

FROM THE WEST AUSTRALIAN THURSDAY NOVEMBER 17, 1977

Parents' chance to shape school role

by TOM JENKINS

A remarkable attempt is being made at Hamilton Senior High School to involve parents in deciding what sort of school they want for their children.

Four hundred questionnaires went out to parents today. Six hundred more will be answered by staff and students at the school.

The exercise is being directed by Mr Don Pugh, a Canadian who has joined the staff of the school as curriculum co-ordinator. He is also studying part-time at Murdoch University for a master's degree in education.

The WA Education Department has given the project its blessing and will be waiting to see whether a similar approach can be used elsewhere to involve communities in schools—a task which has had little success through P & C Associations, school councils and other bodies.

Hamilton school, in Purvis Road, Hamilton Hill, draws its students from an area including Cooper, Jandakot and Spearwood in which many families are Italian, Greek or Yugoslav.

The teachers and their principal, Mr Frank Uster, believe the children probably have different needs for education from those in other areas. The purpose of the project is to find out what these needs are and to see how far the

school can be changed to meet them.

Hamilton has a reputation for innovation in education. Four years ago, a school-within-a-school was established to give first-year students a better start. There are now four schools within the school—each of about 300 students and each with its own teachers, school heads and classrooms.

THE GAP

Mr Pugh, who already holds three degrees ("You just seem to accumulate them," he says) sees his job as "finding out the gap between what the school is doing now, and what the school community — which means, staff, students, parents and employers — feels the school ought to be doing.

"The staff are simply too busy teaching to have time to design questionnaires and to analyse the results. That's where I come in." He will work with a staff committee.

Mr Pugh said: "Employers often say they want students who are reliable and honest. Parents demand that the school teach their kids to read, write and do maths. The teachers may have different expectations from either or both of these. We hope to get all these views together."

Some of the questionnaires that go out will be translated into Italian and Yugoslav. But Mr Pugh believes that his most difficult task will be to get a good response, especially to the first questionnaire.

"If we can establish with parents that answering a questionnaire gives them a chance to play a meaningful role in the school, that will be very valuable," he said. "Next year, we might want to send out one questionnaire a month."

POSSIBLE

The next phase of the programme — next year — will involve looking more closely at the way the school now operates. Only if this is thoroughly understood will it be possible to decide what changes would be beneficial.

Though Mr Pugh does not say so, anyone interested in education knows that teachers with traditional ideas can be a big stumbling block to change as old-fashioned parents or employers.

Don Pugh does not expect quick results. "The outcome should be a slow change," he says. "I don't expect much change in two years, possibly more in five. But I hope that it will be a school more responsive to changing conditions and providing a more useful

education. That is what we all aim for."

Parents are also likely to be asked to come to meetings with teachers to discuss the school and its operation.

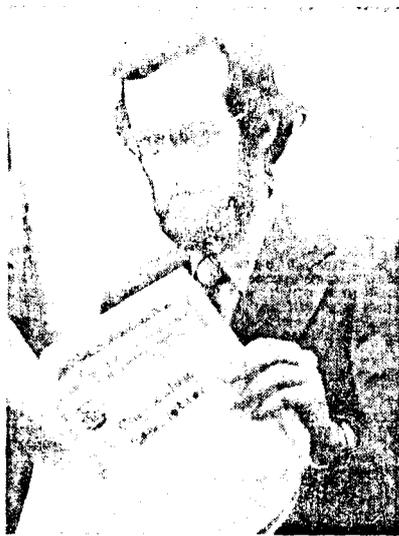
As part of his function within the school, Mr Pugh is producing a "Curriculum Newsletter", with contents ranging from serious examinations of problems and projects to cartoons and limericks.

One contribution by a teacher in the current newsletter makes these points about school courses:

They must be relevant to students' needs, as they perceive them.

They must be enjoyable.

They must be valuable for the personal development of the student as a member of the community in which he lives.



DON PUGH

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WHAT PART SHOULD PARENTS PLAY



Another Hamilton innovation is the class council in which students discuss with teachers the running of the schools. Mr Kevin Ritchie is seen with year 10 students.

HAMILTON Senior High School has also made an attempt to involve parents and other members of the community in deciding what the school should be doing.

Hamilton's principal, Mr Frank Usher, said: "Our idea was to involve the whole community in a thorough-going review of the school curriculum."

To oversee the research, the school acquired, with Federal funding, the assistance of Mr Don Pugh, a Canadian educationist. Late last year, he set out to find out what the community in which Hamilton exists — including the parents of its students — wanted of the school.

He did this by means of an extensive survey, designed to be fed into a computer (the school has a link with the computers at the WA Institute of Technology: students were involved in processing the material).

A questionnaire with 54 questions (translated where necessary into Yugoslav and Italian) was filled in by 250

parents, 625 of the school's students (about half its population) and all of the staff members. Nearly 100,000 pieces of information were fed into the computer as a result of this, and some results are emerging.

People were asked to judge whether the school was carrying out tasks well, or should be doing them better.

For example, Question 1 asked for a rating of the school's performance in helping students to learn "Developing standards of a good home and family life." Question 6 related to "Knowing how to read and play music," Question 9 "Accepting the importance of law and government in our daily lives."

Question 27 related to "Wanting always to speak effectively," Question 38 to "Being able to make sound judgment about political issues" and Question 51 to "Having an awareness of the cultural background of different nationalities."

The range was wide, because the school sees its responsibility as including social skills as well as traditional educational ones.

Overall, the people who answered the questions thought the school was doing a good job. But they picked out some things it needs to do better.

These included the teaching of acceptance of law and cooperation with authority, intelligent democratic participation and civic responsibility.

Education in family life was seen as a need, involving such things as budgeting.

Parents and teachers saw a need for improvement in student communication skills — students thought this was fine anyway!

There were calls for more economics, ecology and music.

The school was seen as satisfactorily teaching physical education, mathematics, art, social studies, languages, science and manual arts, though the first two of these were seen as more important.

Lower-school students were interested in more vocational or career education. Upper school students, parents and teachers wanted an academic emphasis in their years.

A series of committees involving staff, parents and, where possible, students is planned.

Mr Pugh says: "The final product may be a school in communication with, and accountable to, the parents — dedicated to meeting their children's needs in the fullest, most efficient way."

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Changes imposed—for the better

BIG changes have been wrought in a conventional setting at Hamilton Hill High School.

The school was built on traditional lines with classrooms to accommodate about 1200 students, but in the past five years innovations in organisations and the curriculum have marked it out from its more staid counterparts.

Behind the idea is the colourful personality of the principal, Mr Frank Usher. He initiated most of the changes, but is reluctant to accept the credit for creating a new type of school.

"The changes have made people feel more uninhibited, and articulate," he said. "Students and staff are now responsibly involved in making improvements to the school."

When Mr Usher became principal seven years ago, he decided that there must be a better way to run big schools: "Big schools are awful places, they are unwieldy bureaucracies, impersonal and do not respond to the

needs of individuals."

He believes that providing a good learning environment is the most important duty of a school and says that crucial factors in learning are the sensitivity of the teacher to the student, and the student's openness with the teacher.

Believing that these closer relationships are best achieved in small groups, he decided to change the organisation of the school by separating year eight from the main body of students.

"Year eight had its own set of classrooms and teachers independent from the rest of the school. The idea worked well, but we decided that rather than dividing the school horizontally into different years, we would divide it vertically and give students the opportunity of close contact with students of different ages," he said.

"Each group of about 300 students is like a small school with its own rooms and teachers and a warm, friendly atmosphere."



FRANK USHER

Now there are three sub-schools consisting of students from years eight, nine and 10, and a fourth composed of years 11 and 12. Each is autonomous and organises itself with little reference to the central administration.

He says there is little to be lost in breaking a big school into smaller units.

"With 1200 students it is difficult to know everyone," he said. "In our sub-school most students and teachers know each other. We hope that we have a greater sensitivity to each other and a more efficient learning process. At Hamilton Hill we have achieved a closeness and continuity

which is missing in many other schools."

Mr Usher insists that parents are the most important people in the development of their children.

"Some schools have boasted that they will instill good attitudes and values into their students, but they have gravely suppressed the role of parents. At Hamilton Hill we try to involve parents in school activities all the time. There should be a spirit of partnership between teachers and parents in the education of children.

Coffee nights, camps and barbecues are used frequently to introduce parents and teachers. "When they are friends it is much easier for them to discuss student development," he said.

Curriculum development has been another area of innovation at Hamilton Hill. Mr Usher says that a school curriculum includes everything that students do at school and must be relevant to their lives.

"Students from Yugoslav, Greek and Italian families attend Hamilton Hill," he said.

"They needs and expectations are different from other students. It is important that everything from academic studies to school picnics have some meaning for them."

Canadian, Don Pugh

has recently accepted the role of curriculum co-ordinator to help amalgamate the ideas about education from teachers, parents and students.

"With Mr Pugh we hope to work out what is best for each sub-school in terms of the most efficient learning," Mr Usher said.

All these changes have meant that Hamilton Hill is often looked upon as a different school by other teachers. "We are thought of as a half-way house, somewhere between the discipline of conventional schools and the modern almost structureless alternative schools," he said.

Mr Usher admits that there are difficulties in maintaining a system of sub-schools within the traditional pattern of one big school, but says that there is a certain delight in working under tough conditions.



Don Pugh (left) with Bruce Jacobs and Bob Wynn.—Picture by Tony Ashby.

In touch again —with the merest touch

By CATHERINE MARTIN

A touch as gentle as a falling raindrop—just 150 milligrams of pressure—can put teacher Don Pugh in touch again with the world outside his hospital bed.

That is about all the pressure he can exert since he became a quadriplegic through a traffic accident on December 22.

His neck was broken when a car rolled over in Eyre Highway at the start of his summer vacation from Hamilton Hill Senior High School.

He is paralysed from the neck down, with only some movement in his elbows.

He is completely immobilised in traction, his head held rigidly by steel calipers inserted in holes drilled into either side of his skull.

To help occupy his mind in the spinal unit of the Royal Perth Rehabilitation Hospital he asked to continue his hobby as an amateur radio operator.

His portable transmitter was brought into the ward and with a nurse to hold the microphone and manipulate the dials, he went

told other amateur radio operators of his plight.

The response was immediate and a number visited him in hospital.

Others got to work to find ways to modify his equipment so he could use it independently.

Electronics technician Bruce Jacobs, of Shelley, and Bob Wynn, of East Fremantle, who lectures in radio and television at the Mt. Lawley Technical College, arrived yesterday with the modified equipment.

Both are disabled and have been in wheelchairs for five years.

A medical electronics firm gave equipment needed to modify the transmitter, which now has a digital scanner which automatically scans about 1000 channels for an active one on which Mr Pugh can talk.

It needs only a touch with his elbow on an extension of rubber tubing to enable him to transmit and receive, on the air.

Mr Pugh, a Canadian, has arts and education degrees from two Canadian universities. He came to WA three years ago and had completed his thesis for a master's degree at Murdoch University just before his accident.

Mr Pugh said yesterday that he knew of someone who had a similar injury 12 years ago who now drove a car, had a responsible job, a wife and a nine-year-old boy.

"He is leading a very natural, normal life," he said. "That is what I intend to do."

"Once I am in a wheelchair I will work daily in the gym building up my biceps and shoulder muscles, and exercising my wrist so I can pick up things."

"I look forward to going back to work."

"It is quite a shock to be transformed in seconds from a normal human being to a situation where you are helpless and cannot do anything for yourself."

"You have to change your life's goals and you must accept this and try to adapt as best you can."



Don Pugh at Hamilton Hill High School with fourth-year students Tanis Kerdol (left) of Spearwood, and Jacqueline Beavis, of Burrendoh.

Don's double handicap

By Jim Magnus

A quadriplegic in a wheelchair is a key figure in a Perth school's fight to overcome an educational handicap.

Iron-willed Canadian Don Pugh (33) is the coordinator of curriculum at Hamilton Senior High School—a position he held for four months before a motor accident on December 22, 1978 stopped most of his body movement.

He was re-appointed to the \$12,700-a-year job at the start of the current school year, after working at it voluntarily for five months.

This year Mr Pugh in-

troduced a practical trade maths course to suit apprenticeship requirements for Alcoa.

He is continuing the task of co-ordinating a drive to boost literacy and communication skills in the school.

With senior science master Norman Hyde—who acted as curriculum co-ordinator last year—Mr Pugh brought out what is probably the most comprehensive teachers' handbook in WA.

Hamilton Senior High School comes under the Federal government's Priority Schools Programme. It is in an area found to be under a socio-economic educational handicap.

Though funded under

the programme, Mr Pugh's appointment this year had to be confirmed by the WA Education Department.

Said headmaster Frank Usher, "They made it clear this is not a charitable organisation—they said he's got to pull his weight."

"Don has compensated for his disability so well, he's just as effective in the job as he was."

"He is the core researcher advising and helping teachers to work out curricula."

"We're finding out what the students need to learn, and how the teachers want to teach it."

Broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped, Mr Pugh at 1.95m was a typical outdoors man before his accident.

A regular scuba diver and bushwalker, he was also learning to fly. He cycled to the high school from his Kardinya flat.

Mr Pugh had planned a trek through Papua-New Guinea over the Christmas holidays and was en route to Sydney when the accident happened on the Eyre Highway. He woke up

pinioned in the back-seat, in agony and unable to move. Rescuers told him that the driver had fallen asleep at the wheel.

Busy at school, the former canoe trail ranger's disability seemed scarcely relevant.

He was among the students, administering questionnaires and writing a simple plastic attachment.

Mr Pugh said his social life was pleasant and he intended to marry, have an ordinary home and hopefully raise a family.