

MINICOURSES: A WAY TO ADD SPICE TO THE BASICS

Imagine the luxury of teaching a favorite subject to a self-selected group of eager learners.

BY KIM MARSHALL

Four years ago the Martin Luther King, Jr., Middle School in Boston was made into a "magnet school" and faced the challenge of recruiting students from all parts of the city. One of the most successful innovations put into action in response to this challenge was a minicourse program.

The idea was simple: Every staff member offered a high-interest course to be taught during one afternoon period every week. Each kid chose from the list of offerings and went to an assigned minicourse for seven weeks; so by the end of the year everyone had attended five different courses.

The minicourse program, initiated almost entirely by teachers within the school, was an immediate success. It provided hands-on learning and activities that students looked forward to. It gave freedom of choice to students and teachers. It gave students of different grade levels a chance to mix with each other in small groups. It gave teachers a chance to share personal interests and talents as diverse as dog handling, macrame, public speaking, poetry writing and yoga.

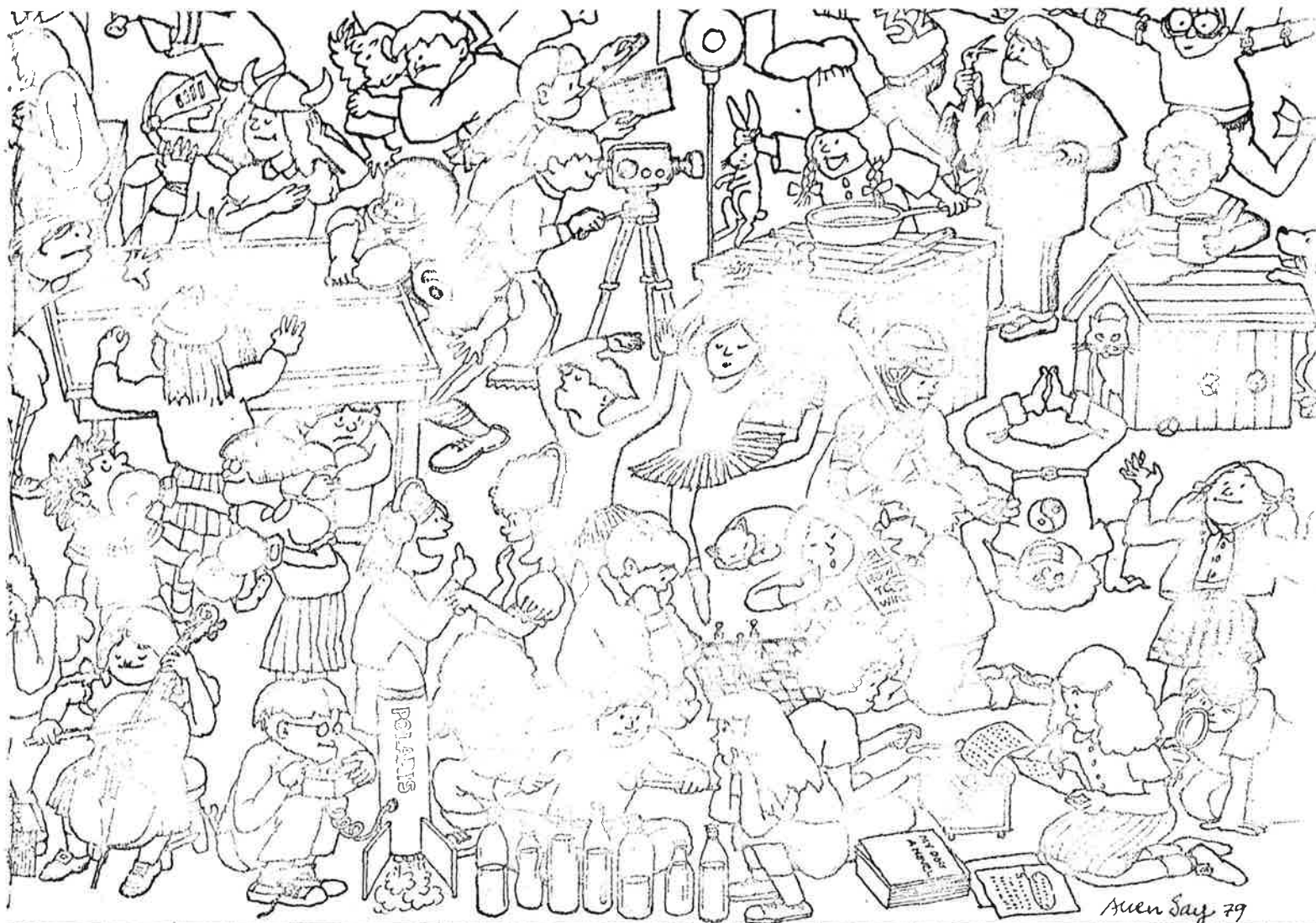
Minicourses are a small part of the

total school program, taking up only 3 percent of the week's class time. But I'm convinced that the program has played a significant role in humanizing the school and in providing options for students without undermining the basics in any way. It's helped us fulfill the role of a middle school—opening students' horizons, providing a caring environment and teaching the basic skills in an atmosphere in which students are willing to learn.

Parents have been impressed with the program, especially with the list of courses offered by the staff. A tour of the school during minicourse time is indeed exciting. Visitors can peer through classroom windows and see kids decorating cakes, meditating, building models, staging plays, learning sign language or playing chess.

Here, for teachers and administrators interested in starting a similar program in their own schools, is the wisdom that has come from four years of running minicourses at the King School:

1. *Establish a philosophy.* It's essential to know what you are trying to accomplish with the program. An im-



portant question to ask is How much will the minicourses be tilted toward or away from basic academic subjects?

2. *Choose the length of the minicourses.* Both the number of meetings held each week and the number of weeks the courses will run will depend on the kinds of courses offered.

3. *Decide whether or not to give grades.* We have tried it both ways and decided that giving grades, even pass/fail, is too cumbersome. Grades seem out of keeping with a program that is basically supplementary and in which most students are highly motivated.

4. *Choose a "honcho."* There has to be one person who has responsibility for the program, or it will founder because of minor problems. This person should have plenty of energy and a belief that the program will succeed. It helps if the person is an administrator, with the attendant clout, but that isn't essential. I was able to run the King School program for two years as a full-time sixth grade teacher.

5. *Block out time in the class schedule.* Everyone must be free to teach or to go to a minicourse at the

same time. We have tried giving minicourses in the morning just before lunch and last thing in the afternoon. Morning was nicer and everyone was fresher, but that part of the day—we finally decided—was prime time for academic subjects.

6. *Get the whole staff involved.* Show no mercy. From the very beginning there should be a clear administrative policy that everyone—including the principal, guidance counselors, nurse, secretary and custodians—will teach a minicourse. The only people who don't should be the honcho and one or two administrators who patrol the halls making sure all students find their way to class.

7. *Work out an average class size.* Do this by dividing the number of minicourse teachers into the number of students at the school. Make it clear that any teacher requesting an enrollment ceiling below this average class size must give a very convincing educational argument (i.e., limited equipment or space).

8. *Get money if possible.* Some teachers may need to buy extra materials for their minicourses. It helps if

they can dip into the school budget or into a special-purpose fund for \$25 or so.

9. *Give teachers a long list of ideas for minicourses.* (See "A Myriad of Minicourses" on page 75.) It's hard to think of minicourse ideas in a vacuum.

10. *Have a group brainstorming and sharing session.* Every teacher should briefly present a tentative minicourse description to the entire staff. As people hear each other's ideas, duplication can be eliminated. Course ideas will change and improve, and some teachers may decide to team up in cooperative minicourses.

11. *Get a volunteer to run a study hall.* This, unfortunately, is vital to the success of the program. There will always be a few kids who don't want to go to any minicourses. Others may be so mad that they didn't get their first choices that they will sulk in the halls. There has to be a place to put these students.

12. *Establish a policy for teacher absences.* There are two options: Students from the minicourses of absent teachers may go to the minicourses run by their homeroom teachers, or

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they may go to the study hall. A clear policy should specify one of the alternatives.

13. *Have teachers write brief descriptions of their minicourses.* This is accomplished more easily if you hand out a sheet with spaces for the minicourse title, the teacher's name, room number, ideal number of students, absolute maximum number of students, brief course description and prerequisites.

14. *Round up and evaluate the course descriptions.* Leave enough time to get back to teachers whose courses are clearly off the wall, won't attract kids, are outside the philosophy of the program, overlap with other teachers' courses or have unrealistically low enrollment ceilings.

15. *Check the total capacity of all the minicourses.* Add up the maximum enrollments for all the offerings to make sure there is room for all the students in the school. If there isn't, some teachers will have to be persuaded to raise their ceilings or to change their courses.

16. *Type up a course list.* Include catchy titles, course numbers, brief descriptions, prerequisites, teachers' names, room numbers and enrollment ranges. Make copies for everyone. Also make a student-choice slip with spaces for the student's name, homeroom and five minicourse choices to be listed in order of preference.

17. *Distribute batches of course lists and student-choice slips.* Each homeroom should receive its supply four days before you want the slips returned. Attach a memo to homeroom teachers urging them to use the four days to round up slips from all their students.

18. *Have teachers "sell" the courses.* Urge them to push new offerings and to encourage kids to make offbeat choices. Students might also be encouraged to take the course lists home and to involve their parents in their choices.

19. *Round up and check over the slips.* In a large school this requires a major dragnet. It's best to set the deadline at noon, allowing a few hours to chase down slips from delinquent or absent teachers. If time permits, it is a good idea to check slips against class lists immediately and to remind teachers about missing slips. Also check for legibility and for "illegal" slips (for example, those listing basketball for all five choices). Send these back to the kids to be filled out again.

20. *Sort the slips out by first choices.*

The whole process of scheduling requires a few undisturbed hours and a cleared work area—preferably a large table. Scheduling is done best—and just about as fast—by one person rather than by a committee.

21. *Note the oversubscribed and undersubscribed courses.* Refer to each teacher's specified maximum class size when making assignments. From this point on, scheduling is quite a bit like a game of Concentration: You try to remember which courses need students as you bump kids out of those that have too many. When evening out the piles, start with the most popular minicourses (ours have included silk-screen printing, gourmet cooking, disco dancing, typing, juggling, calligraphy, basketball and cartooning). Go through these slips looking for second choices that are undersubscribed, then for third choices, then fourth, then fifth.

22. *Be sure that all students get a minicourse they've chosen.* This may sound improbable, but in the 17 times I've scheduled minicourses for the King School, not one student who filled out a slip was assigned to a course that was not one of his or her five choices. A variety of offerings and the natural diversity of interests in any school population account for this success. If things are tight, it may be necessary to cajole a few teachers into raising their maximum enrollments.

23. *Accept the fact that some inequities will occur.* Students whose five choices are all popular, oversubscribed minicourses will probably get their first choices. Kids who choose one offbeat, undersubscribed course as a fourth choice will probably end up there. This is an inherent weakness in the system. It can be remedied by urging teachers to offer high-interest courses and by urging kids to make independent choices rather than follow the pack.

24. *Type up class lists.* Make a copy of the appropriate list for each minicourse teacher and a complete set of lists for each homeroom teacher, distributing the lists the day before the minicourses begin if possible. In some schools the office secretary has time to do this job. In ours that has never been the case, and we have sometimes split the job among four or five teams of two teachers.

25. *Make a list of minicourses that still have openings.* Run off a supply of this list to give to stragglers on the kickoff day.

26. *Announce a time for stragglers to make choices.* Students who weren't assigned to a minicourse for

some reason (absence, illegible handwriting) should come to the school office before the minicourse period. Show students the list of minicourses that still have openings. They may choose one of those minicourses or the study hall. Keep a running master list of additions to minicourses to make sure undersubscribed courses aren't overfilled.

27. *Announce that there will be no transfers.* Stick to that policy. All students should be required to stay with the minicourse assignments they got, even fifth choices. An open transfer policy can turn the program into a mob scene or a popularity contest.

28. *Have homeroom teachers make and post homeroom lists.* Their lists show which minicourse each of their homeroom students is attending.

29. *Give teachers attendance forms.* Require them to take attendance each minicourse day to keep down corridor wandering.

30. *Circulate and offer support.* Once everyone is assigned and the minicourses are running smoothly, get around every week to show teachers there is interest and excitement about what they are doing in their classes. Take pictures, collect course products for bulletin boards and displays, and talk to kids about how things are going. Because the entire staff is teaching, visitors may be the only ones who see the big picture—the excitement and variety of the program. It is essential to get this information back to teachers.

31. *Talk to teachers whose minicourses aren't going well.* Suggest new ideas and materials. Link these teachers up with other teachers who have good ideas.

32. *Ask students to evaluate the minicourses they attend.* Get the results back to the teachers before they decide to repeat their minicourses or to develop new ones. Students should also be asked what new minicourses they would like to see.

33. *Prepare for a new cycle well in advance.* I use a transition schedule that involves backing up almost three weeks from the first day of a new minicourse cycle.

34. *Keep the energy level high.* Maintain momentum. Keep encouraging new ideas. Don't let anyone get into a rut. Give feedback and solicit feedback from parents and from the community.

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The What and How of Teaching a Minicourse

1. If you have trouble coming up with a minicourse, take a look at the following list of titles or have a brainstorming session with friends. Think about which of your hobbies or interests might excite kids. As a rule, the more interested and enthusiastic you are about an activity, the greater the chance is that kids will get involved.

2. Don't be afraid to offer offbeat activities—almost anything is worth one try.

3. Be aware of the importance of the course title and description in attracting kids; after all, your course title is competing with every other teacher's minicourse name. You might also want to promote your course around the school, actively recruiting the kids who would be most interested. If kids enjoy the course, you should make sure they spread the good word.

4. Be willing to admit it if an idea

bombs and don't make the same mistake twice. Offer a different minicourse the next time.

5. Remember that you are going to get a self-selected group of kids with a special interest in your offering. This means that you can move a lot faster and go a lot deeper than you could if you had a class with only a sprinkling of highly interested kids.

6. Plan a fast-moving, informal, hands-on teaching format. Kids expect something other than traditional classroom structure during a minicourse period. There should be a minimum of theory and a maximum of activity.

7. Use the activity time to move around the room. Talk to kids and get kids talking to each other. A hidden agenda of a good minicourse program is to allow an "underground" counseling and interaction network to flourish.

8. Get parents and community resource people involved in the minicourse you're giving. You might want to send a letter home with students, advertise in the local newspaper or scout around the community for people who have something to offer. Sponsor their minicourses at school.

9. Don't get into a rut; even if your minicourse is going well, it's a good idea to change it frequently, perhaps handing off your expertise and materials to a teacher who's having trouble getting a minicourse off the ground. Seek out new interests and learn new skills. You might want to team up with another expert for one go-round, learn the skill and then launch forth on your own. A good minicourse program should be a chance for everyone, teachers as well as students, to learn and grow.

A Myriad of Minicourses

These minicourses have been given at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Middle School in Boston, the Bigelow Junior High School in Newton, Massachusetts, and the Oberlin Middle School in Oberlin, Ohio:

Advertising Design
Airplanes and
Rockets
Animals, Alive and
Dead
Arts and Crafts
Aviation
Backgammon
Baseball
Basketball
Batik
Black History
Bookmaking
Bottle Music
Boxing
Bridge
Broadway Hits
Bulletin Boards
Business Math
Cafeteria Help
Cake Decorating
Calculators
Calligraphy
Career Awareness
Cartoon Drawing
Chain Stories
Chess

Chorus
Classical Music
Clay Modeling
Clothing Repairs
Codes and Ciphers
Comedy Film
Festival
Consumer
Education
Contemporary
Music
Creative Graphics
Crocheting
Current Events
Custodian Helpers
Dance Group
Debating
Decoupage
Detective
Mysteries
Discovering the
U.S.A.
Dog Handling
Drafting
Economics
Educational Games
Embroidery

Ethnic Games,
Crafts, Folklore
Famous American
Women
Fashion Ideas
First Aid
Football Math
Games With Cards
Getting Jobs
Gift Wrapping
Good Grooming
Gospel and
Spiritual Songs
Gourmet Cooking
Granny Squares
Great Disasters
Great Trials
Grid Drafting
Group Counseling
Guitar
Hand Stitching
Hand Weaving
Handwriting
Practice
Harmonica Lessons
History of Boston
History of Puerto
Rico
Hockey
Horror Stories
House Building
House Painting
Human Body
Indian Yarn Craft
Interior Decorating
Italian
Conversation
Italic Lettering
Jazz Education
"Jeopardy" Game
Jewelry Making
Jigsaw Puzzles

Jogging
Journalism
Judo
Juggling
Kitchen
Management
Knitting
Kon-Tiki
Library Helpers
Library Orientation
Library—Quiet
Reading
Liquid Embroidery
Listening to Stories
Macrame
Magic
Making Things
With String
Map Games
Maps
Marketing
Math Help
Mazes
Mechanics
Mind-bending
Games
Model Building
Modern American
Novels
Modern Dance
Monopoly
Moon
Moviemaking
Multi-Cultural Fair
Music of the '60s
and Early '70s
Needlepoint
Oil Clay
Ojo de Dios
Origins of Games
Painting Murals
Paper Airplanes

Papercraft
Parliamentary
Procedure
Patchwork Quilting
Patriotism
Performing Arts
Photography
Piano—Keyboard
and Chords
Ping-Pong
Plants
Play Acting
Playwriting
Plumbing
Poetry Writing
Popular Artists
Popular Music and
Lyrics
Printmaking
Public Speaking
Puppet Making
Quilting
Quiz Kids
Rap Session
Reading Lab
Recycling
Workshop
Rug Hooking
School Store
Science
Experiments
Science Kits
Sheet Metal
Shop Maintenance
and Repair
Shorthand
Short Stories
Sign Language
Silk-Screen Printing
Soccer
Social Dynamics
Softball

Solving Your
Problems
Spanish
Conversation
Speed Reading
Spelling Bee
Sports in America
Square Dancing
Stamp Collecting
Stock Market Math
Storytelling
Strategy Games
Student Services
Guild
Study of Flight
Superstitions
Tag Football
Talent Show
Tennis
Theater Arts
Tie-Dyeing
Tool Maintenance
Toothpick
Architecture
Toy Making From
Wood
Transportation
Typing
Using Creative
Senses
Vaulting
Videotaping
Vocabulary
Tutoring
Voice Lessons
War Games
Word Puzzles
World of Invention
Writer's Workshop
Yearbook
Yoga ■

—K.M.