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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an alternative approach to educating high risk youth, developed in Omaha, Nebraska, and known as the Boys Town Urban (BTU) Program. The BTU Program includes four components: (1) a normalized school setting: (2) a concretized credit system: (3) a focused discipline policy: and (4) a responsive services approach. A rationale for the program is developed in this paper by demonstrating how each of the four components is intended to achieve three important outcomes: (1) increased likelihood of school completion: (2) enhanced self esteem: and (3) diminished alienation. Finally, the paper discusses some of the issues which might be faced by educators interested in implementing this alternative educational model in other communities. These issues include private vs. public operation, finances, teacher qualifications, program evaluation, and program adaptability. A bibliography of relevant materials is attached. (Author/APM)

A "Normalized" Educational Alternative for High-Risk Youth: Description and Rationale of the Boys Town Urban Program[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a promising alternative approach to educating high-risk youth, developed in Omaha, Nebraska and known as the Boys Town Urban (BTU) Program. The BTU Program differs from many other alternative schools not only in the high-risk nature of the students but in the comprehensive inclusion of four program components: (1) a normalized school setting, (2) a concretized credit system, (3) a focused discipline policy, and (4) a responsive services approach. A rationale is developed for the BTU Program by demonstrating how each of the four program components is intended to achieve three important outcomes: (1) increased likelihood of school completion, (2) enhanced self-esteem, and (3) diminished alienation. Finally, the paper discusses some of the issues which might be faced by educators interested in implementing this alternative educational model in other communities.

INTRODUCTION

Of all the youth enrolled in urban secondary schools, perhaps the most difficult to educate are those who might be considered "high-risk." Such youth, whose most common characteristic is a history of chronic difficulty in school, typically have a multitude of problems such as low academic ability, poverty, disorganized and often abusive families, emotional disturbance, chemical dependency, anti-social and delinquent behavior, etc. Any one of these problems is serious enough in its own right, but a youth with several of these problems is likely to have trouble coping with school and with other social institutions (such as work) and may be headed for serious difficulty (such as incarceration) as an adult. Hence the use of the term "high-risk" to describe such youth. It is not an overstatement to claim that conventional education, both in the form of regular and special classes, has not been very successful with high-risk students (Nelson & Kaufman, 1977). It has been argued that non-traditional forms of educational organization and services are needed if high-risk youth are to be "reached" by schools (NAASP, 1977; Neill, 1975; Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, 1980). However, alternative schools, even those located in inner-cities, have typically been directed at relatively "normal" students and few alternative approaches have been devised which are adequate to the needs of high-risk students (Fantini, 1974).

The current paper describes an approach to the education of high-risk youth, developed in Omaha, Nebraska, and referred to as the Boys Town Urban (BTU) Program. This program, which evolved over a period of years, is directed primarily at youth who have failed to "make it" in regular and special education settings and who have numerous personal and family

problems. The BTU Program may be considered a "last chance" for many of these youth, and has succeeded in dramatically impacting on many youth who had been considered destined for serious trouble. As one of the few alternative schools designed specifically for high-risk youth, the BTU Program may serve as a model for educators interested in devising similar programs in other communities. The current paper is intended to describe the BTU Program and its underlying rationale. In the remainder of this section, we shall briefly review the history of the BTU Program and attempt to place it in the perspective of the alternative schools movement. In the next two sections, we shall describe in some detail the main components of the program and the goals which these components are designed to fulfill. Finally, in the last section, we shall discuss some of the principal issues of program implementation which might face those interested in establishing some form of the BTU Program for high-risk youth in other communities.

Development of the BTU Program

The model of alternative education described in this paper grew out of the efforts of a group of educators to establish an innovative school, in the inner-city of Omaha, Nebraska, designed specifically to respond to the special needs of students who experienced difficulties in other school settings. This school--Dominican High School--was established in 1968 as an experimental program sponsored by the Catholic Archdiocese of Omaha to serve inner-city students regardless of their background or religious affiliation. The alternative nature of the school stemmed from the attempt to give students another chance to complete high school by providing a learning environment and a mode of treatment which differed significantly from that found in the larger traditional schools in which the students had

demonstrated a failure to adapt. Dominican High School went through a period of adjustment from 1968 to 1973 and then, in 1973, a core group of staff members began the long road to build the comprehensive model that is now operative. Although the educators at the school brought with them various philosophical frameworks concerning alternative education, the specifics of the school program were determined more by the demands of experience than anything else. The major operating principle was to be extremely pragmatic, i.e., "whatever works, do it." Thus, while this paper attempts to develop a coherent theoretical rationale for the BTU Program, it should be kept in mind that the model evolved out of a concern more with helping youth than with the maintenance of theoretical "purity."

Dominican High School was established in a vacated Catholic elementary school in the inner-city of Omaha. The building, constructed in the 1930's, has 48,000 square feet, and most of the trappings of a regular high school including a gymnasium, cafeteria, etc. Since the school has a rolling enrollment, with students registering at all times of the year, the size of the student body fluctuates considerably, from approximately 100 at the beginning of the school year to over 200 at the end of the school year. Over the course of a year, however, the school will enroll approximately 300 students, about evenly divided between whites and non-whites, with 90% of the students falling below the poverty level, 75% from non-traditional families, and approximately 60% transferring from other schools. The level of skill development of the students ranges from below the tenth percentile to above average. The majority of students, however, are seriously deficient in skill development in reading and mathematics.

A large percentage of the students have serious chemical dependency problems, many have delinquent histories, and a number reside in group

homes. Students are referred from a wide variety of agencies including psychiatric facilities, and many students walk in off the street without agency or parental involvement. Many students were out of school for a considerable period of time, with some of these students having been expelled from previous schools because of misbehavior. Students are charged a modest tuition of $30 per month, a tuition which is sometimes waived or reduced. Because of the symbolic importance of tuition payment as an indication of student commitment to school attendance, however, tuition is waived altogether only when absolute financial inability can be demonstrated.

Until 1980, Dominican High School struggled financially, being dependent on support from the Catholic Church, from student tuition, and from contributions through a development program from individuals and foundations. This support enabled the school to keep going during a period of tremendous inflationary pressure. However, because of the need to construct a new facility due to the imminent destruction of the old school building to make way for a highway, there was a need to put the school on a more stable financial footing in the future. Negotiations were begun with Father Flanagan's Boys' Home ("Boys Town") and, in 1980, Dominican High School became a department known as the Boys Town Urban Program. The plan is for the BTU Program to move to a new facility, also located in Omaha's inner-city, to be completed in the Fall of 1982. The BTU Program is administratively and geographically separate from the residential Home for delinquent and deprived youth which continues to be operated on the Boys Town campus on the western outskirts of Omaha. The residential Home serves youth from all over the Midwest and much of the United States in a number of group homes utilizing the "Teaching Family Model" (Wolf & others, 1976),

a treatment approach developed at Kansas University and known originally as "Achievement Place" (Fixsen, Phillips & Wolf, 1973). The Teaching Family Model, a national movement having its headquarters at Boys Town, has achieved widespread recognition as a framework for residential remediation of pre-delinquent youth. The BTU Program, as a non-residential program, necessarily differs significantly in its treatment methods from any residentially-based program such as that operated at Father Flanagan's Boys' Home. In establishing Dominican High School as the Boys Town Urban Program, it was hoped that this program would serve as a national treatment model for high-risk youth, a model which is operated in community settings and which is intended primarily to meet the educational needs of youth.

Relationship to the Alternative Education Movement

The BTU Program is an alternative school for skill-deficient and multi-problem youth. How does it differ from other alternative schools for inner-city or disruptive students? One answer lies in the voluntariness of the program. As indicated by Smith, Barr and Burke (1976), a key factor in accurately labeling a school as "alternative" is whether attendance is by the student's own choice. Many public education programs for disruptive youth, billed as alternative schools, are compulsory and such programs should not legitimately be considered to be true alternatives.

Another way in which the BTU Program differs from many alternative programs is in the severity of the problems faced by the students. A large percentage of inner-city alternative schools, such as the "street academies" (Levine, 1972), or "magnet schools" (Estes & Waldrip, 1978) are designed to stimulate the interests of relatively gifted youth, often with the intent to motivate them to go on to college. For the great majority of

students in the BTU Program, however, college is not a realistic option and the primary goal is, rather, to help them get through high school.

A key difference between the BTU Program and most of those alternative schools which are also directed at high-risk youth is in the "normalized" nature of the school. Alternative schools tend to be housed in relatively unconventional settings, such as storefronts, and often offer relatively truncated programs; consequently they are forced to either do without certain things or to rely on regular schools or community facilities for such space-requiring programs as physical education and extracurricular activities. As will be indicated in the following sections, a basic belief pervading the BTU Program is that while non-conventional settings and truncated programs may be justifiable for relatively advantaged or gifted students, a key problem for high-risk students is to rectify their deeply ingrained sense of being deficient and deviant, on the one hand, and of being unjustly excluded by society on the other hand. It is, therefore, important for both these reasons that an alternative school for high-risk youth provide a program which in its physical trappings and fullness of program include as many elements as possible as those found in traditional schools. It is in this sense that the BTU Program differs perhaps most significantly from other alternative schools directed at problem youth.

There are, however, important similarities between the BTU Program and other alternative schools. In discussing the similarities it should be kept in mind that there is tremendous diversity within the alternative education movement (Fantini, 1974; Glatthorn, 1975; Smith, Barr & Burke, 1976). Aside from the issue of voluntariness, perhaps the only defining characteristic of an alternative school is that it differs significantly in its philosophy and structure from the school which a student in a given

locale would normally attend. Within this broad framework, there is great variability in instructional philosophy, with some alternative schools (such as the so-called "free schools") espousing a very libertarian approach to teacher authority and curriculum while other alternative schools have a much more authoritative or traditional view of such matters. However, one shared characteristic of most alternative schools, including the BTU Program, is an attempt to develop more of a sense of community than is found in most conventional schools. That is, in part, a function of small size (with the modal enrollment of alternative schools being less than 200), but also reflects a common value, shared by most alternative schools, about the need to decrease students' sense of being a cog in a bureaucratic wheel.

Other similarities between the BTU Program and other alternative schools lie in the "humanistic" belief that all students, even those who have behaved in negative ways in the past, can be motivated to behave in positive ways, and that the solution is to reorganize the school in such a way that learning can be a more joyful and meaningful experience. The assumption is that almost all students are educable and that schools should be more adaptable to the cultural or personality differences of those students who have demonstrated a limited ability to adapt to school (Gordon & Wilkerson, 1966).

As mentioned earlier, the model of education underlying the BTU Program has emerged from the dynamic interaction of the humanistic alternative education philosophy of the late 1960s and the pressing need to devise a program that "works" with high-risk youth. This has meant that many experimental features which looked good in print, or which might have worked with more capable students, had to be abandoned or modified. The

abandoned features included such frills as highly individualized schedules (which high-risk youth had difficulty keeping straight), and interdisciplinary and exotic courses (a luxury for students who need primarily to learn how to read). Given the diversity of the alternative education movement, the uniqueness of the BTU Program stems perhaps less from any one of its individual elements than from the comprehensiveness of the total package. As will be pointed out in the next section, the BTU Program consists of four major program components. To our knowledge, other alternative educational programs for high-risk youth lack one or more of these components. It is our view, for reasons which will be spelled out in the next two sections, that all four of these components are essential if an alternative education program is likely to have a good chance of making a major impact on the educational adjustment of the most disadvantaged of all inner-city youth, namely those who are "high-risk."

COMPONENTS OF THE BTU PROGRAM

The essence of the BTU Program can be boiled down to four major program components. Each of these components represents one important way in which the BTU Program differs from the way traditional schools approach the task of educating high-risk youth. Thus, there may be other important features of the BTU Program (such as an emphasis on skill attainment) which are not mentioned here simply because that is something which virtually all schools, traditional or otherwise, strive to do. In our view, the thing that makes the BTU Program unique, aside from the high-risk nature of the students at whom it is directed, is the comprehensive inclusion of all four of these program elements. Other alternative education approaches which are directed at similar students typically lack one or more of these

program elements, a lack which may limit their success with high-risk students.

Normalized School Setting

Perhaps the most crucial characteristic of the BTU Program is the emphasis on providing a school environment which is "normalized," in that students are helped to feel that they are attending a regular school for regular students rather than an atypical school for atypical students. There are a number of ways in which this is done: by having a self-contained school building and a full-day schedule, a comprehensive curriculum emphasizing the basics, a wide range of extracurricular activities including athletics, a de-emphasis on the use of diagnostic testing and special educational labeling, a wide range of student competence including many in the normal range, etc. These aspects of a normalized setting will be discussed briefly below.

The maintenance of a full-day schedule differentiates the BTU Program from many other alternative education programs which provide a part-day program supplementing a student's regular school program (Silverman, 1978; Wood, 1979). In establishing the BTU Program as a full-day school, the intention was to indicate to students that this is not a "special" school but rather a regular school which welcomes youth with problems. A similar point is made by locating the school in a regular-appearing school building which houses it and nothing else. Often, alternative education programs are housed in unconventional settings such as storefronts or are specialized units taking up a wing of a larger school (Berger, 1978). In such settings, the student not only may be prevented from feeling that he/she is part of a regular school, but often misses out on many important services,

such as library, physical education, art, etc., which require more space than may be available in an untraditional setting. Furthermore, the provision of a comprehensive set of course offerings, with emphasis on the basics, is normalizing in that students are exposed to the same academic subjects which they would ordinarily take in a traditional high school.

A very important aspect of the normalizing function of the BTU Program is the provision of a wide range of extracurricular activities including inter-scholastic athletics for both sexes. It has been argued (Otto, 1975; Otto & Alwin, 1977) that high school extracurricular activities, particularly athletics, perform an important socializing function. Such activities give youth an opportunity to identify themselves closely with a social enterprise which has importance (particularly in smaller communities) to adults. Extracurricular activities also provide youth with an opportunity to interact cooperatively with peers and adults and to engage in various social roles. Less comprehensive alternative schools often do not provide extracurricular activities, a fact which may limit the extent to which they resemble a regular school environment.

Another important way in which the BTU Program is normalizing is in the discretionary use of psychological and educational testing, the avoidance of diagnostic labeling of students, and resistance to the development of a special education tracking system. Although many of the students in the BTU Program have previously been recipients of special education or mental health services, the tendency in the BTU Program is to give each new student the benefit of a fresh start, without being influenced unduly by the reports and test data which have been accumulated in previous schools, residential placements, and social agency contacts. Furthermore, in developing an academic program for a given student, more reliance is placed

on staff experiences with that student rather than on the results of diagnostic testing. On those occasions when it is determined that a student needs an individualized remedial or corrective experience, this is provided matter-of-factly without designating this remediation as specialized treatment and without any sort of labeling process. Thus, one almost never hears staff in the BTU Program use such terms as "learning disabilities," "mental retardation," "emotional disturbance," etc., even though these terms have been used to describe some of these youth in the past. Rather the emphasis is on understanding each student's strengths and weaknesses, without attempting to place that student in some special education category. This avoidance of special education categorizing is very much in line with the thinking of many humanistically-oriented writers who contend that labeling has little educational value and considerable stigmatizing effects on youth (Greenspan, in press; Mercer, 1973).

A final way in which the BTU Program is normalizing is reflected in the mix of students who attend. On average, between 10% and 15% of the student body has consisted of relatively "normal" students who attend the school not because of learning or [illegible]ment difficulties in previous schools, but because the school appeals to them or their family for any number of reasons including convenience to their residence, word of mouth from friends or siblings who have attended the school in the past, parental feelings about the value of alternative secondary education, etc. The fact that these relatively average (and occasionally above average) students attend the school provides less competent youth with positive role models and, more importantly, provides graphic evidence that the school is not just for "dummies" or "rejects," but is for a wide range of youth who feel they can benefit from an alternative high school environment.

Concretized Credit System

Traditional grading systems, with credit given only if a student receives a passing grade, are inadvisable for high-risk youth for two reasons: 1) since such youth usually fail to meet minimal teacher standards for effort, comportment, and/or achievement, they often receive zero credit for courses taken; 2) even when a teacher gives a passing grade to a high-risk youth, the grade is usually a poor one. As a result of the first factor, high-risk youth have little incentive to continue in school when the road to graduation seems so prolonged and there is so little certainty of ever accumulating the necessary credits. As a result of the second factor, high-risk youth may feel justifiably that they are viewed by teachers and peers as "losers" and that education is a game at which they have little chance of succeeding (Johnson, Bird & Little, 1979; McPartland & McDill, 1977). Thus, since high-risk youth get so few of the "goodies" (academic credits and the esteem of others) which keep students motivated to stay in school, they are likely to stop going to school as soon as they are legally of age to do so, something which may explain, in part, the high rates of school dropout of these youth (Elliot & Voss, 1974; Silberberg & Silberberg, 1971).

Alternative educators have frequently criticized the emphasis on grades in American secondary education and have argued for a non-graded approach which emphasizes cooperation and intrinsic reasons for learning rather than competition and extrinsic reasons (Martin & Harrison, 1972). Educators interested in urban youth have, in particular, pointed out the advantages of non-graded evaluation of students, to correct the usual inequity whereby students of lesser ability are automatically prevented from receiving desirable grades. Such non-graded evaluation typically means evaluating

students on a "pass-fail" basis, with all students who meet some minimal standard of effort receiving the full amount of credits without receiving a grade; such an approach may, however, be inadequate for that minority of urban youth eligible for the designation of "high-risk." This is because high-risk youth often have failed to learn how to conduct themselves in school in a manner acceptable to most teachers and may engage in a high frequency of such behaviors as not paying attention in class, talking in class, leaving class early or coming late, not bringing the book, not participating when called on, falling asleep in class, spotty attendance with long periods of absence, etc. Thus, even with a non-graded system it is likely that many of the youth we are referring to would fail to earn credits at anything approaching an average rate.

The credit/evaluation system which has slowly evolved in the BTU Program is one which is specifically designed to give high-risk youth a greater opportunity to earn credits at an average rate, while still holding them accountable for their classroom behavior and for their academic efforts. Although designed for high-risk youth, it is possible that this evaluation system might have utility in other educational settings as well. The key element in this system is to give students the possibility of earning some percentage (ranging from zero to 100%) of the maximum earnable credits in a course, based on their effort and classroom comportment over the span of the course. To help the students (many of whom have difficulty with future time-perspective) to visualize their academic progress, two structural changes (the second of which is the more radical) have been made: 1) The school year is divided into four 9-week periods, with students being officially assigned credits at the end of these periods. Thus, students need not wait until the end of the semester to receive

official credits. This helps students with limited ability to delay gratification to receive credits at a faster rate. It also makes it easier for students who leave school for some reason to come back at a later date. 2) The more fundamental change is that in many courses students know at the end of each class period what fraction of a credit they have earned, with the total credits in a course being the sum of the fractions earned during each class period. The criteria for daily awarding of credit fractions is clearly spelled out for each class, with each teacher allowed to come up with an individualized system which meets his/her needs. For example, a "dot" system may be used, with each student being awarded so many dots (or points) at the end of each class period, with these being convertible--like casino chips--into a stated number of credits. Typically, teachers award dots for such things as attendance, non-tardiness, effort, quality of work, handing in of homework, bringing class materials, amount of class participation, satisfactory completion of assigned problems or units, etc. Most teachers afford students the opportunity to earn bonus points for periods of perfect credit accumulation and for extra work. In those classes using such a system, point earnings for each student may be recorded daily on a chart which is posted in each classroom, with each student encouraged to check regularly on his/her credit progress and to discuss the basis for this progress with the teacher. Thus, in many classes, each student has the opportunity on a daily basis to know how much progress he/she is making toward graduation and to know precisely what aspects of his/her behavior are contributing toward that progress. Furthermore, while rates of progress vary widely across students, the typical student enrolled in the BTU Program is likely to earn credits at a rate much closer to the norm than would have been possible under traditional grading and credit systems.

Focused Discipline Policy

It has been pointed out (Ornstein, 1970) that discipline plays a crucial role in the education of disadvantaged and high-risk youth. Deutsch (1960) found that in urban classrooms, teachers often spend as much as 80% of class time meting out punishment or dealing with disciplinary problems. High-risk youth frequently get into trouble with school authorities, not only for major offenses such as violence and destruction of property, but also for less serious offenses such as smoking, tardiness, wisecracking, etc. Traditional schools typically have little tolerance for the inappropriate classroom behaviors often exhibited by high-risk youth, a fact which is reflected in the frequent use of exclusionary practices ranging from placement in special classes for the "Behaviorally Impaired" to suspension or even expulsion (Editorial, 1981). It has been argued (U.S. Senate Committee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, 1977) that urban schools need to develop a more differentiated approach to disciplining youth who lack the ability to exhibit perfect classroom decorum, saving serious punishment for behaviors which pose some real threats to school safety or order, and exhibiting greater tolerance for relatively trivial misbehaviors. Such a differentiated approach to discipline is consistent with behavior modification-based programs for disruptive children and youth, which emphasize the importance of ignoring minor "annoyance" behaviors, praising or rewarding desired behaviors, and criticizing or punishing only that small subset of misbehaviors which are not only annoying but also intolerable (Miller, 1975). Such a differentiated approach to discipline is also consistent with humanistic principles of adult-child interaction (Ginott, 1965; Gordon, 1970; Greenspan, 1980). Such an approach is also congruent with the view of many alternative

educators (Ornstein, 1970) that a more focused discipline policy is the only way to avoid diverting the educational process away from an emphasis on learning and toward an excessive emphasis on discipline. Such a focused approach reflects a value judgment about the importance of tolerating cultural diversity in students who may not have been trained to respect middle-class norms for obedient classroom behavior (Glaser, 1977; Sizer, 1973). From a behavior modification standpoint, moreover, one can argue that a focused discipline policy is likely to result in a lessening of disruptive behavior as the absence of teacher attention may cause minor misbehaviors to become "extinguished." Furthermore, a focused approach may make it possible for students to engage in more appropriate behavior by learning to discriminate behaviors that are truly unacceptable from those which are not.

A focused discipline policy plays an important role in the BTU Program. This is reflected in the official discipline policies of the school, in the way in which the teachers interact with the students, and in the wide range of non-exclusionary options which are available to deal with student misbehavior. In terms of official policies, the emphasis is on having as few rules as possible, making these very explicit, and enforcing them consistently. Thus, students are informed: (1) that cigarette smoking is allowed only during breaks and in designated parts of the building; (2) dangerous or illegal activities, such as fighting or drug-dealing will usually result in harsh penalties such as expulsion; (3) repeated violations of relatively less serious offenses may result in in-school suspension, etc. Nonattendance is usually handled through the "natural consequence" of a diminished rate of credit earning (see the preceding section), except in cases of prolonged absence or repeated episodes of

nonattendance. Typically, when students misbehave the initial response is to counsel the student and attempt to understand what is underlying the problem; thus there is a "therapeutic" orientation toward discipline, with punishment being only one part of the process.

Perhaps the most salient indication of the nature of the discipline process in the BTU Program is seen in the way in which teachers interact with students. Two striking characteristics of this interactional style are the great deal of tolerance extended toward students and considerable warmth and affection as reflected in such things as touching, smiling, praising, joking, etc. Minor annoyance behavior such as getting out of one's seat, not paying attention in class, talking to friends, leaving the room, etc., are usually dealt with through the rate at which credit "dots" are handed out rather than through confrontations (again, see the preceding section). When limits are set, these are invariably communicated in a respectful and nonconfrontational manner. In short, every effort is made to focus the teacher-student interaction around the learning process rather than around power struggles over issues of compliance.

Responsive Services Approach

A common refrain running through humanistic critiques of American education is the comment that schools have become too bureaucratic and rigid, with a concern more on whether the proper forms have been filled out or the proper regulations have been complied with, than on whether the individual student is "drowning" or being saved (Glaser, 1977). Thus, the primary focus of many traditional educators is to maintain a smoothly running operation, with the result that many educational programs may be considered "school-centered" rather than "student-centered." One feature

of a school-centered orientation is that the school is fairly inflexible in the way things can be done; thus, there are set times during the year when new students may enroll, required forms which must be filled out before a student can do certain things, set times in a student's career when certain courses may be taken, etc. A second feature of a school-centered operation is that schools tend to define their roles fairly narrowly as pertaining mainly to students' acquisition of academic content, and leave largely to the student, his/her family, or outside agencies the task of dealing with personal or family problems. Thus, traditional educators often act as if they are more interested in coming up with reasons why non-academic needs should not be met than in trying to figure out how they might be met. A problem with both of these features of school-centered education, however, is that unless the school is more responsive, both in terms of being less bureaucratic and more service-oriented, the needs of high-risk youth will go largely unmet.

The staff in the BTU Program has consistently attempted to avoid any tendency towards bureaucratic rigidity. When presented with a difficult case, whether involving a new or an already-enrolled student, the question typically asked is, "How can we help this student?" rather than "How does this student's problem conform to the way we define our program?" There are many ways in which this non-bureaucratic flexibility is manifested. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is in respect to enrollment policies. A large percentage of the students are self-referred, walking in off the street at all times of the year and at all times of the school day, often without prior notice, parental involvement or referral from outside agencies. Sometimes this occurs quite late in the school year. The school's policy is to give each student who wishes to enroll a chance to do

so. Almost never is a student turned away, unless he/she has some acutely serious problem (such as a severe physical disorder) which cannot be dealt with adequately in the school setting.

The responsiveness of the BTU Program is also manifested in the range of support services designed to deal with personal and family pressures which might interfere with students' ability to function effectively in school. Services go far beyond those typically found in traditional high schools. For example, since pregnancy is a frequent occurrence among female high-risk students, the BTU Program provides a nursery school where students who are parents may drop off their babies on the way to class. Although the primary purpose of the nursery is to enable these mothers to attend school, the students are also given an opportunity to learn about parenting through spending time in the nursery and through courses in parenting which all students (male and female, parents as well as non-parents) are required to attend.

Another problem to which the BTU Program has been responsive is alcohol and drug abuse among students. Many of these youth have serious chemical dependency problems and strategies have been devised for helping these students to stay "straight." These include informational classes, social work counseling, and various support groups. If a student's drug abuse problem is considered sufficiently severe, referral may be made to one of several chemical dependency programs in the community.

Another, quite striking, example of responsive services is an "assistance and referral" service which provides a number of supportive and emergency services to students and their families. An important part of this service involves helping students to find part-time work. This involves not only telling students about job opportunities, but actively

soliciting jobs in the community, referring students to community agencies such as CETA and the state jobs service, providing pre-employment training for interested students (for example, helping them to fill out job application forms and telling them about what to do on job interviews) and counseling students about their vocational interests. In addition, the assistance and referral service acts as an advocate of students and their families in obtaining needed services such as social security and SSI, ADC, food stamps, money for utilities, etc. When students are faced with family emergencies, and community agencies are not quick enough to respond to these emergencies, direct support is often given to the student and his/her family. This could include such things as providing food, clothing, furniture, bus tickets to visit relatives, etc. Another important way in which the school is responsive to students' needs is in the attitude toward tuition payments. Although students are required to regularly meet the modest tuition which is charged, no student is refused admission or continuation in school solely because of financial inability to pay tuition.

GOALS UNDERLYING THE BTU PROGRAM

In the preceding section, we described the main components of the BTU Program. Now, we shall proceed to explain the rationale underlying the development, and coordinated use, of all four of these components. This rationale is based on a discussion of three explicit goals underlying the development of the BTU Program. Following a brief discussion of each program goal, an attempt will be made to indicate how each of the four program components might be expected to facilitate the attainment of that

goal. Thus, it is possible to construct a three (goal) by four (components) matrix, with the rationale for the BTU model emerging from the intersection between these program goals and components. This matrix, along with a brief discussion of the content of each of the twelve cells, is portrayed in Figure 1.

Goal of School Completion

Of the three goals underlying the development of the BTU Program, the central one is undoubtedly to increase the likelihood that high-risk youth will finish high school. The one characteristic which most of the youth enrolled in the BTU Program have in common is a history of academic and adjustment difficulties in previous schools. Few, if any, of these youth would be likely to have completed high school, with most of them joining the ranks of inner-city youth--estimated as high as 50% in some studies (Rosen & Block, 1980)--who drop out or are excluded from school. The development of the BTU Program was motivated largely by the belief that changes in school structure are needed if high-risk youth are to finish school, and that the act of completing high school may have a significant positive influence on high-risk youths' later development (Polk & Schaefer, 1972).

The belief that receiving a high school diploma may "turn around" a high-risk youth, and make him/her a more successful and acceptable member of society, is based in part on the studies which have shown that high school graduation, independent of social class and ability, greatly decreases a youth's later chances of being unemployed (Vice President's Task Force, 1980), and greatly increases his/her later earning capacity (Jencks & others, 1979). These studies suggest that, despite all of the

arguments about a possible decline in the quality of secondary education, most employers continue to regard a high school diploma as a basic prerequisite for employment and an individual without a high school diploma is facing an uphill battle finding long-term employment. Thus, high school graduation represents more than merely the completion of a course of study. It is a rite of passage of some considerable significance in American society, indicating that an individual has become eligible to enter the mainstream of American economic life. That a high school diploma has some mystical significance is seen not only in the policies of employers, but perhaps more importantly in the behavior and attitudes of the students themselves. It is rather remarkable to observe how persistently may of these youth continue to struggle toward the goal of graduation, in the face of considerable difficulty and frustration. Most youth are aware that however difficult their future life may be, the failure to graduate from high school will likely make it more difficult. It is because they understand the importance of a high school diploma, and because they understand that the BTU Program is designed to help them graduate, that many youth persist, even into their twenties and with intermittent periods of dropping out, toward graduation. It is not uncommon for an alumnus to return and say that graduating was the single most important thing he or she had ever done. Such youth state that graduation convinced them that they could make something of their life and gave them the incentive to try.

Insert Figure 1 about here

How is the goal of school completion facilitated by each of the four program components described earlier? It is our belief that each of these components contributes quite directly and obviously to this program goal, and to the other two program goals to be described below. School continuation is facilitated by the component of a normalized school setting in that students are much more likely to feel proud of their school and to identify with it if it has the trappings of a "normal" school rather than of a special school. Thus, attending the BTU Program does not have the stigma attached to it that would be the case if it were less of a "mainstream" operation. The program component of a concretized credit system contributes to the goal of school completion in that students are much more likely to receive some "partial reinforcement" than would be the case in either traditional grading or a pass-fail system in which students would often receive little or no credit for their work. Since students are always receiving some credits, and they understand the criteria by which credits are to be earned, there is likely to be more motivation to continue in school than would be the case if the likelihood of earning sufficient credits seemed too remote. The program component of focused discipline policy contributes to school completion by removing many of the aversive "hassles" in which these students often were involved previously. Thus, school is made a more pleasant experience for high-risk students and, by decreasing the likelihood of suspension or expulsion and relying largely on non-exclusionary discipline practices, the chances of students' graduating are obviously increased. Finally, the program component of a responsive service approach contributes to school completion by lessening the outside pressures and stresses which often interfere with the ability of high-risk students to concentrate their energies on school work. By helping students

to deal with personal and family problems and pressures, the hope is that their performance and rate of progress in school will improve.

Goal of Self-Esteem Enhancement

A second goal of the BTU Program is to enhance the self-esteem of high-risk youth. It has been pointed out that underachieving youth almost always have low self-esteem (Fine, 1967) and that delinquent behavior may sometimes be understood as a means of regaining self-esteem lost through scholastic failure (Gold, 1978). Traditional schools, with their competitive emphasis on grade attainment, undoubtedly do little to maintain the self-esteem of those students who have difficulty performing at average or passing levels. Often even non-academic avenues for self-esteem enhancement, such as competitive athletics, are denied youth who perform at low academic levels. Alternative educators have been quite critical of the competitive nature of American education and non-graded evaluation has been a central characteristic of many alternative schools, especially those designed for disadvantaged students (Betts, 1975; Irwin, 1978; Oliver, 1977). The self-esteem of high-risk youth is likely to be especially fragile because of the many ways, academic and otherwise, in which such youth have been told that they are deviant and deficient. It is a central belief of the BTU Program that only if high-risk youth can be helped to feel better about themselves can many of their problems of anti-social and self-destructive behavior be substantially altered.

As in the case of the previous program goal, it is our belief that the goal of self-esteem enhancement is directly facilitated by each of the four program components. The component of a normalized school setting contributes to self-esteem enhancement by providing a setting in which

students are less likely to view themselves as deviant or deficient. By de-emphasizing labeling, testing and tracking, and by providing opportunities to engage in typical student roles, high-risk youth are given more chances to think of themselves as normally competent individuals. The component of a concretized credit system contributes to the goal of enhanced self-esteem by drastically reducing academic failure and by giving greater opportunities for students to feel some sense of accomplishment in their academic progress. The component of a focused discipline policy contributes to self-esteem enhancement by reducing opportunities for students to feel like disciplinary "foul-ups," limiting the frequency of rejecting and hostile interactions with adults, and increasing the amount of positive feedback and affection which is directed to students. The program component of responsive services contributes to self-esteem enhancement by attempting to alleviate many of the problems which either cause low self-esteem or which are reflective of it. Thus, as students begin to cope with problems such as chemical dependency, emotional difficulties, family pressures, etc., it is hoped that they will begin to feel better about themselves.

Goal of Diminished Alienation.

A third goal of the BTU Program is to decrease youths' sense of alienation and increase their sense of attachment to society. High-risk youth, particularly those who have exhibited delinquent behavior, show little sense of attachment to adult values and institutions (Johnson, Bird & Little, 1979) and often demonstrate an "external locus of control" (Bryan & Pearl, 1979), that is a belief that what happens to them is determined mainly by external and often malevolent forces over which they have little

control. Given this sense of alienation and hopelessness, such antisocial and self-defeating behaviors as vandalism, drug use, school violence, etc., become much more understandable as a means for achieving a sense of group belongingness (Short & Strodtbeck, 1965), as a means of "paying society back" for imagined injuries and as a symptom of the attitude that pro-social behavior is not likely to have any "pay-off" anyway. It has been argued (Morris, 1978; OJJDP, 1980; Sutcliffe, 1977), that alternative schools have the potential to increase the "bond" between high-risk students and society by helping such students to achieve a greater sense of involvement and participation in the social organization of the school. It is argued that if students can begin to feel some sense of belonging and identification with a school, they are likely to have less need to adopt an "outlaw" identity and will have less need for the support of deviant subcultures (Berger, 1974; Coleman, 1978; Sakumoto, 1978).

In the BTU Program, it can be demonstrated that all four of the program components are designed to help students feel a greater sense of participation and involvement, and, consequently, a diminished sense of alienation and hopeless resignation. The program component of normalized school setting contributes to the goal of diminished alienation by providing a wide range of opportunities for students to participate in activities with students and teachers and to feel that they are an important part of the school environment. Whereas such students often feel members of the "out group" in traditional schools, the hope is that they will feel very much a part of the "in group" in the BTU Program. The program component of a concretized credit system contributes to the goal of diminished alienation by helping students to understand that they have some direct control over their academic progress and success. Whereas in the past, high-risk

students may have felt that academic failure was inevitable regardless of what they did, in a concretized credit system students are more likely to see the "rules of the game" as fair and to see themselves as willing to participate in that game. Thus, it is hoped that students will develop more of a sense of "internal" locus of control, as well as a greater feeling of responsibility for their academic progress. The program component of focused discipline policy contributes to the goal of diminished alienation in that students will begin to understand that staying out of trouble is an option open to them, and that adults are not invariably "out to get them." By concentrating only on those rules which have some obvious importance to the maintenance of safety and order, and by utilizing a "natural consequences" approach to relatively minor infractions, it is hoped that students will begin to understand that there are reasons for discipline and that taking these rules seriously is in their own best interest. Finally, the component of responsive services contributes to the goal of diminished alienation in two ways. By helping students to cope with life problems, it is hoped that students will understand that they can begin to take some responsibility for their lives and that a better life is something that is within the realm of possibility for them if they will try to achieve it. Secondly, by being in contact with teachers and others who unselfisnly respond to their needs, it is hoped that students will come to understand that there are some adults who care very deeply about them and their lives.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

The BTU Program originated as an attempt to help high-risk youth in a specific American city (Omaha, Nebraska) to have a better chance of com-

pleting high school, to feel better about themselves, and to participate more fully in the life of their community. Although the development of the BTU Program has been influenced significantly by the nature of the particular problems, resources and personalities operating in Omaha, it is our hope that this system of alternative education for high-risk youth could be put into effect, with minimal modifications, in a variety of other communities. In this final section, we shall discuss some of the practical issues which might have to be faced in attempting to implement such a program.

Private Vs. Public Operation

One obvious implementation question concerns whether an alternative school needs to be run privately, as in the case of the BTU Program, or whether public operation is feasible. There are some obvious advantages to private operation of an alternative school for high-risk youth. The biggest advantage is that the school is more likely to be viewed by students as a true alternative if it is separate from the public system where the youth has already had some difficulty. If the school is part of a public system, it may furthermore be more difficult to maintain flexibility of responsiveness and there may be greater pressure to follow certain procedures such as labeling and diagnostic testing which are antithetical to the spirit of the model. Additionally, it is believed that the requirement that students make a small monthly tuition payment contributes importantly to the development of a sense of commitment to the school and to finishing. There is one major advantage, however, to operating the school as part of a public system; namely, it provides a stable and adequate long-term funding base. The BTU Program is fortunate to now receive adequate operational support from Father Flanagan's Boys' Home, but

for many years it struggled from chronically inadequate and sporadic funding. Since other alternative schools may not be fortunate enough to have such generous financial support available, it is likely that complete or partial financial support from the public sector may be essential. It is important, however, that administrative safeguards be developed in order to preserve the autonomy and integrity of an alternative education program.

The Issue of Finances

It is obvious that the comprehensive model of alternative education described in this paper will be more expensive to operate than will a more truncated program. We do not feel, however, that the cost should be prohibitive. As explained earlier, Dominican High School operated for several years with inadequate funding. The four program elements were able to be offered in spite of financial hardship. This was a result partially of the willingness of a very dedicated staff to work for less, and of the fact that administrative costs were minimal. If conscious effort is maintained to keep the program free of expensive bureaucratic costs, then many more service activities can be offered within a limited budget. It is also suggested that schools working toward the adoption of this comprehensive model might seek cooperative ventures with other existing agencies. There is no reason, for example, why a local social service agency could not set up a branch office on an alternative school site, thus contributing to the responsive services component of the BTU model. Although it may sound unrealistic and naive, it is our opinion that financial considerations should not be used as the sole reason for refusing to offer high-risk youth a program that can meet their needs. If individuals believe enough in the value of this treatment approach, they can find a way to make it available.

The Issue of Teacher Qualifications

One sometimes-claimed advantage of alternative education is its cost effectiveness. While it is likely that alternative education is less costly than traditional education, it is important that fully-qualified teachers be hired. Given the difficulties of dealing with high-risk youth, it is a false economy to use teachers who are anything other than exceptional in their ability and sensitivity. While such teachers are likely to have considerable dedication, it is unrealistic to think that one can put together and retain a first-rate staff without paying salaries close or equal to the average level among a community's public system. As far as teacher qualifications are concerned, the primary emphasis should be more on how much competence and caring a teacher demonstrates in his/her functioning with students than on how many paper credentials he or she possesses. The one characteristic which should never be tolerated in a teacher of high-risk youth, however, is any evidence of prejudice, meanness or hostility (expressed directly or indirectly). It is important that the teachers be truly interested in the students, that they have considerable patience and understanding, that they not take personally the misbehavior of such youth, and that they demonstrate a tendency to be positive in most of their interactions with students.

One point that should be kept in mind, however, is that the structure of an alternative school such as the BTU Program can positively influence the nature of teacher/pupil interactions, and that it is possible to operate such a program successfully with teachers who do not differ markedly in quality or personality from teachers in public schools. The BTU Program provides considerable support to teachers, for example through daily staff meetings, and conceptualizes the job of working with high-risk

youth in a more positive light than may be the case in other schools. Thus working in a program such as this may give more meaning and purpose to the teacher's role than is the case in traditional inner-city schools. As a result, teacher morale is very high and there is very little of the "burnout" and staff turnover which is experienced in other settings. It is our belief that this is attributable more to the nature of the program than to the uniqueness of the staff, although both of these factors undoubtedly operate.

The Issue of Evaluating Program Effectiveness

It is important that the effectiveness of any alternative program be evaluated, so that it can be determined if the program is accomplishing its ends. Evaluation, to be meaningful, should adopt what Crowell (1980) called a "multi-perspective" approach. The typical sort of single-perspective evaluation, which looks mainly at impact on students' educational achievement levels as measured by standardized tests, is likely to miss much of the significance of what is going on in an educational alternative such as the BTU Program. Like most educational organizations involved in the business of program/curriculum development, the overwhelming emphasis in the early phases of the BTU Program has been on delivery rather than on evaluation of services (Smith, 1980; Meyen & White, 1980). Evaluation studies are currently being undertaken, however, and the results of these will be reported at later dates (Greenspan, Shoultz & Readdy, 1981). It is our view, however, that the model of alternative education presented earlier in this paper provides a logical framework for conducting multi-perspective evaluation studies, not only of the BTU Program, but of other educational interventions aimed at high-risk youth.

Program effectiveness can be evaluated by assessing the extent to which the three stated program goals--increased school success, increased self-esteem, and diminished alienation--have been attained. In the first category, school completion, one could look at such things as rate of credit accumulation before and after entry into the program, percentage of youth remaining in school and/or receiving high school diplomas each year, etc. In addition, one could also utilize standard achievement measures to determine progress in mastering academic subjects. With the second goal, increased self-esteem, one could examine improvement on measures of self-evaluation as youth progress through the program. Also, one could examine changes in measures or behaviors associated with self-esteem such as manifest anxiety, chemical dependency, and emotional problems. With regard to the third goal, diminished alienation, one could look at changes in measures of locus of control as well as in behaviors such as unemployment and delinquency rates, participation in school activities, and in attitudes toward school.

One problem with evaluating a practical school operation such as the BTU Program is in constructing meaningful comparison or control groups. Since the BTU Program has the policy of accepting virtually all youth who are referred, it is not feasible to use waiting lists to randomly assign youth to non-treatment control groups as might be desirable from a purely research standpoint. A more feasible strategy may be to use an essentially descriptive approach to evaluation, using multiple indices of program success. Of considerable value from a descriptive standpoint might be to conduct a second level of evaluation, one which focuses less on "effectiveness" than on "effort." One way of conducting such an evaluation might be to use the four program components as a guide, and examine the extent to

which a program adheres to a normalized approach, shows creativity in giving credits and meting out discipline, and shows responsiveness to students' needs.

The Issue of Adaptability

The BTU Program, as described in the preceding pages, offers a broad formula from which educators may develop services with similar characteristics. It should be understood that some modifications may have to be made, to meet changing conditions and needs. The model underlying this program is intended to be viewed as an evolving, flexible, a adaptive framework and not as a fixed entity which cannot be changed. Thus, the four program components provide a base of services which are intended to meet the educational needs of many different kinds of problem youth. Consequently, considerable flexibility regarding particulars of school situation (size, ethnic makeup, corporate structure, etc.) is possible while preserving the basic characteristics of the model.

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Figure 1 -- Link Between BTU Program Components and Goals

PROGRAM GOALS

PROGRAM COMPONENTS	School Completion	Diminished Alienation	Enhanced Self-Esteem
Normalized Setting	By providing a school youth can feel proud of, students are more likely to continue.	Through opportunities to participate in activities, students will feel less alienated.	Since the setting is not defined as deviant, students are less likely to see themselves as deviant.
Concretized Credit	Since students are always getting some credits, there is more motivation to continue.	By providing clear criteria for academic progress, students will understand that they determine their own success.	Since academic failure is eliminated, students are less likely to feel like failures.
Focused Discipline	By decreasing the likelihood of suspension or expulsion, the chances of graduating are increased.	By utilizing rules which have some "natural" significance, students will better understand the need for rules.	By treating students with respect, there are fewer opportunities for students to feel put-down.
Responsive Services	As outside problems are alleviated, students will be better able to put their energies into school.	By learning how to cope with life problems, students will understand that they can take responsibility for their lives.	By overcoming personal difficulties, students will feel better about themselves.

Footnotes

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