

# Biennial School Media Conference

## Addressed by Thorwald Esbensen\*

by Henry Wefing

A Minnesota educator came to Durham Thursday to tell North Carolina school teachers and administrators about a "revolutionary" school that places the family squarely in the middle of the educational process.

In an interview prior to delivering the keynote address at the Biennial School Media Work Conference at the Durham Hotel-Motel, Thorwald Esbensen described a parochial elementary school in Duluth, Minn., that for the past two years has emphasized individualized instruction.

What makes individualized instruction at the Minnesota school unique, Esbensen said, is the role of the family.

At the beginning of the school year, parents of about 300 elementary school pupils are asked to examine with their children eight catalogs containing more than 1,000 "performance contracts."

Each contract sets forth a specific learning objective. At the most elementary level, for example, a contract might call for a pupil to pronounce the letters of the alphabet when shown them in a random sequence.

After the parents and the child select contracts, the parents visit the school for conferences with each of the faculty members who will work with their children.

The school is divided into a lower division of grades one through four and an upper division of grades five through eight. Within those divisions, there is no further segregation by age or grade level.

"They are all swooshed together like fish in a pond," said Esbensen, a professor of education at St. Scholastica College.

Learning centers staffed by teachers with specialized competence in a specific field replace traditional classrooms.

At 11:30 a.m. each day, children in the upper division meet with advisers and plan for the following day.

Esbensen said pupils have positive and negative inducements for fulfilling their performance contracts.

The positive inducement is a system that allocates bid point values to each of the contracts. Accumulation of bid points permits the pupils to exchange them for certain privileges, like an afternoon of playing chess, attendance at a school movie or participation in a dog obedience training session.

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The negative inducement is forced scheduling. Pupils failing to meet contracts because they have been "goldbricking" lose the privilege of arranging their own schedule.

"We use the regular school day as a punishment," Esbensen said.

The Minnesota educator said the bid point system does not penalize the slow learner when pupils' contracts have been chosen with attention to their levels of development.

In the experimental school, Esbensen said, it is rare to see a teacher addressing a class. He estimates teachers spend about one-tenth as much time talking to groups as teachers in traditional schools.

Parents are kept abreast of the progress of their children through weekly reports written by the teachers. The reports contain specific information on how well the children are meeting their educational objectives. The pupils receive no grades.

Esbensen, who spent five years as an assistant superintendent for instruction in the Duluth public school system, hopes to see widespread adoption of the family-focused educational experiment.

He thinks it represents an answer for parents frustrated by unresponsive school institutions.

"We're making it possible," Esbensen said, "for every family to decide what it wants its children to learn."

He argues that the family-centered system bypasses "big bloc confrontations" over such things as sex education. Each parent is entitled to choose the learning objectives for his child.

"Our rationale is that in a democratic society every family should have the right to mess up its own affairs," Esbensen said.

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