

Teacher 1979 to Principal 1986 to 1989 – B.E.S.T. Alternative High School

I went to Lake Washington to fill the role of a language arts high school teacher for drop-outs. When I arrived there were three new teachers, Gene Beall, Carol Poliak and me, joining Benn Henry who had been there a couple of years. There were about thirty-five students who didn't come to school very much. There were no classes but it was set up so students could work on contracts. I don't remember exactly what the requirements then were but I knew I didn't like the way it was. At the first year I was there the Superintendent came by for our graduation. We only had about fifteen students standing on the tennis court taking a diploma from BEST and waiting for getting the real diploma from the high school had kicked them out. The Superintendent never came again no matter what we did.

What I knew in my heart was that the program had to change. I got permission from the district to take two hours each day in the afternoon of the fall and design the program. Our design changed how they had behaved in the past. We set up a discipline program, a curriculum program, and requirements they had to meet if they wanted to stay in the program. We told students that they needed to take five classes each day and take on three additional contracts. The amount students took in regular classes at regular schools was about six classes. To pass them and graduate from high school they had to complete at least five classes each semester. We set up teams among the students at B.E.S.T. so that every student attended their team each day. As to attendance, we said that each student could miss up to 3 days by the number of classes aligned with the three days or the twenty days of a session. We had nine sessions a year and checked on each student every four weeks to review progress on their classes and contracts. Our first year, we had a small number of students get their diplomas. The second year we rented a place to serve dinners and graduation. We had around fifty students that year graduate. Parents came and we talked a little about each student who was graduating. At this time the district made me into a Head Teacher so I could keep working on issues that resolved would have each student be successful.

That worked so we now were facing well over 100 students graduating each year. I had met with the counselors of the regular schools and I told them they weren't helping students. When we started out the counselors of the regular high schools would hang on to students until they believed they could not graduate and there was nothing more that they could do for the students. So students were sent to B.E.S.T. with no skills, no courses, and no possibility of graduating from high school. I worked with the counselors and eventually they understood that not paying attention to how the students felt as individuals and instead paying attention to them and thus keeping the student at a regular school ended in disaster.

What we did for those students became amazing and wonderful. Each of them was on individual contracts because whether it was a classroom class and/or an extra class outside of the classroom it had to be recorded through the contracts. We recognized them as individuals and gave them lots of time in the contracts to see the world from their eyes and really hear. The school became better and better and my supervisor told me I needed to get trained to be an administrator. I had never thought about being a principal but it bothered me that anyone with that credential could be hired into the school and undo the great things we had done for those students. So I got a position in SPU where I received a Masters plus Administration degree by spring of 1986. I was working very hard in that year and a half on top of teaching and being the Head Teacher for B.E.S.T. I felt very sad about leaving the Head Teacher position with my B.E.S.T. students because the next step required to take care of them after I finished the college work was to apply for the principal. I had to apply for that job to make sure we kept doing what worked for these students. The job meant I would take on two more small alternative schools adding up around 400 students and the summer program for the whole district which was about 1600 students. I knew it was going to a different experience than I had just completed.

The number of students we served grew each year. I had focused on them graduating but a new teacher I hired started working on the students going on from us to college and she managed to move up at least thirty percent of our student graduates to college students. It is amazing where B.E.S.T is viewed as a drop-out school because the students struggled for a variety of reasons in the regular high school programs. When individual needs are evaluated and responded to it can make all the difference. Each student who came to B.E.S.T. had not ever been treated as a regular school teacher's responsibility as an individual. The most amazing things we learned about students who came to B.E.S.T. should be put in a book because treating them as individuals, understanding their individuality, and helping them learn through their individuality makes all the difference.

We participated in a competition of alternative schools. It was academic and fun activities. We helped students prepare for that and experience getting the highest scores. B.E.S.T. won, but most important, all of the several thousand students from alternative schools participated as a school and each individual student was to choose and work towards supporting their efforts.

I left that district to become a principal in another district junior high but I will never forget B.E.S.T. I've done lots of things as a principal but I will never forget or value more what I learned at B.E.S.T. At our graduation when we gave each of them a diploma who had earned it and a speech about them, we saw how great they were. Some of them went on to college, some had decided upon a technical course they needed to take to be able to work in that, some could take on jobs they enjoyed but most important they liked themselves as a result. I've heard things about them since then. One who married and eventually became a PTA president in her daughter's school. She said we had inspired her because she had learned to see herself and do what was right for those kids in that school.

More Reflections and Thoughts about B.E.S.T.

The school was located on the hill in Redmond about a half mile down the road from Redmond Junior High on the other side of the street. It was three or four one-story cement buildings. The government for the army had used it and there were spots on the land, which was about ten acres, where the government agent may have in the past put weapons there. The school district had bought the land from the government as far as I know. That was in the seventies. When I worked there from 1979 to 1989, there were three high schools, now there are many more.

I talked with Barbara Harrison in June of 2010. She is a wonderful person who has been a secretary at B.E.S.T. and I hired her twenty-two years ago. She has stayed there and reached out to kids to help them be successful. When she was talking to me she told me that one of my students had named his daughter Stephanie because of me. I haven't seen most of the students in a long time. I sure would like to see them again... I have learned health information I could share with them that could help them.

At B.E.S.T. we did the work in designing the school so we kept improving it. More and more and more students attended school with us and became successful in completing graduation. We were able to have a hundred and fifty students each year and have 93% of those eligible for graduation be successful and earn their degree from the high school they had come from. We would have well over one hundred graduates each year. Why was B.E.S.T. successful with students who were not able to do well in their home high school? We treated students as individuals based on what each one of them needs, desires, and finds interesting. We designed the school so our students were learning and doing what was required for any high school student but we always stayed focused on each individual student. We worked well together as staff and we supported every student and each other. That is for education and for the future.