

Fifty Years of Flex

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A half a century of seminars, electives, Grade Level Requirements, and town hall meetings. 2014 marks a milestone for the Flex Program; its 50th anniversary.

However, Flex team leader Robin Moten believes the definition of Flex isn't so simple.

"It's really hard to put your finger on [the definition of Flex]. At its core it's a community of learners," Moten said.

"[It was] always with the intent of being based in seminar and conversation," Moten said, "And then offering a rich, engaged curriculum for students while at the same time offering them a chance to have a community in a large high school."

Moten has taught Flex at Seaholm for 19 years, and has been team leader for the past three years.

At its core, Flex, or flexible scheduling, is an interdisciplinary program that combines Social Studies and English into one class with students from all grades. It is team-taught and team-planned by five teachers.

Flex originated in 1963, when the superintendent of Birmingham Public Schools asked the Seaholm community to create an interdisciplinary humanities program as a part of the Birmingham Plan of Excellence. According to the Flex program's website, the plan was designed to "encourage 'new ways to individualize instruction and to professionalize teaching' by funding innovative programs."

Former Flex teacher Dr. Robert Maxfield was one of the first teachers in the program. He joined Flex in 1966 and taught until 1973.

"I came into it feeling like this would be the ideal kind of teaching to do," Maxfield said.

Over the years, there has been skepticism about the Flex program and whether it would work and, more importantly, survive.

"Really the question is: what made it work?" Maxfield said. "And I think what made it work was we had a really gung-ho bunch of teachers who cared a lot about each other and we spent a huge amount of time planning."

Students and faculty in Flex feel the learning environment goes beyond the classroom. The community created is viewed as a prominent feature of the program.

Former Flex teacher Peter Shaheen taught in the program for about 17 years. He said one of his favorite things about the program was the environment.

"We got to know kids really, really well," Shaheen said. "I loved having kids in my room just kind of kicking back and talking about all sorts of things, whether it's music or sports or just talking about something political that happened."

He remembered one Flex teacher who kept card games and a foosball table in his room for students to relax and hang out there during free time.

"They [the games] were just an opportunity

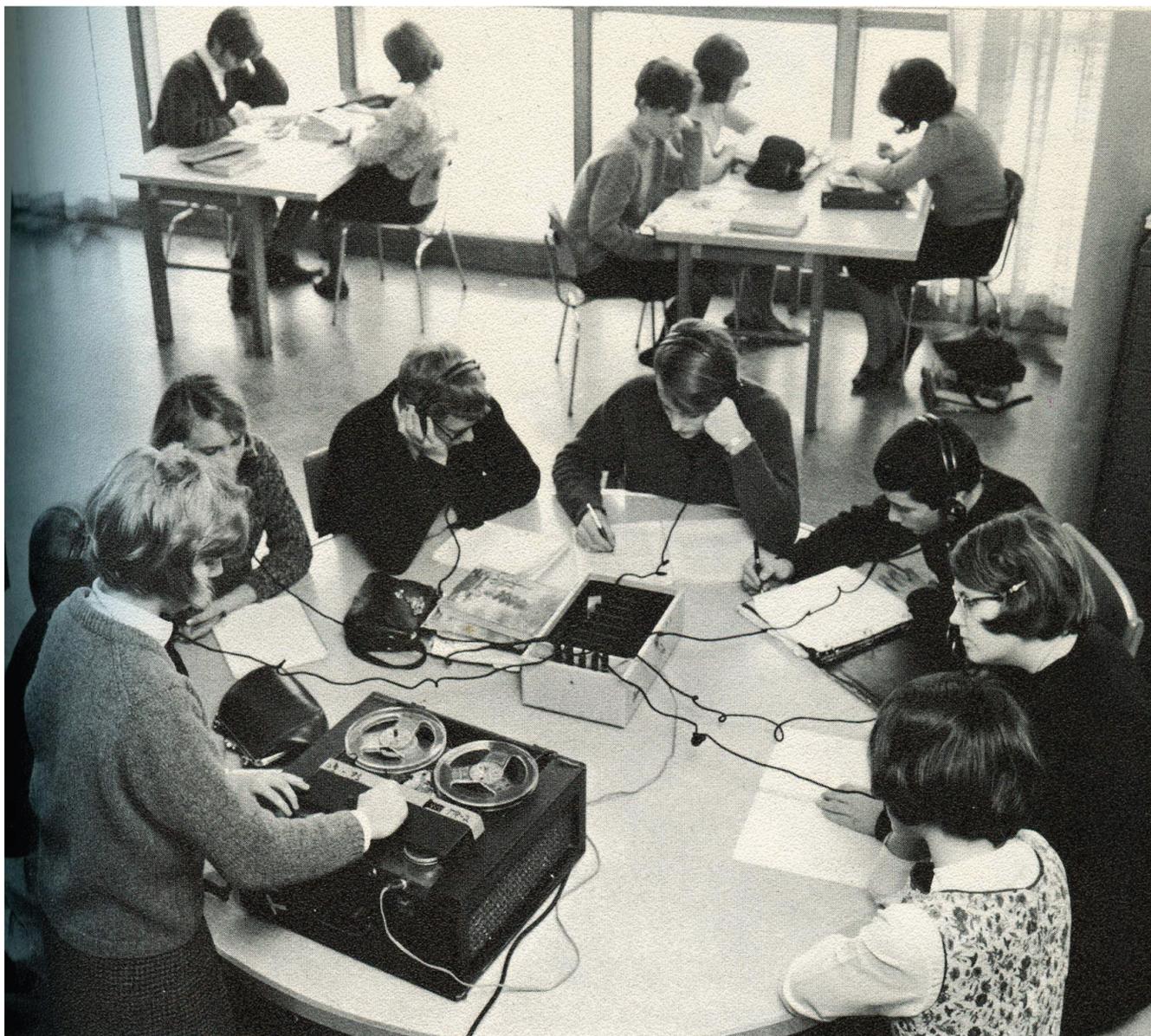


Photo from 1966 Piper.

Early Flex students use new equipment to study classical music. Flex focused on an interdisciplinary approach to humanities.

for people to be real and to talk about things," he said, "and it was really just a nice place to hang and be the kind of humans that we don't have time to be in school anymore."

Flex continues to affect those involved today. Moten said Flex means "everything" to her.

"It's made me the teacher that I am," she said. "I don't think I would've been this teacher without the Flex program. I am grateful every day."

Maxfield believes the program is an important and unique learning experience that should be utilized in other schools.

"It meant a lot to me because I really got to start my career in a wonderful environment,"

he said. "I still see it as the vision of what school should be all about."

Maxfield left Seaholm to take an administrative position in another school district. From then on in his career, he tried to recreate programs similar to Seaholm's, but Maxfield said they were unsuccessful.

"As I went to different schools we tried versions of Flex, and we got parts of it right, but we never got the full Seaholm piece," he said.

Maxfield thinks this could be contributed to students' and faculty's dedication to the program. Their passion has not wavered since the beginning. He recently attended a dinner with current Flex students and was amazed by them.

"I was struck by the fact that they had the same enthusiasm and attitude as students back in the 60s," Maxfield said. "When I went home that night, I told my wife it was like I went through a time warp."

He said, because the program is so unique, it's especially remarkable that Flex has endured.

"What amazes people is that it's lasted this long because innovations tend not to last this long," Maxfield said. "They often don't last beyond the people who started. It's a remarkable story of a program that has survived and continued."

Additional reporting by Emma Lietz

"Most of our alumni would tell you that they knew it was special when they were here. They couldn't put their finger on why, and then when they leave they're amazed at how it impacted their high school experience but maybe even more important how it continues to impact them today."

- Robin Moten



Photo by Kelly Martinek

The newest Flex team teachers: Peter Smith (left) and Matthew Szalkowski (right). Both joined the program this year.

"[Flex] really has shaped my whole education philosophy."

- Dr. Robert Maxfield

A Message From the Founder

Jay Horschak
Co-Founder of Flex

As part of the Birmingham Plan for Excellence, a progressive idea brought to Birmingham by Superintendent John Blackhall Smith, funding was available for pilot programs. A group of Seaholm teachers led by Katherine Blunt, Chair of the English Department, English, Social Studies, Art and Music teachers met over the summer and in the fall of 1965, Flex began. It loosely followed the Great Books format with the aim to individualize instruction and increase teacher professionalism. Students were selected to participate and many were reluctant to become "guinea pigs." Adjustment was very difficult as we attempted an interdisciplinary approach with 3 grades for 3 periods each day for a 3 year curricular cycle. With continued administrative and departmental support over the first five years the Flex Team began to gel. To say that we made it up as we went along is no exaggeration, but eventually students began to participate and teachers began let go of many traditional attitudes. I had been schooled in New Criticism, a critical approach to literature that valued the text and only the text whereas the interdisciplinary approach placed everything in historical, biographical, intellectual, and philosophical context. Then, too, I was familiar with a teacher-centered classroom where I lectured on topics with which I was familiar. The

demands of our wide-ranging curriculum (eg. French Revolution, transcendentalism, Marxism, Confucianism, potlatch ceremonies, neocolonialism, Dada, heroic couplets, etc.) required all of us to adopt a Socratic approach. Flex called for team teaching and team planning. We met to plan every day and often on the phone at night. At least 3 days a week all of us were conducting similar classes. The other two days we led elective courses usually relevant to the unit of study and in our subject areas.

Once some of the conflicts were ironed out and Flex began to run smoothly, it was exciting, enriching and challenging. At our peak, we were an elective course with 6 teachers about 180 students 9 through 12th grades exploring a 4 year curriculum. We had no team leader, rather each of us stepped up as the need arose. I rarely taught the same subject two days or even 3 years in a row. I appreciated the format emphasizing frame of reference. I appreciated the richness and variety brought to the program by films, books, essays, poetry, lectures, seminars and by our actively involved students and their parents. A co-operative learning sub-culture evolved as 4 grades interacted on a daily basis. Many colleagues and students with whom I shared 32 years in Flex still remain friends.

Jay retired in 1997 and lives with his wife in Downeast Maine.

Man on the Street: Flex Edition

What does Flex mean to you?



"When I think of Flex, I think of a box, and everything outside of the box is Flex."

- Freshman Thomas Sawyer



"It also means a strong and welcoming community of smart, nice, and ambitious kids."

- Sophomore Mari Sitner



"Flex means family to me. I spend more time than any other class in this hallway and I love it very much."

- Junior Ariel Zalesin



"A class that allows people to kind of fit into a community. [We] decide like what we wanna do, how we wanna run it."

- Senior Ben Slavin