CHAPTER III

Concepts - Values - Goals - Issues:

What The Project Wanted To Stand For

This chapter is largely a digression from narrative. Before plunging ahead with chronology and description, it seems important to explore some ideas which underlay the events.

The exploration will not be neatly schematic. This report, after all, is on the flavor and facts of a project in educational reform. The reform gains ground or is stymied in the untidily political space and time of a big-city school system, not just in thinkers' heads. Even an ideas chapter must be part narrative.

On the other hand, the exploration is more abstract than a recounting of "what happened." It is a look at some dominant concepts which people either imposed on the events, or (depending on your epistemology) derived from them, or (most likely) both. They are concepts which people usually felt committed to -- or felt they ought to feel committed to. That is, they were not only concepts; they were perceived values informing the project. Like all values, those of Southeast Alternatives often-times became slogans, shibboleths, and jargon. That confirms, rather than denies, their importance as values.

The values eventually (after two years, not at the very start) were distilled, formally stated, and frequently placarded as four official fundamental goals of SEA. In this sense, as coming from and accepted by many participants, they are "what the project wanted to stand for."

Recurring disagreement or uncertainty over how to stand for them defined many of the internal issues which made Southeast Alternatives a history, not a blueprint.

The key concepts in these values/goals are the four sub-headings of this chapter. The official goal statements are printed in full at the close of the chapter. At the close of the entire report, it will be time to review them critically again.

"Basic Skills"

By context and common usage one is never in doubt that "basic skills" is essentially synonymous with "the three R's". It carries connotations of academic seriousness and of making sure the kids really do learn something. From the beginning of proposal writing, and in virtually every SEA publication since, it has been felt important to salute this flag. "Certainly schools will continue to be concerned with this area", said the proposal. Southeast Alternatives will "provide a curriculum which helps children master basic skills." In lists of stated SEA goals, this one is always first.

The emphasis is real. All parts of SEA have worked to make sure that their students do not end up too illiterate to apply for jobs or tell a meter from a mile. But the emphasis is also defensive. It seeks to reassure everyone that alternative education does not throw out the baby with the bath. In 1971 there were many who feared it might. In 1976 many still fear that. We read now of some districts offering back-to-the-basics schools as alternatives in themselves.

To the extent it is defensive, however, the basic skills goal is also misleading. It states the obvious as though it were a discovery. SEA proponents, after all, never thought it necessary to promise that they

would "continue to be concerned" about serving school lunches or keeping classrooms warm in winter. Why solemnly swear that the three R's still matter? The reason is that the values of this project would not change school lunches (unfortunately, say students) or re-set thermostats, whereas they might very likely lead to shifts in understanding of what is basic.

In fact, to have schools which embodied such shifts was itself a major value for many in Southeast. The question was not whether children should learn reading and math, or even some geography and science. "Specific skills, intellectual disciplines, and bodies of knowledge" are important, of course. The question was also not whether anyone was opposed to children achieving "positive self-concept," "personal growth," and "self-determination." There would have been more argument -- much more -- over motherhood and apple pie. The question was whether school should nurture affective skills on an equal basis with cognitive, and be equally accountable for doing so. Should they be valued as equally basic?

An unmistakeable bias of the SEA proposal was to answer that question, Yes. Even the Contemporary School was proposed with an affective ration-ale: that many children "feel comfortable" in a traditional cognitive program. Beyond rhetorical bias, one thrust of alternatives was to say that if some families wanted more than the basic skills as usually defined, they should have it. The only reservation was, they could not have less. That was Goal I.

Though that may seem simple enough, basic skills could never remain a simple matter in Southeast Alternatives. An almost inescapable habit is to call students good if they do well in the three R's, and schools

good if their students are good. The common competitive inference is to measure schools against each other by how fast and how visibly their students acquire the basic skills. Hence the familiar apparatus of standardized tests and comparative school scores.

By the very act of offering options among styles of education, SEA was trying to break this habit. The choice of schools, from Contemporary to Free, is a choice among definitions of what makes a school good, and therefore of what makes a good student. The proponents for Southeast's alternatives manifestly did not all agree that speed and success in basic skills were the prime defining characteristic of school quality. Yet they singled out this one characteristic, defensively, as a prime goal for all. It may have been necessary, and perhaps harmless enough at the time. But it also tended to feed the habit which many of them hoped to kick.

When times came for program evaluation and considering test scores, debate about the basics was inevitable.

"Alternative School Styles"

Pledging allegiance to basic skills merely reiterated something SEA had in common with every district in America. Offering "alternative school styles" struck a note of true difference. The point here is not that alternatives differ from each other, but that the concept of alternatives as such is a radical departure in public school organization. To grasp the alternatives concept is crucial for understanding the Minneapolis project.

In essence the concept is simple. Alternatives exist when students or families have free choice among full educational programs that are equally available, different from each other, and physically distinct.

There are important refinements and additions which may go along with this definition, but those are its essentials: free choice by student or family, equal availability, distinctiveness and separate identity of programs, a full curriculum in each program.

That seems straightforward enough, as a definition. It has a practical corollary, however, which proves slow to sink in. It requires one of those small shifts of perspective which decisively change the whole view. It is this: once alternatives exist, there is no longer any "regular" program.

The point is worth putting in italics, because it is too little noticed, and because it is so foreign to the organizational ethos of public school systems. That ethos has grown up around the premise that there is some "one best way" of popular education. At any given time, the good way is offered by competent professionals and adopted by the school board as standard fare for public consumption. Reforms and re-thinking come and go, as to what the standard fare should be. Thus in different periods, or different parts of the country there are varying orthodoxies of curriculum, organization, pedagogy, and even architecture. Likewise, in any one time or place, there may be departures from the standard fare, for special types of students. Thus there have been schools for the gifted, schools for the handicapped, vocational schools, and -- the most notable instance -- schools for the black. But always the norm of the system is regular schools for regular people. If there is anything else, it is offered or imposed for students who fail to fit in the regular pattern.

The alternatives concept, as defined above, undercuts this tradition deeply. It does not picture the system as a matter of a single rule and

possible exceptions to it. There must be two or several educational pro-
grams, each of which is as much the rule as any other. There can never
be just one alternative school. There must be at least two, because they
only came into existence by being alternatives to each other. By defini-
tion, no one school is better in itself than any other. A program only
becomes better than another in being preferred over the other by people
who will use it. It is only the best program for the people who choose
it. The forum for that decision about quality and use is no longer
reserved to professionals and a central board. It is expanded into the
family and community.

Not all this was thought out and written down when SEA began. It
was all there in embryo, nevertheless. The later definition of alternatives,
in fact, was essentially built from a description of Southeast's elemen-
tary program. It was formalized, expanded somewhat, and in the fourth
year of the project adopted as school board policy.

The definition described the program, even when the program was only
a proposal. Every Southeast elementary family would have not only the
possibility of choice among schools, but the necessity. There would be
bus service to and from the four, for every elementary student. The
schools would have different programs, and all four programs would be
described to every family. Being in separate buildings, the programs
would be physically, as well as stylistically, distinct. Each would be
a full program, covering all the basics and then some, operating all
day, every day, all year, K-6. All at once, on opening day in September,
1971, there would no longer be any "regular" elementary program in
Southeast. There would only be alternatives. Neither school board nor
principals nor teachers could say which was "normal" because none was and

all were. Each family must choose for itself.

In such a situation it was critical that the different programs not be taken as competitive with each other in any other arena than that of families' and students' educational values. People in Southeast must come to understand very rapidly that Experimental Schools and Minneapolis were not trying out several types of school in order to measure results at the end and decide which was best. The aim of the program was to commend itself whole. To that extent it was in the self-interest of each component that all should be successful. It was a bit like oligopoly corporations needing to keep the market divided. The point was pedagogical pluralism, not some new monopoly, nor the old one either.

A striking feature of SEA is the seeming ease with which people accepted this premise. One explanation could be that they did not much care -- that school by any other name is still a job, a requirement, a place to send the kids. Attendance patterns and levels of parent loyalty do not support such a theory. More likely is that unremitting public information and the knowledge that every school would get extra benefits neutralized fear of anyone's losing out. Perhaps still more important was the pre-existing high level of interest and sophistication among Southeast families.

In any event, a sense of commonality did develop, among professionals and parents with quite contrasting views of how children should be taught. The process of that happening is closely related to the project's next basic goal.

"Decentralized Governance"

When consumer choice is made central to schooling, as in an alternatives system, it is virtually implicit that the way education is

governed may change. One item in the 1974 formal definition of Minneapolis alternatives attempts to make the implicit explicit. Each true alternative must be "a program involving the community it serves (parents, students, teachers, administrators, and others) in its decision-making and developmental processes: a) in its initial planning stages; b) in its implementation; c) in its evaluation."

That may say a lot, or it may say nothing at all. It contains an infinitely ambiguous phrase, "involving the community." Everything depends on who interprets that phrase, and how. For SEA there were a lot of interpreters available. Sooner or later almost all of them got into the act, somewhere. Even as the proposal was written and funded, some of the key issues they would raise had briefly surfaced, or were easily discernible.

In parent participation the planning-grant period had set high standards and provided a strong start. From each of three neighborhoods a woman with children in the schools had been paid part-time (and had worked more nearly full) to help with organization and writing. By phone, personal recruiting, and flyers sent home from the schcols each Friday, they brought many more parents into the Saturday meetings and planning process. They were articulate and able. Individually, they advocated Contemporary, Open, and Continuous Progress points of view. All three were high school parents, too. They could represent diverse opinions about the concerns at Marshall-U.

In all this there was one glaring gap which no one knew how, or had the skills, to fill. Southeast had four residential areas, not three. The fourth is the Glendale Housing Project. Parents were present and active from Como, Prospect Park, and the University district. They came

for meetings in the Tuttle teachers' lounge, mixed easily, and regrouped according to educational preference. Glendale parents, with rare exception, were not present.

There is no question Glendale people were invited and would have been welcomed. But in practice it was not so easy. No Glendale mother or father was on the community liaison team. No one actually living in Glendale was picking up the phone or dropping by before supper to brainstorm for better schools. From Glendale to Tuttle was a two-bus ride, with poor Saturday service, and in winter besides. Not everyone had a car. Almost everyone had small children. Even if you got there, you knew without asking what you'd probably find: people with more education than you, and better jobs, who'd lived longer in Southeast, in better places, talking about schools their kids were going to do OK in anyway, dropping names and pushing for ideas you didn't know about, volunteering for committees you didn't have time for. Despite the invitations sent home from school, it was not too inviting. Plans were already set to put Motley and Pratt together, anyway. Aside from that, no one had mentioned any special ideas for Glendale kids. There were no big changes in the air for Marshall-U High. All in all, it made more sense to stay home.

So Glendale at the start was not much involved in community involvement. What it intractably comes down to, no doubt, is that the culture of poverty, the culture of professional education reform, and the culture of parents who feel they own their schools simply do not flow together. Federal criteria requiring "a primary target population of low-income children" and "broad participation of the affected community" could not by themselves make it happen. The fact that it did not

happen in Southeast was to have occasional repercussions later, especial-
ly at Free School and Pratt-Motley. But those would not alter the under-
lying reality. Glendale was in SEA, but never of it.

Albeit without Glendale, by the time a proposal was written each
elementary alternative had an active group of committed parents. It
could be safely assumed that they would take the initiative with staff
to help each "develop its own distinct community advisory group." The
forms and flavor would differ, but the energy was tapped for parents to
join with teachers and principals in deciding about programs.

At this point the barely sketched Free School had no staff -- nor
program, nor space. It had only enthusiastic parents, a few disaffected
senior-high students, and more applications than the school was funded
to accept. Immediately, involving the community raised sensitive issues.
In this instance, because Free School wanted maximum autonomy, they were
hard policy questions of real governance, not just advice. Would
parents and students take a direct part in interviewing and hiring
teachers? Could they be responsible for designing a curriculum? Should
they decide an admissions policy?

It was not the last time such questions might come up in SEA. The
proposed "Student Guidelines for Experimental Schools" had already
argued for student vote in curriculum and personnel decisions. That
pre-Free School idea had not survived to the final proposal. But now the
questions were concrete. People sensed that the system's answers would
be looked to as precedents.

Different issues made community involvement an even murkier area at
Marshall-University. All the factors which had hindered cohesive
secondary program planning, conspired against clear participatory govern-

ance, as well. The high-school community -- students, faculty, parents
-- was anything but cohesive; and those who might have led in bringing
it together were too pressed by other priorities. Plainly there would
not be any action in a hurry to strengthen the community role at
secondary level. Before long, that in itself would become an issue.

Meanwhile, the question of what could or could not happen at M-U was
hopelessly entangled with the governance question for SEA as a whole.
The second question was even knottier than the first. Wrapped up in it
were two of those years' most disputed concepts in school policy:
decentralization and community control. An urban district like Minneapolis,
sponsoring a project on the scale of Southeast Alternatives, was bound
to face the question of how these two terms might apply.

Decentralization alone might be merely an administrative matter.
In a significant way, Minneapolis had already moved to create some dis-
persed centers of administrative control. Within the system were two
clusters of schools, called pyramids, which could be interpreted (but
at the time were not) as prototype subdistricts. A north pyramid,
created in 1967, took in Minneapolis' most heavily black neighborhoods.
The south pyramid, new in 1969, covered the Model Cities area and its
concentration of native Americans. In addition to easing communication
and cooperation, part of the pyramid purpose was to improve focus and
coordination in use of Title I funds. Each had its own central office
and K-12 assistant superintendent -- an intervening level between
elementary or secondary principals and the elementary or secondary
associate superintendents downtown. Budget, staff allotments, and some
services were beginning to be managed from the pyramid offices. Pyramid
superintendents sat with city-wide top management on John Davis' staff

cabinet. They met regularly also with their own citizen advisory committees.

Southeast was not a poverty area, and had far fewer schools or students than either pyramid. Nevertheless, Southeast Alternatives was seen from the start as in some sense analogous to the pyramid structure. For some the analogy probably stopped with administrative convenience. A small cluster of schools, with common attendance area, must be closely co-ordinated in using a large supplementary budget. The five year federal program would have a director, with K-12 responsibilities. He should report to the K-6 and 7-12 associate superintendents. Considering the scope and visibility of the project, it made sense that he should join the cabinet, even though not himself an assistant superintendent.

In Jim Kent's mind, the analogy to the pyramids must be pushed further than that. Even in administration, there was more at stake than convenience in running a federal project. There were important principles and practicalities involved.

The principle was one of intending in the SEA project to implant decentralized administration in still another part of the city. It was the further adoption of a promising practice already tried. Not all of Davis' cabinet, however, were as convinced as Kent that this was the pattern Minneapolis should strive for. They were not so ready to generalize from the pyramids' special case.

The practicalities for Kent were that decentralizing from downtown required centralizing in Southeast. To provide overall leadership, he thought the "director of the federal program" should be director of the local programs as well. If so, then building principals would

report to Kent -- about whether to mix kindergarten with 1st-grade, for instance, or whether to require home economics for boys -- then unless they went around him they must not deal with their accustomed associate superintendents. Vice versa would also be true. Decentralization might relieve top administrators of some work, but it would also relieve them of some power. It might simplify a principal's access to a supervisor, but it also subjected that principal to closer control. As the Contemporary School administrator remarked, before a year had passed, "More autonomy for Southeast, means less for Tuttle."

Both the concept and the practicalities of decentralization were surrounded by ambiguity as Southeast Alternatives began. It was nowhere clear that decentralization was an end of the project, as well as a means. Neither bureaucratic report lines nor the flow of local budget and personnel allotments was specified. Only after six months pushing, in January 1972, did Kent get from Davis the momorandum he wanted: Southeast principals would report in all matters directly to the Southeast director; resource allotments for all five schools would go in a lump to the Southeast director, and only thence be parcelled to the principals.

Decentralized administration becomes decentralized governance as it is linked with strong community involvement. Southeast had spirited parent participation in early planning, which would continue on in the elementary schools and Free School. The question now was what ongoing form that participation might take on a project-wide basis, and what powers it might have. People were sure to want something much heftier than a five-school PTA, and Jim Kent agreed. He also thought he saw a way to get it which would keep the University involved, and at the same time clear a path for moving beyond bad memories of merger in the life

of the high school. But here again Kent was pressing a principle and some practicalities which were not immediately persuasive to his colleagues.

In Kent's view, but very likely no one else's, the "noble experiment" of a joint Minneapolis/University policy board for Marshall-U High had been in princple a decentralizing move and a community involvement move together. He regularly cited the policy board in parallel with the pyramids, and quoted its designers' thesis that "the emerging urban school should be a broadly based community agency." Of course the policy board was not a pyramid, and its broad base was mostly in a perceived community of interest between two large institutions, scarcely at all among parents, teachers, and students.

Nevertheless, it was a structure for sharing control, and it did have specific reference to the Southeast attendance area. In 1970-71, as already described, it was floundering for lack of a clear mission and responsibility. Everyone saw a need for agonizing reappraisal. Kent's inspiration was to seize the opportunity. The Marshall-University policy board, he reasoned, might be "reconstituted" as an integral part of the alternatives experiment. It could become a decentralized governance body, not just for high school overview, but for the entire K-12 spectrum.

If that were done, much else might follow. From committed elementary parents the new policy board would pick up a measure of community energy not available before. With a director for SEA, five schools instead of one, a large federal budget, and an experimentation framework, it would have greatly increased potential for both the University's and the school system's interests. "Carefully reviewed

considering the federal grant," policy board membership could become the strong expression of community ownership and professional experience in shaping the schools. Not least, it might bring to bear on the troubled high school itself a more unified and broader coalition of community concern. One could even evisage that eventually federal, university, and school district funds -- all three -- would be transferred directly to this new Southeast entity. The policy board, then, "would determine policies and allocations within the framework of the legal contract." Administrative decentralization and truly strong community involvement would advance in tandem, both theoretically and practically far beyond where they had arrived thus far.

These were heady thoughts. They found expression in the March 30 draft of the Minneapolis proposal due in the Experimental Schools office April 10. University and Minneapolis officials had agreed a week before, that if Southeast was funded, their contract could be redrawn to put the policy board on a K-12 basis. Two weeks later, the new ideas caught Binswanger's interest, too. Was it possible that this prospective project could so directly and ambitiously provide a formal framework for community voice and vote in decentralized governance? That would indeed be more than a novel means to alternatives; it would be a significant end in itself.

But no, it was not possible -- not that easily. Washington's favorable interest in sub-district community governance was met by Minneapolis' higher-level qualms. In particular, John Davis and Nathaniel Ober had many reservations about letting matters move that way.

Ober, associate superintendent for secondary, was just plain opposed to the notion of making over the policy board into a community board.

As he was Minneapolis Schools' chief presence on the policy board, his views carried special weight. Ongoing advisory groups were fine, he thought, but once student/family choice among alternative programs was assured, the need for neighborhood role in running the schools was essentially met. He liked the analogy to a bakery: consumers determine by their purchases what will be offered for sale; they don't need to be in the kitchen or sitting up nights with the baker deciding the flavor of tomorrow's cupcakes. Ober's particular bête noir was the then much discussed voucher plan idea. Imagining a community policy board deciding what alternatives to offer struck him as not much better.

John Davis also was uneasy with how fast and how far Jim Kent's language was leading. Policy, as he would later feel it necessary to emphasize in a special memo, was an exclusive province of the elected citywide school board. Below the school board level there should indeed be much community discussion, participation, and support. But one must never mistake that for a policy function, nor, therefore, for community control. Control belonged at the top. Kent's proposed policy board in Southeast, empowered to "exercise its discretionary authority," would move it too far toward the bottom. It carried overtones of New York's Ocean Hill - Brownsville debacle, every superintendent's bête noir.

A chief reason for Washington wanting to fund the Minneapolis proposal was the possibility, as it seemed, of fashioning a legal decentralized governance group around the Marshall-University joint policy board. Try as he might, though -- even with Binswanger's help -- Kent could not persuade his superiors that their bêtes noirs were really red herrings. In the process of negotiating a final version of the proposal for school board approval, the expansive language of earlier drafts must be con-

siderably toned down. There was careful noting of "legal and fiscal restraints." A reconstituted policy board might emerge as no more than "the model of an advisory body." In any event, discussions of such a complex matter among so many legitimate interests "will be conducted in a prudent manner." It did not sound so promising as before.

Malcolm Moos, President of the University of Minnesota, had contributed a letter with the proposal, assuring that institutions's willingness to recast its relationship with the schools. As these arguments about the policy board went on into fall, one wonders if he and his deans did not wish there could be some more placid way to stay in touch with the schools than through involvement with community involvement. Eventually one would be found.

It took "several months of vigorous discussions" to lay Kent's ideas for the policy board, and the moribund board itself, to rest. Decentralized K-12 governance would have to come as a carefully delimited advisory council to the SEA director, without structural ties to the University, and without intimations of policy power. By winter 1972 it was clear "that neither administrators from the University nor Minneapolis wanted any other type of governance-administration arrangement." There was still the live question, however, whether such a council could win for itself some semblance of the practical influence originally proposed by Kent for a community policy board. It might be possible, and as will be recounted later, it would certainly be tried.

"Comprehensive Change"

Perhaps the most often repeated, probably the most slippery, and certainly the most grandiose of SEA goals is "comprehensive change." Of particular concern here is its slipperiness. That is made worse by

frequent billing of the whole project as not just a straightforward agenda of reform, but as an "experiment" in comprehensive change. Concern is not diminished by remembering Robert Binswanger's assurance that the reformers need not send him only success stories, because Experimental Schools was above all a program of "research."

To understand Southeast Alternatives as a research experiment in comprehensive change requires three assumptions. First, friendly, that the words do mean something. Second, tolerant, that their meaning is neither fixed nor exceedingly precise. Third, critical, that they rightly have different meanings for people in the different contexts of SEA.

The first assumption is simply to warn cynics away. There are some who enjoy dismissing an effort like SEA on grounds that the leopard cannot change its spots. On this view, a bureaucratized top-down school system is bound to remain just that. Overblown promises of change, dressed up in pseudo-scientific jargon, only camouflage what's really happening. The true story of any big system is its own institutional aggrandizement, the safeguarding of jobs, advancement of careers, and preservation of the status quo. Evidence for all these features can be found in this report, to be sure. But name-calling is not analysis, and the question remains: when people in Southeast Alternatives say their project goal is comprehensive change, what do they mean?

The second assumption is to warn away the gullible. There are those who imagine that where heavily rational and scientific language is used, there must be rational and scientific activity going on. "Experiment" has an aura of controlled laboratory settings and detached objectivity. "Research" connotes meticulous design, painstaking collection of data,

and dispassionate inference at the end. In association with these two, "comprehensive change" suggests an engineered variation of institutional components for the sake of more effective functioning. The planned variation is the experiment; the research will tell what happened; and if the results do not satisfy, another variation can be tried. The gullible believe this is the whole story.

As is obvious already, the real world of Southeast Alternatives is a far messier mix of interdependent variables (sometimes very willful) than this tidy scheme could ever contain. If SEA is research and an experiment, dealing with comprehensive change, it is these things in some much more free-wheeling sense than the laboratory language conveys. One suspects, in fact, that the laboratory language is chosen partly because it is respectable, safe, and suitably pious in the church of social scientism. But orthodoxy is not analysis, either, and the question remains: when people in SEA say their project goal is comprehensive change, what do they mean?

The third assumption -- that there are important different meanings of comprehensive change in different SEA contexts -- provides a framework for considering the question. Instead of as a pyramidal organization chart, it helps to consider Minneapolis schools as a universe of nested boxes or concentric spheres. Living in the outermost sphere are students and families. They are the most numerous, and have the most space to move around in. In the center sphere is the office of Experimental Schools, with few people and not much maneuvering room. Between the outer and the inner are spheres called classrooms, schools, the SEA office, and the central administration. The whole conception is one of worlds within worlds. Travel and multiple citizenship are common, but

usually not farther than neighboring and next-neighboring spheres. Each sphere has its own pattern of internal organization and external relations. Students enter the classroom and school-building worlds easily. They have less traffic with the sphere of central administration. Central-office people communicate readily with SEA headquarters, and jump easily beyond that to deal with the buildings. It is rare to find them with students in classrooms, however, and following farther than that is virtually unheard of. For an associate superintendent to ride bikes around the park with random 11-year-olds, or for them to make phone calls with him in his office, requires a far-afield trip.
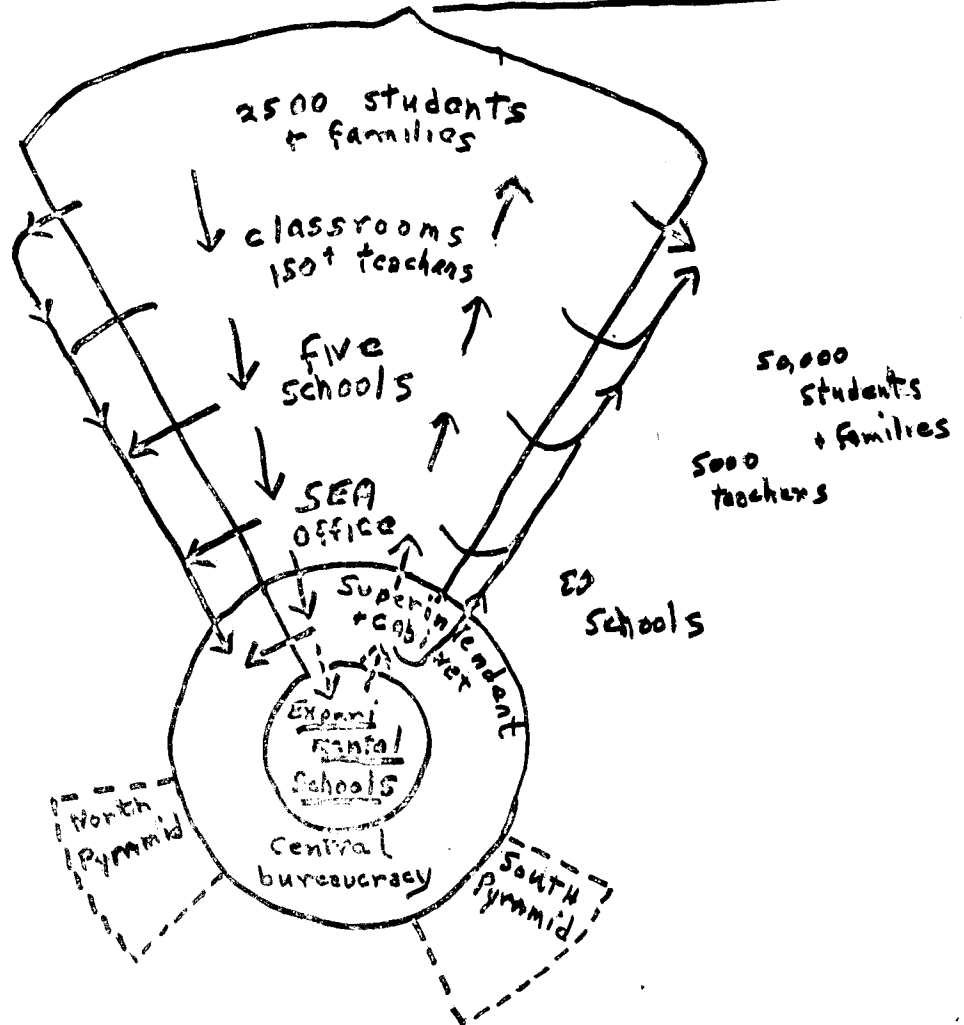
The image of concentric spheres can serve to diagram, over-simply of course, a whole public school system. Southeast Alternatives, however, is only a part of the whole. On the diagram of spheres, then, the students, classrooms, schools, and administration can each only be a sector of its whole sphere in the whole system. Likewise, the schematic must show that initially SEA only engages a portion of top-management's attention, and that only that same portion of top-management is concerned with Experimental Schools.

The image is already too complex to hold in mind. In two dimensions, adding arrows to be explained later, it looks like the drawing, next page.

Now, in this formal education universe of worlds within worlds, what might our slippery terms mean? For these concentric spheres, what is a research experiment in comprehensive change? Since the idea comes from Experimental Schools, with the intent of producing benefits for students and families, let's traverse from the smallest world to the largest.

Inserting themselves temporarily in the center, looking outward,

Southeast Alternatives Sector

2500 students + families

classrooms 150+ teachers

five schools

SEA office

Superintendent + Cabinet

Experimental Schools

Central bureaucracy

50,000 students + families

5000 teachers

50 schools

North Pyramid

South Pyramid

Binswanger and his Washington colleagues wanted to help change spread everywhere, in all the sphere. Needless to say, they had their preferences. Changes which liberalized or loosened up set patterns for students and staff would be favored. But in very large degree all Experimental Schools could really stand for was the presumed positive value of change itself. Their purpose in theory was change for the sake of change, throughout the system. In that quite formal sense, change was to be comprehensive.

To achieve the purpose Experimental Schools relied on one negative assumption and a strategy which was its positive corollary. The assumption (there is much evidence for its truth) has already been mentioned: small isolated, piecemeal changes have no systemic effect; the spheres of the system absorb them like passing showers in the desert, and go on as before. The strategy was implicit, but obvious: get enough locally favored new initiatives started, in enough variety, with enough cohesion among them, on a large enough scale, and over a long enough time that the system as a whole could not possibly ignore or be unaffected by what was happening. Scattered showers make no difference. But a rainy spell, with fertilizer and seed and a county agent, should make the grass grow, bring birds and earthworms, raise the water-table, support crops and farmers, and even lead to irrigation. All that, and the process by which it happened, would be comprehensive change.

Experimental Schools' strategy was also its hypothesis and its experimental method. An important part of both political reality and reform theory for Binswanger was that he could have little control over any spheres outside his own. His office might intervene or influence with counsel and criticism, but beyond helping start up the process he

must be a very passive experimenter. He could not actively control variables nor on his own initiative introduce new reagents. For Experimental Schools, in fact (or at least in theory), it was not even an experimental question whether this or that promising practice, nor this or that combination of practices, "worked". The only question of their experiment was whether many innovations deployed together would provide a critical mass for self sustaining, system reforming change.

That being the case, the only reasonable research task must be to watch carefully what happened, try to trace the strength or weakness of connections among events, make a judgment at some point whether change was comprehensive, and finally a further judgment whether the package of innovations at the start had much, little, or nothing to do with the state of the spheres at the end. Considering the five-year time span, and that all variables were beyond control, it would be remarkable indeed if crisp findings emerged, and still more remarkable if they were other than highly speculative. It is absolutely unimaginable that the hypothesis would be susceptible of either proof or disproof.

Despite the science-tinged rhetoric, it seems, conducting rigorous experiments and recording repeatable results were not very likely the main line of business for Experimental Schools. Promoting and facilitating institutional change was.

Schematically, the arrows in the diagram above suggest ways the strategy for comprehensive change might take effect in Minneapolis. Southeast Alternatives as a whole, including its direct access to top-management, is the seedbed sector. Within Southeast, for several years, extra money from Washington supports a very large increase of activity. The increase occurs in all parts of this section through the spheres of

the school system. It is especially characterized by intensified flows of ideas, information, and influence among all the parts. Arrows on this already crowded diagram show a deceptively simple inward/outward movement of energy, passing equally in both directions across hierarchical boundaries. That is only a very primitive stage of process. As activity increases, boundaries within Southeast will be leap-frogged or bent, sometimes severely. In fact, SEA began just that way. Stepping up communication reduces order and increases energy. Intricate inner loops of interaction will develop, like whirlpools in a stream, which themselves exert change effects for a while, and then fade away. Parents, staff, and students will see each other trying out new roles, and adapt or reject them for themselves. They will compete and compare notes in the use of new resources. Some will find themselves gratified by new rewards.

In all this, new patterns of cooperation and acceptance will emerge, become familiar, and then be counted on to continue. If new vitality is not cancelled out by internal conflict, Southeast will achieve self identity and esprit de corps as a protected sub-system. It will discover a corporate self interest in its own survival, and from that base will begin to foment change outside its sector boundaries. An increasing part of the agenda will be to make the organizational environment more favorable to the organizational oddity. What better way than to shape that environment in SEA's own image?

For systemic reform, this is the crucial enterprise. This is what Washington will be waiting for. Ideas, information, and influence will start to flow sideways from Southeast's homeland, into and through the spheres of the system as a whole. By now the SEA families, classrooms,

schools, administration, and link with top-management will have become a very different entity from what they were (namely, not actually in entity at all) four or so years before. The hard question of all institutional change will come to the fore in a system-wide context: can the new entity be legitimized as rule, rather than exception? or must it lapse back toward status quo ante? Put a slightly different way, will the "large scale experiment" become full-scale policy? From the Experimental Schools point of view that would achieve comprehensive change, the purpose of the project.

But was anything so grand the Minneapolis purpose? This is to ask whether it was Minneapolis policy to approve a project because some time later it would sharply change Minneapolis policy. The question almost answers itself. Beyond approving receipt of the money and recognizing that Southeast people had done a fine job, there was little pre-operational discussion of SEA in the school board. There was none at all (though there were probably some private thoughts) of its potential leverage for changing the system. From the point of view of those wanting change, silence was wise. In a school board election campaign two months after SEA was funded, conservative candidates found that belittling alternative schools won them votes. That must have been code language for showing devotion to the old ways, since at that time alternatives in Minneapolis were scarcely visible. Six months later, however, one board member's trial balloon, in favor of expanding the alternative approach was quickly and easily shot down. The majority view was that schools need offer only the kind of education which the majority wants.

It was true to a degree, then, that the school board did not know what it was doing when it bought into (or was bought into) Southeast Alternatives. If they had, they might not have done it.

That was equally true, if not more so, of the bureaucracy. Four
years later, as he left Minneapolis, John Davis wrote that "the plan"
was to start alternative schools in a "relatively secluded" way, export
their successes to other parts of the city, and finally bring back the
pioneer schools as "an integral part of the school system" again. As a
conceptualization of systemic change process, that translates the implicit
Washington strategy from a language of outside intervention to a language
of inside management. The two are not incompatible. As a management
plan however, comprehensive change was even more secluded than the project
itself. Davis prudently did not bruit it about. At top levels discussion
was brief, oriented toward agreeing on the choice-of-programs idea,
selecting the place, and delegating the responsibility. In the central
service departments it was occasional to the need for quality grants-
manship, therefore technical rather than substantive. Among middle
management outside of Southeast it was a matter of simple announcement
in the elementary and secondary principals groups. Similarly with
teacher organizations, the AFT bargaining agent and NEA affiliate: there
it was considered sufficient to keep the leadership informed (the project
would produce new payroll) and reassured (the alternatives would not
violate any conditions of contract).

So far as most of the system was aware, in short, SEA was not
an entering wedge for comprehensive change. It could more easily be
seen -- and was -- as just a more-than-usually-successful foray into the
federal hunting grounds. Admiration might be mixed here and there with
envy, but need not admit anxiety. And if there were some startling
departures from normal practice, they could be tolerated as "only" an
experiment. Binswanger was right. In school systems, innovation rarely

implied change.

It was a low-profile stance. Later, as we shall see, some Experimental Schools people would interpret this as dire dereliction. But in Minneapolis, at least to start, it was the leadership view that comprehensive change comes best when talked about least.

Except, of course, in the "relatively secluded" sector where the changing was to begin. To, with, by, and among the people of Southeast there was a great deal of talking. Much of it was in terms of comprehensive change, too -- for Southeast, to be carried out by Southeast. Part of the exhilaration which participants felt from the start (and perhaps part of the déjà vu feeling among some at Marshall-U) came from knowing they were part of a process which offered promise beyond their own bailiwick. But most of their energy, perforce, had to go toward fulfilling the promises they were making to themselves. Comprehensive change, project-wide, meant putting in place the K-12 services and connecting apparatus which would provide a chance for five different schools to develop as one cohesive program. The flood of ideas, information, and influences had to be encouraged, and at the same time somehow made manageable. In that context experimentation meant wading into tasks most Southeast people had not performed with their school system, inventing ways to handle them, and if those did not work, trying something else.

At building level, similarly, comprehensive change predominantly meant a trial-and-error shift from what had been toward what was going to be. There were important variations. Marcy and Pratt-Motley each had to undertake major institutional change itself. Existing faculties, working with many new parents, were required to learn new substance and

new style as a group, not just as individuals. The two-page Free

School proposal entailed creating a new institution, not changing an

old one. Even at Tuttle, becoming for the first time an alternative

meant a shift of self-image, an appreciable change of student-body, and

an implied challenge to be the most modern old-fashioned school in the

city. At Marshall-University, on top of everything else, administration

and staff had to weave a web of new relationships, programmatically

in the building, and professionally with new SEA elementary colleagues

outside.

"Where the rubber meets the road," as Tuttle's principal enjoyed

reminding his peers, is in the sphere of teachers and their classroom

students. Here change was expected to be as all-encompassing as any-

where else -- in many instances more so. It was not just concepts which

might be altered radically, but the concrete arrangements of space, time,

people, and things -- for every Southeast teacher and classroom. The

new resources, roles, and rewards of the project came as an especially

demanding offer. Unfamiliar or unheard-of materials and equipment,

which previously could be ignored, must now be chosen or rejected.

Consultants, evaluators, counselors, were standing at the door, waiting

to be used. Non-experts were being recruited as helpful aides and

volunteers, almost before anyone was sure what they should help with.

Teachers must become managers and co-ordinators of many more people

than just their usual complement of children. They had the challenge

of designing new activities and whole new curricula. They might change

the furniture, order up field trips, or buy encyclopedias. Whatever

happened, it would have to be interpreted to parents. Teachers would be

rewarded with power as they sat on committees and councils that made

decisions. They would be praised in print and photo, by an SEA newspaper, as their daily life with students took on new tone. And all the while, of course, they would still be teachers.

Physically and organizationally the perspective and responsibility of a classroom teacher appear narrower than for a principal or project director or superintendent. But precisely because the teacher's realm is smaller, and because all changes in the wider realms imping on this one, classroom change is apt to be more intense and more total than changes in bigger places. By the same token, teachers and students in classrooms have the most opportunity to be truly experimental and to generate useful research findings. That is because they are themselves both subject and object of their own experiments, and the beneficiaries of their own research. How and whether to take systematic and conscious advantage of this opportunity was to become one of SEA's most interesting program questions.

Finally, the intended beneficiaries of all these structures, processes, and people: Southeast students. The aim of comprehensive change through all the concentric spheres of the system, is to produce or support change in the students' formal learning environment -- perhaps by making it very informal. In one way, because of their transiency in any one part of the whole structure, students may have least knowledge of changes over time in that part. In another way, because of their transit through the structure, they may have most experience of its wholeness. In any event, they and their families are the ultimate evaluators of the data (the things given) from comprehensive change. If what happens with these people is deemed good, then what happened five worlds away was good also.

"But how the hell do you tell?" asked another Southeast principal

at the end of a dull meeting; "Count the smiles?" With a touch of

embarassment, he laughed. "Maybe not such a dumb idea."

A lot of SEA's most useful research came as variations on that

not-so-dumb idea.

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Southeast Alternatives Goals

The fundamental SEA Goals are stated in the original SEA
Proposal (I) and in the N.I.E. -- Minneapolis School Board
1973 Scope of Work Contract (II,III,IV) and are as follows:

SEA GOALS

    I. "Providing a curriculum which helps children
       master basic skills...."

   II. "The project will test four alternative school
       styles (K-6) and selected options in schooling
       programs for grades 7-12 articulated upon the
       elementary alternatives."

  III. "The project will test decentralized governance
       with some transfer of decision-making power
       from both the Minneapolis Board of Education
       and the central administration of the Minneapolis
       Public Schools."

  IV. "The project will test comprehensive change
       over a five year period from 6/1/71 - 6/30/76
       combining promising school practices in a
       mutually reinforcing design. Curriculum,
       staff training, administration, teaching
       methods, internal research, and governance
       in SEA make up the main mutually reinforcing
       parts."