

An Uncommon Formula for Scholastic Success

Loudoun's Douglass School Mixes Troubled Teen-Agers With Handicapped Children

Teacher Beverly Dickens goes over a lesson with Susie Begley at the Leesburg school, where handicapped children share some classes with troubled teens.



BY GERALD MARTINEAU — THE WASHINGTON POST

Susan Dieter gazed intently at 17-year-old David McIntire as he crouched beside her wooden desk and turned a page in her photo album.

McIntire, a burly, dark-haired student in the Loudoun County public schools' Alternative Center for troubled youths, pointed to a picture of a school bus and asked, "What is that?" Susan, a developmentally delayed preschooler with cerebral palsy, responded, "Ride a bus."

McIntire turned another page, this one upside down and loose from its binder. "My book's broken," exclaimed a wide-eyed Susan,

By Steve Bates
Washington Post Staff Writer

who'll turn 3 this month. McIntire beamed with pride. "I'll fix it; hold on," he said.

The exchange was a common one at an un-common school, the Douglass Community School in Leesburg. In the aging building that county school officials hope to replace soon, about 65 children with a wide range of handicaps share an education with a comparable number of teen-agers who haven't succeeded in larger schools. Some of them are recovering from drug or alcohol problems.

The older, troubled students, many of whom had been identified as in danger of dropping out of school, spend most of their day down-stairs at Douglass, attending standard and vocational classes for anytime from a month to

three years, until they graduate or return to their regular schools.

Preschool classes and instruction for the physically handicapped and mentally retarded students are conducted upstairs. Some special education pupils will move on to regular schools, while others may stay at Douglass through the 12th grade.

But Douglass is a place where all students, including emotionally disturbed youngsters, mix in the halls, cafeteria and in some classrooms. It is also a place where troubled teens act as mentors for disabled children and learn from them at the same time. The result is a school that local

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Alternative Center's Magic Mix a Success

DOUGLASS, From B1

and national education officials say may be unique.

"It brings out the best in both" groups, said county School Board Chairman Betty S. Poehman of Leesburg. Said School Board member James D. Callahan, from the Guilford District, "The interesting thing is that everyone seems so happy."

"Douglass is a special place," said Susan's mother, Clarice Dieter of Waterford. She said her daughter "has improved wonderfully" in language skills since enrolling at Douglass last year. She and Douglass Principal Lorraine Landolt attribute some of the success to helpers such as McIntire.

McIntire, who lives in the western Loudoun community of Lincoln, said that in less than two months his volunteer work with special education pupils has helped him become "used to being patient." In his own classes, McIntire studies drafting with an eye toward becoming an architect.

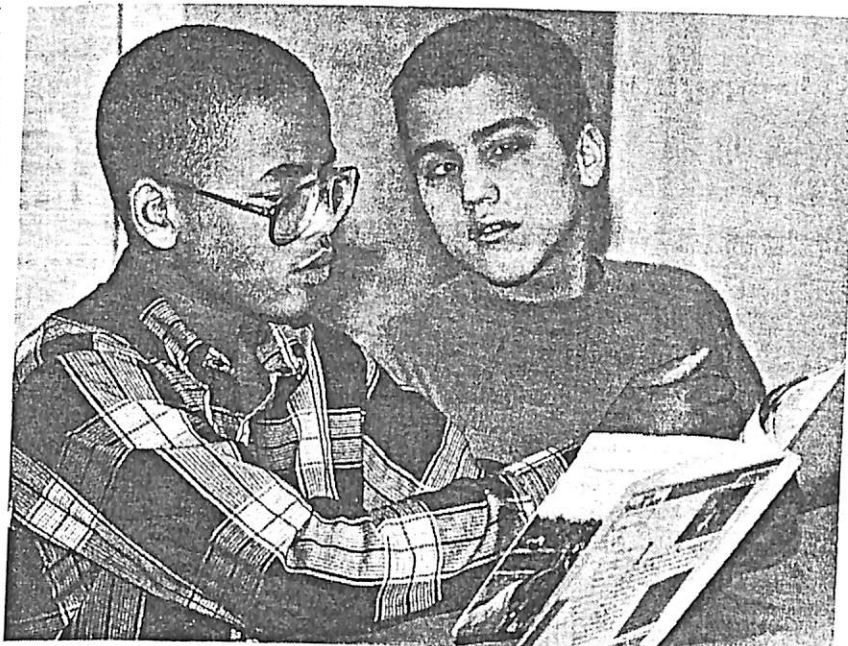
The combination of the special education and Alternative Center students "sort of evolved" in the early 1970s, according to Landolt.

"We had a building" that once had been a high school and now doubles as a community center, Landolt said.

"At the time it was just a convenience. The convenience has been a beneficial combination," she said.

In fact, this winter, when county school officials proposed replacing the 48-year-old structure with a new building, they gave almost no thought to changing the student or educational mix. The new building is part of the schools' five-year capital improvement program, which will be reviewed this spring by the Board of Supervisors.

School officials concede that Alternative Center participants have had their share of suspensions and other discipline at Douglass, but Clarice Dieter said she had no reservations about sending her 2-year-old to a school with troubled teens. "I think it's wonderful the way these [older] kids help out. It gives



Robert Scott, left, reads to Eddie Cooper, who is blind. The school pairs handicapped students with troubled teen-agers. PHOTOS BY GERALD MARTINEAU—THE WASHINGTON POST

them more compassion and a broader scope," she said.

One recent morning, part of a class of moderately retarded students went on a supervised shopping expedition, comparing prices and selecting items needed to make pancakes in the living-skills center, one of three programs open to all those who attend Douglass. The other programs feature arts and crafts, and work habits and skills.

In a nearby classroom, teacher Beverly Dickens worked on communication skills with her severely to profoundly handicapped students, some of whom cannot speak. Seventeen-year-old cerebral palsy victim Susie Begley of Round Hill and Alex Scott of Bluemont pointed to pictures and symbols on custom-

made boards. Alex pointed with a finger, Susie with an eye.

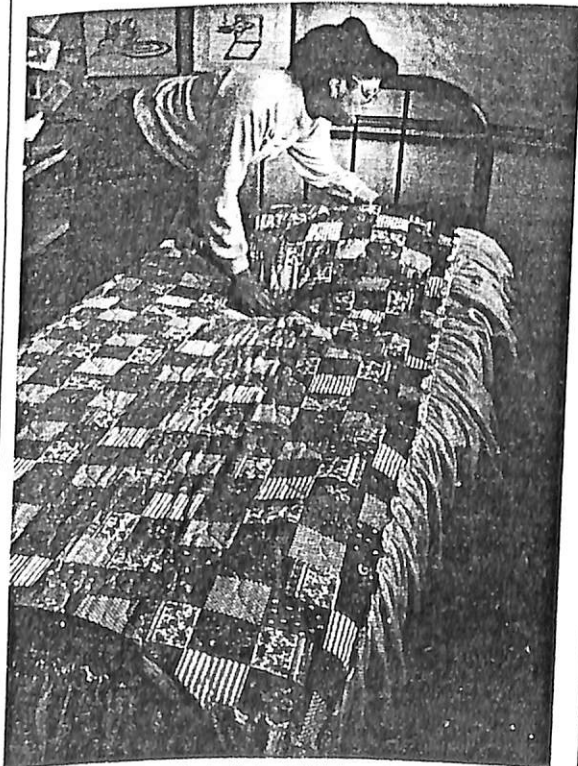
Dickens patiently asked question after question: "What's your favorite color? Your number? . . . Find the symbol that you want to say."

Susie wanted to point out a picture of one of her friends; Alex studied his board, then selected a picture of milk. "Milk? You want to put the milk cartons away at lunch?" Dickens asked. Alex tapped on the "yes" spot on his board.

Another day, 13-year-old Alternative Center student Robert Scott of Leesburg came up to Eddie Cooper, 19, of Purcellville and tapped him on the shoulder. Eddie, a blind student of Dickens', smiled, knowing that Robert was there to read to him.

Across the hall, 18-year-old Pam Runions, who lives in Chantilly, pulled picture cards from a file box—a cow; a bed; someone drinking, running, pulling. Sixteen-year-old Eric Miranda of Great Falls, who is moderately retarded and is learning English as a second language, grinned broadly from his wheelchair as he identified the pictures and received accolades from Runions, who has been helping children at Douglass for nearly three years.

"When Mrs. Landolt first asked [me to help the younger children], I thought, 'Oh no, it's going to be hard. I'll feel sorry'" for the special education pupils. But Runions said this concern was quickly dispelled. Now, "I want to work with handicapped kids" after graduation.



Leslie Lane makes a bed in the "living skills" class, while teacher Susan Reich leads Matt McCarthy, who is in braces after surgery, through some exercises.