

## A Kindergarten Center

BRENDA H. GRACEY<sup>1</sup>, ROBERT N. KRATZ<sup>2</sup> AND AUDREY G. SPRENGER<sup>3</sup>

This paper describes an approach to centralization of classes in a school system with numerous small school buildings. The reasons for development of a kindergarten center are described as are the positive and negative aspects of the kindergarten center.

The Shippensburg Area School District is a 2,840-pupil, K-12 consolidation of rural communities covering 125 square miles in southcentral Pennsylvania. In 1976, in anticipation of the forced closing of Central School, a large, old elementary school, planning began for dealing with the loss of a facility that provided space for over 300 students.

At that time the Central School, as it had for the previous twenty years, contained one or more sections of K-6 for the in-town neighborhood it served, plus the sixth grade classes for the District's four out-of-town schools, which were built before the District was organized on a K-6, 7-9, 10-12 basis in the area served by the Borough of Shippensburg's three elementary schools; K-5, 6, 7-9, 10-12 in the more rural communities served by the District's four six-room elementary schools.

The planning for alternatives to the Central School was extensive. A committee of faculty, administrators and members of the community worked for seven months in an effort to deal, not only with the loss of Central and concomitant problems, but with the broader philosophical issue of what grade level/building organization would provide the best learning opportunities for the District's students in the future.

A comprehensive review of available literature revealed wealths of information about middle schools as compared to junior high schools, open space classes, class and building size, even information about renovation compared to building. However, nothing could be found in the literature to help in the necessary decision about centers, and it was obvious early in the committee's work that a grade level center of some type was a definite possibility. In fact, Central already contained a sixth grade center for part of the District.

Ultimately, after months of study and discussion, reports from the above described committee, and three educational specifications committees, as well as a directive from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to close Central, the Board of School Directors voted to utilize a kindergarten center concept and adhere to a K, 1-6, 7-9, 10-12 organizational pattern.

It should be noted that virtually no one in the District wanted a middle school or sixth grade in any form in a secondary school, but obviously, for reasons of available space, some grade had to be centralized, probably in a secondary school.

Following are reasons in support of a kindergarten center in a situation where some elementary classes must be centralized. These were noted by teachers and administrators during the planning process which led to the development of the center.

- Kindergarten is the child's first year in the public school. It does not follow any other public school program, and therefore, a kindergarten center is not a break in building continuity.
- The program in kindergarten differs from 1-6 more than any of those grades differ from each other. A kindergarten center, then, is not a serious break in the continuity of the educational program.
- Children in kindergarten are more teacher-centered than older elementary students. It seems more feasible to isolate them than to isolate any other level.
- Since it is not necessary to serve lunch to half-day kindergarten students, they do not have to eat in a secondary school cafeteria and are more easily isolated in the secondary school than full-day students would be.

The greatest apparent drawback to centralizing kindergarten was the belief among some parents, particularly parents who were sending their oldest child to kindergarten, that it was not right to put five-year-olds in a secondary school. It does not appear that the Kindergarten Center would have received much criticism or have caused much anxiety had it not been in a secondary school.

Kindergarten has now been in an isolated wing of the Shippensburg Area Senior High School for nearly five years. Numerous public relations strategies were required the initial year to assure the community that a relatively untried concept was workable. A liaison committee was established to facilitate communication between kindergarten parents and the school during the prepara-

<sup>1</sup>Head Teacher, Kindergarten Center, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania 17257.

<sup>2</sup>Superintendent, Shippensburg Area School District, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania.

<sup>3</sup>Kindergarten Teacher, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania.

tions for opening of the Kindergarden Center and the first year of its operation.

District administrators promised parents that for the first year of the Center, children would be grouped according to attendance area so that they would go to kindergarten with the students with whom they would later attend grades one to six. This commitment was not required nor made after the initial year, but students are still generally grouped by attendance area.

To allay parental concerns, volunteer aides were utilized the first year to see that children going to and from the lavatories or water fountain did not wander into other parts of the building, particularly the pool. This soon proved to be an unnecessary precaution. Lastly, assurance was given that the kindergarten lavatories would not be utilized by other than kindergarten students. This assurance continues as does the practice of isolating the Center almost totally from the remainder of the high school—the Center has its own entrance from the bus loading area, its own office/faculty room/storage area, and is generally treated as a separate school responsible to the elementary and not the high school principal.

Following are experienced advantages/disadvantages of a kindergarten center in a high school:

*Advantages*

- All classes of kindergarten in one facility

- ease of grade level meetings
- team teaching

- High school students interested in working with young children are afforded the opportunity and are of value as older peer tutors, probably of more value than younger peer tutors would be
- A centralized kindergarten requires a shorter bus ride for most kindergarten children
- All reasons listed initially and cited above proved valid

*Disadvantages*

- A centralized kindergarten requires longer bus rides for some kindergarten children
- Converting secondary classrooms to kindergarten use
  - smaller (800 sq. ft.) than ideal size
  - lavatories and running water not in classrooms

Little criticism of the Kindergarten Center appears to now exist in the community. The four teachers in the Center agree and have publicly reported to the Board of School Directors, that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. The teachers involved believed in the center idea, made it work, and would now advocate it to any school district, particularly a rural district with numerous small schools, as a superior approach to kindergarten.