adopt and insist that "Childfind" be a yearly event.

- Get your local high schools to clarify their educational goals — in learning outcomes, not organizational needs — and then,

- Insist on decentralization and alternatives so that the goals at least have a chance to work for all students.

I could have learned to hit a curve ball. Maybe there were too many players and too few coaches. Perhaps we needed teams-within-teams. But I could have been taught, and maybe now I would be writing happier stuff, like how to hit the slider. I was not an incompetent learner. No one is. There are only incompetent performances.

Jerry Conrath was one of the principle movers of the Adams High School experiment in Portland. He taught high school for seventeen years and briefly at Portland State University. He is currently teaching undergraduate and graduate education students at Lewis and Clark College. "The Defeated Learner" was the basis of a speech he gave last year at an American Federation of Teachers conference in Washington, D.C., and was the title of a course he taught at Lewis and Clark.

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