

## CHANGING SCHOOL

# The Confusion of Educational Bureaucracy

The scene is a class on California history, and the plan for this day is to see a two-part film on the development of the Imperial Valley.

Except that only Part 2 of the film has arrived.

Still, that is better than nothing and the teacher decides to press on. Lights are dimmed, blinds drawn, and the student projectionist is signaled to begin.

Except that the projector will not work.

"I don't know why this always happens to me," mutters the teacher.

After 10 minutes of wrestling with the projector, the teacher gives up on it. A second projector is wheeled

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**Last in a five-part series of articles on life in a Los Angeles high school by Times education writers Noel Greenwood and Jack McCurdy and Times staff writer Celeste Durant.**

in. It, too, is malfunctioning (there are three projectors in the history department, but it is hard to get them repaired).

While the student projectionist works on projector No. 2, the teacher tries with difficulty to explain to her class why it is seeing only Part 2 of the film.

(This is the second time this year the school district has sent her the film minus Part 1.)

She kills time with some announcements. Meanwhile, in the back of the room, the student projectionist mumbles to himself: "God-damn this lousy film."

Finally, the student projectionist thinks he has the problem whipped. "OK," says the teacher, "let's see what happens. We don't guarantee anything."

Amazingly, the projector works and the film begins. One-third of the class period has been lost, but considering the circumstances, it could have been worse.

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*Board policies are based on a vile amalgam of ignorance, power, prejudice and penny-pinching. The system is top-heavy with administrators who form a closed club whose chief goal is self-advancement and self-protection. The people at the top don't want a better job done (they don't know what a better job would be). What they want is for us to produce a nonrocking boat in which they can sail.*

A Teacher

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Hamilton High School is part of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the largest school system in the United States after New York.

Each Monday and Thursday, the one woman and six men who compose the Los Angeles Board of Education sit in session behind a handsome, curved wooden table in an auditorium at 450 N. Grand Ave. in downtown Los Angeles.

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# Bureaucracy Creates Frustration at School

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At another, larger curved table behind them sit the highest ranking administrators of the district (except for Supt. of Schools William Johnston, who has a place at the board table).

In the hallways and offices of other buildings at the big administrative complex, known as "the Hill," lesser bureaucrats (but, combined, possessing a power to be reckoned with) hold meetings, initial memos and otherwise go about their day.

Decisions made in these carpeted, air-conditioned surroundings — remote from the realities of the classroom—then wend their way to the 12 zone administrative offices (each headed by its own superintendent) scattered throughout the district.

There, the decisions are digested, interpreted, and, if appropriate, sent on to individual schools.

That is the System, and Hamilton High, along with the other 624 schools that make up the city district, is at the bottom of it.

It should be safe to assume that the System exists to support Hamilton High, to do good things for its occupants, to be its loyal ally. But in fact, at Hamilton, the System is part of the problem.

*For years at Hamilton, students in business classes learned how to type on old typewriters. But when they attempted to land clerical jobs, they were required to take typing tests on unfamiliar electric typewriters—and often flunked. Finally this year, the school scraped together some federal and state money to buy 30 electric typewriters. Then came the bad news. They could not be installed because the classroom was in a building that was not earthquake-safe.*

*Someone on the Hill did not want new equipment placed in a building that, two years hence, would be rehabilitated. "The only thing we might lose is wiring," argued the teacher. The principal went to bat for him with school district administrators, who finally relented.*

Hamilton High for three years has been an inner-city school, that imprecise label affixed to urban schools that have more than their share of troubles. But the label is important in terms of dollars: Hamilton receives, as a result, the equivalent of 13 additional teaching positions.

Most of these slots are being used for teachers, resulting in an average class size (in the mid-20s) that is lower than most other city high schools. A few of the slots have been converted by the school to hire an extra security agent and other support staff.

Last fall, the Hamilton principal, Josephine C. Jimenez, began to hear rumbles that the Hill was talking about changing the rules that determine how schools qualify for inner-city status.

She began making phone calls to find out what was happening. A top aide to the superintendent dodged the issue at one meeting. The superintendent himself gave a vague answer to another.

Now it is eight months later, in May, and the issue is still unresolved. Though Mrs. Jimenez has gotten a fix on what is developing, official information continues to be scant ("Everything I know I know through the grapevine, the scuttlebutt," she says).

What is being talked about, she has discovered, is a three-class system for inner-city schools, and Hamilton would be dropped into the second class. Some of the extra teaching slots—she does not know how many exactly—would be taken away.

She is upset because the principals have not been consulted ("The people who are making the decisions haven't been in any of our schools").

## Does Not Like Criteria

She does not like the criteria by which schools will be classed ("The only merit they have is that they can be put into a computer").

But mainly she is discouraged by the seeming unfairness of it all. "I feel strongly that we are being punished for being successful," she says.

"We have a safe and secure and a peaceful climate and many good things are happening. And they are saying, 'Now we can take away those resources that have helped you do a good job.'"

What can be done to head off the change is not at all clear. But she will pass the word to her parent advisory council and perhaps they can help.

*The school system says it wants innovative ideas and creative teaching, but the rules and policies are*

*dated for 10 to 20 years ago, and this does not allow the flexibility necessary to innovate. Just do the same thing and call it something different.*

—A teacher

Three years ago, Hamilton High decided to take a crack at loosening up the rigid and somewhat pressured framework within which classes were conducted each day.

The school came up with a modified schedule. Class periods were lengthened to 80 minutes each, but classes would meet every other day rather than daily. And at the end of the day, the school placed an activity period.

The Hamilton plan was submitted to the zone administrative office, which gave its approval, and it went into effect at the start of school in September, 1970.

Though the new schedule was not without its critics at Hamilton, it generally enjoyed a popular reception — especially among students, who welcomed the fact that one day was no longer identical to the next.

Then, midway through the school year, the zone office and a middle-level administrator on the Hill stopped the new schedule in its tracks.

Recalls Mrs. Jimenez, who was girls' vice principal at the time: "One day just out of a clear sky, Paul Schwartz (the principal then) received a phone call followed by a memo that said, 'Your schedule is illegal and you've got to eliminate it.'"

## State Requirement

There is a state law that requires 240 minutes of instruction for each student each day. Because of the way the modified schedule worked, Hamilton either undershot or overshot the 240-minute standard each day. Over each 10-day period, however, everything averaged out according to the state requirement.

But district officials took a strict view of the situation, and said averaging out was not good enough. The new plan had to go.

"Aside from the strike," says Mrs. Jimenez, "that was one of the most demoralizing things that ever happened to the school."

Hamilton tried to salvage the new schedule by pumping more minutes into each day. Class periods were stretched to 90 minutes and a "study center" (in effect, an extended home room to which students and teachers took an immediate dislike) was created.

That just made things worse, and the school finally abandoned the effort. The only trace of the modified

schedule today is a double-period arrangement used for some classes.

There is a final irony to the story. Many other Los Angeles high schools sent visitors to Hamilton to see how the new schedule worked, and some adopted variations or virtual copies of the Hamilton plan.

For a time, those schools were able to keep their new schedules in effect, apparently because they were in other administrative zones where the issue was of no concern.

(Hamilton, though, had gotten caught in the backwash of controversy over a similar schedule at Fairfax High School, which was then in the same administrative zone.)

*Getting things fixed requires some patience in the Los Angeles city school system. One Hamilton teacher remembers when the attendance office was damaged by fire. "We spent the rest of the school year smelling the smoke, walking through a hallway that looked like the worst bombed area you could imagine, bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling."*

Rules and regulations: they are designed to bring order to a large school system, but oftentimes they have unintended side effects.

A year ago, Hamilton High had a textbook clerk who went on sick leave. It was clear that the clerk would be gone for an extended period of time.

The sick leave began as the school year was drawing to a close in June. The first impulse was to hire a new clerk.

But one rule of the city school system says a person on sick leave cannot be replaced until 90 days after the leave begins.

The rule exists to provide some measure of job protection. But for Hamilton, it meant the textbook clerk could not be immediately replaced—at one of the busiest periods of the year for any high school textbook office.

Hamilton got through the final weeks of school with substitute help and found other temporary help for the summer session.

Another substitute clerk lined up for the fall (for the 90-day period still had not expired) took a permanent job at another school instead. So Hamilton began school in September—the busiest period of all—without a textbook clerk.

The job was finally filled with a permanent replacement a round Christmas.

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# HAMILTON HIGH

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Then there is the requirement that when the school year begins, and again in midterm, Hamilton adjust its faculty staffing to conform to the teacher-to-pupil ratio set by the district.

Few will contest the need to do so at the start of the year. If too many teachers have been hired for the enrollment that finally shows up, that seems the logical time to cut back on staff.

But adjustments in mid-year, when the loss of one or more teachers can play havoc with the schedule of classes, are much more troublesome.

As a result, the school tries to discourage students who have enough academic credits to graduate from leaving in mid-year. If too many do so, it just adds to the usual enrollment attrition at midyear — worsening the faculty staffing problem.

*The (central) administration gets in the way more than it helps. Most of them have been out of the classroom so long they don't know what the hell is going on.*

—A teacher

Last September, Hamilton High received a bulletin from the Hill announcing that the superintendent of schools had proposed a major new effort to improve reading instruction.

Each school, the bulletin said, was to determine its reading goals and "select a preferred instructional reading program."

Mrs. Jimenez, Hamilton principal, asked two teachers to put together a reading plan she could submit for approval. At this point, the assumption was that each school could design its own program.

In early November, the school received another bulletin (dated, oddly, Oct. 5). This told them that reading was their "number one educational priority."

It also supplied the

names of various reading systems they could buy to use in the program, together with forms to evaluate them and criteria for making the evaluations.

From this, the Hamilton teachers deduced that they had misunderstood the first bulletin. They stopped what they were doing and set about trying to design a plan that would conform to the latest instructions.

But the confusion worsened. The information now flowing from the Hill (including the reading systems cited in the November bulletin) had to do mainly with elementary schools. Printed sales pitches began to arrive in the mail—from publishers of elementary-level reading systems.

Recalls Mrs. Jimenez: "The more we talked about it, the more concerned secondary people became . . . We began asking, 'What about secondary?' No answers."

## Other Issues Obscure

Other key points were clouded also: how much money could be spent, how many students should be included, did the money have to be spent entirely on materials or could it also be used to hire teachers?

Still, the Hamilton teachers went ahead as best they could, and prepared a preliminary 50-page plan after an exhaustive survey of each department chairman at the school.

In mid-February, with the deadline for submission less than a month away, there were few new developments.

The first packet of information that pertained specifically to secondary schools (including a list of commercially produced reading systems that the Hamilton teachers regarded as largely outdated) arrived from the Hill.

The school also received the forms on which its proposal was to be submitted.

The forms had space in which Hamilton could ask for the commercial reading systems (which it did not want). But the Hamilton teachers could find no place on the forms to ask for what they did want (more teachers and a reading lab).

Mrs. Jimenez and some fellow principals went to the Hill to try to sort through the confusion. They were refused a deadline extension but they did get an OK to submit proposals in whatever form they wanted.

The Hamilton teachers threw out their 50-page plan, drew up a simple two-page budget asking for a reading lab, another reading teacher and a reading coordinator, and turned it in.

In May, reflecting on the experience, Mrs. Jimenez said the chief problem was a lack of understanding on the Hill that there are differences between the way reading is taught in the elementary vs. the secondary grades.

"We don't know what is going to come of our proposals," she said. "It was very frustrating—we had no basis for anything."

"It's a problem typical of central authority in a decentralized organization. We are told we are decentralized but we keep getting things and information imposed on everyone."

"There has got to be a way to figure out procedures and the logistics of implementing something of this nature, because this certainly was not it."

*Some years ago, when*

*the idea of decentralization was taking shape in the Los Angeles district, Dep. Supt. James Taylor talked about "turning the district upside down."*

*The point was to reverse the traditional order of things—to put the schools on top of the hierarchy and to make the administrative bureaucracy serve and support them.*

*But it has not happened yet, at least not at Hamilton High. There, the school district is still upside down.*