

## **ROBERT PAUL BRIMM**

**By**

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Modest. Humble. Self-less. These words rise first when one thinks of Paul Brimm, Lab School secondary principal from 1948 to 1964. However, they mask the core: the strong, courageous, and highly respected leader and his career.

Robert Paul Brimm was born June 25, 1912 in Creal Springs, a small town in southern Illinois.



He earned his bachelor's degree from

Southern Illinois University and his

master's and doctoral degrees from the

University of Missouri at Columbia.

Brimm served in the Army during World

War II, and was a public school teacher

and administrator before coming to UNI.

In 1948, UNI (then Iowa State Teachers

College) hired him as the secondary

principal of the "Campus School,"

located then in Sabin Hall. He remained

in this role until 1964 when he was

asked to teach full time in the

Department of Education and

Psychology. In 1969, he shifted over to the (now) university's new Department of School

Administration and Personnel, a position he held until his retirement in 1983.

In 1949, soon after he arrived in Cedar Falls, Brimm described the "integration of classroom activities" in various departments of the new Laboratory School, soon to be built on the north campus.

Agriculture, farm mechanics, and shops were to be linked with the science department. The art department would be connected with stage craft, which would also interact with the shops and mechanics department. [For more information on Paul's professional writing click on this link.](#)

In the new school, the middle section of the basement would contain the shops, agriculture, and mechanics areas—to eliminate noise. Directly above the shops would be the stage craft, drama and art rooms, next to the auditorium and stage. Nearby would be the laboratories of the science department, including room for live animals and plants to be used by the biology and agriculture classes.

A portion of the new building's first floor would be devoted to clinical areas, including reading, speech, and math clinics—as well as for a guidance counselor. This area would also include English and speech classrooms and conference rooms. One of the most unique clinic features would be a one-way window for observers to watch without being seen.

The gymnasium section would include a 40×60 foot swimming pool. The gym floor itself could be divided into two sections with a folding screen to permit two classes or activities to be held at the same time. In 1951, Dr. Brimm and Dr. Corinne Harper began the “Classroom in the Woods” tradition of Lab School 8<sup>th</sup> grade camp—early “outdoor education” that lasted more than twenty years. Brimm's 1948 University of Missouri doctoral dissertation had been titled “A Study of Certain Problems in the Organization and Administration of School Camps.”

From his first days at the university, Brimm was sought out as a leader. In 1949—amid the fears of Communism fanned by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the emerging Cold War—the Iowa State Board of Education decided that the question of political speakers on the state's college campuses should be left to each institution. UNI President Malcolm Price appointed Brimm to a committee of seven to address the issue.

In 1961, Brimm spoke out against the Sputnik-inspired national push for science and math education as unbalancing the curriculum. “Federal financial aid is placing a definite emphasis on the development of mathematics and science in our schools, while other phases of the educational program

are standing still, or, in some cases, losing ground,” he cautioned. He recommended instead education for the individual student rather than a common program for all. “When we really accept and start practicing the principle of individual differences, then we will be able to provide a balanced program,” he said, anticipating later education trends. The same year, in a special address, he explored the meaning for Iowa schools of the controversial University of Chicago “Trump Report: Images of the Future, A New Approach to the Secondary School.” The Report called for team-teaching and more individual study.

Brimm stressed innovation and individual learning from his first days on campus. The 1958 *Old Gold* describes instruction in Spanish for Lab School elementary students and a new math program for the junior and senior high school. The next year came an experimental electronics seminar.

In the early 1960s, Brimm took the lead at both the Lab School and the campus at large in study of the new field of “teaching machines,” also called “programmed” or “automated instruction.” Under Brimm's leadership, Lab School teachers created automated programs and tested commercial machines. Dr. Donald Scovel, a secondary social science teacher, designed a program on the U.S. Constitution. A science/math boxlike machine taught students how to convert temperatures from Fahrenheit to centigrade and back again—each student following the program at her own rate.

Brimm's daughter, Shawna, recalls that she and her brother and sister “were kind of guinea pigs for Dad's students” who were “developing the early self-paced learning programs (learning packages). I remember it being rather fun!”

Today we see “teaching machines” as early forerunners of computers. The machines were designed to take the student through a subject, concept-by-concept, in such a simple and repeated manner that the information would be easily retained. The machines would maintain students' interest, but also keep them following the program. Brimm sought to make the theory, the research, and the machines themselves available to all on campus and across the state. Machine demonstration sites were set up on campus and all—students and faculty—were urged to try them.

“The professional teacher cannot afford to turn his back on any device that offers promise of more efficient instruction,” Brimm stressed. “As a teacher, you must be prepared to evaluate for yourself the place of programmed instruction in the school situation. The ideas must come first. Application and drill follow to make the ideas intimate-friends rather than speaking-acquaintances.”

Dr. William Lang, then the university's Dean of Instruction, supported the initiative. “Since we are primarily a teachers college, it is our duty to know about this so that we can inform others when they ask us,” Lang said, adding that “most of the better colleges were doing just this.”

In the early 1960s, Brimm also became a middle-school advocate, serving, Dr. Ross Nielsen explained, “as practitioner, author, and theoretician.” Brimm's book, *The Junior High*, was published in 1963 by the Center for Applied Research and Education, which worked to shorten the time between education research and its application in schools. Brimm helped design the university's new Junior High Teaching Major and sponsored in the 1970s a campus organization for Junior High majors. In 1990, after his death, A UNI student was elected president of the National Collegiate Middle School Association.

For Brimm, teacher-researcher-administrator were one. In the fall of 1964, when he moved after 16 years as Lab School secondary principal to prepare school administrators full-time, the college newspaper asked for his views, for his current “cause” or “complaint.” Brimm touched the campus with his response: “Right now I am very much concerned with the quality of instruction in my classroom. . . . My 'cause' at the present time is to improve my own instructional techniques.”

As Professor of Education, Brimm's final 18 years of service meant simply continuation and expansion of his leadership and work. In 1965, the Faculty Senate elected Brimm as one of five faculty to serve on an advisory committee to President James Maucker on future development of the institution. In January 1967, this committee recommended the College structure which, with only a few changes, came into existence later that year when the State College of Iowa officially became the University of Northern Iowa. Through it all, Brimm focused always on improvements. In 1966, he and Dr. Gordon

Rhum, professor of education and coordinator of research and evaluation, published a pamphlet to help foreign students do better on tests. Called "The Objective Type Test," the pamphlet offered students practical suggestions for taking true-false, multiple-choice, completion, matching, and rearrangement tests. Furman Bridges, the president of the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs, suggested the works' wider scope: "I think the brochure is a rather good summary of the practical problems that anyone meets in taking tests. This is a most useful item to put in the hands not only of foreign students but also American students."

During the summer of 1970, Brimm offered an "Innovations in Education" workshop for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. Participants were first introduced to a variety of innovative practices through learning packages, lectures, and discussion. Then each chose a practice and studied it in depth. Participants looked at flexible scheduling, small-group and large-group instruction, independent study, differential staffing, individualized learning materials, programmed instruction, computer-assisted instruction, learning laboratories, behavioral objectives, non-graded programs, and team-teaching.

In 1975, Brimm turned his attention to small schools with his multi-media presentation on "In-Service Education and Evaluation in Small Schools." In 1977, he focused on "The Non-Traditional School." Four years later, he brought his course "Curriculum Development in the Secondary School" to Indian Hills Community College in Ottumwa, Iowa.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw the fruition of Brimm's long work with the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges, the largest voluntary accrediting agency in education in the United States. The NCA Commission on Schools accredits school programs. The Lab School's high school program was accredited, beginning in 1913.

The NCA initiated elementary school accreditation in 1975, the year Brimm was elected Vice-Chairman of the NCA Commission on Schools, moving to Chairman in 1976-1977. In 1975, the Lab School elementary program was one of only three Iowa programs fully accredited, and one of just 53 in

the 19-state NCA area. Before Brimm's 1975 election, he completed a four-year term as chair of the NCA's Junior High/Middle Schools Liaison Committee. In 1981, he was elected Executive Secretary of the Iowa Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Through these years, Brimm backed his studies with his pen. In 1974, he published a paper for NCA on "Fostering Articulation Within and Between Schools." In 1978, he offered counsel to administrators and school boards on "Screening Teacher Applicants." The next year he addressed the question: "State-Mandated Programs: How Effective Are They?"

Brimm's progressive mind is seen in "Challenges in Education," a 1968 invited piece for the campus newspaper designed to explain the new NCA policies and criteria for high school accreditation that were to start in 1969: "Credit by examination is permitted and independent study programs are encouraged with specified students not being required to attend class on a regular basis. Schools are also expected to set aside a portion of their operating budgets for research and development activity so as to reduce the time lag between new knowledge and school practice."

Paul Brimm retired from UNI in 1983. At his death on October 30, 1985, after a lengthy illness, Dr. Ross Nielsen noted that Brimm's "gracious assistance to schools throughout his UNI tenure [was] legendary." Brimm, Nielsen said, "will be remembered for his deep concern for the welfare of school students [and] his great pride in the accomplishments of the Laboratory School."

The R. Paul Brimm Scholarship was established to assist those showing scholarship and leadership in middle level education. Scholarship winners have gone on to teach at the University of Iowa College of Education (Dr. Amy Shoultz), St. Cloud State University (Dr. Frances A. Kayona), Wartburg College (Dr. Jean Schneider), and at UNI and its Lab School (Dr. Lyn Countryman).

Brimm met his wife, Betty, at the Lab School. He was secondary school principal; she, a speech therapist. "Dad and Mom both loved their years at the Lab School and always referred to the students, past and present, as their 'kids'," Shawna Brimm says. "I know Dad enjoyed his years 'on the hill,' but I think that he felt his highest achievement was the time spent at at the Laboratory School."