

Chapter Seven
When Alternatives Collide

Alternative learning was a growing educational trend in the early seventies, but towards the end of the decade the concept lost its popularity, and many alternative and experimental schools folded before they even got off the ground. The alternative schools in Arlington always had a tenuous existence, particularly at the junior high and high school levels. They were small operations with unorthodox teaching methods, and they had an unpopular image in the community. Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston were founded in the early seventies to alleviate student unrest and dissatisfaction in the traditional high school setting, and to provide young people the opportunity to take responsibility for their own education in a relaxed school environment. For their first five years, the alternative programs in Arlington had been allowed to operate virtually free from administrative interference. The liberal county and school boards afforded Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston sufficient autonomy to establish themselves, and Superintendents Robert Chisholm and Larry Cuban, along with Associate Superintendent Harold Wilson, supported the alternative schools and protected them from critics within the county. However, in 1976, the programs were not spared the effects of a decline in the county's student population. At a time when conservatives began to reclaim their seats in Arlington's local government and alternative learning began to fall out of fashion at the national level, the resolve of the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston communities to maintain their programs was challenged.

Entering the 1976-1977 academic year Arlington's overall student population had declined, and once again a strained budget forced the school board to close several small neighborhood elementary and junior high schools. As a result, the school board made several drastic changes: they drafted plans to move ninth grade students into the under-populated high schools, a blueprint to determine intermediate school districts, and a proposal

to merge the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston Programs.²⁴⁶ The Arlington County Public School System was changing to meet the needs of the community, and if the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston Programs were to endure they would have to adapt to meet that change. In September, 1976, Superintendent Larry Cuban notified the two alternative programs of the school board's plans: it was recommended that the programs merge the following fall. The news was unexpected. For years the alternatives had operated free from bureaucratic interference, and then overnight -- the programs were told that they would have to merge, with less than a year to plan.

Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston had established two very different programs, and neither wanted to lose what it had worked so hard to create. Students at Woodlawn led the resistance. They feared their autonomy would be lost to the structure that a school with younger students would need to have. What would happen to Town Meeting if the two programs merged? What would happen to open campus, and who would be the head teacher? Would there even be a head teacher? What if the new program had a principal? The Woodlawn Program was designed to give students greater responsibility for their own education, but seventh graders had not yet reached that level of maturity. A merger of the two programs would jeopardize everything the school had achieved over its first five years. However, pressures to consolidate the schools continued to mount, and in October, the staffs of the two schools met to discuss the possibility of a merger.

Opinions varied. Both school communities understood the board's recommendation. The ninth grade was going to be added to the high schools. The Woodlawn building was not large enough to accommodate the addition of

²⁴⁶Junior high schools which had been grades 7,8, and 9, became intermediate schools with grades 7 & 8. Years later they gained grade 6.

ninth grade students, and the loss of those students would seriously threaten the Hoffman-Boston Program, which had always struggled to maintain its student population. Therefore, it was in the Hoffman-Boston community's best interests to merge. The Woodlawn community felt differently. They had established the first alternative school in the county, and they had made it work. Woodlawn did not have a problem maintaining its student population, it cultivated a comfortable and creative learning environment, and the percentage of graduates who went on to college as well as student test scores proved the program's success. Woodlawn had no loyalty to Hoffman-Boston, and the program had everything to lose and nothing to gain from the merger. Nothing that is, except the opportunity to continue.

A merger seemed inevitable, but there was concern that less than a year of preparation was not enough time to plan. In attempts to reach agreement there were several meetings between students and staff of the two schools and Superintendent Larry Cuban. The ninth grade was not going to move to the high schools until September of 1978, and the alternative programs lobbied to delay the merger until that date. "At a January 1977 public hearing before the school board a group of Woodlawn students spoke so strongly against the September 1977 date for the merger that the Superintendent and the school board reconsidered the proposal and decided to delay the merger to September 1978."²⁴⁷ The board did not consider the postponement a concession. The extra year was to be used to plan the merger of the two existing alternatives to create a new program "rather than the Woodlawn idea of merely 'co-locating' the two programs in the same building."²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷Report of the Hoffman-Boston/Woodlawn Merger Committee, Arlington, Virginia, November 29, 1977, page 3.

²⁴⁸Ibid.

The board's decision brought temporary relief to both the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston communities. Although the people at Woodlawn were still not happy about the fact that the two programs were going to merge, they now had the time to plan a 'New School' that would preserve those elements they valued most.

Preparation for the merger began in April, 1977. For three months meetings of students, teachers, and parents from the two schools were held to create a structure for the Merger Committee which was established in June, it had a total of seven sub-committees. This was not a small operation. There was a Philosophy and Organization Committee (36 members), a Staffing & Curriculum Committee (9 members), a Guidance & Counseling Committee (14 members), a Naming of the School Committee (6 members), a Building Committee (11 members), a Consolidation Committee (11 members), and finally, there was a Preparation of the Report Committee (4 members). Some members were on only one committee, while others were on as many as six.

For months this dedicated group studied all aspects of two schools: philosophy, administration, guidance, grade level organization, curriculum, staffing, the advisor system, and open/closed campus rules. Proposals and counter-proposals for the merger were discussed, and "virtually every configuration imaginable was considered" until the final options were drafted.²⁴⁹ Three times, reports were mailed out to all students, parents, and staff of the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston Programs who attended the different mass meetings on September 15, October 13, and November 15, 1977.

Each proposal of each committee was voted on at the mass meeting. "The balloting procedure used called for successive ballots [from the group] until one proposal received a two-thirds majority, and the proposal with the least

²⁴⁹Ibid., page 5.

votes was dropped."²⁵⁰ There were six proposals for the philosophy statement, and each was discussed and then taken to a vote. Once a proposal received a majority vote, the proposal with the least votes was dropped, and the group repeated the process until only one proposal remained. "It was a tedious process, but it was the most democratic way the Committee had to ensure a new program that was created by both the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston communities."²⁵¹ When a proposal was accepted, a representative from each sub-committee prepared a report for inclusion in the final Merger Report. "These documents were then used as a basis for a formal draft which was reviewed and edited into final form" by the consolidation sub-committee.²⁵²

On November 29, 1979, 'The Report of the Hoffman-Boston/Woodlawn Merger Committee' was delivered to the Arlington County School Board and Superintendent Larry Cuban. The twenty page merger proposal was the result of "six months of intensive concentration and effort on the part of many students, teachers and parents."²⁵³ It was prepared by participants in the educational experiments who were devoted to the concept of an alternative program that would endure Arlington's societal changes. The proposed New School was "not radically different than the two schools being merged."²⁵⁴ The obvious difference was that the merged program would include grades seven through twelve. The school would be divided into three levels: Level I (grades 7-8), Level II (grades 9-10), and Level III (grades 11-12). Level I would function with class structure and individual study plans similar to the Hoffman-Boston Program. Level III would function similar to the Woodlawn Program, with more frequent class meetings and less individualized study

²⁵⁰Ibid., page 3.

²⁵¹Randy McKnight interview.

²⁵²Report of the Hoffman-Boston/Woodlawn Merger Committee, page 4.

²⁵³Ibid.

²⁵⁴Ibid., page 5.

plans: and Level II would combine aspects of the other levels with both class meetings and open lab work. Curriculum at the new school would also combine the courses offered at both Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston. The merger committee adopted the Hoffman-Boston version of the teacher-advisor (TA), but kept the Woodlawn 'outside teacher' system and Town Meeting (TM). The new Town Meeting would advise the new school administration, which would consist of one head teacher, one assistant head teacher, and one business manager. The "process of preparing the merger report gave [participants] deep insight into the workings of the two programs, and a much greater awareness of the part of one school to the operation and purpose of the other."²⁵⁵ The changes to the two programs were subtle on paper, but no one knew if and how they would actually work.

The first three months of the 1977-1978 school year were devoted to the preparation of the Merger Report. The schools continued to operate 'business as usual,' but there was something inevitably different about that academic year. The seniors at Woodlawn would not be affected, and the younger students at Hoffman-Boston were perhaps too young to understand the significance of what was happening. This left Woodlawn's tenth and eleventh grade students and the staffs of the two schools to carry the brunt of the forthcoming merger. The group published flyers to advertise the new program, and word of a New School once again circulated the community.

PRESENTING:

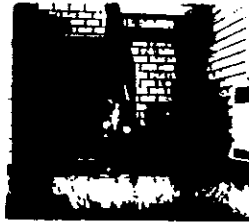
²⁵⁵Ibid., page 5.

A NEW ! SCHOOL !



The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards.
—Aristotle

DO YOU NEED A CHANGE ?



Do the traditional schools give you the freedom to make your own education? At the New School you will learn to take responsibility for your own life. The New School will try to create a small intimate community of students, parents, and others. People learn best in an environment that meets their individual needs. The New School will provide such an environment. By providing a program for personal and academic growth, students will have opportunities to become self-motivated and active members of society.

At the New School you will be responsible for your own education. The school will be run, as much as possible, by the students.

The New School will be a program for grades 7 through 12. It will be a public school that any student can attend. The school will be for people of all ages who work well independently and who can learn in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. It has been created to provide an alternative secondary education in Arlington.

The program at the New School will include a variety of stimulating learning experiences. Classes will be taught in different ways, such as individual contracts, group instruction, independent study, and internships.

The New School will be one school, divided into three levels as a general guideline: I (grades 7-8); II (grades 9-10); and III (grades 11-12).

Level I will have class meetings, individual contracts done in open labs, and a closed campus.

Level II will have class meetings and a combination of work done in open labs and outside school. There will be a partially open campus.

Level III will be similar to a college with class meetings and an open campus where students must manage their time to do outside work.



The New School will have a flexible and unique program. There will be a number of quarterly electives in subjects such as Film History, Life Drawing, Math Culture, and Women in Literature. You will have the opportunity to do independent study in areas of special interest to you. Interested students can bring in outside specialists to teach courses such as Dance, Creative Writing, Asian Studies, and Photography.

Almost all the standard courses will be offered. Students can also participate in special activities and classes in their home school or the Career Center.



Every Student will choose their own teacher-advisor to guide them in their personal and academic progress. The nature of the guidance will vary with the needs of each student. The school's small size will encourage close relationships between teachers and students. Career and higher education planning will be performed by teachers with special skills in these areas.

For two months the programs awaited the board's response to the merger report. The Hoffman-Boston staff was certainly more optimistic than their Woodlawn counterparts. Margery Edson and a small group of teachers visited Woodlawn several times during the course of the year to initiate candid discussions of the merger. Their presence was not welcomed. Though the visitors were not refused a forum to voice their concerns, 'therapeutic' discussions never ensued. It was a time of uncertainty. The program would continue in Arlington but no one was quite sure of the format the new school would take. How many concessions would each side have to make, and what exactly would be lost in the process? Would the school board approve the merger report, and even then, could the programs endure a merger? Ray Anderson and Mary Flynn once had a "heated argument in the parking lot of Hoffman-Boston over the freedoms that Woodlawn students would have to concede when sharing a building with seventh graders."²⁵⁶ There was an inevitable clash of ideologies which occasionally flared up. The groups often

²⁵⁶Anderson interview, page 47.

said that they "were trying to mix apples and oranges, and all they were getting was bruised fruit."²⁵⁷

On January 3, 1978, Superintendent Cuban approved the Report of the Hoffman-Boston/Woodlawn Merger Committee with one major adjustment. Town Meeting was to be "made advisory to a principal/head teacher," and a true administrator (principal/head teacher) was to govern the merged program. It was final. The two programs were going to merge.

The new school was assigned to the Stratford building, and by the end of February, Margery Edson was appointed head teacher of the program, while Ray Anderson was chosen to fill assistant head teacher position. "Officially Margery had experience as a school principal, and in the eyes of the county administrators that made her the more qualified candidate."²⁵⁸ With those positions filled, all parties felt confident that the new alternative would continue to operate under capable supervision, and the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston communities prepared to close the doors on their respective programs.

There was a mixed sense of loss, optimism, indifference, and foreboding at the two schools as the 1977-1978 school year came to a close. The students and staff at Woodlawn held a funeral for their school, at which they buried a time capsule and read poetry in honor of the program before they left and said good-bye. The Hoffman-Boston community was more optimistic. Margery Edson believed the 1978-1979 school year was "going to be the most exciting year yet in the lives of both Hoffman-Boston and Woodlawn," and ninth grader Lisa Beltz "[couldn't] wait for the joining of the two schools."²⁵⁹ A distinct 'last hurrah' attitude was evident at Hoffman-Boston's last graduation which

²⁵⁷Schroeder interview.

²⁵⁸Mayeux interview.

²⁵⁹Jack Lerner. "Hoffman-Boston Graduation is the School's Last Hurrah." *Arlington News*, Arlington, Virginia, June 22, 1978, page 1.

recapped highlights of each of the plays the staff had put on at years end.²⁶⁰ As always, the ceremony brought laughter and cheer to the students in the audience; however, at this, the school's final graduation, that joy was also accompanied by a few tears.

The merger marks a turning point in the history of alternative education Arlington. In the early seventies the Woodlawn and Hoffman-Boston programs were founded to meet the changing needs of Arlington's students. Over the years the schools continued to meet student needs which continued to change. There were compromises and there were trade-offs, but the concessions that the programs endured enabled them to continue. "Both schools believed that their programs were worth preserving no matter what the cost," and the merger is proof of their resolve.

The merger was perhaps the greatest compromise that either the Woodlawn or Hoffman-Boston communities could and would ever make. On September 5, 1978, the new school opened its doors. It was called H-B Woodlawn, and it was an alternative to the traditional system of education in Arlington.

²⁶⁰Ibid., page 8.