

The Unlikely Success of Arlington's "Hippie High"

BY CHARLIE CLARK

On June 17, 1972, an on-air editorial on WTOP-TV commended an experimental high school in Arlington for having completed a successful first year. The Woodlawn program has brought "education back to life for students for whom the adventure had paled," the commentator said. "It may be here to stay."

More than a quarter-century later, the H-B Woodlawn alternative secondary program teems with over 500 students and a waiting list.

Housed for the past two decades in the 1950-vintage edifice that originally was Stratford Junior High, the school that began as a free-form refuge for alienated hippies today boasts students who score higher on the SATs and the Stanford-9 achievement tests than their counterparts at neighboring Yorktown, Washington-Lee and Wakefield High Schools. Woodlawn produces proportionately more National Merit Scholarship semifinalists than Arlington's conventional high schools, and it consistently sends more than 90 percent of its students to college.¹ Its chief founder and only principal, Ray Anderson, in 1996-97 won his district's Principal of the Year award. And in 1998, Woodlawn was ranked eighth on a list of the country's top 100 high schools in a nationwide survey.²

Woodlawn's 6th- through 12th-graders, who are admitted to the program by lottery, are known for their self-directed academics, informal relationships with teachers and coequal status with adults in school governance. Many among their peers and parents know that this school came out of the "turbulent" years of the late 60s and early 70s. But not all realize that its birth was a result of a unique confluence of events in Arlington history.

Woodlawn's roots go back to the 1967-68 school year, to the height of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society initiatives. Responding to political unrest among youth, the Arlington School Board hired a full-time coordinator named Larry Countryman to work with local youth and a newly formed body called the Arlington Youth Council.

Increasingly in those days, the issues on young minds were moving beyond such perennials as bland cafeteria food. Kids were challenging their elders over student rights to protest, underground newspapers, oppressive dress codes, creating a smoking court and demands for free-form education.

School board members found themselves confronted at hearings by the

spectacle of a 17-year-old youth leader named Jim Rosapepe haranguing them on points of order.³ “The schools didn’t respect students as free-thinking individuals with constitutional rights, and so the students didn’t respect the schools,” recalls Jim Massey, the president of the Arlington Youth Council in 1969 whom the Commonwealth’s attorney indicted (unsuccessfully) for encouraging students to skip school to protest the Vietnam War.⁴

Under the spell of these older young radicals was a 15-year-old Washington-Lee sophomore named Jeff Kallen, who would become the Youth Council’s third president. “We learned how to write memos and run meetings, and to cultivate our parents’ friends” in the civic federation Arlingtonians for a Better County, Kallen recalls.⁵

A sympathetic math teacher named Jerry O’Shaughnessey taught Kallen and his comrades how to bluff their way into the county education building to use mimeograph machines for antiwar leaflets. The irreverent kids also appeared before the County Board to pronounce the Arlington schools so bad that teachers should be paid progressively less for each year they stayed on.

“We felt a frustration with the system and had a desire for something different,” recalls Bill Hale, who attended Washington-Lee with Kallen.⁶ “Arlington schools were simply trading on their reputation from the 1950s,” when the system was celebrated in a national *March of Time* documentary.

In the late 60s, these young activists took an interest in the alternative education they’d read of in a *Life* magazine description of Philadelphia’s Parkway Plan school, and in works like A.S. Neill’s *Summerhill*. When they broached the topic with the Arlington School Board in spring 1970, they were told the board would study the matter. They spent the next year helping launch experimental classes at all three county high schools, with names like Student-Teacher Responsibility for Developing Education (STRIDE) and the Experiment in Free-Form Education (EFFE).

Ray Anderson entered the picture in December 1970. He was then teaching history at Wakefield High, having abandoned a career in operations at the CIA. He was dabbling in mutual funds and was preparing to enter law school.

It was during an out-of-town drive with his wife that he suddenly announced that all the antiwar protests and world political conflicts were interfering with education in Arlington. He asked his wife to write down what followed, an idea for a school separate from Wakefield, peopled by “bright but bored” volunteer students who wanted to learn what was “relevant” and help run the school.

Anderson’s principal, who had permitted some experimental elective courses, offered him 10 rooms in a new addition at Wakefield. But Anderson insisted that the experiment take place in a separate facility because “you can’t expect two dif-

ferent behavior patterns.” He drafted a proposal and arranged to have it offered by the Arlington teachers union, whose representatives he felt were more likely to stick around long enough to see it through.

Meanwhile, the superintendent of the Arlington schools, Robert Chisholm, was also considering something new. He was charged with the politically touchy task of desegregating the county’s all-black schools—Drew, Hoffman-Boston, and Langston. “On my first day, some black activists went on strike and occupied my office,” he recalls. “My other headache was the American Nazi party taking me to court for not letting them hold meetings in schools.”⁷

Paving the way for the coming alternative school was Chisholm’s need to spread the county’s black student population around. This meant that several elementary school buildings, Lee, Langston and Woodlawn, would be newly vacant.⁸ With the teachers association advising the county to hold on to extra buildings to handle future population growth, the interests of the superintendent, Ray Anderson, and the student radicals converged.

It was at a March 1971 school board meeting that Jeff Kallen, there with Yorktown senior Jean Lichty to protest prepackaged cafeteria food, heard the Wakefield teacher named Anderson speak of his proposal for an alternative school. Kallen suggested they pool their efforts. It was a marriage, both agree a quarter-century later, of Kallen’s political savvy and Anderson’s practicality.

Soon they were meeting at Kallen’s to recruit more kids from around the county to join Citizens for the New School, a name Kallen modeled on the 1940s progressive movement in Arlington called Citizens Council for Better Schools. They drew support from Kallen’s mother Vivian, an Arlington political activist, and Ann Broder, the wife of *Washington Post* political columnist David Broder, whose children would be among Woodlawn’s earliest students.

They massaged the proposal and turned out newsletters aimed at the grass roots. “Are desks and bells and passes and lectures and tardy slips and school lunches getting you down? New School is Coming!” read a flier urging students to pack a school board hearing. They engineered preemptive approval from the county board, threatened to take advantage of a teacher’s strike to

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- Robert Chisholm, Superintendent of Arlington schools

launch the school unilaterally, and incorporated behind-the-scenes advice from Arlington deputy school superintendent Harold Wilson.

In April, Chisholm worked the board by drafting a memo in which he argued that the experimental school would attract students who would work extra hard because of their commitment to making the project a success, and that it might provide a model for activities that could be incorporated into conventional schools. "I knew it would be necessary to have open-minded people who were willing to try, to experiment and then revise and modify it as they went along, and they accepted those premises," Chisholm says. What also helped was that "Ray Anderson was a wonderfully creative guy."

The activists expected support from long time liberal school board members such as John Lee Spicer. But they counted on opposition from a couple of conservative members, Homer Lee Kraut (an aide to Republican Congressman Joel T. Broyhill) and Henry St. John Fitzgerald, who, Kallen recalls, used to read newspapers at hearings as an insult to the students who testified.

It was shortly before a crucial board meeting in May 1971 that Kallen was crossing the street and was hit by a car. His mother recalls that school board member Bill Graham phoned her to ask if there was anything he could do. "Yes," she told him, "give Jeff his school."

In late May, the board approved the project 5-0. It was one piece of a broader plan that would create an alternative elementary school at Drew and, a year later, an alternative junior high at Hoffman-Boston.⁹

Anderson, Kallen and others believed the reason the proposal breezed through was that many in the Arlington establishment were secretly glad to rid the mainstream schools of political troublemakers. "It looked like a great way to siphon off discontent," Kallen says, "not just those marching on the Pentagon, but also kids who were the square pegs who just wanted to work on car engines."

The bad-apple theory is denied by both superintendent Chisholm and school board member Graham. "There was a cadre of intensely radical student leaders, but support for the project was broader," says Graham, now retired in Arlington. "It wouldn't have been approved unless there were good arguments."

The victorious organizers, however, now had to face some cold facts. They had barely two weeks left in the school year in which to spread the word, conduct a lottery and recruit the teachers and 90 juniors and 90 seniors who would create the school. It didn't help that Anderson and his wife were about to embark on a long-planned summer trip to the Soviet Union. That meant the serious curriculum planning would be packed into the last weeks of August 1971.

"I have been informed of the school and its experimental nature," read the parents' pledge on the first Woodlawn application. "I realize it offers no transportation or lunch, and that educational activities may take place off the school site."

“Verbum Sap Sat” (a word to the wise is sufficient) was adopted as the motto for the school where persuasion was emphasized over enforcement of rules. At the first Woodlawn “town meeting,” Anderson sat with students and teachers and debated such issues as course names. “I originally thought we would have just three or four generic titles for credit,” he says, “things like physical phenomena, man’s institutions and self-expression.” But many of the kids were worried about their college transcripts, so the group decided to play it safe by using conventional labels such as English and history, while giving a wide berth to actual content with such courses as “The Unexplained” and “Mind-Altering Drugs.” Even so, some radicals thought this too was too structured, and about a third of the students walked out.

Daily life at Woodlawn meant lying around in small groups on the floor in bare feet and jeans. Rooms were often divided by portable chalkboards in a building that lacked even a custodian. “A student might ask, ‘What will we do today?’” Anderson recalls, “and I’d say, ‘Read a book for an hour, help with a physics project and then mop the floor.’” Many classes involved practical lessons, such as translating documents for immigrants who used the local hospital and fire department. There was lots of chess and checkers and philosophical arguments.

Linda Christenson, a language teacher in those seminal years, said she found it “difficult to teach a skills subject when the kids didn’t meet every day.” And without school buses, she found herself offering to drive to one student’s home to roust her to class; that student on another occasion told her she was skipping class to be fitted for a diaphragm.

Lore Schneider, who taught German in the 1970s, recalled that some kids were uncomfortable with the protocol of calling teachers by their first names.

Martha Franks, a 1973 Woodlawn graduate, recalls being questioned for truancy by a police officer who found her sitting in a field reading Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*. “But I knew back then that I wanted to pursue the hippie persona,” she says, “and Woodlawn was the first place in which my quirkiness was welcome and I felt confident and unafraid.”

There was access to illegal drugs and frequent student absences. “Drunk with the freedom to avoid class,” says Franks, “I avoided French class almost entirely until the end of the semester. At that point, I went to the French teacher to talk about what was happening. He was entirely friendly, but very clear. Because I had not done the work, I would not pass the course.”¹⁰

A survey taken in December 1971 found that only 27 percent of Woodlawn students felt that they had learned as much factual data as they had at their old school. But 83 percent felt that they had learned more general ideas. Test data had to be gathered, wrote Mary McBride, a charter-member teacher now

Woodlawn's deputy principal, because of "certain small but vocal groups who regard the New School as an 'extravagant frill.'"

By the late 1970s, the radical students had largely moved on, and with Arlington's building configurations changing, the county determined that the alternative high school and junior high (Hoffman-Boston) should merge. Superintendent Larry Cuban made the proposal because the Hoffman-Boston program was having trouble attracting students. The merger plan pleased the junior high crowd but went over poorly with the high schoolers at Woodlawn, who, reluctant to compromise their freedoms with younger students, held a mock funeral marking Woodlawn's demise. The consolidated program would take over the Stratford building and take the combined name of H-B Woodlawn.

Thus began a series of changes that formed the program of today. With a building outfitted with chemistry and physics labs, Woodlawn began to look more like an actual school. Classes that used to meet twice a week began meeting three and four times. Advanced placement courses became common. A limited learning-disabled program was introduced. The program took on its share of the older immigrant students taking high-intensity English, and shared its building with Arlington's special program for the disabled. And when Arlington switched to middle schools in 1990, Woodlawn's new 6-8th-graders got their own office and attendance policies that phased in the freedoms a bit at a time.

By the start of the 1990s, there were more applications for Woodlawn than there were slots for a program that, planners say, depends on its small and intimate scale to make its student freedoms workable. The school board, however, had grown concerned that Woodlawn and Arlington's other county-wide choice schools do their part to keep racial and ethnic minorities represented in their student bodies. For the first time, the board required those schools to give minority applicants added weight in the otherwise first-come, first-served process.

Race had seldom flared as an issue during Woodlawn's first dozen years, particularly since practically all who applied to the program in the 70s and early 80s got in. In 1983, for example, Woodlawn's student body was 83 percent white, while nearby Washington-Lee was only 61 percent white.

But the 80s brought big demographic shifts. "Housing prices shot up, many in the middle class were driven out, and there was an influx of Hispanics and Asian immigrants," Anderson says. Equally important was the way "the baby-boomer parents began their search for competitive academics. So many parents were focusing on making money to compete with Japan Inc., they were trying to preposition their kids for an economic lifestyle. All of these forces combined to focus attention on Woodlawn as the only option for some people who wanted out of their neighborhood schools."

Beginning with rising demand for limited slots at the back-to-basic program at Page Traditional (now Arlington Traditional School), dozens of Arlington parents toted sleeping bags to camp out on the school steps in order to clinch their child a place. By the dawn of the 1990s, the camp out had moved to Woodlawn, and in 1992, the school board took pity on the parents and instituted the lottery.

Today, the Woodlawn student body is about 40 percent minority. Its high school grades are 8.8 percent Asian, 13.9 percent black, and 17.2 percent Hispanic, with slightly fewer minorities in the middle school. Its percentages of minorities are slightly higher than those at neighboring Williamsburg and Yorktown.

The combination of the lottery and racial weighting policy endured until 1997. That was when, with national trends moving against affirmative action, the parents of some Arlington students who had been denied admission to Arlington Traditional and Woodlawn filed lawsuits. That May, U.S. District Judge Albert V. Bryan Jr. ruled in their favor, striking down the race-conscious efforts to promote diversity as unconstitutional.

The school board responded the following December with a proposed new policy—replacing the weighting by race with a minority outreach effort and extra weights for those who are minorities, come from low-income families or speak English as a second language. It had been vetted by top civil rights lawyers, and School Board Chairwoman Mary Hynes expressed confidence that it would hold up to a legal challenge.

But in spring 1998, parents of students who failed to get into Arlington Traditional again filed suit. Weeks later the same judge again struck it down, forcing ATS to conduct a second admissions lottery that was strictly random. Rather than chance a lawsuit on Woodlawn, the board in May then decided to wipe out results of the weighted Woodlawn lottery and conduct a random one there as well. This, however, irked many of the parents whose children had been accepted in the weighted lottery. A subsequent compromise allowed some of those children in by expanding—over the objections of some Woodlawn staff and students—the number of slots in the 6th and 9th grades. “We cannot make everyone happy,” Hynes told the board. “It’s not right but it’s what it is.”¹¹

The fights over who gets into the school that was once a haven for an offshoot of the disgruntled were now proof that the program has become an Arlington institution. Yet that hasn’t prevented critics from calling for its demise. Some academic traditionalists think the hippie school has run its course, while others argue that 21st-century alternative schools should have cutting-edge themes such as science and technology. Proposals to abolish Woodlawn

come up every five years or so, Anderson says, “not usually because of what we’re doing but because someone else brings it up.”

Woodlawn alumni are only growing more dedicated. They organize reunions and have created their own web site.¹² They have been responding in recent years to school efforts to document their whereabouts and accomplishments. A surprising number have started businesses, and many work at teaching, in libraries and museums, notes Bill Hale, who says his “lifelong autodidact tendencies” found their expression at Woodlawn. “It still astonishes me in retrospect, how quickly it could all happen,” he says. “Perhaps the system is not so inflexible as we thought.”

Notes

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References

- ¹ Test scores examined for this story were supplied by Arlington County Public Schools and from H-B Woodlawn.
- ² *Washington Post* reporter Jay Mathews ranked high schools based on the number of students taking Advanced Placement courses divided by the number who graduate. His book, *Class Struggle: What's Wrong (and Right) With America's Best High Schools*, (Times Books, 1998), was excerpted in *Newsweek*, March 30, 1998, p. 53.
- ³ Rosapepe went on to a career in the Maryland legislature, and most recently was named by President Clinton as ambassador to Romania.
- ⁴ Massey is now a web site designer in Los Angeles.
- ⁵ Kallen is now a linguistics lecturer at Trinity College in Ireland.
- ⁶ Hale now runs a rare books shop in Georgetown.
- ⁷ Chisholm is now retired in Gig Harbor, WA.
- ⁸ The Woodlawn building on North 15th Street, originally named for the Fairfax County historic plantation, now houses the Hospice of Northern Virginia.
- ⁹ For the chronology of Woodlawn's founding, the author is indebted to a research paper by Christy Mach, “A Study of H-B Woodlawn: An Alternative Program,” Senior Thesis for the History Department, University of Pennsylvania, April 1996.
- ¹⁰ Franks is now an attorney with the Interior Department.
- ¹¹ Quoted in *The Arlington Journal*, May 29, 1998.
- ¹² <http://www.hbwoodlawn.org/alumni/>