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CATCH'M IF YOU CAN

by Barbara Thronson, Alpena Public Schools

Truancy and school dropouts are becoming a problem area in our corridors of education with administrators, teachers, probate courts, and society. In America today, the relative rights of society, the individual rights, and the educator's rights are being debated in our courts and educational institutions. Our society is in a state of change. Legal issues are being argued in our halls of justice and parents are beginning to rise up in the turmoil of dissention. Catch'm if you can! Yes, but how do we catch the youth of today who are dropping out of school at the age of 14 to become truant cases.

In Alpena, Michigan, CATCH was initiated to provide an alternative educational program for school dropouts, juvenile delinquents, and truants.

One obvious purpose is to prepare youth for society. In a society marked by rapid and far-reaching economic and social change, how do educators accomplish this goal? For our future society, youth and adults will need to learn skills that will enable them to be flexible, adaptable and capable of adjusting to their changing environment.

It is difficult to reach agreement on the aims of education for that percent of students who don't fit into the regular classroom. In designing the Program CATCH, young lives are at stake. How do we encourage legitimate resources (work, school, and community) instead of illegitimate resources (truancy, police, and the courts). Hopefully, this program will place young people in an active role where something valuable is contributed rather than a passive and negative role where some service is provided.

How do you set up a program so students will learn they have skills,

knowledge, abilities and resources that can contribute to the community in which they live? In group and individual counseling, we opened the door of communication for many of the troubled youth. Opportunities were provided where freedom to learn by exploring, choosing, and making judgments was evident. Many of the students learned to develop self-respect for others, they learned to set realistic goals for themselves, and they learned that they could be successful academically.

In learning new skills called for by our changing economic scene, these students are enrolled in work situations matched to their interests. One young man worked as an aide to the Department of Natural Resources; a young lady was a teacher aide at Pied Piper School for retarded children in Alpena; another girl was employed as a secretary in the MSU Reading Institute and other young people helped at the Senior Citizens, Boys' Club, Nursery School, National Armory, and at the Fisheries Department at Alpena Community College.

Instead of traditionally using community resources to a minimum, we utilized community leaders for successful field trips and classroom experiences. Mr. Bob Boynton, Vice-President of Peoples Bank, gave a Money Management Seminar, Judge Meden gave a seminar on Law and Order, and Dixon and Dixon Lawyers discussed youth's role in society. As we opened up doors, businesses became more receptive and proud to share with our students. In learning the skills of interaction with other people, the students had opportunities to go on canoe trips with the help of Sawyer Canoe Company in Oscoda, Michigan. They went

camping and backpacking, and became more acquainted with the State by making field trips to Mackinac Island, Marquette, Michigan, Harbor Springs, Leland, and to other local areas. None of the students had ever been across the Mackinac Bridge. What a learning experience for the students who had never been out of their own community or had known the wealth of resources within their own community.

Individualized instruction was provided by the two CATCH teachers in Reading, Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies, and other academic areas. A screening committee consisted of Judge Meden of Probate, Dr. Robert Gutshall, Director of Special Services in Alpena, Dr. Glenn McAdam, principal of the Alpena High School, Dr. James Findley from the Mental Health Clinic, Mr. Bob Wightman from Voc. Ed. - AMA, Wayne Lindsey from Vocational Rehabilitation, Ms. Ronnie Fitzgerald from Social Services plus the two CATCH teachers, Julie McKenzie and Barbara Thronson. The CATCH teachers worked with the high school counselors on each individual program. The Committee worked as a team to provide the best opportunities for each student. Performance Objectives helped each student meet their own individual goals. Many of the experiences triggered off discussions, led to creative writing experiences and aided com-

munication with information flowing verbally and in writing.

One of the CATCH students, Darlene Donajkowski, graduated on the Program after completing a class at Alpena Community College. Her Poem, "What Is Me" was published in the national magazine, *People and Places*, in the July, 1974 issue.

WHAT IS ME

Grains of sand slip through my fingers,
As the wind breezes through my mind,
Blowing blades of grass as they
Whisper thoughts with no meaning.

The sun kisses my forehead,
Only with the touch to be
Overshadowed by the dark clouds,
Then feel each drop of rain fall upon
me,
As I sit here alone, wondering what
is me.

The young writing talent of this young lady might never have been discovered had CATCH not provided her the opportunity to graduate on their program.

CATCH did provide an opportunity for these troubled youths to learn that they had skills, knowledge, abilities, and resources that enabled them to make a contribution in their community. The community was their classroom! Yes, CATCH'M IF YOU CAN. Young lives are at stake.