

# Fighting the System

## Dr. Irwin Hoffman

**“B**ELEAGUERED” IS HOW Irwin Hoffman describes the situation of public school teachers today.

He doesn't necessarily mean financially; his salary, after some 26 years in the Denver Public Schools and with a Ph.D. under his belt, is, he says, “adequate.”

No, what Hoffman is really concerned about is less tangible.

“We're beleaguered by an inertia of bureaucracy that doesn't allow for change or creativity,” he said, as if he'd given this speech before. “Those of us willing to effect change do so most prodigiously, draining our very souls.”

He gestured toward the classroom at George Washington High School behind him, full of serious-looking teen-agers working on purring computers. He needs, he says, 30 more computers; he has 36 now, and barely a third of those came from the school.

“The rest I got by chicanery, bribery, grants. . . it took a lot of effort,” he said.

Indeed, Hoffman's “prodigious” efforts have made this computer lab what it is — and it is nationally-known. The Atari Institute's board of directors — whom he described as “brilliant minds concerned about students” — visited the lab in early May to observe student work, and students do programming for private firms both locally and around the country.

One-fourth of the school's students pass through the lab each day, and what makes GW's computer program unique is that it treats the entire curriculum, he said. Students compose music on computers, others do complicated research on math and astronomy, busi-



*Dr. Irwin Hoffman, right, and his assistant Jim Branche, electrical engineer*

ness students learn word processing, and slow learners improve their skills via the computer. Even GW's chronic no-shows are improving their attendance patterns, coming to school just to work on the computers.

“There is no messing off here. Kids want to learn. No game-playing,” he said.

Hoffman says he must study constantly to keep up with what his students. They are, he says, assimilating in two years what it took him 20 to learn. He becomes animated as he explains the various accomplishments of his students, how they continue to amaze him.

Hoffman became a teacher so he could be a tennis pro — he needed a job that gave him summers off. He *did* pursue the tennis — and is still the pro at Green Gables Country Club — but along the way got addicted to teaching.

“I stayed with this because the stimulation is beyond imagination. Once you start, you can't quit,” he said. Yet he had vowed as a child *not* to be a teacher. His father was a teacher, and Hoffman “saw him working 15 hours a day. *I* wasn't going to be 35 and starving.” Tennis, however, allowed him the financial freedom to remain a teacher.

Teacher burn-out? Not for Hoffman, who has been at George Washington since it opened in 1960, and he doesn't see it ever happening.

“I am not burned out,” he said, emphatically. “I get up every day and look forward to work. What greater blessing can a man have? I get up at 4:10 a.m., and think about how exciting a day I'll have.”

Hoffman denies that there are severe discipline problems in the schools — “I don't see it” — but admits he's been “accused of wearing blinders.”

“I see a certain eagerness to learn, and I do see distractions. I always knew I'd have to fight that, though” he said.

“What teaching is, is a hard sell. . . you have to be a salesman,” he said. “Good teachers, if they were salesmen, they'd be members of the million dollar club.”