

Eight Common Myths About Remediation

by Kim Marshall

One of the most important challenges facing us in the years ahead is meeting the needs of students who are working one or more years below grade level. A good deal of thinking has gone into the issue of remediation this year: a broadly-based committee has had several meetings, and a 21-page paper including specific recommendations has been prepared. Below is an excerpt from that paper addressing some widely-held misconceptions about remediation.

Myth #1: The roots of remedial needs lie in factors beyond the schools' control — poverty, family background, television, etc. — so there will always be a sizable number of students needing remediation in schools serving disadvantaged youngsters. The social science research of the 1960's and 70's led many urban educators to conclude that there was little schools could do to counteract the various effects of poverty on their students. This view has been debunked by the "school effectiveness" research of the last seven years. It has shown that some schools serving disadvantaged populations are remarkably effective at bringing most of their students up to grade-level expectations — hence the slogan ALL CHILDREN CAN LEARN. The new research has identified a cluster of school characteristics associated with these schools' success. The inescapable conclusion is that if schools are well led, well-organized, take responsibility for and believe in their students, and energetically seek out solutions to their problems, a great deal can be accomplished.

Myth #2: Effective remedial programs can and should close the gap between lower and higher-achieving students. Current research indicates that the gap between students at the top and the

bottom of the academic spectrum is unlikely to narrow no matter how effective our remedial efforts are. What can be altered is the number of students who attain the basic skills and knowledge necessary to move along to the next grade. Ron Edmonds defined an effective school as one where the same proportion of a school's least-advantaged students achieve minimum mastery as the school's most



Reprinted from the New York Times Book Review, May 5, 1985.

advantaged students. Edmonds did not have any illusions that the least advantaged students could gain ground on their more advantaged peers, since the rising tide in effective schools lifts all boats. But his analysis of unusually effective urban schools did identify the characteristics of those programs that have achieved basic equity with regard to basic skills.

Myth #3: The problems associated with remediation lie solely with the students, not with staff expectations. One of the most difficult and challenging aspects of dealing with students needing remediation is changing the expectations of some teachers and school administrators. As Boston's student population has shifted, many staff members hearken back to the "good old days" when students entered school with more of the academic and behavioral prerequisites for

learning, when students seemed more motivated, and when there seemed to be more support from the home. What we expect of students is communicated to them in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways, and low expectations are a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Myth #4: Remedial problems can be solved only by massive infusions of additional resources and staff. Many of the barriers to increasing the achievement of students having difficulty in school relate to school organization and climate, staff attitudes, and other factors that do not cost money to change. It is possible for schools to do a dramatically better job with low-achieving students without additional resources. And with a thoughtful and effective approach to remediation, schools can get an even greater "bang for the buck" from additional resources (636. Boston Plan for Excellence School Initiative Grants, HEART Program grants, block grants, etc.).

Myth #5: Funding and directing remedial programs is mainly the responsibility of the central office. Responsibility and ownership must rest at the school level, with the central office providing overall direction, a helpful planning structure, feedback on school planning efforts, assistance and access to resources for carrying out the plan, and evaluation of the effectiveness of various approaches. It is vital that each school assess its unique problems, take responsibility for meeting the needs of students needing remediation, and make remediation an integral part of its overall plan, with first call on personnel and fiscal resources. Meeting the needs of these students must be seen as part of the school's overall mission for which all staff members share responsibility. The role of the principal is absolutely critical.

Myth #6: There is one instructional solution to the remediation

continued on page 4

Remediation

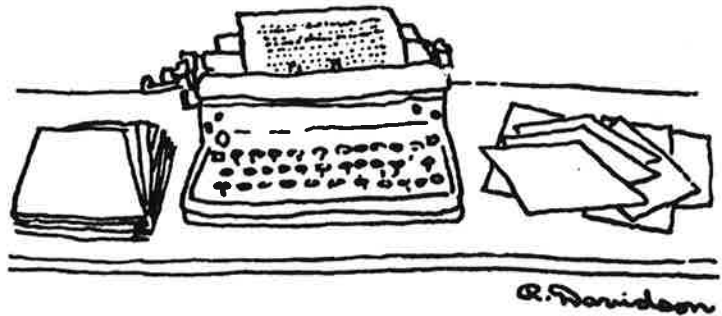
continued from page 3

problems waiting to be found and implemented. Unfortunately, there is no conclusive body of research pointing toward one panacea for remedial instruction; mastery learning, computers, cooperative learning, and other strategies all show promise under certain conditions. Common sense seems to be the most important commodity in designing programs for students in need of remediation; these students need solid, consistent instruction carefully geared to their needs, taking advantage of the best materials and technology available. Whatever approach is adopted, an important variable is the degree of *staff ownership*. It is also critical that schools pursue particular strategies in a systematic and unified manner over a period of years.

Myth #7: Students in need of remediation must work on lower-order reading and math skills and cannot afford the luxury of studying science, social studies, and other subjects in any depth. Limiting these students' diet to lower-order skills almost always has three effects: (a) it turns learning into drudgery, creating motivation and attendance problems; (b) it deprives those students of the conceptual tools and background knowledge to make sense of grade-level material and the world around them; and (c) it creates a self-perpetuating "no-exit" situation for these students in which they fall further and further behind. For these reasons, it is critical that schools teach the *full curriculum* to all students and find creative ways of bringing the more difficult material to low-achieving students (e.g., reading literature aloud, asking oral questions at all conceptual levels, and teaching science and social studies content through children's literature, films, simulations and role-playing, field trips, and hands-on experience).

Myth #8: The most effective remediation takes place outside regular classrooms in pullout or after-school programs. There has been a strong tendency to sequester remediation in special pullout programs outside the mainstream of the regular program. Although this model can be effective (some elementary Chapter I programs are examples), there are five reasons pointing toward the need to free ourselves from the notion that remediation must always take place in pullout settings: (a) recent research has raised questions about pullout programs, especially where students are carrying on two

ulum requirements and attend remedial classes; (d) if adjustments in time allocations were made, pullout programs would cut into time for social studies, science, foreign languages, library, art, and music — all of which are important to motivation, basic skills, and an overall well-rounded education; and (e) as far as after-school remediation programs are concerned, many students have difficulty attending such classes because of busing limitations, and other more attractive activities, so that after-school programs seldom attract students who need help the most. In short, there is little time outside



Reprinted from the *New Yorker*.

parallel, unrelated programs with different goals, standards, materials, and instructional strategies and little communication between pullout and mainstream teachers; (b) frequently these programs become "no exit" programs in which students fall further and further behind their peers; (c) scheduling a major pullout remediation effort during the school day would necessitate re-thinking the time allocations for students needing remediation, since there is not enough time in the school day for them to accomplish the new curric-

the regular program for remediation to take place. The needs of these students must be met primarily in their *regular* math, English, reading, social studies, and science classes.

For a copy of the complete document, contact Instructional Services, 8th floor, 26 Court Street (726-6200, extension 5349).

Kim Marshall is Manager of Instructional Services.

