

## Schools Without Failure: Roosevelt (1969 – 2001)

*“I was walking in Boston a few years back, and suddenly I heard, ‘Look who’s here!’ I turned around, and there are these two young women – seniors in college. They run up to me and start recalling all of the different classes they had taken at Roosevelt. I’m thinking to myself, when do any of us remember our middle school classes?!? Their boyfriends were completely baffled. One of the girls turned to them, and said, ‘You don’t understand. Roosevelt was a really special place!’”*

- Ray Scofield, Teacher, Roosevelt Middle School

The 1960s was an era of change. We were all engaged in a reevaluation of how things had “traditionally” been done. As an educator, I was dedicated to a re-examination of how schools functioned. It was evident to me that the way public school education operated was boring, stale, and dysfunctional. After serving a year-and-a-half with the VISTA program, I had the opportunity to interview for a new program at Roosevelt Junior High in south Eugene, a unique program that seemed to match my aspirations to be a part of the change in the institution of education.

When I interviewed for the teaching position at Roosevelt, the principal asked me where I received my teaching credentials. I responded, “My life-time teaching credentials are from Salem State.” There was silence in the room. People on the hiring committee looked back and forth, fidgeting uncomfortably in their chairs.

*“Salem State, you said?”*

“Yes. I received my teaching certificate in Massachusetts when I lived in Boston.”

The relief quickly returned to their faces. It was later that I was told that Salem State was the main mental institution in the State of Oregon.

Lucky to survive the interview, I was offered the job, and joined an incredible team of teachers at Roosevelt Junior High. We were all dedicated to the “revolutionary” concept that kids should come first in education, and that schools should be focused on helping students to enjoy their learning.

Our staff adopted the philosophy and approaches promoted by Dr. William Glasser’s, “Schools Without Failure.” The prevailing attitude of the staff was that anything was possible – we’ll try it, and, if it doesn’t work, we’ll modify it, adapt it, or change it. We were open to all kinds of ideas and suggestions to teaching, so long as they benefited kids and their learning.

“We should never forget that people, not curriculum, are the desired outcome of schooling. What we want to develop are students who have the skills to become active contributors to society, who are enthusiastic about what they have learned, and who are aware of how learning can be of use to them in the future.”

- William Glasser

When people asked what we taught at Roosevelt, we replied, “We teach kids.” Students, parents, teachers, administrators, cooks, custodians, clerks all became part of the process of “teaching kids,” supporting this new Roosevelt program for thirty-two years.

At Roosevelt, a teacher had the power to develop his/her own special classes. As long as it focused on a specific learning skill or goal, anything was

possible. The students had the power to elect their own course of study three times a year, with over 200 classes offered to choose from each term. Class offerings included “Shakespeare,” “Advanced Spelling,” “Geometric Designs,” “Wild and Tame” – an animal literature class that studied everything from endangered species to pet care, “Star Trek and Social Issues,” “Sports History,” “Bow and Arrow Making,” “Storytelling,” “Multicultural Mythology,” “Small Engine Repair,” “Orchestra,” “Child Care,” “Play-writing,” “Math Games,” “Drafting,” “Through the Camera’s Eye” – American history through movies, “King Arthur & Medieval Times,” “Animation,” and so many more. Our drama and music groups became known state-wide, and, for 24 years, I led and directed the nationally-known Troupe of Tellers.

We incorporated basic life skills into our classes, and our students consistently ranked among the top performing in the state. Many students who failed to succeed, or “didn’t fit it” at other schools, found a “home” at Roosevelt – the support and style of learning that helped them to become successful. There were always some who couldn’t initially comprehend and accept the privileges, the choices, the responsibilities that our school was designed with, and decided to leave Roosevelt for another school. Parents of Roosevelt students frequently told the staff that they wished they could come back to school and enroll in our class offerings.

My special resource for beginning each of my classes was a collection of prized books titled, *Uncle John’s Bathroom Readers*. Full of fun and interesting facts about famous people, animals, science, literature, history, and so much more, I would have one or two of these facts written on the board each class, requesting the students to copy them down upon arrival. This kept their attention while I took attendance and prepared to actually begin the class. I would read the odd facts out loud, requesting students to comment and discuss. I would offer students extra

credit if they could memorize some of the odd facts and write them at the end of an exam.

In our program, instead of grades, students received written evaluations twice a term for each class. The evaluation would explicitly describe what the student had accomplished, what skills he/she needed to improve, and suggestions for what classes that they might choose in the coming term. Seventh through ninth graders (later, when Roosevelt converted to a middle school format, sixth through eighth graders) enrolled in the same classes. The enthusiasm! The extra effort and work and commitment! It's truly amazing what students and staff can create and accomplish when given the chance!

With today's budget cuts to education, the millions of dollars spent supporting the Republican school testing industry, and the lack of time to teach except to the test, very few of the students we worked with over all of those years would have had these meaningful life experiences they gained from their time learning at Roosevelt.