

Chapter Six
Hoffman-Boston: The Middle Years

THE HOFFMAN-BOSTON COROLLARY

Who is the pupil?
A Child of God, not a tool of the state.
Who is the teacher?
A Guide, not a guard.
Who is the faculty?
A community of scholars, not a union of mechanics.
Who is the principal?
A master of teaching, not a master of teachers.
What is learning?
A journey, not a destination.
What is discovery?
Questioning the answers, not answering the questions.
What is the process?
Discovering ideas, not covering content.
What is the goal?
Open minds, not closed issues.
What is the test?
Being and becoming, not remembering and reviewing.
What is the school?
Whatever we choose to make it.²⁰⁷

If Woodlawn was considered 'Hippie High,' then Hoffman-Boston was definitely 'Hippie Junior High.' Again, there was no dress code or rule prohibiting male students from having long hair, and students were allowed free time during the course of each school day. Teachers did not lecture to note-taking students and students were not shuttled from class to class each hour when a bell rang. Attendance was checked once at the end of each quarter, there were couches in the classrooms, and students played their guitars in the hallway. Given the alternative's free-form structure it was difficult for outsiders, and sometimes even insiders, to recognize that there was a structure. To many the school seemed out of control, and the fact that it was quickly labeled "the weird school, the druggie school, and Hippie Junior High," was therefore not all that surprising.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷Allan A. Glatthorn. "A New Catechism." *Hoffman-Boston Program Yearbook*. Spring 1975, page 20.

²⁰⁸Mary Flynn, interview by Christy Mach, Arlington, Virginia, 13 February 1996.

Students at Hoffman-Boston did not do 'normal' junior high school things like sit at desks all day, study out of textbooks, and play on sports teams in the afternoons. Many of the students went to class no more than four hours a day; they studied at math labs and learning centers, and their afterschool activities tended to stretch their imaginations rather than their quads or hamstrings. However, the school was not a haven for drug-users and near drop-outs as many people claimed. Hoffman-Boston offered students a choice in how and what they studied in a relaxed and personalized atmosphere.

At Hoffman-Boston students had a voice in planning their education. As long as they met all course requirements, students were free to take as many or as few modules as they wanted. The 'mod' schedule from the first year remained the same in succeeding years: 12 modules, each 25 minutes long, with a five minute break in between. Most classes had a "minimum attendance requirement of 6-8 mods a week for credit," but each class had a different system for dividing up class time.²⁰⁹ For example, it was recommended that students schedule "single modules rather than 2 or more consecutive mods" for typing. In science, however, students were required to schedule "at least 2 consecutive mods," with no limit on the number each day.²¹⁰ The program was individualized and self-pacing. Students chose the courses they studied and teachers catered to student interest. Self-pacing allowed the student who excelled in first-year French to continue onto the next level during the same academic year. Similarly, it allowed the student who had problems with geometry the choice "not to finish in June and to pick up where he left off the following September."²¹¹ Students chose the pace at which they studied as well as the courses they scheduled each day.

²⁰⁹Hoffman-Boston Staff, Module Requirement for Courses, September 1973, page 1.

²¹⁰Ibid., page 1-2.

²¹¹Hoffman-Boston Staff, letter to the Arlington County Administration and School Board Members, May 30, 1974.

The amount of freedom students had at the alternative school was significantly different from the other junior highs around the county. Students who wanted to change their schedules daily were allowed to do so, and those who preferred regularity in their day could have that too. At the traditional junior highs, students' schedules were planned for them, but at Hoffman-Boston, "about half of the student's day was set aside for flexible scheduling."²¹² Students spent approximately half of their time in county required courses, but their school experience was spent learning what the student considered to be the better alternative. Students were encouraged to take responsibility for their education. "A child might decide to spend 75 minutes in the science center working on an experiment -- to really work on it and get it done. Then in the afternoon he might spend some time exercising in the gym."²¹³ There were no limits and there were very few rules, and the endless possibilities to create and to invent educational projects produced a "tremendous amount of energy at the school."²¹⁴

An organized activity period, planned by both the student and the staff, was scheduled every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. "The theory was that if teachers offered something interesting students would come."²¹⁵ The activities, or 'happenings' as they were called, took place during regular school hours, and sometimes they were even held on the weekends. Many students decided to join Bobbi Schildt's history class in the teepee that she and one of the other teachers used in their study of Native Americans. Students joined Susan Welsh's science class when the group tried to bake cookies outside using solar ovens. A 'World Food Day' also drew a large crowd of students, teachers, and Hoffman-Boston parents, and one Sunday afternoon "Mary

²¹²Mike Lipske. *Northern Virginia Sun*. "Alternative Junior High Offers 'An Individualistic Approach,'" March 23, 1974.

²¹³Ibid.

²¹⁴Randy McKnight, interview by Christy Mach, 23 February 1996.

²¹⁵Bobbi Schildt, interview by Christy Mach, 20 February 1996.

Flynn organized a bicycle tour of Arlington called tour d'Arlington, patterned after the 2,300 mile tour de France bicycle race."²¹⁶

Students and teachers maintained a level of energy in the classrooms at Hoffman-Boston. The science department directed by Steve Horowitz and Susan Welch, led students in their "quest for scientific knowledge" by offering many "diversified activities including mini-courses such as 'the great outdoors,' 'anatomy and physiology,' 'Man, Myth, and Magic,' 'Kitchen Chemistry,' and 'movement.'"²¹⁷ During their quest the class encountered "stopped up sinks, explosions, fires, loose gerbils, eclipses, flight workshops, plaster casting, plant growing and other generally chaotic activities."²¹⁸ Language arts activities ranged from "a Georgetown scavenger hunt to grammar activities with a world of choices in between. From the 'create' box to the 'making it strange' corner, students learned to explore their creativity and build language skills, while enjoying themselves."²¹⁹ The drama class often played acting pranks on the rest of the school to test their performance abilities in what were classed 'living stage workshops.' "One student pretended that there was a mouse behind a broom in the library, another went to the science lab and pretended to get acid in his eyes, and another group of students staged a fight in front of the school office. Staff members responded to each of the 'workshops,' and the students walked away pleased with their performances."²²⁰ School certainly was not boring at Hoffman-Boston.

One of the more memorable episodes at the school involved a six week mini-course on Brautigan's book *Trout Fishing in America*. The culminating activity in the book involved a scavenger hunt, which Chelle Glassman's

²¹⁶Bart Barnes. "Turned-Off Students Get An Alternative - In The System." *The Washington Post*, June 27, 1974, page F1.

²¹⁷Yearbook Staff. *Hoffman-Boston Program Yearbook*. Spring 1975, page 10.

²¹⁸Ibid.

²¹⁹Ibid., page 18.

²²⁰Mayeux interview.

language arts class decided to organize as an event for the entire school. "Chelly's class organized the whole school - 180 kids - into evenly grouped teams that were each given a list of things to be found in various places throughout the school."²²¹ Just as Don Brandewie walked into the building with the Home Economics Supervisor from the State, the entire school burst out of the cafeteria doors in every possible direction in search of the treasures on their lists. "Don's jaw dropped, the Home Economics Supervisor from the State was shocked, and that was pretty par for the course."²²²

Students who were encouraged to take an active role in their education, also contributed to innovative courses at Hoffman-Boston. One such student-initiated class studied Death as an interdisciplinary mix of English and history. The class read William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* and Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, and complemented the readings with visits to a nearby funeral home and local cemetery. The group "explored feelings, customs, and traditions associated with death."²²³ At the end of the course, a student suggested that everyone write their own obituaries, and the group had a discussion of how they felt about death and what they had learned from the class. At Hoffman-Boston, learning was not limited to textbook study in a classroom setting; students also learned from sharing and analyzing their opinions and feelings too.

Many students who had special needs prospered under the individualized attention their teachers provided them. During its first year of operation, Hoffman-Boston was a dumping ground for 'problem kids' throughout the county. Though that percentage of students did fall over the years, the alternative continued to be sent kids who had problems. "For those

²²¹Ibid.

²²²Flynn interview.

²²³Bart Barnes. "Turned-Off Students Get Alternative - In the System." *The Washington Post*, June 1, 1975, page F1.

students who had been turned off to learning, Hoffman-Boston was a step in the right direction."²²⁴ Jim Schroeder remembers "one student named Richard. He was a very angry kid and teachers had all sorts of meetings to try and figure out what to do with him. Richard had an immediate reaction and distrust of authority, and so the staff decided never to respond to him in an authoritative way. [They] decided to be positive with Richard whenever he misbehaved, and it actually worked."²²⁵ The student was no longer hostile towards his teachers and his behavior at school did improve. The teachers took a genuine interest in their students, and that was perhaps the program's greatest strength.

Teachers worked to create a comfortable and educational atmosphere at Hoffman-Boston, concentrating on their students' emotional as well as academic needs. Teacher-Advisor groups (TAs), Hoffman-Boston's adaptation of a home room, provided a base of support for students who met with their TAs at the beginning of each school day. Each teacher-advisor helped students plan their schedules, charted student progress, and served as a resource scholastically as well as personally.

Students and teachers had unique relationships at the alternative. It was not unusual for students to hug their teachers before they left school at the end of the day. "Foot massages were occasionally exchanged" between students and staff, and teachers took students on "annual ice-cutting ventures up to Vermont for the weekend."²²⁶ Students convinced librarian Judy Lucia to have a "slumber party in her living room one time," and the whole student body once attempted to have a sleep-over at the Hoffman-Boston building.²²⁷ Though the school sleep-over never happened, parents did permit their

²²⁴Schildt interview.

²²⁵Schroeder interview.

²²⁶Schildt interview.

²²⁷Mayeux interview.

children to have a slumber party at the librarian's house and to go on weekend field trips with their teachers. During school days, children planned their own field trips, and parents allowed them to travel, unaccompanied by an adult, to museums and parks all over the metropolitan area. Although this now sounds unsafe to anyone in the Washington D.C. area, "there was not the kind of fear and paranoia at that time that began to surface in the early eighties."²²⁸ The barriers and boundaries between students and teachers were very loosely defined at Hoffman-Boston, because the times allowed them to be. Teachers "treated the kids as equals."²²⁹ Sometimes that meant that teachers were a little naive with regard to the activities they planned with their students outside the classroom. However, the staff "treated students with respect," which alleviated tension and did enhance energy in the classroom.²³⁰

Over the six years its separate operation, the Hoffman-Boston Program struggled to maintain a minimum student population of 180 which the county required for the school to remain open. The school building was isolated from the rest of the county, it required a long bus ride each day to get to school, and many parents questioned the program's ability to academically prepare their children for the demands of high school. Most students who came to Hoffman-Boston had attended Drew Elementary, and for them "it was a natural progressive step" to go from one alternative to the other.²³¹ However, Hoffman-Boston did recruit students outside of Drew. Each year the students and staff organized skits and puppet shows that they put on at elementary schools throughout the county. It was a modest operation, and the group

²²⁸Schildt interview.

²²⁹Schroeder interview.

²³⁰Ibid.

²³¹Mrs. Flanelley, interview by Christy Mach, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1 March 1996.

received modest results, yet "somehow the program always had enough students"²³² to be allowed to continue.

Fortunately, the school administration also supported the creative initiatives of the teachers at Hoffman-Boston. Superintendent Larry Cuban often visited and encouraged student activities. Students set up a factory during their study of the industrial revolution, and "Cuban came over to supervise their work production on sewing machines."²³³ Like Chisholm before him, Superintendent Cuban allowed the alternative program relative autonomy and did not interfere in the creativity of its day-to-day operation.

Similarly, the board allowed the program autonomy in filling any staff vacancies at the school. Interview committees composed of teachers and some students were responsible for interviewing prospective faculty and making a recommendation to the school principal, who then informed the county administration of the group's decision. Bobbi Schildt was "shocked" when she went to Hoffman-Boston for an interview and "found [herself] at the end of a large table that was surrounded by the entire teaching staff."²³⁴ She expected an interview with the principal, and though Brandewie was there, Schildt quickly learned that "the teachers had as much if not more to say about changes in staff at the school."²³⁵ This system, though perhaps difficult for the interviewee, worked well to maintain a teaching staff that was both open to innovation and creativity, and devoted to students and meeting their individual needs. The episode also gives insight into the control the teachers at Hoffman-Boston had over the Program. Don Brandewie handled the administration and let the teachers "do pretty much what they wanted."²³⁶

²³²Mayeux interview.

²³³Schildt interview.

²³⁴Schildt interview.

²³⁵Ibid.

²³⁶Judy Mayeux interview.

It took a special kind of person to make the Hoffman-Boston Program work. During the first years of the program most teachers were voluntary, and they worked hard to develop an alternative program that would endure in Arlington County. In the following years "involuntary transfers had a detrimental effect on both the students and the teachers involved because not all teachers desired nor agreed with the approach to education practiced at Hoffman-Boston."²³⁷ To protect their students and to protect the Hoffman-Boston Program, the staff challenged the administration's assignment of teachers to their school.

In 1974, a county-wide decline in the student population resulted in a reduction in the number of teachers. Though the basic number of positions at Hoffman-Boston remained almost unchanged, the reduction was felt, and the alternative program was threatened by the "possible loss of its faculty" due to county-wide seniority rules. When Hoffman-Boston lost a teacher, the program suffered because "a new teacher had less experience and less knowledge of the Program."²³⁸ This was particularly detrimental because of the individualized and nature of the Program. "For example, self pacing meant that some students did not finish a course in June and therefore picked up where they left off in September. But if there was a different teacher in September, continuity of the learning experience was more difficult to maintain," and that jeopardized the strength of the school.²³⁹ The School Board agreed that involuntary teachers and a high rate of teacher turnover did threaten the innovative program. As a result, Hoffman-Boston was granted a degree of immunity from staff cuts due to the decline in student population in the county.

²³⁷Hoffman-Boston Staff. Letter to the Arlington County Administration and School Board Members, May 30, 1974.

²³⁸Ibid.

²³⁹Ibid.

In the Spring of 1975 Don Brandewie announced his retirement, and the Hoffman-Boston Program faced an uncertain future. The school accomplished everything that it did under his protection from County Administration and the school's constant critics. Don Brandewie allowed the teachers to run the school, and the staff feared that a new principal would infringe their liberties and possibly destroy the program. It was with sadness that Hoffman-Boston said good-bye to Don Brandewie, and with reservations that they welcomed Margery Edson as his replacement.

In the fall of 1975, Margery Edson became the new principal of the Hoffman-Boston Program, as the school began its fourth year of operation. Edson had been a school principal in Arlington and she was known as a progressive liberal educator in the county. She had a good reputation with the County Administration, and her enthusiasm and experience "clearly made her the best candidate for the job."²⁴⁰

Edson was a "micro-manager," and she had her own ideas about how the Program should operate.²⁴¹ However, in its three years of its tenuous existence the school had established itself. Margery Edson therefore encountered "a pretty powerful culture" at Hoffman-Boston, and one that she was not able to change. Occasionally she would make decisions without involving any of the staff. Teachers opposed this, since they were accustomed to their control over the decision-making processes at Hoffman-Boston under Brandewie. Randy McKnight remembers leaving the school building one day and noticing an honor roll posted on the wall. "Hoffman-Boston had never had an honor roll, and [he] went and told Margery that if the school was going to start to have one the staff should have a discussion about it."²⁴² The honor

²⁴⁰McKnight interview.

²⁴¹Schildt interview.

²⁴²McKnight interview.

roll was taken down, and the following day the staff had a discussion about the issue. Never again was there an honor roll at Hoffman-Boston.

Even though Edson had her own ideas about how to run the school, "she never hammered things," and teachers did still have a voice, albeit a more limited one.²⁴³ Some of the staff resented Edson's authority more than others, but all them were thankful for her good intentions and efforts to continue the Program after Brandewie left. Perhaps the teachers' greatest satisfaction came from knowing that they had created a school that was strong enough to endure change. The Program did not fold when its founding chief administrator left. The teachers learned to share the decision-making process with Edson, and Edson proved herself by picking up where Brandewie left off and continuing to protect the school from its outside critics. The Hoffman-Boston Program endured, and in doing so it continued to offer a creative and caring educational environment that shaped young lives in a positive and productive way.

Every school year ended with an informal graduation ceremony which highlights the community atmosphere at Hoffman-Boston. Students did not walk across a stage, shake a few hands, and receive a symbolic pat on the back before they were sent on their way. Instead the Hoffman-Boston graduation was an informal affair that crystallized the events and personalities of that year. The teachers usually began the show with one of the unofficial school songs, like the H-B version of "Blowin' in the Wind":

How many years can a student exist before he can average a C?
And how many trails can a student endure before he's allowed to be free?
How many times will we think of you all out in re-al-i-i-ty?
The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind."

²⁴³Ibid.

Then, the staff would perform skits with titles such as "Friday Morning Live" and "Saturday Night Fever," and some teachers showcased special talents. Harry Haught's Elvis Presley imitation was always a hit, as was librarian Judy Lucia's baton-twirling exhibition. Finally, each ninth grader was given an uncensored award which allowed the teachers to "get back" at some of their students.²⁴⁴ The 'Best Foot Forward Award' was given to a student who was expelled on the first day of school for smoking an illegal substance, and a T-shirt emblazoned with the names of every seventh grade girl was once given to a lecherous male student.²⁴⁵ It was unorthodox, it was not traditional, it was friendly, it was Hoffman-Boston.

²⁴⁴McKnight interview.

²⁴⁵Jack Lechner. "Hoffman-Boston graduation is the school's last hurrah." *Arlington News*, June 22, 1978, page 8.