

INNOVATIONS TRANSFORM HAMILTON HIGH SCHOOL

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INNOVATIONS TRANSFORM HAMILTON HIGH SCHOOL

BY SKIP FERDERBER
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WEST LOS ANGELES—It was late Friday afternoon, and the high school principal was trying to leave his office to watch the football team play when the swami appeared.

Dressed in a royal blue turban, body shirt, flared pants, sandals and with several rings on his fingers, the bearded man was accompanied by two slack-jawed, long-haired boys and a women's gym teacher.

The swami sat on a conference table and began explaining the benefits of yoga as an answer to student drug addiction.

The principal listened intently, but kept an eye on the wall clock.

The teacher was one of the swami's students.

"Both of these boys were heavily into acid and pot," the swami said, pointing to his two companions who

responded with mesmerized looks. "Yoga got them turned onto themselves. We turn them on with breathing."

The principal nodded quickly, nervously looking at the clock. "Yeah," he said, "we gotta have yoga in our activity period."

"Tension can be released by yoga," the swami intoned. "Once the tension is released, there can be no more room for drugs."

The principal stood up, adjusted his green baseball cap and said, "Yeah, we gotta release some of this tension. Great. Let's teach yoga. Well, gotta run," he said, shaking hands with the swami who nodded knowingly.

"Yoga," the principal said wonderingly under his breath and dashed out the door to the football field just in time to see his team kick off.

A scene from television's "Room 222?"

No, just part of the everyday schedule at Hamilton High School under Paul Schwartz, the 49-year-old principal of what has become one of the most experimental and exciting schools in the Los Angeles system.

Whether it be yoga, mass media, anthropology, or computer math, Schwartz says Hamilton is ready to try anything.

"Why not?" he asked rhetorically. "What are we going to do—hide these kinds of activities from these kids? This is now! We're still using the textbook as a major source of education and we've got a long way to go."

Schwartz, a teacher and administrator for 23 years, wears a green and white booster button in his lapel with the word "PRIDE" superimposed over a big Hamilton "H," a pride which he obviously feels as he talks about the changes in the school.

To keep up with the changes, he moves as fast as his students, perhaps faster. There is always someone at his sleeve—a student asking questions on a campus display, a teacher requesting authorization to buy books for an experimental course.

The accent is on the "yes" at Hamilton.

And Schwartz's metier is involvement—involvement with the students, with the problems, with the myriad problems confronting the high school of the 1970s.

"We've got unlimited dreams," he said. "The only thing stopping us is our imagination."

Under Schwartz, Hamilton has become a Project 18 school, one of 18 designated by the Board of Education as having the flexibility to experiment with classes, curricula and programs.

It also gives the schools local con-

trol over supplies, textbooks and equipment funds.

Project 18 is an outgrowth of the state's Miller Act which broke down the rigidity of scheduling physical education courses and opened the way to innovating class scheduling.

The act said a school must provide an accumulation of 400 minutes of physical education every 10 school days.

Prior to this, physical education classes were scheduled one period a day for a total of about 500 minutes. The new law thus liberated 100 minutes or the equivalent of two full class periods every two weeks for innovative education.

"We researched schools around the state which had implemented the Miller Act," Schwartz said, "and based on that, we presented a package tailored to fit Hamilton's needs.

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PAUL SCHWARTZ
... listening to the swami.
Times photo

Hamilton High School Undergoing Changes

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The result is a cornucopia of traditional and "how" subjects.

Student elective classes now include philosophy, anthropology, mass media, Asian and Afro-American history, modern European history and computer math.

Along with the new courses, Hamilton has adopted a modified class scheduling procedure which allows a student to take fewer classes per day with more time per class, yet gives him an accumulation of hours equal to a student attending class on a regular schedule.

Activity Period

At the end of the regular day, from 2 to 3 p.m., the school has an activity period, a freewheeling combination of subjects which students and faculty members have agreed to set up.

A recent week's activities included workshops on Japanese culture, American Indian society and culture, chamber music, the "Brown Brotherhood" and the Japanese game of "Go."

Another is the newly inaugurated yoga class

which, Schwartz said, attracted 150 students.

Still another experiment is a pilot project set up with the Beverly Hills Bar Assn. and the Langston Law Club, a black law group. Two attorneys, one black and one white, team-teach a course in government twice a week discussing selective service, purchasing and installment buying, civic rights and other subjects.

All this is a far cry from 1969 when Schwartz became principal. The school was rife with racial antagonism, violence and vandalism were on the upswing and extortion among students was common.

With the idea of getting people talking, Schwartz initiated two convocations earlier this year, one for faculty and students, the other for parents.

The ensuing criticisms and suggestions are the basis for many of the changes at Hamilton today, he said.

Examples include drug programs, a rumor clinic, human relations classes, group counseling and rap sessions, more power for student government, more advance planning, more

flexible class scheduling, and more intimate classroom arrangements.

The campus today reflects a happier, healthier and more involved situation for students and faculty alike, Schwartz feels. He sees signs in some of the little things which usually characterize campus discontent.

"There aren't any students hanging around the halls," he said. "Sometimes after school we get calls from junior high schools with reports that our students are hanging around. Thus far this semester we haven't had a call."

Preliminary reports on the activity period, which Schwartz pointed out is voluntary, show that students are attending, although he indicated there would be an evaluation of the period in mid-November at the 10-week mark.

Realistic Viewpoint

Although the picture looks rosy, Schwartz is a realist and is aware of the continuing problems in integration and drugs.

"We've got a long way to go," he said. "The drug situation is a lot better than last year. There hasn't been one arrest yet this year. I don't know why. Maybe we're not smart enough, not catching enough."

Also, because of the continuing financial crisis in the district, Schwartz has had to rely on some parent help, a volunteer force which he feels could be doing much more for the school.

The continuing influx of black students has changed Hamilton's demo-

graphics from an affluent white middle-class Jewish student body to its present configuration of 23% black, 3% Mexican-American, 3% Oriental and the remainder Caucasian. Schwartz said the school is still losing white students.

But Schwartz's view for Hamilton is into the future when the high school serves the community as a combination community center, family meeting ground and even a substitute for television.

"We've got it within our power," he said, "to utilize this school 24 hours a day and 12 months a year—a real center, the pulse of the community."

"There's a real need in urban America for this and I think the school's the natural vehicle for this kind of operation. You know, a place where kids and parents can come together, something like a cross between the traditional adult school with a regular high school.

Strengthened Families

"Right now, though, the school is just a small part of the community life. You can see it when you know the parents usually come here once a year.

"Well, you know and I know the structure of the family needs to be strengthened and a school can provide this type of implementation.

"These kids have turned off from their families and their school. And the parents too. They're bored with TV. They're seeking other modes of interest. But no one's doing anything about it.

"I take that back. We are."