THE PUBLIC REPORT

by Jerry Conrath

I love watching the World Series on TV. It goes with autumn, truth, and justice like crisp apples off my tree and a cold cup of bourbon. There is nothing like it. The only trouble is I have never been invited to play. Of course I know it is not an invitational. You must be on one of the teams. The last baseball team I was on was in 1952, and it was neither in the American nor the National Leagues. It was a high school team. It was some years ago. And I could not hit a curve ball.

I was considered "good field; no hit." My coach described me to the local press as "good glove; quick off the bat; heads up ballplayer; can turn the doubleplay." He had me bat eighth (before the era of the designated hitter), and continued to boast about my fielding. I was an incomplete ballplayer. I never learned to hit a curve ball.

THE DEFEATED LEARNER

The coach did not teach the basics. He did half the job. When I was in the field, I had, as we say now, a positive self-image. When I was getting close to my turn at bat (the ones who are not baseball followers have no idea how often an eighth place hitter comes up with two outs and the bases loaded), I was frantic. I labored with low self-image. I knew I could not do it. I sold myself short. I actually came through at least twice in the four years. But most people who have not learned the basics, who have a low self-image, tend to sell themselves short. They give in to the overpowering sensations of defeat. They capitulate into impotence.

Those of us who sell ourselves short, who feel defeated, often drop out. We pursue activities in which we have some self-confidence. So there I was, a baseball dropout at eighteen. That was not serious.

It is serious that so many young people sell themselves short. They are dropping out of our schools at an alarming rate. They are dropping out of our schools because they cannot read, write, or figure. As learners, they are defeated.

In Oregon the "holding power" is awful. In 1980, only sixty-eight and one-half percent of the young people who started grade nine completed grade twelve.

Many of the causes for this lack of holding power, or "dropout rate" since most of the thirty-one and one-half percent are indeed defeated dropouts, are beyond the control of the schools. Schools cannot control homes where parents do not support the attempts of the teachers. Schools cannot control the economy that no longer needs young people and their work; that requires "tolerable levels" of unemployment, especially from teenagers who represent more than thirty percent of all "official" unemployment. Schools cannot control the appalling distribution of wealth that mires so many young people in the quicksand of poverty. Schools cannot control these factors even though so many of our scholars and commentators admit that education is indeed the single most important factor in determining whether a family is "economically disadvantaged." Of course much of our anti-social behavior results from low self-image, learning defeat, and school dropout. Educators have known that for years. Educators have never been in control of the American economy.

They are in control of the schools. They can admit that learning defeat is often the result of fragmented learning experiences that do not require students to learn and apply the basics in lively, lifelike curriculum.

Most significantly, learning defeat is the result of inflexible school organization that provides little direction for learning and does not require a cohesive approach to instruction, discipline, and parent responsibility. Anonymity breeds irresponsibility and large, centralized schools create anonymity. Middle school is the first impersonal institution most young people face, and many high schools continue the trend.

If education is so important, and it is, we need to do something more serious than fret about the costs of unemployment "benefits" and the costs of crime. We need to investigate the possibilities of more resources for education and demand a more imaginative and effective reallocation of existing resources. We need to insist that schools change what they can change.

The school is a social institution that can identify early symptoms of the defeat, apply prevention tactics, and discover cures. All teachers must be technically expert at diagnosis, prescription, and evaluation of learning the basic skills and at the application of them to all subjects.

We must begin with the assumption that humans desire to learn, achieve, be useful, be competent, and to belong. Nobody rejects these. Students sometimes reject our approaches to them because direction and choices are missing. Learners need direction, and learners need choices. Learners also want to succeed and be recognized for achievement. Of course. We all do. It is occasionally fashionable to say that some of the young do not want to learn. Nonesense. You cannot find a five year old who does not want success, nor a fifteen year old who does not want recognition for achievement. You can find young people who reject what the school offers them and behave in unmotivated, non-involved, non-achieving ways. They have experienced too much setback, have lost too many battles. They are on their way to defeat, and they know it.

If learners need direction, school organization and curriculum do too. The two most crucial learning needs of students, and therefore the goals of schools, are: to gain skills and confidence in negotiating their environment; to grow up to be participants in, and not spectators of, their culture. We participate in our culture when we can read and write the language and compute with the numerical system. We participate in our culture when we can critically think through the historical, social, economic, political, and ecological data and evidence to creatively solve problems. We participate in our culture when we are confident that we are, as much as possible, in control of our own decisions.

It is not an easy task for the schools to reach these goals, but what else can they do? Sociologists tell us that the dimensions of adolescent alienation are personal lack of confidence, cultural estrangement, and lack of a sense of direction, a future, goals. I know that schools can attack these problems in ways no other social institution can even approach them. Schools have the resources: professional personnel, space, legal requirement of attendance, and state annointment to grant certificates of citizenship -- diplomas. They also have organizational structures that usually render these resources helpless and their "holding power" fragile. We can learn to mobilize these resources to overcome the problems.

Carl Rowan writes in a column, "How to Stop Violence in the Schools," a praise for the "little red schoolhouse." In another column he reprimands parents of economically disadvantaged, defeated learners to "get their kids to school." Bravo! In the column I am quoting he says, "In the old style smaller school, there was no place for troublemakers to hide, because the principal usually knew each student — and his or her family. Some of today's schools are so large that not only do principals and teachers not know all their students, but they cannot distinguish students from outsiders who peddle dope, steal lunches and purses, foment violence and otherwise create a climate of fear." Is he ever right. I spent seventeen years in large, urban and suburban high schools as a teacher and school director, and every one of those years brought me into vivid contact with the accuracy of Rowan's words. Large schools cannot come close to working for all their students, and small schools can.

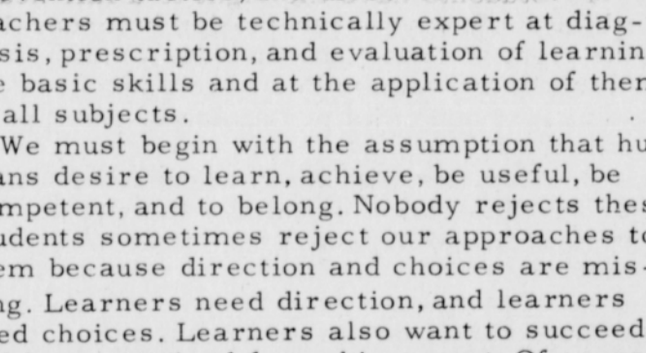
Small school organization gives teachers and administrators the potential to know all their students and know them well. It also gives them the potential to deliver on their goals.

The Portland schools have some lively examples of small schools that work. They did it without dismantling old structures and building cozy ones. They did it by allowing teachers to develop schools-within-schools. They demonstrated that small is indeed beautiful. Or at least has the potential for beauty.

In 1971 I participated in and directed the development of Quincy School, within John Adams High School. Quincy was one of the nation's original comprehensive schools-within-schools in that it served a population that was a cross-section of the host school's population rather than a specifically identified population. In that respect, as well as in its subsequent success in meeting student learning needs, Quincy gained considerable national attention.

The Qunicy students were a wide-ranging variety of individuals. Like the entire Adams population, some were very successful with school, some were already agonizing in the symptoms of defeat, some were apathetic, some were energetic. More than students in any other school in the state, they were an "unstable" population in that the Adams yearly turnover rate (moving and transferring to other schools and transferring in) was more than thirty percent. More than forty percent came from low income homes. At least twenty percent lived in foster homes. Many did not come from families experiencing the fruits of the American dream. Some did. Far too many were on the fringe of dropping out when they entered.

Some impressive observations were made by the teachers. Students who had poor atten-



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