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Yerba Buena High nevertheless can show a record  
of three violence-free years  
and comparatively few cases of vandalism

# Crisis Counseling

BY SHIRLEY BOES NEILL

**Y**erba Buena High School in San Jose, California, serves a "challenging" neighborhood, among the most economically strapped in all of Santa Clara County. It's one of those places that sprouted too fast—rich farmland suddenly overgrown with urban sprawl. With urbanization, minorities moved in—also too fast for easy absorption into the cultural milieu. Racial feelings boiled and, in the 1960s, inevitably, exploded into riots and bombings.

With this kind of legacy, a third of the area's families are on welfare, which helps explain the transient quality of Yerba Buena students, about half of whom are in and out of school in one term or less. And it's no secret that truancy and dropout rates are fairly reliable indicators of potential trouble. Moreover, that many of the students come from one-parent homes suggests a lack of parental guidance, a principal contributing factor in juvenile delinquency. With these characteristics, the neighborhood would appear to be constantly ripe for trouble.

What the character of the neighborhood does not explain or suggest is the fact that Yerba Buena, which serves 1,900 students—half of them Mexican-American, about a seventh of them black, and the remainder white with a sprinkling of Asian and American Indian—has experienced no violence since 1971 and comparatively few cases of vandalism. According to a national survey,

most school districts spend anywhere from a dollar to a shade more than \$13 per student per year as a result of the destruction caused by vandals; Yerba Buena spends less than \$1,000 per year total.

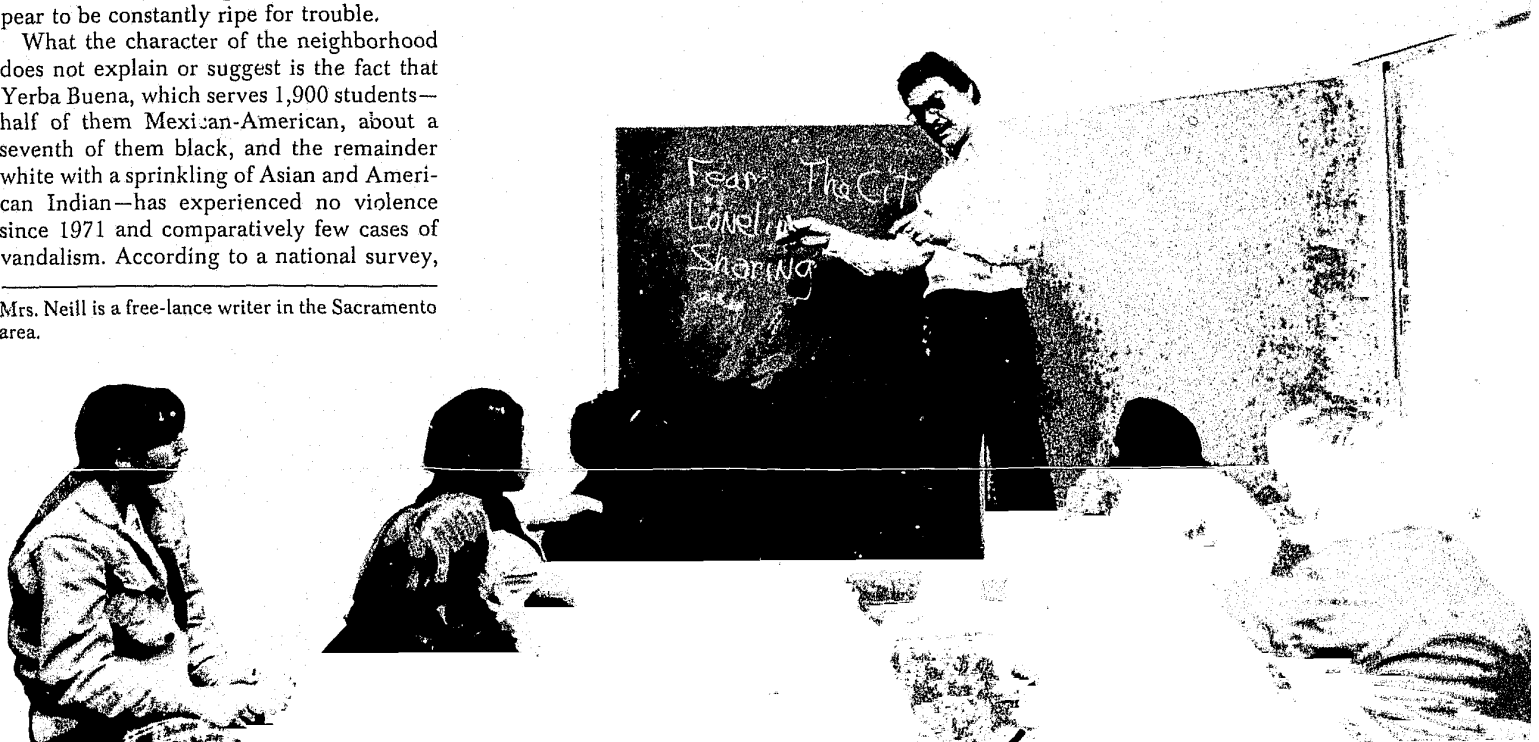
There is, of course, an explanation for this happy statistic. It's a project called "Crisis Counseling," and it deals with distress situations: A distraught teenager threatens suicide because she needs someone to help her work out some personal problems. A severely bruised boy admits to a teacher or counselor that he was beaten by his father. A 13-year-old, a good student, refuses to attend school because her parents cannot afford to buy her a pair of jeans. Gerald Mullins, the project director and chief counselor at Yerba Buena, talks of "crisis students" as the "often neglected but easily identified" youths who cannot relate to school. Hard-core crisis students, the most difficult ones to deal with, often are beyond control at home and at school. They frequently display hostility or passive resis-

tance, and they are prone to drug addiction and truancy.

These kinds of "crisis" situations markedly affect a child's life and a school's operation. Yet, many educators cannot or do not know how to deal with students in crisis. Crisis counseling calls for the precise skills that can deal with students who are on the ropes.

Three to four years ago, there were as many as 50 Yerba Buena students experiencing some kind of personal torment at any given time. Now, potential crisis situations are frequently spotted in their beginning stages. Staff members immediately step in to help students and their families deal with their problems on a short-term or long-term basis. Parents are an important cog in the crisis-counseling mechanism, and the school offers them special day and evening education classes, which are well attended. The project's success is attested to in having been

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cited as a model by the California School Boards Association and copied by 53 other schools and youth-serving agencies.

Crisis Counseling was developed at Yerba Buena shortly after the school was established in 1971. Gerald Mullins believed the school should, right from the start, take the lead in handling student and community-related problems in the neighborhood. Mr. Mullins also wanted to test a new conception of working with those agencies in the county that offered social services to youths and families. He started the project and became its director. For four years the work was funded modestly (approximately \$30,000 per year) under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Now, because school officials believe that the project has been responsible for much of Yerba Buena's model status, the school is continuing almost all aspects of the project on its own.

The problems of crisis students usually start in the home. Most—but not all—of the youths so labeled come from low-income families; parental neglect is rampant, with little communication between parents and children. Well-meaning parents many times have to admit to not knowing “what we’ve done wrong” or “what to do next.” Sometimes the rivalry among their own children stumps them. Often, child-rearing and earning a living compete for the time and attention of a single parent, usually the mother’s. More than likely economics will prevail, leaving little time to bring up children. Within the immediate area there is scant evidence of anyone “making it” and few success models to copy.

To work with crisis students in a positive manner takes specialized skills, Mr. Mullins contends. “Crisis counseling goes beyond just talking about a student’s problems. It requires a person with intuitive knowledge about students, experience in working with them, good communication skills, and the ability to work through crises with students, adults, and appropriate community agencies. The kind of ‘crisis’ work we do requires a person who can identify the problem and more. He or she must be able to come up with a solution. It’s not enough just to ‘rap’ with the kids.”

Often, more than one member of the crisis team—which includes all nine members of the school’s counseling department, a school administrator, and a school liaison consultant—work with a single student. Before federal funding ceased at the end of the 1975-76 school year, representatives of social-service and youth-serving agencies were stationed in the school to work jointly with its crisis team. Usually available were two representatives of social-service agencies, a probation officer, a police officer in charge of a diversion program, a psychiatrist on a part-time basis, community volunteers

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who manned a 24-hour crisis hotline telephone, tutors from the General Electric Company, and representatives from various support services.

These people help students mainly through counseling and through a learning center that was opened to provide remedial instruction in reading and math to Yerba Buena students and to junior high students from a feeder school. Yerba Buena students are offered individualized instruction in an opportunity class when they cannot keep up with the demands of a regular classroom. Counseling and tutoring by their classmates are also available to crisis students. Other services—temporary out-of-home placement and temporary in-home assistance—are made available when a crisis situation demands that a youth leave home for a few days or that someone deal directly with a student and his parents in his own home.

Almost all of the program’s components are being continued by Yerba Buena with its own funds since the federal funds ran out. There are a few casualties, however. Social-agency representatives are no longer stationed in the school, although the crisis-counseling team continues to work with the agencies. Nor could the hotline be continued on a round-the-clock basis. Mr. Mullins believes, however, that the school must continue to accept phone calls. During the 1975-76 school year there were an average 120 calls monthly. “We can still take care of a good number of the calls,” Mr. Mullins notes, “because most come in between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.”

How many of the project’s services are needed varies according to each individual case. Take Joe Smith, whose mother tells about her long-standing problems with her son and how she and Joe were helped by the Crisis Counseling Project.

Joe, who, according to Mrs. Smith, was “always a temperamental child,” adopted truancy as a way of life in his midteen years. Neither Mrs. Smith nor her husband was informed of the boy’s truancy by officials of his

school (not Yerba Buena). When Mrs. Smith found out that Joe hardly ever showed up at school she questioned the school officials about it. “They had the attitude that it’s great if he comes to school,” says Mrs. Smith, “and it’s also great if he doesn’t.” Joe had been truant for almost four consecutive months.

Mrs. Smith feared for her son if he was let loose to roam the streets. She relentlessly—but unsuccessfully—sought aid from Joe’s teachers, school administrators, the police department, the probation office, and private counseling agencies. She had him picked up and taken to juvenile hall three times for truancy, but, she says, “the juvenile court doesn’t really want to deal with truant.” In order to obtain some help in handling Joe she declared him “beyond control.” He ran away, however, and was picked up by a probation officer who asked him to sign a contract stating that he would attend school. Joe signed the contract—then promptly broke it.

Mrs. Smith was at her wit’s end when, having found marijuana in the home, she called her son’s probation officer, only to be told, “Flush it down the toilet.” Some time later the probation officer said he would solve her problems by placing Joe in a foster home.

About this time Mrs. Smith came across the Crisis Counseling Project in some literature handed her by one of the social service agencies. At first she was hesitant about calling the project because she did not live in the area served by the Yerba Buena school. But her desperation overcame her timidity and she called, bringing to an end the “cat and mouse” game which she unwittingly had been playing. A Yerba Buena counselor took Joe in hand, and Mr. and Mrs. Smith were both enrolled in parent-education classes.

“I learned in the classes that none of us are trained to be parents,” Mrs. Smith says. “We need help. I started to see that I had been giving in to my children from the time they were very small. I recognized this by listening to the other people in the class tell how they were raising their children. I could spot what they were doing wrong, and then I realized that I had done the same things. It’s like a light bulb going on. I found out that parents all have one hang-up: They give in to their kids.”

“I learned that I have to be consistent,” Mrs. Smith goes on. “It doesn’t matter if neighbors or friends agree or not. Consistency counts most. Kids know how far they can press to get their way, and the parents’ best defense is consistency.”

Mrs. Smith says her son has profited from Crisis Counseling as much as she and her husband. “He is still a typical teenager,” she says, “but he is doing much better now because he likes himself much better. And



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he likes his father and me better because we finally took a stand."

Joe is now enrolled in a continuation school (a special school for students who cannot make it in the regular system), and he wants to stay there for another year. "He realizes," says Mrs. Smith, "that he is not yet ready to go back to his regular school."

Mrs. Smith is continuing in the parent-education classes, saying, "It's like belonging to Alcoholics Anonymous. You start to get weak and you have to go back for reinforcement. Besides, I'm not through raising my children yet." Mrs. Smith is trying to persuade her married teen-age daughter to enroll in the classes "so she will be better prepared than I was to raise a family."

Some crises are particularly delicate to handle. One example is deciding how to intervene in an obvious case of child beating when the child is reluctant to press charges. Other crises have a hair-trigger tenseness about them—trying to dissuade from suicide a youngster who seems bent on self-destruction.

One of the school's counselors, Jerry Powell, is known specifically as the school's "crisis counselor" because he works mainly with the most difficult cases. He has worked with up to 50 "hard-core" crisis students and their parents at one time, sometimes stretching cases over two or three years. Mr. Powell, who was raised in an inner city, seems to know instinctively how far he can and must go with some parents. His acquaintance with all the excuses as well as the legitimate reasons why students end up in crisis situations serves him well as leader of two of the three parent-education classes and of the peer-counseling program. To many of the students, he is counselor, hard-line disciplinarian, and friend.

Mr. Powell says students start to "phase out" as early as the second grade. He explains: "The second-grade teacher may hand out ten problems in math. The kid may hand in seven and get away with it. If the teacher says at this point, 'Well, that's good enough for him,' and there is no complaint or questioning from the parents, the kid starts to phase out. He learns early in life what he can get away with. The same thing happens with parents sometimes. They may feel sorry for the child for one reason or another. Maybe there is no father in the home, or the mother overindulges with presents to make up for not spending enough time with her child or to make up for the child's illegitimacy. In the classroom a white teacher may feel sorry or guilty about a black child's background and won't hold that child accountable."

When Mr. Powell encounters a crisis student at the late age of 14 or 15, things often are out of hand. Once he starts to work on a case, he confesses that "things generally get worse before they get better." Often he must

try to persuade parents to do something about their own problems as a means of solving those of their children. Basically, he says, he teaches parents how to hold the line, how not to get into arguments with their children or give in to them, or indulge them with presents, or bribe them.

Mr. Powell has been known to tell parents of an overindulged child to take extreme measures if the child threatens to run away. "Pack his bags for him, sell his motorcycle, clean up his room and rent it out to a college student. "Then," Mr. Powell tells the parents, "you two use the money you get from selling his stuff to take that trip you've always talked about."

Mr. Powell adds a footnote that he doesn't really expect parents to take this advice. "I am trying to establish a different attitude," he says, "so that the child won't see his or her parents as easy marks. I train the parents to be more assertive with their child and less aggressive and permissive.

"Youngsters are a lot more powerful than parents in many situations," Mr. Powell goes on to say. "They can punish their parents: They can get poor grades, get caught with dope, get pregnant. One of the best weapons they have is running away. Kids know they can control parents through these devices. Take runaways. Most children do not run away because they are abused at home. They know that parents are vulnerable to the threat of running away, so they use this tactic to drop parents to their knees."

According to Mr. Powell's experience, youngsters who run away usually go to a friend's house around the corner. There they leak the word where they're staying so the parents will come looking for them. This allows the child to negotiate with the parents on his or her terms. "When a youngster tells me he is going to run away," says Mr. Powell, "I tell him, 'Your parents sure don't need you. You need your parents.'"

Mr. Powell believes that when a youngster runs away, the parents have to lay down certain rules and, before readmitting the runaway into the house, be prepared to say, "This is what I expect of you before you come in. If you cannot cooperate with these guidelines, just hit the road." Mr. Powell also believes parents have to get across to their children that "love is conditional. It's got to be earned. It's like respect. You can't give love and respect away for nothing."

**E**stablishing different attitudes in parents toward each other may work back to solving a child's problem, Mr. Powell feels. "Women have been trained to see themselves as mothers first, with all of their other roles secondary to that," he says. "I try to get a mother to improve her self-image. She must ask herself, Who and what are you? Maid, chauffeur, cook, slave, mother, lover, wife, a person? As a mother becomes more liberated, the

marriage improves. There are fewer problems with the children because they learn to understand and respect the parents' roles, once they are defined."

Mr. Powell also advocates a new role for fathers—that of teacher to their children. Fathers must learn how to help their children become more assertive without being aggressive, he says.

Other problems may arise in school because it isn't the happy place some administrators and teachers think it should be and they feel guilty about it. "Bosh!" says Mr. Powell. "School is meant for hard work." He is critical also of teachers who go overboard to help a student while, at the same time, not demanding that the student do his share of studying and extra work.

If Mr. Powell's advice and criticisms seem

harsh, his methods appear to work. "He hasn't had one case blow up in his face yet," says a fellow counselor. And everything points to his being well liked and respected by the parents who participate in parent-education classes. According to Mrs. Smith, "Jerry Powell really doesn't tell us what to do. He lets us talk and then he gives us ideas and things to think about."

Jerry Powell and his boss, Gerald Mullins, are consistent in stressing the importance of consistency. The whole Yerba Buena staff, in fact, operates on the principle of consistency. This eases the burden on everyone. "Rules must be consistent and consistently applied in the school," Mr. Mullins says. "Each and every faculty member must know, abide by, and follow through on the same set of rules. This practice takes the au-



*Junior-high students performing below grade-level work get remedial help daily in the learning center at Yerba Buena, lessening the chance of their becoming crisis students when they get to high school.*



thority problem off the principal's back because all the teachers must agree to follow all the rules. This gives the principal added moral authority and enables him or her to say, with the backing of the staff, that any teacher deviating from the standards set by all will be censured."

Under ordinary conditions youngsters soon learn what they can get away with from any one teacher. With a set of rules equally enforced by all, however, a teacher, an administrator, or a parent has a better chance of succeeding with students—who soon become aware that their small one-act dramas are ineffective, no matter what teacher they're up against.

Although consistency is not easily attainable, Yerba Buena staff members' loyalty to the project's philosophy seems to vouch for the workability of the policy. Staff turnover is almost nil. One assistant principal at another school in the district decided to leave the administrative ranks to join the nine-member counseling staff at Yerba Buena.

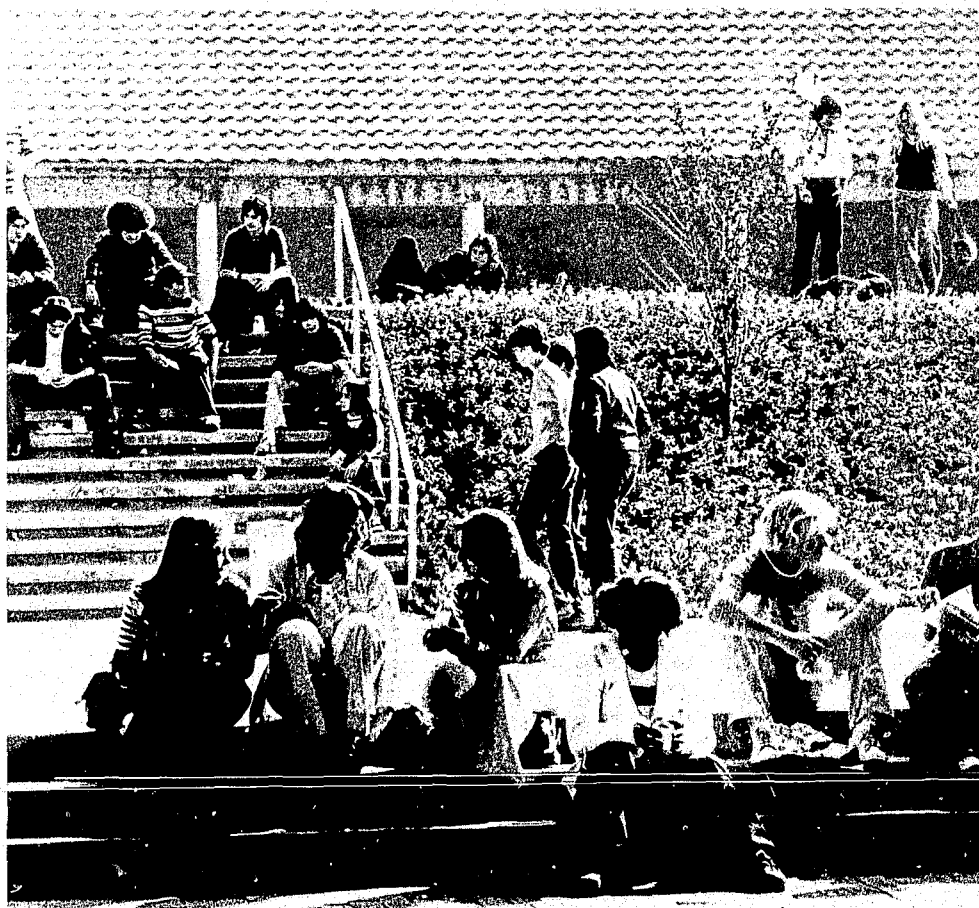
The counseling staff members all work together and meet together once a week with associate principal John Sellarole, an enthusiastic supporter of the project. Sitting in and participating in every meeting is Iola Williams, the community liaison consultant, who keeps up her contacts in the community by "sticking my nose in anywhere." As a school board member at a feeder school, a parent, and an active member in community affairs, she knows what is going on. She is often the first person to know about events in the community that could affect what happens at Yerba Buena. By attending a local planning commission meeting, for example, she learned that a four-lane street was proposed to hug the school on one side. "I told community members of the proposal, and we attended the next planning meeting to let the commissioners know that we didn't think much of their plans." As another example, she says "just knowing that a nearby district is planning an inservice day can save us a lot of grief. That way, we are prepared when a lot of youngsters from the other school come swarming onto our campus."

Mr. Mullins relates how one of the project's crisis-prevention techniques got off the ground because of Mrs. Williams's connections. Yerba Buena came up with plans for a learning center where students could receive remedial instruction in reading and math. No funding could be found, however. Mrs. Williams carried the proposal to another board of education for a feeder school. Board members agreed to provide a coordinator for the learning-center program. Now, 30 junior-high students who are two or more years below grade level in reading and math spend two and one-half hours daily in the Yerba Buena center.

By eliminating the academic deficiencies



*When the rich farmland of Santa Clara County seemingly changed overnight into an area characterized by urban sprawl, doomsayers predicted that its schools, with their increasing minority enrollments, would be ever ripe for turmoil. Happily, Yerba Buena High has demonstrated otherwise.*





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of the youngsters while allowing them to become acquainted with the high school, says Mr. Mullins, "we are decreasing the chances that these youngsters will be crisis students later when they are in high school." With reading and math consultants available to assist, the junior-high youngsters are tutored in the center by Yerba Buena juniors and seniors, thus giving the younger students models to emulate. Mr. Mullins says the junior-high students who participate in the daily remedial courses can be scheduled into regular English classes instead of reading classes when they reach Yerba Buena. Senior-high students also have profited from the center. According to Mr. Mullins, student performance in reading and math is now at or above the state average.

Other means of crisis prevention are: teacher training in crisis counseling, which is given for university credit, an opportunity class for students who cannot function in the regular classroom, and a successful peer-counseling program. In the latter program, youngsters who have experienced and conquered a particular crisis work with a youngster who is involved in the same type of situation. To illustrate: A youngster who

has kicked the drug habit would be trained and then assigned to work with a student who is found to be using drugs.

With those critics who argue that a school cannot possibly meet all the needs of all youngsters, their families, and other community members, Mr. Mullins would probably agree. In his 16 years' experience as a teacher and counselor, he has had ample opportunity to note firsthand the incomprehensible bureaucratic tangle of overlapping services provided by federal and local agencies. In a school district where students may be lacking food and clothing and such services as counseling, he says, teachers and administrators often do not know that aid is available through a local agency or organization.

Consequently, Mr. Mullins spends a good deal of time and effort in coordinating Yerba Buena activities with those of various youth-serving groups in the county. His purpose is to establish the school as the "logical agency to coordinate youth services in the community." He says this kind of arrangement has long been recognized as ideal by some child-advocacy and youth-serving groups. In 1971, for example, the American Correctional Association stated: "Outside of the family, perhaps the most strategically placed social institution in terms of youth development is the school." In mid-1976, the Junior League of San Francisco examined youth services in that city and reached the same conclusion that Mr. Mullins had reached four years earlier—that is, services must be coordinated if they are to work effectively and efficiently.

Why is coordination needed? "The prob-

lem, as Yerba Buena saw it within its neighborhood, was fragmentation of professional leadership," says Mr. Mullins. "Schools, police, probation, social services were all working in separate worlds with no day-in and day-out working relationship. There was no agreed-on method for systematically dealing with the problems of family, school, and neighborhood. This kind of system—or nonsystem—has done more to promote delinquency than it has to prevent it."

Trying to establish the "interagency concept" is not easy. "It took us a year and a half to persuade the probation department of the value of having one man working out of the school," Mr. Mullins says. "Prior to that time, there were as many as 12 probation officers passing in and out of the school with very little communication with anybody." By bringing different agency personnel together under one roof, the school and the agencies have gained experience in working together, if nothing else. And, although the agencies have withdrawn their representatives from the school because the school can no longer compensate them for their presence, Mr. Mullins remains optimistic. He believes the interagency concept offers the best route for curing school and community problems.

The cessation of funding has also reduced the number of extra services the school could provide, but the effects of the project on the school remain. John Sellarole acknowledges that "the way we've chosen to go in this school takes a lot of work. But in the long run it's worth it. The students are going to come out of this school better people, better prepared to face what is ahead of them because of the approach that was fostered by the Crisis Counseling Project."

Many groups are recognizing that existing organizations are too big and too complex to deal with problems at the neighborhood level. A local university sends its students who are training to be social workers to learn about the Yerba Buena program. "This way," Mr. Mullins says, "we may be able to affect the thinking of some of our future social workers." As it is, he receives at any one time some 100 requests for information on the project. Many parents are looking to get their neighborhood schools to adopt a crisis-counseling approach. They are all of a mind similar to Mrs. Smith's when she says, "Why, my goodness, if each school had something like this, we parents wouldn't have such problems." □

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the Yerba Buena Crisis Counseling Program, write to Mr. Gerald Mullins, Project Director, Yerba Buena High School, 1855 Lucretia Avenue, San Jose, CA 95122, or phone (408) 279-1500, ext. 77.





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