

Chapter Nine
The Program Evolves

I would like you to catch a glimpse of H-B Woodlawn:

First of all, the size: HB is small -- there are 70 kids per class. That means you'll know most everyone you see in the hall. Also, we call our teachers by their first names, and the student/teacher relationships that exist outside the classroom are friendly and informal. This makes the atmosphere more relaxed. Teachers are supportive and take a personal interest in the students; school is like a big family.

Students at HB have access to individualized attention and the flexibility of the program provides ample opportunity to develop and exercise leadership skills. Students organize their own academic schedule and there is a plethora of academic options that can be arranged, such as independent studies, volunteer work for school credit, independent projects, etc. Kids can also develop and create both academic and non-academic electives if enough interest exists to form a class, and our Town Meeting approves it.

Students play a major role in decision-making at HB. Our student government is embodied in Town Meeting; all students can participate and any issue can be brought to the meeting: from approving a dance, to deciding not to serve pineapple from South Africa, urging our school and country to divest from that nation, to approving budget allocations to all academic departments.²⁸³

The description of H-B Woodlawn in 1989 sounds similar to the original Woodlawn of 1971 and also the H-B Woodlawn of today. Since H-B Woodlawn merged in 1978 until the present day, the alternative program has maintained much of its basic character but also endured several changes in its operation and in its students. The school has always existed to encourage students towards being self-directed learners. For twenty-five years, the two principal tenants of its approach have always been (1): that children are individuals with unique needs and talents, and (2): that learning occurs in its highest form when students play an active role in their education.²⁸⁴ This basic philosophy is what has always made H-B Woodlawn "alternative," and it has not changed. However, over those years the student body itself has changed. The changes in motivation and behavior from the students of the early seventies to the eighties, and on to the students of today, have been reflected in the H-B

²⁸³Jennifir Bailes, Speech for National Honor Society Senior Banquet, printed in *Seen Your '89*, a 1989 student publication by Anne McCarthy and Brad White, Arlington, Virginia, page 8-9.

²⁸⁴The Underground Student Handbook, published by Warren Overholt, Arlington, Virginia, Spring 1995, page 4.

Woodlawn Program itself. On paper the school carries on the "tradition" of being alternative, but it can be argued that in some ways it became more traditional.

The flexibility, informality, and individuality of the atmosphere at H-B Woodlawn continues today. Students have continued to schedule their own classes, vote on elective course offerings, and have a decisive voice in governing their school. Students are still encouraged to design and implement their own educational programs, and the H-B Woodlawn staff continues to meet the ever changing needs of its student body. However, since the 1978-1979 merger, more structure has been imposed on the program. Students at the alternative have become less interested in experiments in education, and more focused on getting into college.

Ironically, the students' own decisive power has acted to curtail the individuality of the alternative program. Perhaps the most powerful decision students at H-B Woodlawn have made was to add more Advanced Placement classes to the program. In the late eighties, "the school began to really emphasize academics."²⁸⁵ Many students felt that they needed AP courses in order to compete with traditional high school students for admission into college. Students at the alternative "used to view college as a place to learn things to save the world, but that changed as society viewed advanced education as more of an opportunity for personal advancement than intellectual growth."²⁸⁶ By 1990, H-B Woodlawn offered AP classes for English (grades 11 and 12), History (US and European), Government, second-year Science (Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Computer Science), Math (Calculus AB and BC), and all of the foreign languages. Although students at the alternative originally may have taken the advanced courses for their intended

²⁸⁵Jim Schroeder, interview by Rena Levin, page 11.

²⁸⁶*Ibid.*

goal of offering more challenging work to a select group of students, by 1995, "it was widely acknowledged that students no longer took AP classes for the intellectual rigor involved."²⁸⁷ Rather, many students chose the advanced courses to boost their G.P.A. and get into the big-name colleges. "Colleges began to demand more of high school applicants. Students have always felt that pressure, and the increased number of AP classes at H-B Woodlawn reflects that."²⁸⁸

Growing student preferences for standardized advanced placement classes has limited educational options and virtually eliminated H-B Woodlawn's elective program. "Students don't want choices in the classroom, they want structure."²⁸⁹ Before the infusion of AP courses, classes met no more than three times a week, and electives, and field trips and educational variety existed much like they had at Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston. However, with at least 40% of the student body taking advanced placement courses, which meet four times each week in a very traditional classroom setting, H-B Woodlawn as a whole has become more structured and perhaps less "academically alternative."

Over the last twenty-five years the program has continued to adapt to change. In the early seventies students in Arlington wanted to create a school that opposed traditional educational practices, and the creation of Woodlawn provided students that alternative. As the years passed, students at the program were less skeptical of "the system," and they began to adopt some traditional methods of education. Society in the nineties is not what it was in the seventies, and H-B Woodlawn reflects that. The school has not lost its focus,

²⁸⁷Underground Student Handbook, published by Warren Overholt, page 34.

²⁸⁸Ellen Kurcis, interview by Christy Mach, Arlington, Virginia, 23 February 1996.

²⁸⁹Judy Mayeux, interview by Christy Mach, Arlington, Virginia.

rather, the concept of an alternative program has proven itself to be flexible which has enabled it to endure.

Originally students at H-B Woodlawn had very little contact with their home schools. Very few participated in extra-curricular activities, and most were content with the educational offerings at the alternative. However, in the mid-late eighties, students became more involved at their traditional home schools. More students participated in sports, National Honor Society, Model UN, and other activities than ever before; a practice that continues up to the present day. Not only does this involvement parallel student aims of attending good colleges, but it has changed the character of the student body as well.

The program had always attracted non-mainstream kinds of students. Woodlawn was founded by the politically active students, who were replaced by those interested in drama, art, and photography. Hoffman-Boston, was sort of a catchall school, that catered to students who needed personalized instruction that the traditional schools did not offer. These groups were content operating independent of the mainstream, and most were not interested in what the traditional schools had to offer. Over the years that has changed. As a result, H-B Woodlawn has attracted a wider variety of students, who themselves are perhaps less "alternative" and more mainstream than those who attended the school a quarter of a century ago.

After it became clear that the school was going to survive the merger, more students and their parents expressed interest in H-B Woodlawn. By the 1980-1981 school year, the alternative could no longer meet student demand, and forty-four students were put on the first waiting list. In contrast with Hoffman-Boston's difficulty in meeting their minimum enrollment, H-B Woodlawn became so popular that parents camped out for as many as three nights before the sign-up to get their child's name on the list.

Students were admitted to H-B Woodlawn on a first-come first-served basis. Each November a sign-up sheet was posted in the office, and the first 70 student names on the list were admitted to the entering seventh grade class. The remaining names were put on a waiting list and only offered admission when a space opened up. Most student who entered the program in seventh grade remained at the alternative until they graduated. For some parents, this made admission for the seventh grade year imperative. By the fall of 1981, all student spaces were filled before winter break, and each year the list continued to fill earlier. By 1987, parents lined up outside of the school to register their children the morning that the sign-up list was posted, and then parents began camping out days in advance of the sign-up.

The first few years that parents camped out evoked very little negative response from the Arlington community. "People may have shaken their heads, but they did not oppose what was going on."²⁹⁰ However, by 1990, some residents began to denounce the camping event and the entire admission process to H-B Woodlawn. The parents who camped out were only those who could financially afford to do so. These parents did not have to worry about baby-sitters or missing work while they spent the night or the weekend in a tent. Most of the campers were Caucasian and belonging to an upper middle class income bracket, just as most of the H-B Woodlawn students were. Critics scorned the program for its low percentage of minority students, and they branded the school as a "white flight" operation. In 1989, 80% of students at H-B Woodlawn were white, and the school board agreed with the critics who argued that the alternative should have a representative amount of minority students in relation to the percentage in the county.²⁹¹ That year, the board

²⁹⁰Anderson interview, page 50.

²⁹¹H-B Woodlawn student enrollment record, Arlington, Virginia, September 1988.

began to examine H-B Woodlawn's admissions procedure, but no changes were made to the first-come first-served system until the 1991-1992 school year.

In the late eighties, student enrollment at the elementary school level was down, and the school board was in the midst of restructuring the county's intermediate schools (grades 7 & 8) when complaints about H-B Woodlawn's admissions procedure began to surface. The board's plans to convert the intermediate schools into middle schools that would include the sixth grade, took precedence over student admissions at the alternative. Planning the conversion was complete by the end of the 1989-1990 school year, and in the Fall of 1990, the sixth grade was added to all middle schools including H-B Woodlawn, which then became an alternative for grades 6-12. The addition was an adjustment, but it was not nearly as controversial as the school board's decision to impose a lottery system for admission to the alternative which began the following school year.

In November, 1991, H-B Woodlawn held its first ever double-blind lottery. Anyone interested in attending the school's sixth grade class the upcoming academic year submitted an application to the school office before the November deadline. That year, 116 student applications were received for the 70 sixth grade spaces. All application forms were placed in a box, on a table, in front of principal, Ray Anderson. At another table ten feet away, Mary McBride, the assistant principal, sat in front of a box with 116 three by five notecards, numbered 1-116. The contents of both boxes were shuffled, and as Anderson randomly selected a student application, McBride blindly chose a three by five notecard. The application was matched with number on the notecard, and the process continued until each application had been assigned a number.

Applications numbered 1-50 were automatically offered admission to

H-B Woodlawn for the following school year regardless of the applicant's ethnicity. The remaining 20 spaces were subject to the school board's "ethnicity clause" which stipulates that the Superintendent of Arlington Public Schools and Ray Anderson use the remaining spaces (in 1991, applications numbered 51-116) to ensure an ethnically balanced student body.²⁹² This meant that if student application #51 was a Caucasian child, he/she might be bumped any number of spaces depending on the racial balance of the first fifty applications selected from the lottery. The sixth grade class that entered H-B Woodlawn in the Fall of 1992 was ethnically balanced, and each sixth grade class since that year has been.²⁹³ The lottery did satisfy critics of the program's admissions procedure, however, the new admissions policy sparked controversy within the H-B Woodlawn community, as well as those applicants who were not admitted.

Students, teachers, and parents have agreed that the program was too homogenous, yet they have never believed that the school board's stipulated lottery is the solution to the problem of achieving and maintaining an ethnically balanced student body. "The lottery system made it too easy for anyone to register for the program, and the selection process does not screen families to make sure that a) the child wants to go the alternative, b) the parents really want their children to attend the school, and c) that both the children and their parents are interested in H-B Woodlawn because it is an alternative educational environment."²⁹⁴ The school board has does agree with this argument, and several proposals that would replace the lottery system are presently under examination. In the meantime, student

²⁹²The Ethnicity Clause to the Lottery stipulates that no more than 52% of the H-B Woodlawn student population can be white, and at least 48% must be an ethnic minority.

²⁹³A similar procedure does exist for the entering ninth grade class, however, given the limited number of student spaces for that year no more than fifteen students have ever been admitted off of the ninth grade lottery.

²⁹⁴Underground Student Handbook, published by Warren Overholt, page 6.

H-B Woodlawn for the following school year regardless of the applicant's ethnicity. The remaining 20 spaces were subject to the school board's "ethnicity clause" which stipulates that the Superintendent of Arlington Public Schools and Ray Anderson use the remaining spaces (in 1991, applications numbered 51-116) to ensure an ethnically balanced student body.²⁹² This meant that if student application #51 was a Caucasian child, he/she might be bumped any number of spaces depending on the racial balance of the first fifty applications selected from the lottery. The sixth grade class that entered H-B Woodlawn in the Fall of 1992 was ethnically balanced, and each sixth grade class since that year has been.²⁹³ The lottery did satisfy critics of the program's admissions procedure, however, the new admissions policy sparked controversy within the H-B Woodlawn community, as well as those applicants who were not admitted.

Students, teachers, and parents have agreed that the program was too homogenous, yet they have never believed that the school board's stipulated lottery is the solution to the problem of achieving and maintaining an ethnically balanced student body. "The lottery system made it too easy for anyone to register for the program, and the selection process does not screen families to make sure that a) the child wants to go the alternative, b) the parents really want their children to attend the school, and c) that both the children and their parents are interested in H-B Woodlawn because it is an alternative educational environment."²⁹⁴ The school board has does agree with this argument, and several proposals that would replace the lottery system are presently under examination. In the meantime, student

²⁹²The Ethnicity Clause to the Lottery stipulates that no more than 52% of the H-B Woodlawn student population can be white, and at least 48% must be an ethnic minority.

²⁹³A similar procedure does exist for the entering ninth grade class, however, given the limited number of student spaces for that year no more than fifteen students have ever been admitted off of the ninth grade lottery.

²⁹⁴Underground Student Handbook, published by Warren Overholt, page 6.

applications for H-B Woodlawn continue to increase, the lottery system remains, and the student body continues to diversify.²⁹⁵ .

Though the program's student body has modified H-B Woodlawn's operation over the years, the school has maintained the fundamentals of the Woodlawn Program that was created in the early seventies. The original program was created to meet the changing needs of student in society, and the alternative continues to meet those needs today. Students and teachers are still partners in learning, education is still personalized, and the school atmosphere remains friendly and informal.

Town Meeting continues to set the standard for the sense of equality that permeates all relationships at H-B Woodlawn. Students and teachers continue to maintain informal relationships, and students often spend their free time talking with teachers on any number of different topics. Each teacher is still an advisor to a group of students, and it is still his/her job to provide academic and personal guidance to those children. Occasionally the groups organize "TA activities [which] range from cookies and milk, to TA softball competition, to a full-fledged week-end beach trip."²⁹⁶ H-B Woodlawn has also maintained its informal graduation ceremony, to which both students and teachers continue to contribute. For twenty-five years all members of the school community have worked together towards equality in life and learning; the school is like one big family.

On June 12, 1996, H-B Woodlawn will graduate its twenty-fifth "experimental" class. The program has offered students of Arlington County, Virginia an alternative to the traditional system of education since Woodlawn first opened its doors in September 1971. Over the years, the program has

²⁹⁵In November 1995, 185 applications were received for the 75 student spaces available in the in-coming sixth grade class. That number is the largest amount applications ever received.

²⁹⁶Underground Student Handbook, published by Warren Overholt, page 13.

changed. Indeed, to endure at the secondary level within the Virginia public school system it has had to. However, the guiding principal of the New School has remained the same, and for a quarter of a century, H-B Woodlawn has encouraged students to accept greater responsibility for their own education. Many students have excelled at the program, and some have failed. Regardless of their transcripts, the value of their participation can be judged as more informative to the students than whether the alternative worked or not. But after twenty-five years of operation, it is hard to say that it has failed.