

CHAPTER II

WRITING THE PROPOSAL: January - June, 1971

It did not take long for an in-house group to put together a letter of interest to Experimental Schools. Both Associate Superintendents worked on it, as did James Kent, from Marshall-University High School. With suggestions from specialist departments, such as evaluation and the curriculum consultants, they could present the essentials of a purposeful idea and strong potential, without pre-empting the planning which would design the project. The idea was that every student and family should have a true choice among styles of education. The potential was in the Southeast schools and community, and in an array of promising practices ready to be combined in new programs.

Well before the January 30 deadline, John Davis signed the letter and mailed it to Binswanger. From 489 applications, a selection committee picked Minneapolis and seven others for 60-day planning grants. Detailed proposals were due by mid-April. Before mid-February, work must begin in earnest.

All had agreed that if a proposal was to be written, Jim Kent would head up the process. Optimistic for the best, he had already begun garnering ideas from small neighborhood meetings in Southeast. With definite good news from Washington, he set up shop in available space at Tuttle school. Coming with him to help was Betty Jo Zander, who had just quit as administrative assistant in charge of Peik Hall at Marshall-U.

A Process: Everyone Can Win

Kent's priority was to enlist community involvement in shaping a proposal. That accorded with his own values, and was one of Experimental Schools' criteria as well. Further, even if not funded, a plan for change that came from people in the schools would fuel the local process of change, in any event.

First and foremost, therefore, Kent went to Southeast parents, their principals, and any teachers who wanted to help. Word had spread fast enough that a planning grant was in hand, by which large dreams might win large rewards. When Kent publicized that there would be weekly open meetings, people willingly came by the dozens. It was a sort of Saturday-morning market place of ideas, supplied by a growing number of smaller groups who met afternoons and evenings to put their particular proposals on paper. The elementary principals, some teachers from all schools, and a few high school students joined in, on their own time. Three parents were hired for community liaison. In short order some 30 diverse people were giving substantial time, and 13 of those were a writing team to draft sections of the full proposal. Top management downtown kept hands off. Except when asked for technical or tactical help, with matters like population data or budget figures, the central bureaucracy was not involved.

From very early it was clear in all these meetings that Experimental Schools offered a change for almost everyone to win something. It was also possible that new programs would attract new students from across the city. If so, Experimental Schools might end the danger, posed by long-term declining enrollments, of Southeast losing Marshall-U or an elementary school. The purpose of the community process was not to decide on Southeast's single best way, but to see a spectrum of distinct options within

which most families could recognize their own values. Once accepted that there could be genuine alternatives -- equally legitimized, equally funded, equally accessible -- no one need attack one idea in order to advocate another. Each school of thought (and each thought of school, one might say) could gain energy for its own development, because none was needed to discredit someone else's. Except for an inevitable few to whom attacking and discrediting were values in themselves, people in Southeast understood that right away.

Elementary: Not So Hard

At elementary level it really was not difficult to act on the understanding. Immediately, parents began to convene on the basis of their values for their own children's schooling, rather than by attendance area or neighborhood. Traditionalists from all buildings knew what they liked, and had a chance now to make it better. Parents for Open Classrooms were far along toward defining what they wanted, and now might imagine having it all together under one roof. The continuous progress principal and teachers were sought out by new parents who liked that emphasis, and left alone by old ones who did not. If possible, everyone preferred that people more or less like-minded should have a whole building to themselves. Because they preferred that, and because the number of buildings was finite, the groups successfully resisted sectarian splintering. No Montessori wing, ITA segment, or operant conditioning module was seriously considered. The time pressure helped, too. Jim Kent's determination was firm that a clearly structured, readily understandable, probably fundable, and administratively feasible document would be delivered in Washington by April 10.

Quite quickly then, there was broad consensus on the outline and

placement of a three-part elementary program. There would be an improved and improving traditional school, called Contemporary. It would be at Tuttle, where present teachers and a parent majority leaned in the traditional direction. It seemed to fit with the flavor of the neighborhood.

There would be an Open school at Marcy. Several strong parent advocates came from that neighborhood. Some Marcy teachers were already moving in the open direction.

Pratt-Motley would be the Continuous Progress school. It was already begun. Willing staff were experienced or being trained. It was professionally planned to meet the necessities of its divided neighborhoods.

All three attendance areas, however, would now become one. Any K-6 child could attend any of the alternatives as a matter of right. Criss-crossing bus service would be built into the proposal. Actual enrollments in the three would be determined entirely by family choice. With this much clear, writing committees for each elementary alternative could move ahead, setting forth rationale, spelling out promising practices to be combined in the program, suggesting positions and materials they would like included in the budget.

Secondary: Not So Easy

By contrast with elementary planning, finding agreement on form and content for secondary options was a snarl of difficulties. The background sketched in Chapter I suggests several reasons why: the age-range and extreme diversity of a 1,200-member student body; the history and organization of Marshall-University High School; faculty discouragement with the results of merger; the mood of the times. Mingled with these were some important accidents and conflicting perspectives of personal position. All told, it was virtually impossible to get synoptic agreement

on the job to be done. Instead of people and ideas being able to move in parallel, and develop their own strong agendas, as in elementary, at secondary level they kept colliding. They tended to neutralize each other's momentum. As a result, no crisp pattern of necessities or possibilities was able to emerge. To see what did emerge, we have to review the people and their ideas.

Jim Kent had been director of Marshall-U less than a semester when he took on planning for Experimental Schools. Formally he was still director, the accountable administrator, with title and authority. For day-to-day operations after January, though, he was mostly out of the M-U building. And since day-to-day operation was Marshall-U's pre-occupying real-life agenda at that time, out-of-the-building in many ways meant out-of-the-picture.

Interestingly, one of Kent's major reasons for leaving Marshall-U was much the same as his major reason for coming there in the first place. He was fascinated by the community governance possibilities, as he saw them, of the joint policy board. Here, in principle, was a decentralization of control which had happened without political upheaval. By legal contract, approved in the city-wide board, it moved policy responsibility for one high school down toward the neighborhood which that school served. Four of the ten members on the policy board were Marshall-U parents. In a period when dispute over decentralization and community control had verged on open warfare in New York and other urban systems, this was a small hopeful development. Perhaps it could be made into a large one. "That's why I came to Marshall-U," says Kent; "I had read the contract, and thought something could be done." In January of 1971 he had also talked with Binswanger, and knew that evaluation of governance changes

was an Experimental Schools priority.

Helping Kent as staff for the Southeast planning process was another administrator who had just left Marshall-U. Betty Jo Zander's departure had been rather more definitive, not to say emphatic, than the director's. It was indirectly, but significantly, related to Experimental Schools. She was administrative assistant, in charge of Peik Hall, and from there co-ordinated the controversial School Without Walls program. When it became clear in January that Kent's time would be more and more pre-empted by the quest for Federal money, Marshall-U's principal (second in authority after Kent) said he must have a full assistant principal to help him run the buildings. He wanted one particular man, too -- a long-time Marshall High biology teacher, of military mind-set and a strong vocation for restoring order in the halls. The principal got his man appointed, and it somehow happened without Zander's hearing the news. Neither substantively nor procedurally was she pleased, when she arrived at a staff meeting one morning and saw the biology man there, now one of the administrators whom she was to assist. She was displeased enough, in fact, that she walked right out, permanently.

After a couple of weeks in limbo, Zander began working with Kent again. Now she, too was away from the day-to-day, yet directly involved with proposing a years-long strategy for schooling Marshall-U's clientele. Her particular interests were junior high or middle school years, and the future for students in School Without Walls.

Meanwhile, back in the principal's office at Marshall-University High was William Phillips. This was his first year, too, after coming up through the Minneapolis ranks and being an assistant principal for junior, high elsewhere in the system. He had his hands full, and then some, just

running the place. Before him there had been two years of what some viewed as near chaos. The pressing need of the day, as he and many others saw it, was for stability, not excitement. The pressing need in planning was for 14 departments and 75 teachers to design and describe departmental (and inter-departmental) course offerings in the just-approved trimester format for next year. Experimental Schools support might help with that, but there was no time -- nor was this a good time -- to think in terms of revamping the whole high-school approach.

Bill Phillips, in short, was a careful, conscientious administrator. In the view of the associate superintendent who assigned him there, that was what Marshall-U needed. Phillips wanted programs clearly defined, set in orderly organizational context, and as nearly as possible surprise-free. Probably because it was none of these, governance by joint policy board, not to mention talk of using it for K-12 decentralization, did not appeal to him. Neither did projects so by-definition unboundaried as School Without Walls. Above his desk he kept a favorite slogan: Innovate, But Take Attendance.

Phillips, not surprisingly, did not spend major time with Kent and Zander in conceiving or writing the secondary part of Minneapolis' proposal. Nor did any except a few of the Marshall-U faculty. Those who did acted not as representatives for the rest, but on their own, with more encouragement from Kent than from their colleagues. Chief among them were the program co-ordinators -- department heads on joint University/Minneapolis appointment -- for math, english, and counseling. They all had promising practices they wanted to push.

Fewer secondary parents than elementary, as may be natural, showed keen interest in planning for their children's school. Almost none of

those who did were from the non-Southeast black families now choosing Marshall-U as an alternative to their neighborhood junior or senior high. The vocal parents from within Southeast tended to be intensely critical, divided into two opposite camps, and not effectively organized. One portion, already mentioned, wanted an end to the laxity that had come, as they saw it, that came with being a large institution in a bureaucratic structure. For them voucher plans sounded good, and some made extravagant claims that a third of Southeast parents were ready to start an alternative of their own.

For the vast majority of students, of course, school was school. It was part of the given order, a stretch of time to be variously tolerated, resisted, enjoyed, hated, dropped out of, or graduated from. Only among a few -- the articulate sort whom school itself would define as most able -- was education a cause for reform. Some of them did join the planning. They were oriented toward better intra-school communication, more student share in making decisions, and some bill-of-rights guarantees. They produced a careful document: "The Running of a School: Student Guidelines for Experimental Schools."

Given the time constraints, what might feasibly emerge from this mix of actors, re-actors, and non-actors? It was clear enough that some structurally clean or conceptually neat avenues to change were closed off from the start. Just the fact that Southeast by itself was the planning base, for example, ruled out proposing Marshall-U as a single-style city-wide alternative high school. Parkway in Philadelphia and Metro in Chicago were well publicized modern models, as were older specialty schools like Music and Arts in New York, or Boston Latin. The St. Paul Open School, K-12, just then being organized, was even closer at hand.

But -- unless the whole Minneapolis secondary system was to be altered at once -- no one of them could now be translated into choices, plural, for Southeast. The idea was not even considered.

An idea that was considered, but only fleetingly, was simply to extend through junior and senior high some analogues to the three options that were coming clear for elementary. Two major obstacles blocked that course. First was a strong fear that to divide Marshall-U vertically into separate educational programs, schools within the school, would be to invite separation by race and class as well. New alternatives might be old tracking system in disguise. Second, it seemed beyond imagining anyway, at least within the few weeks available, that this school's space, time, and personalities could be re-shuffled into three comprehensive but different programs. Only to the simple-minded could such a scheme, in winter 1971, have seemed simple. Kent and his colleagues dropped it, fast.

Looked into much more seriously, especially by Betty Jo Zander, was the idea of creating apart from Marshall-U an alternative to Marshall-U. It was chiefly conceived as a middle school, grades 4- or 5-8, with hopes that program could be designed to hold the 30-plus junior high students already in School Without Walls. Of course the middle school idea presented problems as to what sort of alternative environment it should be, other than in age-range, to the elementary schools and junior high which it would overlap. Reactions in community meetings were not encouraging. People tended either to like or dislike it on an assumption that it would siphon off the "problem" kids. Before that could be seriously addressed, however, it turned out that the hoped-for space in Southeast (a small building, used by a city-wide program for pregnant teen-agers) could not be considered. The separate middle school became moot.

All these ideas that could not happen remained in people's minds to influence the secondary projects that could. What was actually proposed, however, remained a collection of largely individual notions which Kent and the writing team worked hard to present as a cohesive whole. Marshall-University High would be a single school within which individual student programs might range from a regimented series of traditional classes in one building, to a free-form pattern of interdisciplinary involvement all over the city. To increase variety and ventilate the structure, a lot of new initiatives would be encouraged, among staff and students. To stabilize the structure and maintain continuity, much would be left just as it was. In proper proposalese -- "an eclectic curriculum approach...centered around four instructional modes" -- it sounded fine. But the easy language was wrapped around some uneasy bedfellows. Everyone realized high school would be the hardest part of the whole project to make real.

Writers preparing the proposal for Washington, early in April, called the whole Marshall-U section "Secondary School Without Walls." That was meant to suggest, plainly, a liberalizing direction of change. To many Southeast locals, however, it meant delinquent rowdies being tutored from a rented house. "Connotation of name objectionable to community," wrote one parent on her copy of the draft. It was too much. It was relaxation, not reform. Before long, the offending words were dropped.

For a sizeable few, however, the same slogan was not enough. Even if kept, it was rhetoric, not reality. Some just did not believe that M-U's administration and teachers would move that way, no matter what Jim Kent hoped. Others were angry that nothing was now planned for the Glendale students whose need had inspired an actual School Without Walls

in the first place. Since the program was dropped, honesty demanded the name should be too.

Betty Jo Zander felt the way these people did. She was also still convinced that somewhere among the alternatives there needed to be an option clearly outside the main stream, especially the secondary main stream in a comprehensive high school.

So it came about that in the very last pre-deadline days, Zander and a few of the more radical parents, wrote in a fifth component school. Its name would be Free. Its age-range would be K-12. Its size would be 70 or less. Its space would be rented. Its emphasis would be "daily success, self-direction". Its curriculum and organization would be "as students and teachers decide." Beyond that, little was specified. Kent was not enthusiastic, but apparently the Southeast's vocal left would be. Those most disenchanted with existing schools, would have a chance to make their own. At best, the Free School idea added risk-taking pizzaz to the plan as a whole. At worst, Washington could take the blame for saying No. "It seems valid," Kent cautiously wrote in the proposal, "to see whether this option ... is viable."

Wrapping Up The Proposal

With this piece, the program outline and substance of the Southeast proposal were complete. Because of the K-12 limitation, advocates for post-high school and pre-kindergarten programs had to be disappointed. But except for these, virtually all groups had got in much of what they wanted. Even more important, they had made themselves heard in how they wanted it. The organizing principles were clear: distinct alternative programs, and free family choice among them. With three elementary schools,

one far-out K-12, and one many-sided junior/senior high, there were enough options for real selection, and few enough not to be utterly confusing.

A governance section looked toward making the Marshall-University policy board virtually a Southeast community school board. Early plans were laid out for extensive staff development. Specific promising practices, pedagogical and organizational, were clustered throughout the proposal. Careful evaluation was promised, and researchers requested to carry it out. Each school would get extra teachers, aides, equipment, and supplies. There might be some minor building renovation. There would be a special Southeast resource center for environmental studies in science and social studies. There would be extra counseling and social-work services. Children would ride by bus from home to their chosen schools. A project director's office would give overall direction with program budgeting help and a public information center. All in all, the people who had worked so hectically for two months, felt good about what they had produced.

Binswanger's office felt good about it, too, and so did his independent selection panel. While they were reviewing the eight proposals produced by planning grants, Kent and colleagues had plenty of work to keep them busy. Like their counterparts in seven other districts, presumably, they spent a month preparing alternate work plans: one to use if news was good; the other if it was bad. On May 15, finally, Washington let Minneapolis know that Southeast Alternatives, as the proposal was now called, would definitely be funded. By coincidence, Southeast Parents for Open Classrooms had convened a strategy session that very evening. Their agenda was to plan pressure by media and by picketing, if necessary, in case the Open School was turned down, and Minneapolis

chose to forget open classrooms, too. Grassroots politics, of course, gave way that evening to grassroots partying.

With hefty funding assured, it still remained to negotiate exact amounts; to fill in gaps, meet criticisms, and add milestones in the proposal; and to get a formal Board of Education vote on the final version. That took three more weeks of high-pressure work, for not all of Binswanger's questions were minor, and the budget detail was major. In the same three weeks all Southeast families heard again, by mailings and meetings, about their now real options. Before summer vacation began, they checked off their choices and sent them in. Teachers, likewise, had to pick their options -- whether to stay where they were, or ask for transfers; and in either case, whether to sign up for summer staff development. "Choicemaking," as the proposal had promised, was beginning to become "the basic way of school life."

By June 7 the final negotiated document was ready to be laid before the School Board. It spelled out 3.6 million extra Federal dollars to come for Southeast over the next 27 months. It was renewable, at an estimated 2.9 million, for 34 months beyond that. Running to June 1976, that would mean a five-year supplement of more than \$500 per student per year, to get alternatives started. The Board voted unanimously in favor.

A few days before, John Davis had sent Robert Binswanger a copy of the completed proposal as it would be submitted to the Board. "Dear Dr. Binswanger," he wrote, "...We are well on our way." Beneath the superintendent's brief letter, the Federal man typed his own reply: "exciting, promising, and important;" then, "By the way ... you don't have to address me as 'Dr.'! Fondly, 'Bob'." Davis' reply in its entirety, typed beneath Binswanger's note, ran "Dear Bob: You are right! 'John'."

Southeast Alternatives was indeed endowed with more than money.
Mutuality and trust at the top, were part of its underpinnings.