

Chapter Eight  
H-B Woodlawn: Conflict and Compromise

*H-B Woodlawn:*

*an alternative secondary program for students in grades 7-12 who want to accept greater responsibility for their own education.*

*a small community of students and teachers who have chosen this school, working together to create a flexible, personalized learning environment.*

*an instructional program that can be adjusted to meet each student's needs with the personal commitment on the part of all participants to do so.*

*an intimate community of people who relate to each other as unique individuals and where close relationships between student and teacher are commonplace.*

*governed by all who belong to it - each student, teacher and parent granted an equal vote.*

*located at 4100 N. Vacation Lane, the former Stratford Junior High School, within walking distance of the Central Library and on bus routes to the resources of the Capital.<sup>261</sup>*

The H-B Woodlawn Program "was a better alternative than people thought it was going to be."<sup>262</sup> Most students and teachers from both Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston began the 1978-1979 academic year with reservations about the new school. The older students continued to lament their beloved Woodlawn and resent the change, the younger students missed the "warm feeling" of Hoffman-Boston and did their best not to cross paths with a sniveling senior, and the staff was rightfully concerned about how the students would adjust.<sup>263</sup> "Everybody felt like they'd lost a lot, and nobody was sure what they'd gain."<sup>264</sup> To be sure the first year was trying.

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<sup>261</sup>H-B Woodlawn Program Brochure, Arlington, Virginia, 1979, page 1.

<sup>262</sup>Ellen Kurcis, interview by Christy Mach, Arlington, Virginia, February 1996.

<sup>263</sup>Jack Lechner. "H-B Woodlawn Opens: Early Reviews are Mixed." *Arlington News*, Arlington, Virginia, September 7, 1978, page unknown.

<sup>264</sup>Mary Flynn, interview by Rena Levin, Arlington, Virginia, May 1993, printed in a student publication: "They Way It Was, The Way It Is, Teachers' Perspectives on H-B Woodlawn," page 5.

During the 1978-1979 academic year, the toughest critics of the new program were its own participants. In November, the *New School Press* published its first issue with the headline: "IS H.B.W. UP TO PAR?" The school's news writing and editing classes (which included Woodlawn refugees) asked students and teachers to compare the new program to the original. One 12th grader felt that "Woodlawn had lost its identity."<sup>265</sup> He stated that Woodlawners "were adhering to Hoffman-Boston's way of doing things such as the idea of a mod schedule."<sup>266</sup> Stuart Elliott, another 12th grader, said "there [was] a steady decrease of alternativeness (sic)."<sup>267</sup> He claimed that "participants in the program were becoming more traditional in their outlook," and that they were "not as open to different things."<sup>268</sup> While a number of the older students had their doubts, the teachers and younger students at H-B Woodlawn tended to remain optimistic. Spanish teacher Pam Walker said that "students could still find a learning style to suit their individual preferences and that they were still allowed to work at their own rate."<sup>269</sup> Terilee Edwards, a 10th grader, agreed that "H-B Woodlawn offered more academic freedom because students could take more and different types of classes."<sup>270</sup> The article offered nothing in terms of analysis for the first two months of the program, but it highlighted both the difficulty older students had adapting to the merger and the enthusiasm that the rest of the school community had for the future of H-B Woodlawn.

The merged program adapted aspects of both the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston schools. H-B Woodlawn adapted a 'block' schedule from the

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<sup>265</sup>Staff. *The New School Press -H-B Woodlawn School*, Arlington, Virginia, November 1978, Volume 1, Number 1, page 1.

<sup>266</sup>Ibid.

<sup>267</sup>Ibid.

<sup>268</sup>Ibid.

<sup>269</sup>Ibid.

<sup>270</sup>Ibid.

Hoffman-Boston 'mod' schedule model. Once again, not every class met every day, classes were divided into one hour blocks, the program did not require continuous adult supervision, and students decided how to use their free time. The amount of unsupervised time increased gradually from the seventh to twelfth grade. Some students used free time to study, while others spent it socializing or away from the building. The program trusted the good intentions of its students, who generally reciprocated with a sufficient degree of personal responsibility.

All students were given control in setting educational goals. After the first month, the merger committee's tripartite arrangement which categorized students into three levels proved unnecessary and useless. Students naturally separated themselves according to grade and maturity levels. Academically, the younger students worked closely with their teachers on personal contracts and began to take elective courses such as in foreign language. Ninth and tenth grade students relied less on the contract system and more on group instruction. They did not work as closely with the staff, they took elective courses, and they began to work on independent study projects. The program's oldest students had the most flexibility when scheduling their courses. They took AP courses, electives, worked independently, and continued to have internships. Of course there were always exceptions to the level at which the average student worked. It was not uncommon to have freshmen and seniors in the same elective history courses, or seventh graders and sophomores in the same introductory Spanish class. "Extensive overlapping and the possibilities for diversification and individualization were almost unlimited."<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>271</sup>Report of the Hoffman-Boston/Woodlawn Merger Committee Report, Arlington, Virginia, November 29, 1977, page 13.

All courses that had been offered at Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston were offered at H-B Woodlawn. In addition to year-long courses, Woodlawn's elective program was also offered in English, Social Studies, and Psychology. "Under the system, an English student took one quarter course each nine week grading period and accumulated a total of one full credit by the end of the year."<sup>272</sup> Woodlawn's "outside teacher" system was also implemented at the new alternative. These courses generally lasted one quarter and they were taught by specialists on a subject in which the year-long teachers were not well versed. Financial difficulties and teacher allocation cuts did not enable H-B Woodlawn to have quarter course outside teachers during the 1978-1979 school year. However, the program's German, Psychology, and Photography courses were all taught by year-long outside teachers that year, and the financial problem was solved the following September. Independent study, interdisciplinary courses and internships were also available at the alternative.

Most of the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston communities did transfer to H-B Woodlawn in the Fall of 1978. Over the summer students chose one of thirty-five full time staff members as their teacher-advisor (TA) for the school year. The TA system at H-B Woodlawn worked almost exactly like it did at Hoffman-Boston. The advisors recorded student attendance and made sure that students met all course requirements for their grade level. Younger students often planned group activities with their TA groups, but the older students boycotted the "touchy-feely" gatherings. The Woodlawn refugees continued to resent anything at H-B Woodlawn that they had not brought with them. For them, Town Meeting was perhaps the new program's saving grace.

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<sup>272</sup>Stuart Elliott, Jim Fussell, and Charlotte Mooney. *The Underground Student Handbook*. Copyright 1979 by the Underground Printing Office, Inc., 47 Space, Black Hole #470127, The Universe, page 4.

Town Meeting was the policy-making body of the new program. It met weekly at H-B Woodlawn just as it had at Woodlawn. Students, teachers, and parents each had one equal vote, and the group decided almost everything that went on in the school. Legally, the head teacher was not bound by the decisions of Town Meeting. However, morally she was, and though the group objected to some of Margery Edson's decisions that first year, "there was no instance of [her] usurping the authority of Town Meeting."<sup>273</sup>

As principal of Hoffman-Boston, Margery Edson had been known to make administrative decisions without consulting the program's students or teaching staff. She continued that practice at H-B Woodlawn. As the program's principal/head teacher, Edson walked a fine line. Certainly some decisions did not require a stamp of approval from Town Meeting before they were made. If a toilet overflowed, Edson did not have to wait until the next TM to get a custodian to fix it. She would have been ridiculed if she did not fix the problem immediately. However, on other issues, Edson sometimes neglected to consult Town Meeting before making a decision, and the H-B Woodlawn "seniors did not let her get away with it."<sup>274</sup> Students did not want Edson to tell them the location of the smoking court, they wanted to vote on it. Similarly, they wanted a voice in deciding the school's schedule, and they wanted to be consulted before a News Board or Personal Message Board took up space on their school walls. "The big joke among the students was deciding what to scold Margery for each week."<sup>275</sup> Officially, the "Town Meeting was made advisory to the head teacher who had the final administrative voice."<sup>276</sup> Therefore the governing body never seriously reprimanded Edson., who did

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<sup>273</sup>Ibid., page 9.

<sup>274</sup>Anderson interview, page 58.

<sup>275</sup>Ibid.

<sup>276</sup>Larry Cuban; Memorandum to the Members of the School Board concerning Recommendations for the Hoffman-Boston/Woodlawn Merger, Arlington, Virginia, January 3, 1978.

have some great ideas, but Town Meeting did continually remind the head teacher of her moral responsibility to share decision-making with the entire school.

The H-B Woodlawn community gradually adapted to its new building and to its new program. Edson improved her relations with Town Meeting, and the Woodlawn refugees grew tired of complaining. "By Spring Break the school had really come together."<sup>277</sup> The seventh graders grew accustomed to the seniors sitting at the table next to them in the cafeteria, and older students were bothered less by the younger ones.

Once everyone was comfortable with the program, they began to appreciate the opportunities it afforded them. School publications were not censored (which allowed students to gripe about the merger), students and staff maintained informal relationships (which again allowed student to gripe about the merger), and those who chose to gripe about the merger were encouraged to do so in a productive way. One trio of Woodlawn refugees that was particularly concerned with maintaining experimentation and creativity at H-B Woodlawn published an "Underground Student Handbook" in the Spring of 1979. Stuart Elliott, Jim Fussell, and Charlotte Mooney hoped that "the Underground Handbook would help the participants in the H-B Woodlawn Program figure out who they were. Perhaps its content would help the new community recover some of the energy that the alternative schools used to have, to find the courage to let go, and to start to really do things."<sup>278</sup> The Handbook addressed all aspects of the H-B Woodlawn Program, beginning with a brief history of the "painful" merger, the Handbook identified the school faculty, it explained schedules, classes, and open labs. A map of the school, teacher biographies, outside resources -- everything about H-B Woodlawn was

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<sup>277</sup>Judy Mayeux, interview by Christy Mach, Arlington, Virginia, 26 January 1996.

<sup>278</sup>Jimmy, Charlotte, and Stuart. *The Underground Handbook*, page 1.

included in the Handbook. The students who produced it encouraged all other students to use their ingenuity and to put some of their "own ideas into their classes - books, speakers, field trips, etc."<sup>279</sup> It was a reminder to everyone that they "could really do just about anything at the school -- which was what the program was all about."<sup>280</sup> The handbook itself, which was an independent study project for English credit, is an indicator of the types of things that were possible at H-B Woodlawn. Thought perhaps Stuart Elliott, Jim Fussell, and Charlotte Mooney and many of the other Woodlawn refugees "would still say that the merger never should have happened," it did happen; and their contributions made a lasting impression on the alternative program.<sup>281</sup>

In June 1979, H-B Woodlawn graduated the fifty-seven members of its senior class. The ceremony was a mix of both Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston tradition. A bar-b-que was held on a corner of the school's softball field, teachers stood on a makeshift stage and spoke about each graduate, and each graduate received a student-produced diploma which perhaps summarizes the group's feelings toward the new program. The diploma read: "Toto we're not in Kansas anymore."

"It was difficult for the school to overcome merger anxiety, but eventually it did happen."<sup>282</sup> When those who had most resisted the change graduated, the H-B Woodlawn community was reminded less of its past and focused more on the establishment of its own program. Drawing from both the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston Programs, H-B Woodlawn began to develop its own alternative program during the 1978-1979 academic year. Since that date, the school has had its own trends and it has created its own traditions.

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<sup>279</sup>Ibid., page 4-5.

<sup>280</sup>Ibid., page 37.

<sup>281</sup>Mary Flynn, interview published by Rena Levin, page 5.

<sup>282</sup>Ibid.