CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
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The Opportunity Program
at
Portola Jr. High

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Counseling and Guidance

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Table of Contents

I. Purpose of the Opportunity Program 1-4
II. Procedure for Assignment to the Program 4-5
III. Activities During the Assignment 5
IV. Types of Pupils Assigned and Specific Cases 6-14
V. Student Comment on Teachers 15-18
VI. Suggestions and Goals 19-20
VII. Summary
My experiences in the Opportunity Program at Portola Jr. High began approximately two years ago when I was asked to conduct it for one period. Since I was at that time enrolled in the counseling program at Valley State, I felt it would be good experience. During the one period I was about twenty-five different students as they were assigned to the Opportunity Room. It was the most involving period of the day for me and has become the focal point of my interest at school.

The next year I conducted three periods and presently have two periods of Opportunity Room and two periods in the Guidance Office. I believe the program is very valuable both to the school and to the students. My paper will explain the program, its purposes, the procedures and, most importantly, some information about some of the individuals in it, why they are there, and what value it has for them. I would also like to offer some suggestions for improving the program and perhaps the conditions that necessitate the program.

Opportunity Program is designed for students who are habitually truant or who have behavior problems. The purpose of the assignment in Opportunity is to help resolve the problems and send students back to class, better able to adjust to the classroom situation. It is
hoped that with individual guidance and instruction their attitudes, attendance, achievement and study habits, as well as their behavior, may be improved.

The other purpose of the Opportunity Program is to rid the classroom of those pupils who may be interfering with the educational progress of other members of the class. In this area the Opportunity Program is definitely a success. It does get the problem students out of the classroom. Whether the program accomplishes all the other objectives is debatable; sometimes, with certain students, it seems to work.

Most of the students who come to Opportunity are sent by one of the vice-principals after several teacher referrals. These students usually have discipline problems. They are the ones who are interested in interfering with the classroom procedures because of talking or other general disturbance. In the two periods of Opportunity I now have there are nine students, four in one period and five in the other. All but two are there because of class disturbance. One boy complained about each assignment and refused to work without first making a great deal of noise. One girl made an obscene gesture to the teacher because the teacher was critical of her. One boy clowned around in Physical Education and made fun of other boys who were not very skilled. The others
caused general disruptions like throwing papers, hitting other students, or just talking too much.

Two of the students in there now are there because of emotional rather than behavioral problems. One boy has an I.Q. of 135 and does nothing in his English class. He will neither write nor talk during discussions nor contribute much at all. He is extremely shy and does not relate to others. He loves mathematics, though, and will work on his algebra all period. When someone in Opportunity talks to him he answers very quietly and his speech is slurred. Sometimes he just turns his head aside.

The other boy is not quite as shy: in fact, he can be very outgoing with certain other students. He is on the opposite end of the scale intellectually and should probably be in an EH program, if there was one. Because of his lack of success he often avoids going to class at all. Even though Opportunity Program was not designed for either type of pupil, I feel it is useful here, too, because both do get accepting, personal attention.

Most likely a student who is so much of a discipline problem that he is often referred to the vice-principal, or the pupil who is emotionally or socially disturbed may need some help in a subject.
Sometimes a pupil may be referred to me simply because he needs this kind of individual help.

The procedure for assigning a pupil to the Opportunity Program is simple at Portola. At some other schools more people are involved in this decision. Here, the assignment may be suggested originally by the teacher or may be done solely by the vice-principal. Either way the decision is the responsibility of the vice-principal, the assumption being that he or she knows the whole child and how that child is in other classes as well as at home.

Once the decision has been made to assign a pupil to Opportunity, the parent is notified either by phone or letter. A transfer is made out by the vice-principal and both the referring teacher and I sign it. The pupil reports to me in Opportunity Room for a minimum of ten days during that one period. Of course, in the case of a few students, more than one teacher has made a referral to the Opportunity Program.

I then immediately request assignments from the referring teacher or teachers in an effort to help the pupil keep up with class. Occasionally I serve as a tutor as well as a counselor. My main function, though, is to get to know the pupil and perhaps understand why he is not adjusting to the school. This is the really interesting part because so often I can see not only why
he is a disturbance, but why I feel he has a right to be.

There are few rules that have to be followed in the Opportunity Room. The students need to report on time and stay in the room unless we all go outside or unless I feel they can leave without disturbing another class. I try to encourage them to work on their assignments, but they are under no pressure to do so. My feeling is that it should be different from their other classes and a comfortable, non-threatening place to be.

Our main activity is talking to each other, about whatever the students feel like talking about, so long as no one is being bothered. We have a radio, a television set, a record player, games and a great machine called the Messenger, which plays cassettes and film strips. The students are free to use any of the equipment whenever they wish.

Many students, after their ten day assignment, return to class and function there quite well. In fact, so far this year only two students out of 43 have been referred back to the Opportunity Room from the same teacher. This is not to say that all of their problems were solved, but the time away from class was a good settling period, and if nothing else made them realize that they were missing something by not being in class.
This type of student is usually one who does not really hate school and does care about learning, but has had a problem with one subject or one teacher or just a few bad days.

The others are the real problem students to the school. They are the ones who are hostile, sometimes very unhappy and nearly always hate school. Why they hate school is a question of great interest to me. Sometimes it's because they hate life. Mike is an example of this.

When Mike was seven his father left his mother and nine children. Mike's mother could not support all of them and Mike was given away. He was adopted by an aunt and uncle who have a son of their own. From age seven to fourteen Mike lived with them and never felt loved or a part of the family. He was careful to keep in touch with his mother and at fourteen ran away, but returned. He wants to quit school as soon as he is sixteen so he can return to his mother. To him, school means nothing, so naturally he can't sit still and quietly in class. He needs a place where he can be himself and be accepted.

With Mike, my function as counselor is, I feel, to show him he is worth caring for. I encourage him in activities in which he finds success. Since he is good
in Physical Education and is rather strong, he does some of the moving of equipment and furniture. I have also let him show the others how many push-ups he can do. This brings him a great deal of praise.

Mike likes to sit at my desk and talk to me about his family. I listen a great deal and encourage him to talk. He also asks me questions about my personal life and I answer honestly. He seems to have respect for me and since I respect him, I hope this will foster the idea that others could also respect him.

Ted is in the Opportunity Room the second time from the same teacher because he says he hates her. He is a very bright boy and wants to know the purpose of everything, and if he doesn't like what's being done he says so. He is a serious student and doesn't have the same problems in other classes. Opportunity Room gives him a chance to "blow off steam." He is not pressured to work and often does nothing constructive during the period, but he does keep up with his class on his own.

Counseling Ted is different from counseling Mike. Ted is already interested in school and has found success. He comes from a family which is close and caring. When he talks about the things he dislikes in school, such as not having the freedom to roam the campus and not being allowed to talk back to teachers, I express an
understanding of his frustration and without arguing about it give him reasons for the rules. He is able to discuss these rules with me without hostility. I am able to communicate with him because I do not react to his complaints as have other adults. He feels I do understand his side even though I don't always agree with his way of handling the frustration. We talk about the alternatives to disrupting class when frustrations arise. For instance, I believe that now he can see why his regular teacher would react defensively to his outbursts of criticism in class. It is likely that when he returns to class, he will see that teacher as a human being with feelings like his and like mine, which will enable him to choose a more acceptable way of stating his opinion.

Steve is in Opportunity Room because he seems to be hyperactive. A couple of years ago, he attended the P.T.A. Guidance Clinic with his parents. Although several tests were given to him, his parents did not follow up on them. After talking to Steve's mother, I think she feels it's useless and has accepted the fact that Steve just will not function acceptably in class. He seems to be in a world of his own and although he is not particularly disruptive, he has not been doing work in his class and it is very difficult to communicate with him. He is, however, very capable, according to his
intelligence and achievement test scores.

Steve seems to have acquired the belief that what he does is of no real consequence. Perhaps this stems from his home life. After talking to his mother and another counselor who is familiar with the family, I feel that Steve, as a middle child, gets little attention. I try to help him realize that who he is and what he does is important to him, to me and to others. When he says something or does something I give him as much positive attention as possible. Since he is good with words and language he will sometimes help others with their work. On some days we watch a word game on television and he is always the leader in guessing the answers. This success seems to have encouraged him to venture into some of his lessons, which he avoided before. This was the original complaint of the referring teacher, that Steve just wouldn't try. I think he will, now.

John is a very angry young man. He talks very loudly and constantly, with a great deal of foul language. He is bitter and hostile, picks fights and makes fun of others. Yet, he is extremely bright and can be enjoyably witty. In fact, I enjoy talking to him; he seems to feel free to say anything to me. I have not as yet discovered why he is so uncooperative and bitter. He is someone with whom I would like to work to try and understand his
unhappiness. He has been in the Opportunity Room twice this semester from two different classes. The only way I know how to help him is to continue having a good relationship with him.

I give John a great deal of freedom. He can say and do almost anything with the exception of something which will hurt someone else. He is the present leader of the group of students in the Opportunity Room that period. He sometimes bullies them and tells them what to do. They are somewhat frightened of him and usually do as he says. However, he will back down if he feels he is become unpopular with them or with me. If we all react negatively to him, usually by ignoring him, he will calm down. I try, though, to let him act out his hostilities as much as possible.

Last year when John was in the Opportunity Room he was very subdued because he was neither the biggest nor the strongest one there. His behavior is directly related to those around him; it changes when someone to whom he feels inferior is around. I have seen him suddenly become very quiet when a graduate from the school came in to see me.

I see him as a very sensitive boy who needs a great deal of approval. His toughness is his way of getting attention. He shows it only when he can prove
himself superior; he doesn't try if he isn't sure.

In my regular English class, which is a unit of independent reading, John is very shy and quiet. He believes he can neither gain attention through positive participation, nor get approval by misbehaving because most of the students are serious about their work and some are campus leaders. In order to help John see that he can profit from positive participation, I have made a special effort to select books for him to read which I know he will like. This has worked, and he is not only reading enthusiastically, but is trying to get an A in the class and seems to find it rewarding to see this as a good possibility.

One of the boys' favorite activities in Opportunity Room is a game called football which is played with a piece of paper they slide across the table for points. Ted and John are the main competitors, but this game brings out even the shyest ones. I play sometimes, too, and the boys really get excited when I come close to beating them. I think this game, our talking about drugs, school, home, sex, anything -- all contribute to a good positive relationship which many of them take with them when they leave.

Last year Linda came to this school as a ninth grader. She had been truant most of the first semester.
In order to encourage her to come to school without too much pressure, she was assigned to me in the Opportunity Room for her history class. This variation from the usual purpose of the Opportunity Program seemed justified in this case. We did work on her history, as well as her other subjects, but most of the time we talked about her life and why she didn't like to come to school and what she did when she didn't come. We became friends and she never failed to come to that one period of the day, and seldom missed school at all. I feel that having the Opportunity Room as a refuge at school enabled her to attend. She did graduate and was very proud.

Sometimes in a case of school phobia, a student who has one period a day that offers him a chance to discuss his problems, not be pressured and be accepted, will come in. I try to offer, in a case like this, some specific suggestions on how the student can find success in his classes. For instance, we may practice note-taking, outlining, reading or whatever may help. This approach can be rather directive, but it relieves the feeling of hopelessness a student may have. Of course, in some cases the problem is not one of being afraid of school, but one of feeling insecure at home. In this case, I talk to the parents about what can be done at home to help.
There have been a few occasions when role-playing has been an effective method of counseling. This is especially true when there is only one student in the Opportunity Room. Sometimes, however, we do it with a group, usually playing roles of members of a family. Role-playing with Ted was effective when he played teacher and I played his part as the disruptive student. The other members of the class just listened and commented later. I think this helped Ted see how his teacher might feel when he criticized her in class.

Other than the activities that take place in the Opportunity Room, I do a great deal of counseling with parents, teachers, appropriate grade teachers and vice-principals. The referring teacher is usually the first person I consult, as to his feelings about the problems in the classroom. From the grade counselor and the vice-principal I learn about other activities of the student and perhaps other problems. This begins to give me a total picture of the student I'm trying to help. If the student continues to behave inappropriately, I find it useful to arrange a staffing for his teacher, the vice-principal, counselor and parents. We offer each other opinions as to the cause and possible solution to the problem. Sometimes just being aware of the student's life and problems brings about a working change in those
around him and he is treated with more understanding. Sometimes specific suggestions for modifying behavior are offered to the parents or teachers. At times, when nothing else seems to work, the student's schedule is changed, or he may even be sent to another school. Whatever decision is made, it is based on the total communication between everyone involved.

Andrea has been in and out of the Opportunity Room for the last three years. She is bitter, aggressive and can be very cruel to others. Her family is quite wealthy; she is extremely spoiled. She seems to be accustomed to controlling things and brags about what she does and gets away with. She is hard to reason with and is one of the very few I find difficult to like. I don't honestly know if whatever programs are being offered in schools would help her. Like some of the others, I feel her problems are deeper than a change in school environment could help, at least without some other assistance.

With many students, however, I feel there has been a specific relationship with a teacher, or some other negative occurrence which has served to alienate the student from the school. For the past year I have tried to elicit from my Opportunity Room students any such events. I've also gotten some interesting responses from students in the regular classrooms.
One of the repeated offenses of teachers seems to be in embarrassing students. This is done in a number of ways. The most common way is to read test scores aloud; this, of course, really hurts those with low grades and discourages them from trying harder. Teachers seem to feel that embarrassing the students will encourage them to change. It doesn't. Some students are embarrassed when asking a question in class and they are made to feel stupid. Sometimes they are even called stupid. I have also heard some teachers (only one or two that I know of) make fun of the physical appearance of a student, especially if he is fat.

Sometimes a teacher's hasty remarks and insensitive attitude cause some real hurt feelings that last. One girl was told not to use the mimeograph machine. She was not told why, but she saw others using it and felt very rejected. In Shop, one boy was told to throw the pencil holder he had made into the trash can. This made him hate teachers for awhile.

A girl whose name is toward the end of the alphabet asked to sit up front and was told by the teacher the computer put her in the back and that's where she should stay. This same teacher, when disappointed in test results, said he didn't care how the students did or if they failed as long as he got his salary.
Several students have told me of incidents of physical punishment administered by teachers. They may sometimes come in the form of pulling hair, a pinch, a hit in the back or a kick. One boy told me about a teacher stepping on his foot as hard as she could because he kept putting his feet on the desk in front of him. I have heard about this particular teacher from several others, so I do believe him. When an incident like this happens to a student, he is usually very shocked by it and loses all respect for the teacher. Many of the students have said they realize the teacher is taking out her own frustration on them.

Another common complaint of the students is that teachers won't help them enough. They do their teaching and they know their material but they don't explain enough. They won't really put themselves out because they don't really care. Students also hate the idea of being given a book and being told to read it and answer the questions. Most of them would want to learn if they weren't bored, uncomfortable or resentful.

Being accused falsely hurts a great deal. I've had many students come to see me because of this. Sometimes the accusation is not false, but it's the way it's done that hurts, as in the case of Debbie. She told me about an incident in grade school when she was at the
blackboard and looked at the work of the girl next to her. The teacher ran up and slapped her across the arm. She said it didn't hurt much but that it frightened and embarrassed her so much that she didn't want to return to school. She cried for a long time and had trouble attending classes the whole year. She eventually was put back a grade. She blames that on the one incident and has felt very bitter towards teachers since then. In her case she probably did cheat but the cheating was not nearly as harmful as the way it was handled. In many cases a student is accused of cheating when he wasn't, or given an unsatisfactory mark when he wasn't the one talking. This type of thing adds to the already present feeling in many students of being picked on. I try to help them understand that teachers are human and make mistakes, but when they feel they've been treated unfairly, it doesn't help much. Besides, how can they see teachers as human when so many of them don't seem to be?

This coldness on the part of teachers is another problem. Students need to feel warm and relaxed. They want to see the teacher as a real person and to know something about him as a person. They can accept a great deal, even a bad mood or a mistake, if the teacher will give something of himself, something to which the student can relate or with which he can identify.
There are many more specific incidents that have been related to me by the students, incidents that have helped create negative feelings toward a teacher, teachers in general, school or sometimes the whole system. The above-mentioned incidents, or ones similar in nature, are the most frequent offenses by teachers. If teachers could realize what their influence can be and if they cared, there would be little need for the Opportunity Program. This is not to say that there are no caring teachers; there are a great many fantastic human beings in teaching, but I am concentrating on the ones who help cause the problems.

Sometimes if a student comes to me in the Opportunity Room with this kind of incident behind him, it helps just to have a positive, accepting relationship with another teacher or adult. Sometimes a student is so bitter and feels the world is so against him that I can do little to change that attitude. As I've mentioned before, sometimes the problems are not related to anything in the school at all and school is just another frustrating place to be. With other students the problem is not a general negative attitude but is specific to one class. In any case, they are in Opportunity Room because they were not getting along in their regular classes.
To get along in their regular classes is sometimes not an easy task. The fault certainly lies with the student sometimes, but often it lies with the teacher or with the system itself. The purpose of this paper is not to suggest ways to improve the school system, but I see the necessity of the Opportunity Program as a sign of inadequacy on the part of the system. It is inadequate in its personnel, in the case of some teachers and administrators, and in its priorities, specifically the one that sets teaching a subject above helping students adjust to themselves and others. Many schools are recognizing the need to help students adjust to growing up and to their problems. Rap Rooms are emerging and some teachers and counselors in schools are having group sessions with certain classes or certain students. This is how I see the Opportunity Program: not as a punishment, but as a problem solving effort.

The Opportunity Program at Portola is not unique in its operation, in that it follows the guidelines set down by the school district. Other schools function somewhat differently, though, in their method of assignment and perhaps in their philosophies. Rather than have a student for one period a day for ten days, another possibility is to have him for half a day for a semester along with six or eight others, perhaps the worst students in the school. This would allow these students to be a
group, to do things away from the school and to have a chance to find some positive feelings that they obviously haven't found in the regular school program.

Whatever particular procedure is followed in the Opportunity Program, I feel it should provide for the student a warm feeling of acceptance that perhaps he doesn't get anywhere else. The goal is that he will take this feeling with him when he returns to the regular program and be able to function acceptably in it.
Summary

The purpose of the Opportunity Program is to provide individual attention for pupils on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. It is a counseling center for students who are causing problems in their regular classes. As the Opportunity teacher, I also sometimes serve as a tutor to those whose problem is academic. Another purpose of the Opportunity Program is to aid in the smooth running of the classroom by ridding it of students who have discipline problems. My job is to try to improve achievement, attitudes and behavior of the students so that they may return to their regular classes and function acceptably.

The assignment to the Opportunity Program is made by one of the vice-principals, usually after several referrals by a teacher or upon the suggestion of the teacher. The assignment is for a minimum of ten days. During the ten day period I encourage the student to keep up the work in his class, but that is not the main activity. Our main activity is talking about whatever is on their minds. Other activities include playing games, listening to the radio or record player, or watching filmstrips or television.

Of primary interest to me is the reason or reasons
why students do not function acceptably in their classes and why so many of them hate school. Some specific cases and some individual comments from students regarding certain incidents which have occurred between themselves and teachers indicate such teacher offenses as embarrassing them, not explaining things, being too quick to accuse, seeming inhuman -- have helped create negative attitudes toward school.

Opportunity Program is an effort to replace some of these negative feelings with positive ones through providing an accepting environment.