

# Country Garden School: Back to the Basics

by Dave Schwantes

Seven-year-old Julie Messinger draws her pencil in an arc across the blue-lined tablet. "Move across the top of the clock from the 2 to the 10," her teacher tells her. "Around to the 8 and 4. . . back up to the 2 and down."

Julie bites her lip as she completes the pencil strokes. "Aaaw," Julie says, pronouncing deliberately the lowercase "A" she has just written on the paper. A smile of accomplishment brightens her face.

Julie sits at a low table, one of five such tables in an almost spartan classroom. She and her Level I classmates spend a major portion of their school in phonetic training. They must master the skills of writing and spelling before progressing to studies in reading and grammar. Julie's other classroom activities include memorizing Bible texts, performing hand work, practicing music and participating in aerobic exercises.

Is Julie a victim of some tutorial timewarp? A fugitive from an earlier educational era? No, Julie Messinger is a normal, healthy, active girl, one of 35 students enrolled in Country Garden School, a proprietary Christian elementary and secondary school. It is housed in a two-room annex to the home of Dr. and Mrs. Lawrence Hawkins, who own four acres of farmland near Walla Walla, Washington.

The General Conference is aware of the existence of alternative school systems such as Country Garden, but does not sanction their operation. According to Dr. Charles B. Hirsch, director of the North American Di-

vision's Office of Education, the church, through its local conferences cannot officially recognize these institutions, nor can it participate in their funding. "To do so," explains Hirsch, "would be to dislodge our present educational system."

He adds that these schools "cannot be taken under the department's umbrella" if the department does not know what's going on in these schools. The denomination has to answer to government agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service concerning the operation of its sanctioned organizations. "How can we vouch for an institution's tax status or its nondiscriminatory policy," Hirsch asks, "if we don't know what's happening in that institution?" The church's only official contact with these schools is through its affiliation with the Association of Privately Owned Seventh-day Adventist Services and Industries.

Although Country Garden School may not be typical of the nearly 80 known self-supporting mission outposts around the world, its operators share a common belief with those in the other institutions that organized Seventh-day Adventist education has fallen short of the Christian ideal. "Our purpose," Mrs. Hawkins says, "is to provide youth who may be educated and trained so that all their powers will be given to God's service."

Dr. and Mrs. Hawkins chartered Country Garden School four years ago to meet the educational needs of their four children. Even before moving in 1974 to Walla Walla, where Dr. Hawkins serves as an anesthesiologist on the staff of Walla Walla General Hospital, they became concerned about the "humanistic" tendencies they detected in traditional Adventist education. While still

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living in California, they began reading in the works of E. A. Sutherland, former president of Madison College.

In a pamphlet entitled *Educational Experiences Before the Midnight Cry Compared with Educational Experiences Before the Loud Cry* first published in 1915, Sutherland contended that the great Protestant denominations failed because they did not free themselves from the papal system of education. Quoting freely from Ellen White, he compiled a study of Christian education to "help us as Seventh-day Adventists to avoid their [the Protestants'] mistakes as we approach the loud cry, soon due to the world" (p. 1).

Mrs. Hawkins observed the teaching of values clarification in some Adventist schools. She defines values clarification as "a method for teachers to change the values of children without getting caught." Under her concept of values clarification, parents and teachers reject the "right answer syndrome." Humanistic educators insist that there are "simply no right answers, especially in the area of morals."

Although Dr. and Mrs. Hawkins did enroll their children in Rogers Elementary School, the local Seventh-day Adventist school, when they first moved to Walla Walla, they began searching for a smaller, rural school where their children could be taught in "the true science of Christian education." Not finding such a place, they decided to start their own Bible-centered school where students would acquire "unquestioning confidence in God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer."

**I**n charting their own educational course, Dr. and Mrs. Hawkins faced two immediate needs: a suitable meeting place and a teacher whom they felt was "a student of the Spirit of Prophecy." They contacted ministers both inside and outside the local Adventist community in trying to find a school facility. They finally located a basement in need of remodeling in the Four Square Gospel Church. They were permitted to use the facility in return for maintaining the church and its grounds.

Their search for a teacher led them across the United States to Dr. Richard Hansen, medical director of the Wildwood Institute, a self-supporting medical/educational facility near Chattanooga. Hansen suggested Betty Nick, a teacher at Yucki Pines Institute, Seale, Alabama. Mrs. Nick had been a student at Wildwood and had trained under Ethel Wood, who later became a curriculum developer for Bethany Homestead.

Mrs. Nick assumed duties as head teacher of the one-room school with 15 students in grades 1-8. The basement facility was upgraded to meet county health standards and was approved by the state of Washington as meeting basic legal requirements for safety, pupil attendance and teacher certification.

Since enrollment in the basement school was limited by the state to 20 students according to the number of square feet in the facility, Dr. and Mrs. Hawkins began searching for a more acceptable school location which would permit them to grow as interest in alternative Adventist education grew. They found not only a school site, but also a home-site. Next to the five-bedroom house, which they purchased in 1976, stood a one-story, wooden structure that, with a little remodeling, became the new location for Country Garden School.

In the last three years, enrollment has nearly doubled. Two secondary grades have been added. Three full-time teachers and several teaching assistants conduct courses in science, nature, health, mathematics, social studies, reading, music and art.

In addition, all students spend time each day engaged in practical skills such as cooking, washing, ironing, mending, cleaning, woodworking, auto mechanics and ceramics. The children have garden plots which they are responsible for maintaining, and they perform a modified form of aerobic exercises based upon the Canadian Air Force plan.

Students are placed according to levels rather than grades, and advancement depends upon mastery of skills rather than age. Children are encouraged not to enroll before age eight, although younger children, such as Julie, are evaluated on an individual basis for admission.

“During the first six or seven years of a child’s life,” Mrs. Nick contends, “special attention should be given to his physical training rather than his intellect.”

Each student’s performance is evaluated according to his individual abilities and achievements. Parent-teacher conferences are scheduled to discuss the student’s progress.

Country Garden School, along with two similar institutions in eastern Washington, sought last year and, for a short time, received recognition by the education department of the Upper Columbia Conference as an alternative educational facility. This permitted them to participate in teachers’ conferences and training sessions and to receive materials from the education department.

But members of a conference advisory committee raised questions over legal responsibilities which might be incurred by the

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denomination, and the arrangement was modified. The conference no longer officially recognizes Country Garden’s operation, but it still shares informally information and resources with the alternative schools.

**M**ost Seventh-day Adventist elementary and secondary schools offer a basic curriculum similar to Country Garden’s, designed to develop the body, mind and spirit of the student, and some denominational schools have even opted for nongraded levels of achievement.

What makes Country Garden School and other self-supporting institutions different

from organized Adventist education, according to Mrs. Hawkins, is a combination of five distinguishing characteristics:

1. The Bible serves as the basic textbook in all courses.
2. Children learn to read using a pure phonics method.
3. Teachers emphasize mastery of the basics.
4. Discipline comprises a cornerstone of education.
5. All students engage in a work-study program.

Mrs. Hawkins draws her philosophy of the ideal Christian education from Ellen White and quotes her writings frequently in explaining the operation of Country Garden School.

The Bible becomes the child’s first reader, Mrs. Nick explains, and as such serves as the basis for study in all areas. Science, history, math and other course work are related to the Bible and biblical times. In addition, students in all levels spend at least 30 minutes each day memorizing Bible verses.

But before students are taught to read, they learn to write and spell using a pure phonics approach. This approach, according to Mrs. Hawkins, teaches “the ability of the mind to analyze, to take apart the difficult so that the simpler components can be understood.” After students have learned to write letters and to spell words, they progress to sentences, paragraphs and essays. But mastery of basic skills is stressed at each step of the progression. As an older or more advanced student masters a subject, he will work with the younger student until the younger student has acquired mastery of the subject.

Mastery is achieved through discipline, according to Mrs. Nick. Consequently, discipline plays an important role in learning at Country Garden School. Mrs. Nick speaks not merely of self-discipline, although that is her goal, but she also emphasizes discipline from the outside as administered by the teacher. “This is the same thing God does for us,” she explains.

One way in which teachers at Country Garden School promote discipline is through a work-study program. Students spend a

portion of each day engaged in some practical experience. Even the youngest have duties for maintaining the classroom and school grounds. In addition, each student has a garden plot or greenhouse space where he or she tends a variety of edible and nonedible plants.

Mrs. Hawkins believes that the practical experience not only encourages self-discipline but also instills a work ethic in the student. She is a strong believer in the free-enterprise system and contends that each person should be rewarded according to his or her works.

The relative importance of individual achievement is where Country Garden School differs most significantly from its self-supporting counterparts. Persons at Wildwood Institute and its affiliates practice what Mrs. Nick calls "religious socialism." They live a primitive, almost spartan existence of self-deprivation and communal sharing. According to Mrs. Nick, there is no personal property. Group accomplishments are stressed over individual accomplishments, and students are discouraged from harboring individual ideas or opinions.

As a result of her belief in the free-enterprise system, Mrs. Nick contends that students should be taught good business techniques. Consistent with this belief, secondary level students take a course in book-keeping to supplement their practical work in typing, shorthand, printing or duplicating.

The educational philosophy of Dr. and Mrs. Hawkins and its embodiment in Country Garden School is generally well received or at least tolerated by the local Adventist community. While not all agree with the basic tenets of the school, members of the community do feel it provides a needed alternative for those families seeking something other than the traditionally organized Adventist school system.

**J**ohn Thorn, principal of Rogers Elementary School, probably stands to lose the most

to Country Garden's existence in a moderately positive light. "Schools such as Country Garden provide a safety or release valve for those in the community wishing to become more directly involved in the operation of their school," he explains. "There are always those looking for a school with the 'blueprint,' whatever that means."

Thorn believes that the Rogers School program is biblically oriented and that it meets the needs of the majority of Adventists in the Walla Walla Valley. He can say this with some confidence since his school's enrollment is up from a projected 266 students to 329. Where he does take exception to Country Garden's program is its almost total reliance upon the Bible to teach all subject matter. While agreeing that the Bible should serve as the basis for Christian education, Thorn contends that lessons should be made relevant and contemporary to students.

Thorn explains that Christ used familiar examples and parables to teach spiritual lessons and that teachers can do the same today. "What's most important," he contends, "is not the specific example used in the lesson, but the spiritual manner, tone and flavor in which the teacher presents the lesson."

Thorn expresses caution over the Upper Columbia Conference's recognition of Country Garden's operation. "When we take in a school, we are in essence sanctioning its program even though it may differ from accepted state and denominational standards, and we are ultimately responsible for its program should it get into legal difficulties."

Seven-year-old Julie and her classmates at Country Garden School could not care less about conference recognition or state standards. They know little about curriculum planning and have even less desire to learn about humanism or religious socialism at this stage of their lives. All Julie wants to do right now is to finish her writing lesson so she can go outside and see how her tomatoes are doing.