



the
open
school



team building school
art school
cooking school
fort school
piano school
graphic design school
epic nerf battle school
chemistry school
friend school
knitting school
parkour school
literature school
film making school
dance school
engineering school
american history school

The Open School

gamer school
changemakers school
costume design school
skateboarding school
current events school
song-writing school
backgammon school
garden school
world religions school
chaos math school

TABLE OF CONTENTS

What is The Open School? ... 05
Education for the 21st Century ... 07
Growth of the Sudbury Model ...10
Children's Rights ... 12

01

FUNDAMENTALS

Basic FAQ's ... 15
How Do They Learn? ... 20

02

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Liberty or Lord of the Flies ... 23
One Person, One Vote ... 24
The Law Book ... 26
Matters of Justice ... 28

03

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

04

- Your Choice of Education Could Save Your Child's Life ... 31
- You Can't Do Sudbury at Home ... 32
- The Truth about Video Games ... 34
- Our Daughters Need Sudbury Schools ... 36
- What About Learning Disabilities? ... 38
- Age Mixing, Peer Pressure ... 40

ARTICLES

05

- Evaluation, Privacy, and the Role of Parents ... 43
- Why is the School so Small? ... 45
- College and Beyond ... 46

WHAT TO EXPECT

06

- Admissions Action Items ... 49
- Campus information ... 49
- Tuition and Fees ... 49

NEXT STEPS

01



**The Open School has
no teachers
no classes
no curriculum
no tests
and no homework.**

SO WHAT DOES IT HAVE?

Freedom

Students can spend all of their time however they choose. If they want to, they can play outside all day. They can do art all day. They can have conversations all day. They can dabble in a hundred different things. Nobody is judging or evaluating them. They have the space and time to discover and develop their passions. They can learn about themselves, how to function in a community, and how to learn. They are allowed to grow and be healthy intellectually, emotionally, and physically.

Responsibility

Because nobody is telling them what to do, and they are not supervised all the time, students are responsible for their own behavior and their own educations. They decide what to pay attention to, what to spend their money on, when to eat lunch, who to lend their toys to, and whether to obey the rules. This is a huge responsibility. There is no one else to blame if things go wrong. Students learn to own up to their actions and strive to do better in the future.

Independence

Away from the prying (though well-meaning) eyes of parents and policymakers, students can follow their own paths and become unique individuals. They are allowed to grapple with the problems of childhood — like boredom, mistakes, and conflicts with friends — without a helpful adult rushing in to take over. They only receive help if they ask for it. At The Open School, students are becoming adults capable of directing their own lives and making their own decisions.

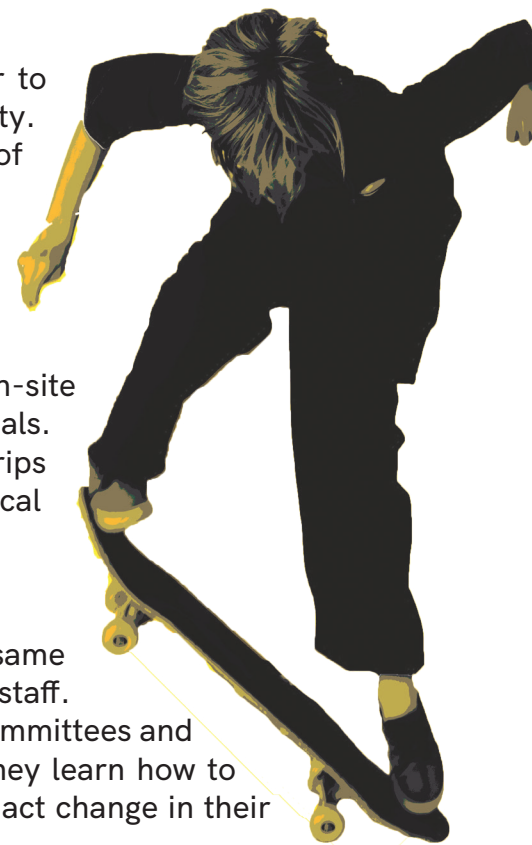
Respect

Students are afforded the same rights as adults and are treated like full human beings. There is no adult authority — the only authority is the written Law Book, which applies equally to kids and adults. This Law Book exists to protect the rights of school members, such as the right to be free from harassment, the right to decide what happens to your own body, and the right to say what's on your mind. At The Open School, kids' voices are heard and their opinions are taken seriously. They learn respect when they experience being respected.

Empowerment

Students have the power to make their ideas a reality. Free from the confines of curriculum, they can procure whatever materials they need using the school's budget, or request instruction either from on-site staff or outside professionals. They can organize field trips to anywhere, from the local arboretum to a distant national park.

Students here have the same administrative power as staff. They can be elected to committees and positions of authority. They learn how to be leaders and how to enact change in their communities and beyond.



Democracy

The Open School is Southern California's only self-directed democratic school. The school is based on the Sudbury model and is run democratically by staff and students together. We do this through our weekly School Meeting, where every member's vote has equal weight, regardless of age. Read more about this weekly meeting in "One Person, One Vote," on page 24.

The School Meeting is also our name for the entire body of students and staff, which is legally the Head of School. The School Meeting determines everything about running the school, including hiring and firing, budgeting, field trips, and rules. No one person is above the School Meeting; even the staff and the founders are subject to its decisions.

The School Meeting delegates certain decisions and tasks to committees and agents, such as the PR Committee and the Admissions Agent. These committees and agents must answer to the School Meeting, and their decisions can be overridden by the School Meeting. Any student or staff can join any committee or be elected to any agency.

The rules of the school are determined by the School Meeting and are codified in the Law Book. A special committee called Civics Board investigates and makes determinations about rule infractions. All School Meeting members (students and staff) must serve on Civics Board on a rotating basis. Learn more about our Lawbook on page 26 and about Civics Board in "Matters of Justice" on page 28.

Occasionally a student or staff wants to create a group to handle a certain subject area, such as art, cooking, or photography, which is not covered by a committee.

These interest groups are called corporations, and they are given permission by the School Meeting to allocate their budget and set rules for their materials.

We Are The Open School



- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>01 School Meeting
Entire body of students & staff. Head of the School.</p> | <p>05 Committees
School Meeting approved task forces.</p> |
| <p>02 Students
Students are School Meeting Members.</p> | <p>06 Corporations
Special Interest groups.</p> |
| <p>03 Staff
Staff are School Meeting Members.</p> | <p>07 Agents
Elected Members tasked with a certain job or role.</p> |
| <p>04 Civics Board
Investigates & makes decisions on rule infractions.</p> | <p>08 Law Book
Codified rules determined by the School Meeting.</p> |

The Open School Basics

The Open School serves students ages 5-18 in an age-mixed environment. Each Open School campus is an ever-evolving and unique space created by the students and staff to serve its internal community.

The Open School does not discriminate on the basis of race, color,

national or ethnic origin, ancestry, age, religion or religious creed, disability or handicap, sex or gender, gender identity and/or expression, sexual orientation, military or veteran status, genetic information, or any other characteristic protected under applicable federal, state, or local law in the administration of its educational policies, admissions policies, scholarship and loan

programs, and athletic and other school-administered programs.

The Open School is a 501(c)(3) tax-deductible organization.

For more information about the campus, staff, and enrollment, please see the Campus Information addendum at the back.

Self-education is, I firmly believe, the only kind of education there is.

~ Isaac Asimov



EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

After decades of decreasing playtime for children, and the widespread disappearance of recess, we have reached the point of a health epidemic. So in 2018, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a clinical report advising doctors to write literal prescriptions for play in order to improve the mental and physical health of children. But play is not only necessary for children's health, say pediatricians — it's also a vital part of their education:

"Collaboration, negotiation, conflict resolution, self advocacy, decision-making, a sense of agency, creativity, leadership, and increased physical activity are just some of the skills and benefits children gain through play."

These are exactly the skills our children will need to be successful in the 21st century. Yet traditional schools are still focused on teaching students information which can

easily be looked up at any time on the Internet, and skills that can easily be done by robots, such as following instructions and doing calculations. According to New York Times bestselling author Yuval Noah Harari:

"We might invest a lot of effort teaching kids how to write in C++ or how to speak Chinese, only to discover that by 2050 AI can code software far better than humans,

and a new Google Translate app enables you to conduct a conversation in almost flawless Mandarin, Cantonese or Hakka, even though you only know how to say “Ni hao”. So what should we be teaching? Many pedagogical experts argue that schools should switch to teaching “the four Cs” — critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity.

More broadly, schools should downplay technical skills and emphasise general-purpose life skills. Most important of all will be the ability to deal with change, to learn new things and to preserve your mental balance in unfamiliar situations. In order to keep up with the world of 2050, you will need not merely to invent new ideas and products — you will above all need to reinvent yourself again and again.”

Although The Open School has no curriculum, it happens to do an excellent job of nurturing “the four Cs”. Critical thinking, for example, is promoted by the school’s democratic process. All rules and policies are constantly up for debate in the School Meeting, which students are a part of. There is no because-I-said so. Students have to think and make good judgments if they want to have a well-functioning school.

Traditional schools tend to discourage communication and collaboration, since almost all of their time is taken up by lectures and books. Students at The Open School, on the other hand, are constantly working on their communication and collaboration skills. If you walk into our school at any time, you will see kids engaging in conversations, arguing about rules of games, negotiating, compromising, trading, and collaboratively building things such as forts, Legos, and Minecraft houses.

Creativity, or the ability to come up with novel ideas and solutions, doesn’t even need to be nurtured, because all children are naturally creative. Pablo Picasso famously said, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.” Unfortunately, by rewarding right answers over creative solutions, traditional schools play a central role in smothering the creativity children are born with.

At The Open School, we don’t chastise students for coloring the grass blue. They are free to make up elaborate imaginary scenarios, invent their own games, and tinker with everything they see.



Play is the highest form of research.

~ Albert Einstein



Did You Know?

01

When humans experience stress while trying to retrieve a memory, such as during an exam, catecholamine levels in the brain decrease the ability of the brain to recall information.

02

In addition, if cortisol (the stress hormone) is elevated at the time of learning, the brain will have a more difficult time consolidating new information into long-term memory. What will be retained is the stressor that caused the elevated cortisol.



In other words, if a kid is stressed, and most kids in traditional school are, their ability to retain and retrieve knowledge is significantly impaired.

¹Vogel & Schwabe, 2016



GROWTH OF THE SUDBURY MODEL

The Open School is the only self-directed democratic school in Southern California. Worldwide, however, we are not especially new or unique. We are one of at least 80 schools around the world (with more being founded each year) modeled after Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts. Sudbury Valley School has been running for more than 50 years, and has proven through the years that giving students ownership of their lives and education not only makes for happier and more responsible kids, but also yields adults who excel in the standard metrics of college attendance and career success.

The Open School is more than just a single school. It is a network of schools in Southern California, beginning with one campus in Orange County in 2015, and then expanding to Temecula Valley in 2019. There will be

even more locations in the future. We envision an Open School campus within a 20 minute drive of every family in Southern California. And as we build more schools, we will send a message to American culture that children are trustworthy and that the Sudbury model is a powerful and reliable method of education.

By enrolling at The Open School, you are not simply signing up at a local school. You are joining a growing organization with multiple campuses. You are joining a movement which advocates for children's rights. You are making a difference not just for your own children, but for countless children now and in the future.



I am beginning to suspect all elaborate and special systems of education. They seem to me to be built up on the supposition that every child is a kind of idiot who must be taught to think.

~ Anne Sullivan

Growing The Open School



Orange County Campus

Made up of School Meeting Members, Board & Parents



Temecula Valley Campus

Made up of School Meeting Members, Board & Parents



Future Southern California Campuses

Made up of School Meeting Members, Board & Parents



CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

While we consider education important, the foundational principle of The Open School is children's rights. This is what distinguishes a self-directed democratic school from virtually all other kinds of schools.

Throughout the 20th century and even today, schools and governments have been thinking about children's rights in terms of the right to education, the right to parental care, and the right to protection from abuse. These are important things

for children to have, but there's a huge piece of the picture missing.

What we have failed to realize is that children are people, first and foremost. Before we start thinking about special rights for children, we need to make sure they are granted the universal human rights we have already decided all other humans should have. What about the right to autonomy? The right to freedom of speech? The right to vote? The right to due process of law?

Defenders of the status quo argue that children don't need rights, because they are well taken care of by their parents and teachers. Most caregivers consider children to be precious. They go to great lengths to protect, serve, and love the children in their care. However, this is exactly what most people were saying about women a century ago. "Woman does not have to vote to secure her rights," said politician J.B. Sanford in 1911. "Man will go to any extreme to protect and elevate her now. As

Kids don't resist learning; they resist teaching.

~ John Taylor Gatto



long as woman is woman and keeps her place she will get more protection and more consideration than man gets."

A century ago, people said that women didn't need rights because they were well taken care of by their husbands, brothers, and fathers. Women didn't need the vote, because men loved them and were voting in a way that took women's needs into account. Women didn't need to work outside the home, because their husbands were earning plenty of money on their own.

In the hundred years since these arguments were made, a light has been shone on the systemic oppression of women that has been with us all along. We now recognize that being cared for by men doesn't guarantee that women's needs will be met. Women, like children, like all people, need rights -- they need to be allowed to make decisions about their own lives, bodies, property, homes, and careers.

Possibly one of the most egregious forms of oppression in our society is the forced schooling of all people under the age of 16. People say, "We have to make children work, because they need to learn how to work." They say it's particularly important for children to learn how to do work that isn't instantly gratifying, such as rote menial labor. Yet a century ago, when children were forced to work, we called it "child labor", and we outlawed it. And interestingly, the rote menial labor we're making kids spend most of their time in school on bears little resemblance to most 21st century jobs, which involve creativity, problem-solving, self-direction, and judgment (and are, as a result, a lot more gratifying than schoolwork).



Since about the 1950's we have been gradually taking children's freedom away. We are engaged in a cruel experiment to see what happens, and the experiment isn't working out very well because we're beginning to see the high rates of anxiety, depression, even suicide ... mental disorders of all sorts that occur when you take children's freedom away.

~ Dr. Peter Grey

02



BASIC FAQ'S

Are there grade levels?

There are no grade levels at The Open School. We respect that no two children are the same and that different children learn things at different ages. We also understand that ranking students by ability can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Age mixing provides a tremendous benefit to the school community. It enables younger students to learn from older students by watching them, and allows young students to participate in more sophisticated games which they would not be able to conduct by themselves. In addition, exposure to young children enables teenagers to be more playful, open, and creative than they would normally be in the company of other teens. Also, the process of teaching a concept to another student can deepen the teacher's understanding of the concept.

Why don't you assign homework?

Students at The Open School are self-directed learners, so we have no business assigning them anything. We find that homework in conventional schools takes time away from families and turns parents into reluctant task-masters. Children need to develop healthy relationships with their families; this is as developmentally important as anything a school can offer. Nonetheless, often students will continue at home the activities and projects they started at school, because they want to. Their time belongs to them.



What if a student wants to study something you can't provide?

We live in the age of the Internet, where all of the world's information is available to students at the click of a mouse. Nine times out of ten, a student's curiosity can be satisfied by YouTube videos and online articles. When that fails, students are able to tap our local community. For example, if someone wants to learn woodworking, we might reach out to a local hobbyist group. Or, if someone is interested in aviation, we can arrange a tour of John Wayne Airport, or ask a pilot to come visit.

Part of the job of the staff is to help students find resources. However, we recognize that allowing students to struggle to find their own resources is also an important part of the learning process. Our policy is to offer information and resources only when asked for by a student. This empowers students to take learning into their own hands, and to develop into self-sufficient lifelong learners.



If you don't offer classes, how will students be exposed to new things?

Our students are exposed to much more than they would be in a conventional classroom. Their learning is driven by curiosity instead of by a fixed curriculum. There is no way to predict which direction or how deep their curiosity will take them. Perhaps a student sees someone knitting and decides to learn to knit; or they watch a baseball game and want to learn more about baseball statistics; or they decide to build a fort and realize they need to know how to measure and cut wood.

Because we live in a close community, our knowledge and interests are viral. One day, a student watches a YouTube video about cooking, then decides to cook something; other students see her working in the kitchen, and now they want to cook too. Elsewhere, two students decide to play a game of Magic; soon several more students have crowded around and want to play too. Meanwhile, a staff brings his guitar to school to entertain some students; now the students want to learn to play the guitar.

If nothing is planned for the students, won't they get bored?

Boredom is an essential part of education at The Open School. As adults, we are tempted to rush to help children overcome boredom, by suggesting things for them to do and scheduling activities. But boredom, and enough free time to fully experience boredom, allows us ponder and process our thoughts. Because boredom is unpleasant, it motivates us to search for things to do, to try to discover our interests. Children can never discover their infinitely unique interests and passions if they are not permitted to go through this difficult process. This is the hard work of being a student at The Open School.

Don't children need to learn certain skills while they're young?

People often worry that children need to learn certain things, like reading, math, or music, by a certain age, or else a "window of acquisition" or "critical period" will pass and the opportunity will be lost. However, this is merely a myth. Scientists have identified critical periods for certain basic biological functions such as visual development, and there is some evidence for an "optimal period" (not a critical period) for language learning. However, there's no evidence for critical periods for any cognitive skills -- not for reading, music, or anything else that a person might need to study to master.

Spanish immersion programs are very popular for preschools in our area. While we find nothing wrong with Spanish immersion programs per se, it's still a violation of a child's autonomy to force them to participate in such a program against their will. You might think, "So what if it's a violation of their autonomy? It's such a small cost and a big benefit. They'll thank me when they're older." Or even, "It doesn't count as a violation of their autonomy, because very young children pick up new languages almost automatically and with almost no effort." However, while it may look effortless to you from the outside, in fact a child must exert a tremendous effort to learn a language. They have to spend a huge amount of time listening, processing, and practicing -- time which could have been spent on other things, such as developing a greater mastery of their native language, talking to people and building relationships, or learning other skills. There are tradeoffs involved which may have far-reaching consequences in the child's life. All this to learn a language they might never use and might even completely forget by the time they're an adult. Is it worth it? The only person who can answer that question is the child.

If a person eventually decides that they need to know a foreign language in order to achieve a personal goal, they can still learn it at any time -- and it will be fresh in their memory for whatever task they need it for.



My kids are learning so much about life and how things work in the real world. They are learning what they are passionate about and how to make anything they want to learn possible.

~ Heidi (Parent)

What do the teachers do?

There are adult staff members, but they are not called “teachers” since there are no classes or curriculum. Staff have the difficult task of abdicating their adult authority and becoming community members. They will be vocal on subjects that interest them, but must realize that their input might not be heeded. They cannot rely on the mere fact of age to grant them authority.

The primary role of the staff is to fiercely protect the rights of the students, to preserve the space and freedom granted by the school, and to truly love each person in the community. As role models, staff model responsibility and respect and engage in passionate pursuit of their own interests. They also serve as mentors to students, investing time to learn who they are and what they love, answering questions, showing, explaining, playing, and helping students as they go about their day.

In addition, the staff are responsible for running the school. This includes a huge variety of tasks, including marketing, communications, admissions, budgeting, clerical work, website maintenance, and scheduling field trips.

Although staff members are not automatically teachers, teachers do exist in another sense. When a student wants to learn something and decides that the best way to learn it is from another person, they may approach another member of the community and ask them to serve as a teacher. This means that staff and students alike are potential teachers, depending on the knowledge they possess. In this sense, our student/teacher ratio is always 1 to 1.

What does a typical day look like?

Every day is different at The Open School. Some days, a student might be laser-focused on a project. Other days, that same student might engage twenty different activities. It all depends on what he or she is interested in.

Is there a part-time option?

Our program is full time. Students must be present each day for a minimum of 5 hours. It is imperative that students come to school on a full-time schedule for two reasons. First, students vote on school business, so part-time students would not have equal voice in running the school. Secondly, we find that the community thrives when everyone is equally invested; whether it is in joy or struggle, the community functions in solidarity.

However, because some 5- and 6-year-olds are not developmentally ready to be away from home full time, we do offer a part-time schedule for our younger students. During the enrollment process, the school and family will decide together whether a child would benefit from shorter hours or fewer days at school. The specific schedule is set by the school and parents working in collaboration.



Is this a religious school?

No, The Open School has no religious affiliation.

I don't think I can afford this school, but I really want my child to attend.

The Open School values accessibility for all families, and has created a Sliding Scale tuition program based on ability to pay. For more information, see page 49.





What ages does the school serve?

- The Open School serves students between the ages of 5 and 18.
- Children under 5 may enroll if they will turn 5 during the semester.
- Teens older than 16 who are interested in enrolling for the first time at The Open School will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Does this school work for teenagers?

The teen years are the time when kids are really figuring out who they are and what their place is in the world. It is during this time that they begin to think about what they want to do with their lives. At The Open School, teenagers are given the space and time to explore their passions and delve deeply into topics that interest them. Some of them acquire specialized talents and start doing productive work years before their peers in conventional schools. The rest develop self-knowledge and become comfortable in their own skin, which is the paramount work of being a teen. When they reach college age, they know what their goals are and can make informed decisions about how to achieve those goals, whether that means going to college or doing something else.

Do you offer diplomas?

At The Open School, we recognize that not everyone needs or desires a diploma, but for the students who choose to pursue a diploma, we have a program designed to ready them for their next phase of their lives.

I'm nervous about what other people will say about me as a parent.

Making an alternative educational decision for your child should reflect your family's value system. We offer a parent support program that guides parents through their own process of understanding how The Open School's self-directed democratic model fits in with their values. Once you become confident that you want your child to be independent, responsible, and empowered, it becomes easy to justify the decision to others. You will become aware that your child is not only learning more than she would in a traditional model, she is becoming a better person as a result.

HOW DO THEY LEARN?

I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.

~ Mark Twain

Cassi rolled into school on a Tuesday morning and noticed a slip of paper hanging on the bulletin board. "Sign up for Emily's Snack Shop, starting May 29," it read. Curious, Cassi tracked down Emily, an 8-year-old student at The Open School, and asked her what the deal was. "I'm opening a snack shop," she explained. "To replace the school's snack shop that closed down."

Apparently Emily was planning to make a trip to the grocery store to buy corn dogs, ramen noodles, sodas, and chips. Then she would sell the items at school for a markup and make some profit for herself. She needed workers who could advertise, take orders, and make change once the shop was up and running. She was planning to hire employees and share with them some of her profits. The day after she put up her sign-up

sheet, Emily made a menu and a price list. Then she started asking around for a loan, which she needed to buy her first products. She managed to get five dollars in exchange for an IOU slip. According to the terms of the IOU, she would have a two-week grace period to pay it back before it started accumulating interest.

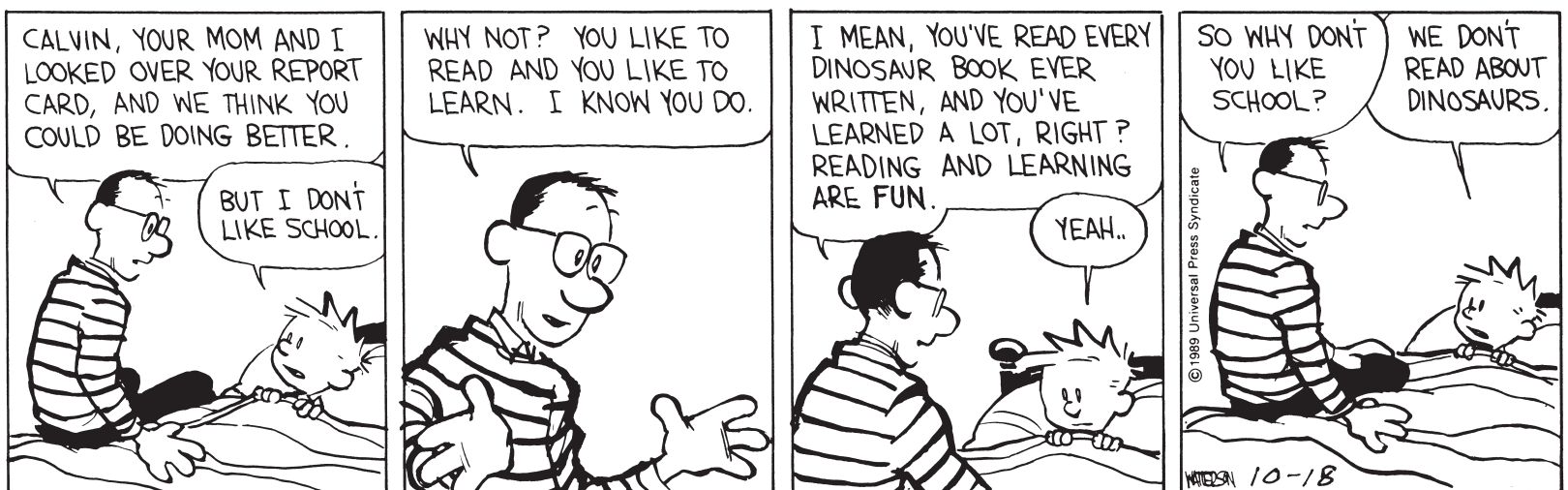
Just in these two days, Emily has demonstrated her spelling, reading, and math abilities, and has grappled with complex problem-solving. She has even started to consider HR issues, such as how many hours her employees should work, and how much they should be paid. John Holt was right when he said, "We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way."

If Emily continues down this path, she will leave school with the

skills she needs to be a successful entrepreneur. Other kids will leave the school with other skills. Some will be great speakers, some will be great builders, and some will be great puzzle-solvers. There are as many kinds of outcomes as there are students.

Robert, an 11-year-old student at The Open School, has memorized most of the 802 Pokemon, including their names, habitats, and evolution data. He learned all this without the help of, and likely much to the horror of, his parents and teachers. Two years ago, this boy left public school because he had been receiving failing grades.

How can a kid who is so good at learning fail in school? Why couldn't he use his clearly superb learning skills to learn reading, math,



CALVIN AND HOBBS © 1989 Watterson. Reprinted with permission of ANDREWSMCMEEL SYNDICATION. All rights reserved.

geography, and so on? A little boy named Calvin provides a possible answer in the comic strip on the previous page.

Children love to learn, and they're really good at it. They just don't always want to learn the particular things we want to teach them.

If a student needs help learning something, The Open School will provide support for them. For a few months the school held a weekly ballet class at the behest of one of our 5-year-old girls. We have also done science experiments, trips to the zoo, and countless other educational endeavors at the request of students.

If you're concerned about reading, writing, and arithmetic, realize that these things are woven into the fabric of everyday life in the 21st century. Reading is necessary for texting, surfing the web, playing video games, leaving yourself notes, watching foreign films, reading novels, and many, many other things. It's virtually impossible that a kid could grow up illiterate in this culture and not be driven crazy by it.

An Open School student named Nell was 9 years old and could barely

read. Almost on a daily basis, we witnessed Nell in situations where she and her friends were doing an activity that involved some reading -- like watching a YouTube video with subtitles, or playing the card game Apples to Apples -- and she could not participate in the activity or follow the discussion that her friends were having. We also witnessed Nell frequently struggling to sound out words when she had some downtime by herself. Even at the young age of 9, Nell knew that literacy was important and was willing to work hard to learn how to read.

Arithmetic is everywhere too. Consider this: It's 10:43. How many minutes until 11:00? Or: You owe me \$4.25, and you gave me a five dollar bill. How much change do I give you? Or: The recipe says 1 1/2 tablespoons. How many half tablespoons is that? Even video games often require players to do sophisticated arithmetic. Consider the story of one parent:

"My 11-year-old son plays MapleStory [a popular online game] and has figured out complex mathematical structures to play the game. 'If I want to buy this helmet for this amount, how many hours do I have to play making

this amount per hour in order to buy the helmet? If I sell this item in the market and the fee to sell is a certain percentage, how much will I have left after the fee?' ... Plus in the game you work with three different currencies and have to be able to translate back and forth among them regularly."

A study of unschoolers (kids who never go to school and who aren't formally taught at home) found that the age at which children become proficient at reading spans from 3 to 16.5 years, with an average of about 8. And being a late reader doesn't seem to get in the way of mastery -- one unschooled girl started reading at 8 and now, at 14, "reads hundreds of books a year," "has written a novel," and "has won numerous poetry awards."

Aside from being futile, trying to force children to learn to read can cause problems. Children who are forced to read before they're ready often develop a fear or hatred of reading, which can delay mastery and even instill a lifelong aversion to books. On the other hand, free children associate reading with pleasure, and are set up for a healthy relationship with the written word for life.

Did You Know?

People who are stumped in solving certain kinds of problems are much more likely to solve the problem if they take a break, in which they think about something else for awhile, than they are if they work continuously on the problem.

This is called the "incubation effect." A number of studies have shown that the incubation effect works best when, during incubation, the person is just daydreaming or working on some relatively easy set of tasks rather than focusing heavily on a new problem.²

²Sio et al, 2017; Sio & Ormerod, 2009



03



LIBERTY OR LORD OF THE FLIES?

Some people, when they hear about democratic schools -- where each student has the same power as any adult -- are reminded, in horror or breezy dismissal, of Lord of the Flies. In William Golding's 1954 novel, a group of British schoolboys are stranded on a deserted island and attempt to survive while they wait for rescue. Their attempts to establish a unified democracy fail as they split into two factions, go to war with each other, murder each other, and ultimately burn down the island.

Those who want to believe that children are incapable of governing themselves are reassured by Lord of the Flies. They take it as confirmation of their belief that children need adults to govern them, and as a reinforcement of traditional, authoritarian schools. In fact, the book itself -- a work of fiction -- is a reflection of Golding's attitude that young people cannot build a successful society on their own.

In any case, a democratic school is not a deserted island. In Lord of the Flies, the children were all dropped onto the island at once with no pre-existing system of governance or authority. When some of the boys tried to establish a democratic order, other boys did not recognize the authority of that order and established their own order. The conflict that resulted is similar to what often happens in (adult) societies which start that way.

The Open School, by contrast, started with a democratic governing system, a law book, and a unified vision about freedom in education.

The first group of students, numerous enough to out-vote the founders, could have abolished the democracy, repealed all the laws, and corrupted the vision. Why didn't they? Because at The Open School they were free. That's why they came here. They didn't want to risk destroying something so rare and beautiful. Over time, they came to adopt the vision as their own.

The Open School is not a deserted island and it's not anarchy. For one, it has adult staff who are keeping an eye on things and keeping everyone safe. It also has an extensive democratic structure and a culture of respect. (By respect, we don't mean that children must respect their elders. We mean that everyone has to respect everyone else's choices about their own lives, bodies, educations, and so on, regardless of age.) While, in the beginning, the structure and culture were mainly enforced by the founders, now they are mainly enforced by the students themselves, because it's their culture and it's their school, and they love it. They get by with advice from adults, not control. And through this process they learn how to get along with others in a community and how to effect change in their government.

Perhaps children have a tendency towards bullying those they don't like; they also have the power to repeal the school rule against bullying. Why don't they? Because this rule keeps them safe. They don't want Lord of the Flies to happen at their school. And in fact, democratic schools have much lower levels of bullying than public schools.

Perhaps children sometimes have bad ideas. Then again, so do adults. Both children and adults also sometimes have good ideas. During the debate which happens before every decision, the good ideas are separated from the bad, regardless of who they came from. The vast experience provided by adults is valuable in these debates, and this lends us a natural authority. But we can't get a motion passed if we don't have good reasons for it that other people can accept. "Because I said so" won't cut it here. And especially as students get older and have been at our school for a long time, their level of experience starts to rival that of staff.

Students at The Open School are learning how to operate a society and resolve conflicts themselves in a lawful, respectful way. Contrast this with traditional schools, where students are expected to blindly follow orders. Children can't learn to be responsible if they are never given opportunities to exercise responsibility. And we can't expect them to become active participants in their governments if they are systematically disempowered throughout childhood.

We like to think that if The Open School's student body were suddenly stranded on a deserted island, they would have no trouble building a successful society. That's because, unlike the boys in Lord of the Flies, they've been given the tools to govern themselves, and they have a shared vision and a culture of respect.

ONE PERSON, ONE VOTE

The School Meeting is the ultimate authority of the school, handling everything from Law Book changes to budgeting to hiring. All staff and students are members of the School Meeting, although nobody is required to come. Everyone who is present at the meeting gets one vote, after everyone has had a chance to share their opinions in the debate. Following is a sample agenda from one of these meetings:

Called to order at 1:20pm by Aaron

Civics Board Business

Approve Civics Board minutes -- **PASSED**

Referral: Amy, case #05-03-03, charged with Breaking Sentence

Move: Amy is restricted from writing checks for the next month -- Cassi **PASSED**

Second Readings

Move: Sell non-perishable lunch items, such as Trader Joe's ramen. Not using counter or fridge space.

-- Cooking Corporation **PASSED**

Move: No eating on the bottom area of the playground -- Maria **FAILED**

Discussion: It seems like eating on the slides is more of a problem than the picnic table. We could create a certification and also have only the picnic table being on-limits and other parts off-limits.

First Readings

Move: No one may put any foreign objects, regardless of form or function, into the sand in the playground

-- Cassi

Move: Purchase a set of 1000 generic block-shaped Legos for \$24. -- Aaron

Move: Reduce Sports Corp's budget from \$50/month to \$20/month. -- Aaron

Move: Become certified for Open Campus -- Nick **WITHDRAWN**

Discussion: The rules require 3 months without being charged with Community Norms, which Nick doesn't meet.

Agents, Committees, and Corporations Business

Move: Pursue a lease with Temple Beth Sholom for the 2019/2020 school year. -- Vision Committee

Move: Schedule school photos with Stacey Still on September 25th -- Official Authorities Agent **PASSED**

Open Agenda

Move: create a rule limiting strong personal odors and consuming foods that leave behind a pervasive odor.

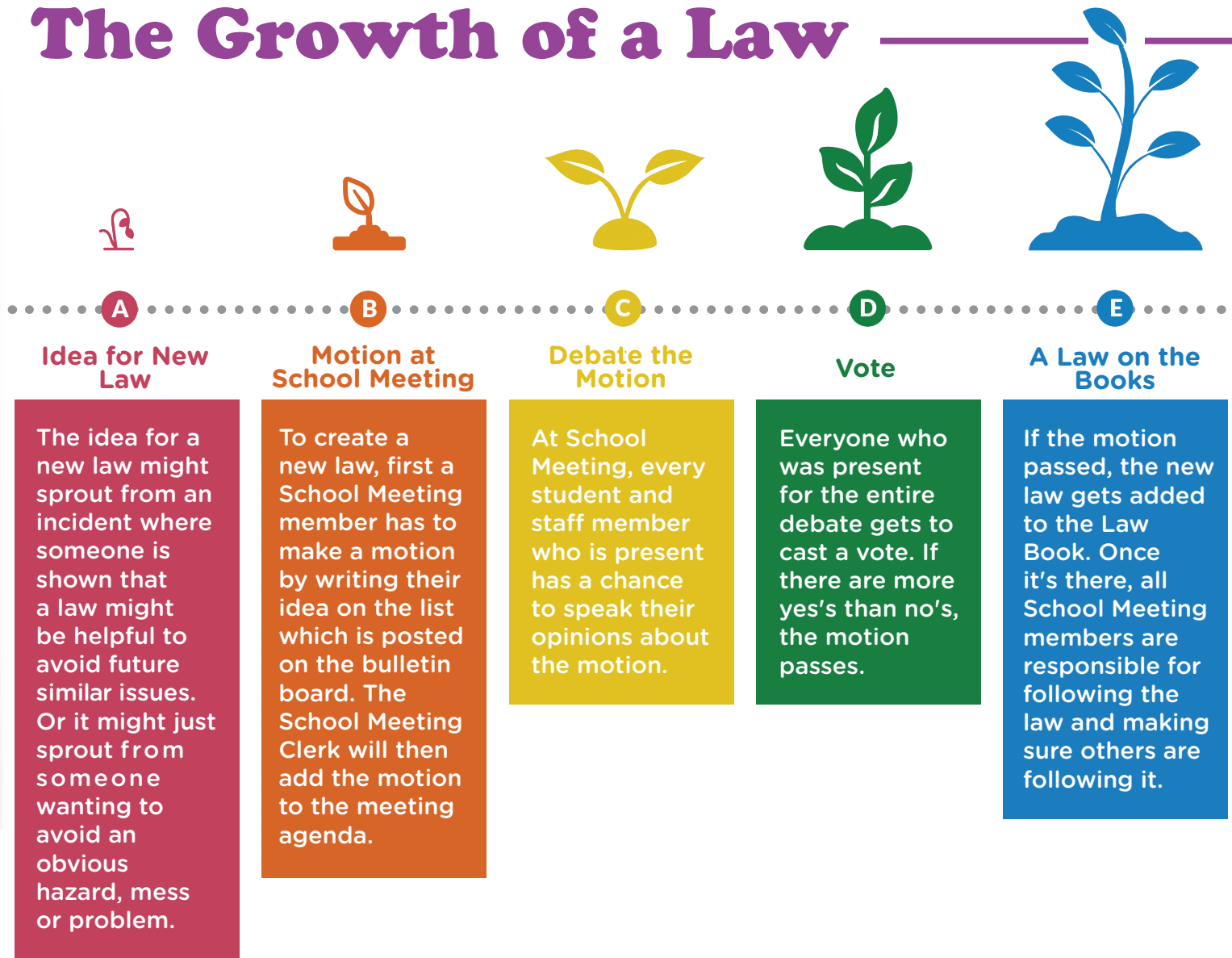
-- Cassi

Move: permit Jana Williams, age 11, to visit the school next Friday for one day. -- Lily

Meeting adjourned at 2:28pm



The Growth of a Law



THE LAW BOOK

The Open School's Law Book has been developed over the course of the school's existence. Each law begins as a School Meeting motion, which is debated and voted in. The laws may then be amended or repealed by the School Meeting at any time in the future. The laws may not infringe on the fundamental rights afforded to students at The Open School (see "Bill of Rights" on page 29). Rather, they exist to protect the individual rights of each person as well as to safeguard the school as a whole.

Following are a few sample laws from The Open School's Law Book. These apply to all School Meeting members (students and staff). The Law Book contains more than 200 laws in total. The first two laws listed are foundational, and breaking these rules is considered a very serious infraction.

Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life.

~ B. R. Ambedkar

- **0310.100 Preservation of The Open School**

No one should act in a way that threatens the existence of The Open School.

- **0310.200 Preamble**

All School Meeting members are responsible for the general welfare of the school through actions that contribute to preserving the atmosphere of freedom, respect, fairness, trust, and order that is the essence of the school's existence.

- **0310.15 Stop Rule**

When a School Meeting member says "stop," it is indicating that the School Meeting member feels harassed or threatened, is not playing a game, and does not wish a troubling action being directed at him or her to continue. Not stopping after being told to stop is prohibited.

- **0310.19 Community Norms**

Activities that are not appropriate in a public space are not permitted at school.

• **0311.20 Prohibited Content**

Media containing any of the following is prohibited from being brought to or consumed on campus at all times: 1) graphic sexual content; 2) frequent use of strong language; 3) gratuitous extreme violence.

• **0311.40 Permission for Image Usage**

School Meeting members must ask permission of others before posting their image to the internet or sharing it with others, with the exception of official school PR materials.

• **0321.31 Mess**

School Meeting members must clean up all personal messes before moving on to a new activity.

• **0340.00 Abuse of Property**

No School Meeting member may destroy or act in a way that might destroy property.

• **0340.90 Water Play**

Water balloons are not permitted on campus.

• **0341.5 Throwing Sand**

No one may throw sand towards others.

• **0500.00 Personal Safety**

Activities that present a real or potential danger to anyone's personal safety are prohibited.

• **0601.3 Verbal Assault**

School Meeting members may not use aggressive derogatory language towards others, make threats of bodily harm towards others, make threats of a sexual nature towards others, or make statements in favor of self harm towards individuals.

• **0601.7 Begging**

No one may beg for food or panhandle for money.

• **8111.13 Cyberbullying**

School Meeting members are not permitted to cyberbully other School Meeting members at any time, regardless of time or location of the perpetrator. They also may not cyberbully any member of the general public while on campus.

Cyber bullying is defined as harassing others using electronic means, posting or sending mean-spirited messages targeting a particular person.

• **8116.20 Impeding Pickup**

When a person responsible for pickup is on campus, any School Meeting members being picked up must get ready to go immediately and may not knowingly delay the pickup.

• **9990.10 Eating Areas**

School Meeting members who are not certified Free Eaters may only eat and drink outside, or on tables in the big room and the small room.

MATTERS OF JUSTICE

Civics Board is the committee empowered by the School Meeting to enforce the rules in the Law Book. School Meeting members serve on Civics Board on a rotation, and Civics Board must always have more students than staff.

Below is a sample Civics Board case, based on a real situation.

1. THE INCIDENT

Mark and Sebastian are playing in the grass with some rocks they drew faces on. Julia has her own pet rock and wants to play with Mark and Sebastian, but they tell her no. Julia really wants to play with them, so she sits next to them and acts out her own rock story, riffing on the boys' story. Mark and Sebastian tell her to go away and stop bothering them. Julia is hurt by this, but she stays. All three children are getting increasingly upset as this goes on and on.

Julia gets up for a minute, and when she comes back she can't find her rock. She sees Mark's rock and mistakes it for her own because they look similar. She grabs Mark's rock, and Mark pushes her down while trying to get his rock back. Julia begins crying and goes to tell a staff member that Mark pushed her. She also tells Mark's mom about the push during pick-up.

2. THE WRITE-UP

Julia gets a complaint form and, with the help of a staff member, writes down the following: "Mark, Sebastian, and I were playing with rocks. Mark took my rock, and when I tried to get it back, he pushed me down."

3. THE INVESTIGATION

Civics Board convenes at 11:00 the next day. This committee consists of two students of different ages, Emma and Lachlan, and one staff member, Cassi. Emma and Lachlan have been chosen randomly from the community and do not have any connection to the incident.

Emma, Lachlan, and Cassi, along with Julia, Mark, and Sebastian, all gather in a room. Emma reads the complaint that Julia wrote the previous day. Mark and Sebastian protest that Julia left out part of the story. She hadn't asked their permission to play with them, so

she was actually harassing them. They told her to stop several times but she didn't stop. Also, Mark didn't take Julia's rock -- it was the other way around.

After some discussion, Civics Board realizes that Julia mistook Mark's rock for her own and it was actually a misunderstanding. Mark also mentions off-hand that Julia told Mark's mom that he pushed her. Mark's mom got upset about this and demanded that Mark apologize to Julia. Civics Board decides to include all of these details in their written report.

4. THE CHARGE

Civics Board looks through the Law Book to see what, if any, rules were broken. They all agree immediately that Mark broke the rule "Violent Acts" for pushing Julia down. Lachlan suggests that Julia also be charged with breaking the rule "Harassment" for persistently bothering Mark and Sebastian. Finally Cassi suggests that Julia be charged with "Expectation of Privacy" for reporting Mark's behavior to his mother. Civics Board votes yes on all these charges, and Julia and Mark both plead "guilty".

5. THE RESOLUTION

The group decides to restrict Julia and Mark from playing with rocks for the next three days of school. They also decide that Julia will buy Mark a snack from the school's snack shop, as compensation for the unnecessary family conflict she created by reporting Mark's behavior to his mother.

The Open School Bill of Rights

AUTONOMY

- **Personal Autonomy-** The right to personal autonomy, so long as that autonomy does not harm or endanger the self, others, or the community at large
- **No Persecution-** Protection against unreasonable persecution of or by individuals or communities
- **Pursuit of Activities-** The right to pursue lawful and sanctioned activities without inviting harassment
- **Privacy-** The right to reasonable personal privacy with respect to their body, possessions, activities, positions, & time

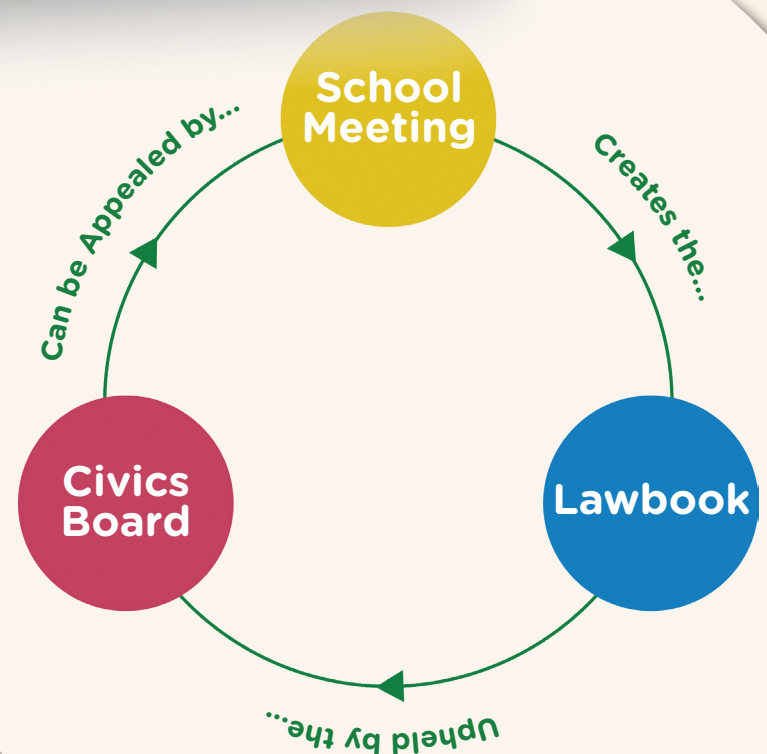
INFORMED CONSENT AND DISSENT

- **One Person, One Vote-** The right to have regular access to direct “one person, one vote” input in school governance
- **Collaborative Administration-** The right to have access to and input in administrative actions such as hiring and budget
- **Bureaucratic Transparency-** The right to access accurate and transparent representations of policies and procedures that impact individuals or the community
- **Dissent-** The right to voice dissent without incurring retribution
- **Abstention-** The right to abstain from participation in activities, except services essential to the community

JUSTICE

- **Complaints-** The right to lodge formal complaints against others for infringing on the rights of individuals or the community at large
- **Hearings-** The right to a fair and impartial hearing of complaints
- **Closure-** The right to have complaints and infractions dealt with in an expedient and proportionately responsive manner

Governing Structure at The Open School



04



YOUR CHOICE OF EDUCATION COULD SAVE YOUR CHILD'S LIFE

By Ben Page, Open School co-founder

First, let me figuratively shake you by the shoulders with a few statistics:

- According to the CDC, the rate of youth suicide in girls doubled between 2007 and 2015 and the youth suicide rate for boys climbed by 30%.³
- According to the National Institute of Mental Health, around 30% of girls and 20% of boys have had an anxiety disorder.⁴
- According to the Department of Health and Human Services, in 2015, 3 million adolescents aged 12-17 had at least one major depressive episode within the last year.⁴

These statistics are unbelievable and unprecedented. The new generation, known as iGen in some circles, is in a crisis, and most researchers believe the culprits are overexposure to social media, declining face-to-face social interactions, and increased levels of stress. A common theme in the current literature on youth depression and suicide is that today, more than ever before, young people feel isolated. This is the tragedy of our times.

I believe young people feel isolated because they lack community, time, and freedom. They are chronically over-scheduled, taught to pass tests and not to explore their interests. They are not allowed to freely socialize, not allowed to learn self care, not taught how to self-regulate their bodies and emotions, not allowed to seek justice in meaningful ways, not allowed freedom of speech and expression, not allowed to say "no" to an authority figure. They are like animals on a farm, segregated, assessed, graded, rewarded for

obedience, valued only for their labor. So of course they feel isolated, and depressed, and anxious. Wouldn't you?

I'm genuinely sick and tired of arguing about academics and curricular objectives. I'm done. It's obvious that the modern system of education is contributing to the systemic harm of American children, and this is where the conversation should be, not on the trivialities of test scores.

For those of you reading over the age of 30, I want you to understand that your school experience is a distant memory. I've been on the inside. I've seen it. The school experience you had is extinct. The last 20 years have been an educational catastrophe, most significantly in terms of human development objectives. You can quote statistics to me all day about academic achievement and I could not care less. You are breaking these children. The system is crushing them in order to extract those numbers. It is simply not worth it. Your child's life is not worth it.

Look, I'm not going to say I have all the answers, but I do believe that self-directed democratic schools, like The Open School, are a much healthier system for human development than any other model. At The Open School, young people learn to be independent, self regulating, and responsible. They are trusted, they have meaningful ways to seek justice against peers and adults when they are wronged, and they participate in the creation of rules and in the administering of justice.

Our kids are powerful and they know it. They will not be harassed or dominated, and they will not stay silent or blame themselves when it occurs. They are not anxious, because they are in control of their lives. They are not depressed, because they know themselves and they love themselves because that's the feedback they get from adults. They are witnessed for being themselves.

And you know what? They're smart too. They learn all the time; in fact, they love learning. So if your only detraction from my school is that you don't believe your child is intelligent enough to be a self-directed learner, I'd ask you to consider how that attitude might be affecting your child.

I want you to know that you have options. You do not need to put your child through a traditional system of education. You do not need to subject them to a school where they are made to conform and sit still. You do not need to force them to learn everything everyone else learns.

You don't need to worry that they will be a failure in any other system of education. They will shine in our school, and that shine will not go out when they leave our walls. They will carry it with them throughout their lives.

At the end of the day, I'll take mental health over a transcript any day of the week. Wouldn't you?

³ "QuickStats: Suicide Rates, for Teens Aged 15-19 Years, by Sex — United States, 1975-2015." CDC, 4 August 2017, www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6630a6.htm. Accessed 15 June 2019.

⁴ Schrobsdorff, Susanna. "What's Causing Depression and Anxiety in Teens." Time, 26 October 2016, time.com/4547322/american-teens-anxious-depressed-overwhelmed/. Accessed 15 June 2019.

YOU CAN'T DO SUDBURY AT HOME

Why pay tuition to have your child do what they can just do at home?

by Cassi Clausen, Open School OC staff and co-founder

I talk to a lot of parents who are looking for a different kind of school for their kids. These people are used to having a school where teachers are creating content, planning projects, and pushing kids to do things. They may think that this is the whole point of sending their child to a school: to have teachers mold their child into some desirable outcome.

So then when they look at our school and see that we do none of that, they ask,

Why would I pay tuition to have my child do what they can do at home?

Democracy

Students at our school have authentic agency and voice to affect their school. No matter how democratic you try to make your family, it can never be (and should never be) a true democracy. The fact is, they cannot vote you out of your role as Mom or Dad. But they can vote me out of my position, and they must learn to use this power responsibly. They can't decide how your family will spend every dime, but they can vote at School Meeting and decide how our money is spent.

The opportunity for real agency with real consequences means that our students learn how they can affect their world. They graduate with an understanding that their voice is valuable and they can create change.

The other part of our democracy, which is impossible to enact in your home, is peer-to-peer justice. The Civics Board is the way our school handles rule infractions. It is made up of a rotating group of students with one staff member, each of whom gets one vote. There will never be more adults than students on Civics Board. Anyone can write up anyone

(yes, students can write up staff) and that complaint goes before the Civics Board which investigates and decides what has happened and how the offender should make up for their offense.



The experience has been strange and wonderful. This year, my son is making decisions for himself. I see him involved in school and learning how to balance great freedom with deeper responsibility.

~ Scott (Parent)

Students sit on either side of the table at different times (sometimes both sides in one day). They have the opportunity to think through how their actions affect the school because they represent the school in enforcing the rules. They grow enormously in taking ownership of their decisions and accepting the consequences of their actions. They learn that there's no need to be defensive or hide their actions, because this is a community maintaining its own order, not a top-down authority trying to keep everyone in line.

Deep social connections

Attending a full-time school where students have all day to spend with peers gives them a unique ability to forge strong friendships. These are deeper relationships than are normally made in schools because kids have the luxury of spending every moment in social interaction if they choose. There are no teachers telling them to stop talking or bells that signal they must separate from their friend to go to class. This depth of time with one another means they have opportunity for conflict and for moving through conflict. We have the time to spend working things out. This is where relational and emotional growth happens.

Being in a community is not just about forging deep relationships, but learning to get along in a shared space with others whom you may or may not like. It's about having consistency and stability in who you are with, where you can't just abandon them the moment things get tough and they can't abandon you after one mistake. In addition to being a great learning experience, this creates a sense of security and safety in kids' lives.

Independence

By virtue of being their parent, you cannot give your child authentic independence at home. For them to grow to be their own person, truly, they must have space from you. Our school provides a space for kids to try different things, fail, do "nothing", and otherwise have autonomy without the oversight (no matter how benign) of a parent.

To understand the way this works, consider how you feel and behave when your parents come to visit you. No matter how comfortable your relationship with your parents, their presence changes what activities you do and how you talk to your spouse or kids. Their presence isn't bad, but it impacts your choices.

It's the same with kids. They make different choices or feel differently about their choices when a parent is there. Because of this, you will never see your child fully independent. You will never know how they handle problems or advocate for themselves when you're not around.

Sudbury schools are unique places where children are given the same freedoms and rights as adults, and are given a place to practice being an adult. This is something that they can never experience at home.

The ability to take control of their life

So, maybe you want to put your child in a school where you aren't present, thereby giving them space from you. But you would be hard pressed to find a school where they were authentically able to take ownership of their life. Our staff do not manipulate or coerce kids to do what we want, or what we think the parents would like. We fully support and respect who kids are, and we are around to help when they have questions that need answering or skills that need teaching.

The biggest gift you give your child when enrolling them in a Sudbury school is, "I trust you and believe in you." Whether or not kids consciously understand this at first, they feel it through the structure of the school and in the way the adults in their lives aren't rushing to take over when something isn't going the way they hoped it would go. They learn that the people they love most in the world, their parents, trust them to make their own decisions, believe that they will learn from their mistakes, and have faith that they will grow into the person they were meant to be.

What am I paying for?

So, if you enroll in our school, what are you paying for? You're paying

for a completely unique school where your child has real power to change their surroundings, where they can forge life-long and deep relationships, where they can experience true independence, and where they can write their own story.

Why does this take money? We need a cool place to do it (rent), skilled people to make it happen (salary), and stuff to play with (materials). There are also business expenses such as insurance, accounting, marketing, and maintenance.

Paying money to send your child to a school when you have a free option down the street (or perhaps in your home) is a big ask. It's not a decision that families take lightly, nor should they. Your choice in schooling is one of the biggest parenting decisions you will make, and it's imperative that you find a place for your child where your family values are reflected at school.

Other than your home, your child will spend the most amount of their childhood at school. So, why wouldn't you invest in a place where they are valued for who they are, encouraged to follow their own path and take control of their lives, and develop deep relationships with a diverse group of people?



THE TRUTH ABOUT VIDEO GAMES

By Aaron Browder, Open School OC staff

Screens and children: two things which must not be allowed to mix, according to ongoing media reports. Every day it seems there's a new study on how digital media are damaging children and warping their development, and how video games lead to addiction and real-world violence.

Moral panic about new technology is as old as time. Socrates warned against writing, fearing it would "introduce forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories." In the late 19th century, social critics complained that the newly invented telephone would cause people to talk to each other too much; one writer lamented, "We shall soon be nothing but transparent heaps of jelly to each other."

According to Dr. Nicholas Kardaras, video games are a form of "digital drug" that turn kids into "psychotic junkies". In a 2016 article in the New York Post, he claimed, "Recent brain imaging research is showing that video games affect the brain's frontal cortex — which controls executive functioning, including impulse control — in exactly the same way that cocaine does."⁵

What Kardaras leaves out is that this is the same effect produced by everything pleasurable. Video gaming raises dopamine in the brain to roughly double its resting level, much like eating a slice of pizza. Meanwhile, drugs like heroin, cocaine, or amphetamine increase dopamine by roughly ten times that much. Video games aren't addictive — they're just fun.⁶

Video Games Are World Simulation Systems

Nell likes to play a game on her iPad that involves dressing up digital people in various outfits. She is able to pick an article of clothing off a shelf and see how it looks on a person, combined with other articles of clothing, with a few taps of her finger. As far as I can tell, the only differences between this activity and dressing up physical dolls are (A) she has access to thousands of articles of clothing for free, and (B) she can change outfits in a few seconds instead of a few minutes.

Video games are, in essence, world simulation systems. Children love video games because video games allow children to explore and experience the world, and thus, to learn.



Neuroscience supports this world simulation theory. Research shows that video games activate the parts of the brain that underlie the activities which are being simulated. So games that involve visual acuity and attention activate parts of the brain that underlie visual acuity and attention, and games that involve spatial memory activate parts of the brain involved in spatial memory. Some research even indicates that extensive gaming can increase the volume of the right hippocampus and the entorhinal cortex, which are involved in spatial memory and navigation.⁷

A skeptic might wonder: “What educational value could a combat game possibly have, since it is unlikely that kids will ever need combat skills in life?” I would address this question the same way I would address the question, “What educational value could a book about a battle possibly have, since it is unlikely that kids will ever find themselves in a real battle?”

Certainly, reading a book about anything will improve the reader’s reading skills. By the same token, playing a combat game improves the various skills necessary for the successful execution of combat strategies, such as innovation, teamwork, concentration, and coping with failure.

You can see from this simple example how much richer the experience of playing a game is than reading a book. Educators love to praise

“
*Much that passes for
 education is not
 education at all but ritual.
 The fact is that we are being
 educated when we
 know it least.*
 ~ David P. Gardner

books for their power to transport us to distant places and teach us about the world. But books are a passive medium, while video games are an interactive one. In a video game you can ask questions and get answers, which is not possible in a book. In a video game you can mess with things and see what happens. With a book you can learn information, but with a video game you can develop skills. It’s no wonder that kids today prefer video games to books.

Video Games and Real-World Violence

But if all these video games are really educational, many people might be concerned that video games are imparting the wrong lessons to children. What are kids really learning from games like Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto?

As someone who played both of those games as a kid (back then it was 007: Goldeneye instead of Call of Duty), I can attest that there’s great value in being able to explore the implications of violence without needing to engage in actual violence. My friends and I played those games for hours and never got the slightest impression that it was okay to shoot somebody in real life just because it was okay in the game. In fact, in Grand Theft Auto it’s not okay to shoot somebody; if you do, the police will come after you, and you will probably get shot. Isn’t that a valuable lesson?

Some people are concerned about the current level of violence and war in the world today, and wonder if the rise of violent video games might be partly to blame. However, meta-analyses of studies of the effects of violent video games on real world violence conclude that there is very little or no link between the two.⁷

Video games may even be a force for reducing violence, as gamers have the opportunity to vent their frustrations in virtual worlds rather than the real world (the catharsis theory). In fact, during the years in which violent video gaming has steadily risen, real-world violence by youth has been simultaneously declining.⁹

⁵ Kardaras, Nicholas. “It’s ‘digital heroin’: How screens turn kids into psychotic junkies.” New York Post, 27 August 2016, <https://ny-post.com/2016/08/27/its-digital-heroin-how-screens-turn-kids-into-psychotic-junkies/>. Accessed 24 June 2019.

⁶ Markey, Patrick M. and Christopher J. Ferguson. Moral Combat: Why the War on Violent Video Games is Wrong. BenBella Books, 2017, pp. 132.

⁷ Gray, Peter. “Sense and Nonsense About Video Game Addiction.” Psychology Today, 11 March 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201803/sense-and-nonsense-about-video-game-addiction>. Accessed 25 June 2019.

⁸ Gray, Peter. “The Many Benefits, for Kids, of Playing Video Games.” Psychology Today, 7 January 2012, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201201/the-many-benefits-kids-playing-video-games>. Accessed 25 June 2019.

⁹ Gray, Peter. “The Many Benefits, for Kids, of Playing Video Games.” Psychology Today, 7 January 2012, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201201/the-many-benefits-kids-playing-video-games>. Accessed 25 June 2019.

OUR DAUGHTERS NEED SUDBURY SCHOOLS

Independence and empowerment are for everyone, not just boys

by Cassi Clausen, Open School OC staff and co-founder



As the Admissions Agent at The Open School, I have interacted with hundreds of parents who are looking for something different. Their stories echo each other, and I have noticed a troubling trend. Many of these parents have come to us because their child is struggling in their traditional school, and a vast majority of the time, that child is a son.

"He keeps getting into trouble because he wants to move around."

"They want to diagnose him with ADHD and I refuse to drug him."

"He just doesn't have any interest in doing what other people tell him to do."

"He's being bullied and feeling anxious about going to school."

For whatever reason, boys in traditional schools have obvious indicators when they're not thriving. Perhaps they have internalized the

cultural message that, as a boy, they are allowed and expected to be a leader, and that directly opposes the message of school.

This is not to say that boys don't need to be pulled out of traditional schools in favor of learner-centered models like The Open School. They do need it — desperately. The thing is, girls need it desperately too. However, because girls' indicators are not blaring, parents often don't see the need until it's too late.

Parents tell me that their daughter is "doing fine" in her traditional school, or even that she's happy and thriving. She is getting good grades, is appreciated by her teachers, and even does her homework without too much complaining. The system seems to suit her.

The thing is, girls struggle in school just as often as boys. They're just

better at hiding it. Recent studies indicate that ADHD occurs in girls almost as often as boys, but that it often goes undiagnosed in girls because the symptoms are different. While ADHD tends to manifest in boys as hyperactivity, it is more likely to manifest in girls as depression, eating disorders, and suicide.

Taught by their culture that their worth lies in their ability to please others, many girls will not dare to let anyone know about their struggles. They are too afraid of being a disappointment. Without an outlet for their suffering, they blame themselves.

Instilling Inferiority

Traditional schools teach girls that compliance is desirable and that their worth lies in the judgment of others. By "doing well" in a traditional school, a girl becomes one more woman who has to overcome the cultural

message that she needs to subjugate her personhood, her passions, and her independence in favor of a larger system that determines her worth based on outward performance and conformity.

I have a son and daughter both attending The Open School. My son is focused and independent by nature. Any time he has brushed against a traditional system of adult hierarchy, he has bucked against it. He won't sit

still and listen unless he has personal reason to.

My daughter, on the other hand, loves to please others. In her play-based preschool, she did every project and enjoyed the adulation of the teacher. During her first year at The Open School, she complained about not having project tables. She wanted someone to set up things for her to do, and to tell her how good she was at doing them. By all

accounts, she would "do well" at a traditional school.

And yet, if I was forced to make a Sophie's choice of sorts to send one of them to my local public school, I would choose my son without hesitation. Why? Because I believe his determination would survive that system, while my daughter's natural inclination toward pleasing would be further rewarded and entrenched. She needs the education provided at The Open School more than my son does.

By the way, it's working. She has developed a strong sense of self and independence. Instead of complaining about not having projects set up for her, she grabs art materials and creates her own projects. Instead of pining for praise from adults, she finds her value based in her own estimation.

As a woman in this world, I know the pressures that girls will have to face in their lives. The message that my worth is based on my outward appearance and performance is woven into every form of media. The notion that my voice isn't as important as how polite I am is part of every interaction. And the belief that compliance makes me a good partner underlies every aspect of relationship.

Mothers and fathers of little girls: isn't your daughter going to have enough cultural baggage to deal with? Why put her in a system that emphasizes expectations she may never be able to defeat? Don't you want to give her the best chance to become a woman who loves herself despite what others say, and who speaks her mind, leads her peers, and is fully empowered in her life?



WHAT ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES?

At Sudbury Schools, kids are not defined by their diagnoses

By Emma Boers, alumna of Hudson Valley Sudbury School (a sister school to The Open School)

When I was 15, I dropped out of school. It was more of a passive decision than an active one. I just decided I was sick of sitting in a classroom for an hour learning facts that I either knew already or didn't need to know at all. I didn't announce to my mom "I'm going to drop out of school." I just didn't go. I refused to.

This wasn't unusual for me. I always had a history of hating school, since I was bullied since first grade and the school did absolutely nothing to stop it. But with college looming on the horizon in several years, I think the school district (and my parents) finally decided to do something about it. The district organized several meetings with my parents, the school staff, and my teachers from the previous year. I was never at these meetings, nor was I invited. But every month or so, right on schedule, my mom would come home with printed information and brochures on faraway boarding schools that specialized in disabled children.

That first set of papers was also the first time I realized that the public school system didn't see me as an individual. To them, I was a diagnosis.

I wasn't Emma Elizabeth Boers, as it was printed on my birth certificate. I wasn't a being of any sort.

I was Autism.

After a failed period of being homeschooled, my mom found the Hudson Valley Sudbury School online. We drove down an hour

and a half to Woodstock to visit in the middle of a dreary December night. I knew after the informational meeting that this is where I wanted to go. I canceled my meeting with a Montessori school the next day, my mom paid the fee for the visiting week, and it was settled.

My first day, I moped around the halls feeling lonely. The school's environment was so social, it was difficult for me to even try to fit in. What would they say if I talked out of turn or said something stupid? I didn't understand how I would ever fit in. I walked into a room of gamers and thought it would be a good idea for me to bring a few video games the next day. And the next day, I suddenly became the game room's favorite new student.

After a few long weeks of nothing but Super Smash Bros. Brawl, I was slowly becoming more social. I still didn't understand what was and wasn't appropriate to say or do, but I at least decided to speak up instead of being quiet and not talking to people. Slowly but surely, my social skills were improving far beyond what they ever were in public school. I was never afraid to talk to different people, new people, people I didn't know. Bullying seemed almost nonexistent (though I had issues with a few students) and I felt like I was actually accepted by other beings for once in my life.

While at HVSS, I also decided to pursue my old interest in writing. I had written an (unpublished) novella at the age of 13, but stopped writing

when I couldn't get it published. It was bad, and I realized that, but I also felt like with classes and homework out of the way I had the strength to pursue something like that again. I started on the first draft of the novel *Leech Child* at HVSS, with the support and advice of the staff.

Near the end of my first year at HVSS I was sitting in the lounge, chatting with some of the other students, when the subject of mental disability came up. I offhandedly mentioned something about my autism, not even thinking about how people might respond.

"Oh, you have autism? Wow, I never would have guessed."

"Yeah, me neither."

The responses came one after the other, and even as the conversation moved on, I was shocked. Why weren't they making fun of me? Isn't it obvious I'm different?

I thought about it for a bit, and a realization came to me - Sudbury, as a whole, was different. The philosophy was obviously different than the compulsory schooling most kids were used to. The kids were nicer, funnier, and more social. The parents cared more about their children, and the staff didn't take the job for any superficial reason - they loved kids, and they loved to teach them the way they were supposed to be taught.

We were different, and I loved it.

Several more years passed by, and my mom moved down to Woodstock so I could attend the school more easily. I learned to play Magic: the Gathering, hosted several games of Pokemon D&D, Espionage and Dokapon Kingdom, started school wide projects like making Shrinky Dinks for the craft fair, made Cheeze Whiz flavored gumdrops, and generally had an excellent time. Leech Child was coming along well and I even served on the Judicial Committee, something I thought I would have never been able to do.

At the end of what would be my last year at HVSS, I walked up in front of a whole crowd of people carrying a sheet of notebook paper, and I recited the speech I had written down. I was shaking, and my mouth seemed to move on its own, and I think I cried a bit at the end, but it was beautiful.

It's been a bit more than six months since I left HVSS, if my memory is right. I'm not in college yet because

I wanted some time off to pursue my interests - writing, art, and game development - but I'm hoping to go to Hudson Valley Community College in the fall, and I have little doubt that they'll accept me. Leech Child is on its third or fourth revision, and I think it's going well.

Probably the best side effect of HVSS for me was that I began to accept who I was. That I was a being, a person, a somebody. I wasn't a diagnosis or a label. I could be whatever I wanted to be, within reason, and that was okay.

Today I'm going to announce that in the long run, I'm okay with who I am. Sometimes I might falter or lose faith in myself but for the most part, I appreciate the young adult I'm turning into.

I'm a writer. I'm genderqueer. I'm an artist. I'm a misanthrope. I'm geeky. I'm autistic. Some people know me as Emma, while others know me as Seika or Ness.

But none of these alone are really me.

Sudbury, both the philosophy and the community, helped me realize this. No being is a label, or even a collection of them. We are all a collection of unique experiences and stories, and we each have the potential to contribute something positive to this planet, no matter how small.

It's okay to be YOU.

And so my story comes to an end. I am NOT Autism. I am Ness, and this is the beginning of a (hopefully) long list of contributions I will make to planet Earth:

Listen to your child. Do they enjoy school? If not, something is wrong. Learning should be an enlightening experience. It shouldn't be a jail. Your kid will tell you the truth. After all, kids are the most honest people on Earth.

Well, except for me. I'm a bit too brutally honest for my own good. And I'm okay with that.

*What does education often do?
It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free,
meandering brook.*

~ Henry David Thoreau



AGE MIXING, PEER PRESSURE

By Aaron Browder, Open School OC staff

One of the major fears parents have when sending their children off to school is “peer pressure”. This frightening force is what makes otherwise good kids do bad things, like trying drugs or committing crimes. And beyond this obviously dark side of peer pressure there is a broader risk of young people losing themselves, and their unique personalities and interests, into the abyss of conformity as they grow from children into teens.

Of course, peer pressure and conformity are not all bad. Those impulses are what allow groups of people to adopt a common set of rules and norms and to work together harmoniously.

At The Open School, you’ll find plenty of the good kind of peer pressure with hardly any of the bad. A 12-year-old boy swings on the swingset every day, and his age-mates have never made fun of him for it. A 10-year-old girl brings her stuffed animals to school some days and plays with her 7-year-old friend. Other days she hangs out with the teen girls, who accept her as one of their own. Students here are allowed to be their quirky selves, as long as they aren’t breaking rules or disrupting the activities of others.

At The Open School, we have a different kind of peer pressure. Everyone at the school, from 5-year-old children to adult staff, makes up a single peer group. Everyone is expected to abide by the rules of the school, respect each others’ rights, and fulfill responsibilities like chores and participation in the justice system. Likewise, when people choose to play games, they have to follow the agreed-upon rules of the game. This kind of conformity is what allows the school to function.

When a new student comes to our school, it’s like a breath of fresh air. They don’t have to hide themselves. They can be nerdy and pursue their interests. An 11-year-old boy, who seemed like a typical “cool kid” when he arrived here, eventually started collecting and trading Pokemon cards and playing Pokemon video games at school. Everyone still thinks he’s one of the coolest kids.

How does this happen at The Open School? The main factor is the age-mixed environment. Whereas at a traditional school students are segregated into same-aged classes, at The Open School everyone is free to interact with anyone in the school, anywhere, anytime, of all ages.

One of the strongest friendships at The Open School is between two boys aged 8 and 5. They get along well because they happen to have a lot of interests in common despite their age difference.

While at a traditional school students are pressured to act their grade, at The Open School most students don’t even know each other’s exact ages. There is no need for students to take part in rituals to gain acceptance into their same-aged peer group. Students are accepted just for being themselves. As a result they are less likely to be pressured into doing dangerous things, like drugs or law-breaking.

Also, the democratic structure of the school means that everyone of every age is an equal. There is no age-based hierarchy. The lack of grade divisions means nobody assumes that older students are better or smarter than younger students. We all have our unique strengths, abilities, and talents, and we can all learn from each other.



How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?

~ Henry David Thoreau



05



EVALUATION, PRIVACY & THE ROLE OF PARENTS

If you don't test students, how will you know if they are learning anything?

Our students evaluate themselves. It is their responsibility to set their own learning goals and decide whether they have reached them. If a student bakes a cake, and she doesn't like the taste, she knows she must do better next time. If a student is trying to learn Spanish, and he can't understand his Spanish-speaking friend, he knows he has more work to do. If a student can't wrap her mind around how cells divide, she knows she needs to ask more questions.

The students are much better at evaluating themselves than we could ever be at evaluating them. Furthermore, our students don't associate failure with shame. They recognize that failure is not a mark of stupidity, but a stepping stone on the path to mastery.

Will I receive any student evaluations, reports, or have parent-teacher conferences?

As a general rule, no, you will not receive reports or evaluations. We are committed to honoring students' right to privacy, and allow them to share with their parents whatever they are comfortable sharing.

We do hold conferences with families in a few different situations. Early in your enrollment, we will hold two "check-in" meetings with your entire family (not just parents). This is a time to discuss how the family is fitting with the school (and vice versa), and if there are any concerns that need to be addressed.

Another time a conference might be held is if the School Meeting has requested a parent conference due to a

severe behavior concern. This conference may or may not be in conjunction with a suspension. The Open School prefers to give students a few chances to correct their own behavior issues before inviting parental involvement. Usually students are able to do it on their own, and this allows them to grow in independence.

Parents may also ask for an entire-family conference at any time with our Family Liaison. If there is anything concerning you, please feel free to ask for a conference. Being a parent at The Open School can be challenging, so it's important to us that you are able to voice your concerns and get answers to your questions.

Remember that these conferences are not intended to be discussions about academics, but instead about personal responsibility, community, and independence.

What is the role of the parents?

The primary role of parents at The Open School is to trust their children and to trust the school process. Many parents have been conditioned to be vocal activists on behalf of their children. Such a role is necessary when students are in a system where they have no recourse or authentic voice of their own. However, at The Open School, students are given direct access and agency to make changes in their school and advocate for themselves.

We also ask that our parents be active members of our community. We want to know who you are as a person, and we want to give you support in your parenting journey. Our school is a vibrant community, but only when parents are actively engaged. We hold events monthly to foster relationships between parents and to offer workshops and support for our families.

Why won't the staff tell me what my child is doing at school?

The gift of independence, enabled by respectful privacy, is an important reason parents choose The Open School. Even parents accustomed to micro-managing their children find deep benefits, and sometimes personal liberation from worry, as children assume increasing self-responsibility.

The Open School is a child's "public" place, separate from home and family. Thus released from the habits and expectations of family life, children are freer to think expansively about themselves and their place in the world. Out of their parents' sight, in their independence at school, they are freer to try out new ways of interacting with people, new areas of knowledge, new mental models of how the world works, new physical feats, and a host of other innovations.

How do parents learn about what is happening at school?

The school maintains communication forums with parents so that parents are alerted to any announcements, events, or emergencies in a timely fashion. This forum is determined by the Family Liaison and may include an app-based messaging group, email, texts, or other means of electronic communication. Parents are responsible for keeping up to date with the messages from the school.

Social events and fundraisers are also a good place to find out about school news, and are a great place to bring grandparents and friends who have questions about the school.

For personal information about their own children, parents' best source, naturally, is their own children - through dialogue and observation. If that proves unsatisfying, the school encourages parents to speak with the Family Liaison to address their concerns.



WHY IS THE SCHOOL SO SMALL?

The Open School is small in comparison to surrounding schools. At first blush, our size can be a concern to prospective parents and students. They might worry about not having a wide enough variety of equipment, or enough opportunities to make friends. However, at The Open School, these two things are not issues like they might be at other schools.

EQUIPMENT

At The Open School, we can procure anything a student needs for their passion project. If a student wants something that the school doesn't have, they can make their case to School Meeting and a special purchase can be made. On the other hand, in a school which already has a lot of materials lying around, students are at risk of getting the (wrong) impression that they have to use the materials that are on hand, or nothing at all. This can actually get in the way of students' process of exploring their own interests, encouraging them instead to fall back on beaten paths. Central to the mission of The Open School is giving students the opportunity to chart their own courses through life. Pre-loading our campus with a lot of specialized equipment would in fact work against that mission.

FRIENDS

While it may seem like a smaller school affords fewer opportunities to find friends, in practice every student at The Open School manages to form deep and satisfying relationships. Occasionally this takes time, especially for introverted students -- yet those same students are the ones who benefit the most from the struggle to build bonds because of the skills they learn through that struggle.

One Open School student spent several months alone, working on personal projects. She complained of boredom and depression, and often considered leaving to go someplace else. Finally, one day, she decided she wasn't going to be alone anymore and worked up the courage to ask a group of girls around her age if she could hang out with them. They said, "Of course! Why did it take you so long to ask?" Now they are best friends, and she waits impatiently for school vacations to be over so she can be with them every day again.

Possibly the most innate and powerful human drive is to form relationships. Time and again at our little school, we have seen people who initially seemed to have nothing in common develop deep friendships. They become friends

in spite of their different ages, genders, socio-economic backgrounds, interests, or personalities, learning new things about themselves and others in the process. And when things get tough, they can't simply run away and find new friends -- they have to work through the conflict. These are skills that will serve them for life.

WHY CAP ENROLLMENT?

Because The Open School is a community based on trust and personal responsibility, we have decided to manage our growth to protect those core values. By growing slowly, we give our new students time to integrate and embody those values before adding more students. This is how we protect and grow our unique culture of trust, respect, and responsibility.

Families who enroll in our school within these first years have the opportunity to be foundational in a school where their input is actually incorporated. Students who enroll during this period will be the students who decide what kinds of equipment to invest in, how to design our space, and what directions we will grow. Parents who join now are the parents who will lead events for our community, mentor other parents in the future, and help with things like design and equipment procurement. These founding families have the opportunity to leave a legacy in a way that future families will not have.



COLLEGE & BEYOND

How does a college evaluate a student without GPA, class rankings, or transcripts?

The truth is that colleges seem to love students from these types of schools because they are so unique. Graduates from Sudbury model schools have consistently reported that they had no special trouble getting accepted into the college of their choice.

There are many ways an Open School graduate can prove their worth to a college without a high school transcript. They can submit a portfolio of work from their teen years, including leadership positions they held at The Open School (there are a huge number of opportunities here). They can submit a recommendation letter written by a staff member who has gotten to know them deeply over many years. They can study for and take the SAT or ACT. They can even take community college classes and get college credit while attending The Open School, and then enter college as a transfer student.

Sudbury Valley School, which has been in operation for almost 50 years, and on which The Open School is modeled, has a rate of about 80% college attendance, much higher than the national average. Furthermore, all Sudbury Valley graduates who wanted to go to college have been admitted, and usually to their top choice school.¹¹

Take Tay for example:

“When I decided I wanted to check college out, I wasn’t sure I wanted the full four-year deal. I started by taking a few night classes at a private university, and ended up having a lot of fun. It was easy then to transfer into the day school, and I always had really high grades

because I had been focused on what interested me the most. I never needed a high school transcript, and I never even took the SATs. In fact, I didn’t take any tests like that until I took the GREs for grad school, which I did well on.”

In 2015, The Circle School, a Sudbury model school in Pennsylvania, conducted a study of the 78 students who had graduated since 1998. The study found that graduates of the Circle School attend college more often than the average American -- between 65 percent and 85 percent of Circle School graduates attend college, depending on their household income, compared with 58 to 82 percent of Americans.¹²

How can kids pass the SAT if they aren’t taught math and writing?

The Open School provides support for students interested in going to college, just like we provide support for all student-initiated pursuits. As with all things, when students are trying to learn something because they’re self-motivated, they learn much more rapidly and effectively than if they were being forced.

Open School students can study for the SAT using school-provided materials; they can receive tutoring from staff (if they want it); and they can organize study groups with other students who have similar goals.

¹¹ Marano, Hara Estroff. “Class Dismissed.” *Psychology Today*, 1 May 2006, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/200605/class-dismissed>. Accessed 26 June 2019.

¹² “Circle School Graduates in 2015.” The Circle School, 30 July 2015, circleschool.org/wp-content/uploads/Circle-School-Grads-in-2015-July-30-2015.pdf. Accessed 15 June 2019.

Do Open School graduates succeed in college?

According to The Circle School's 2015 study (cited earlier), their graduates are more likely than the average American to earn degrees, including bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. 28 percent of Circle School graduates earn bachelor's degrees, compared with only 20 percent of Americans.

Graduates of Sudbury model schools usually report that they felt better-prepared for college than their traditionally schooled peers. Sudbury graduates attend college to achieve their personal goals, not simply because they're expected to attend. Since they are self-motivated, they are more engaged in class and learn more effectively. Meanwhile, graduates of traditional high schools are often only there to put in their time, and consequently they struggle to find motivation.

Although Sudbury graduates often have little or no experience in formal classroom environments, they are able to learn and quickly overcome this handicap. To quote one graduate, Sam, "I think going to Sudbury Valley School and not really having a class experience has helped me stay motivated when people I know who have been in class their whole lives have lost some motivation."

Did You Know?

According to a major IBM survey of more than 1,500 Chief Executive Officers from 60 countries and 33 industries worldwide, chief executives believe that -- more than rigor, management discipline, integrity or even vision -- successfully navigating an increasing complex world will require creativity.¹³

¹³IBM 2010 Global CEO Study, <https://www-03.ibm.com/press/us/en/pressrelease/31670.wss>

Are Open School graduates able to get good jobs?

According to The Circle School's 2015 study, their graduates go on to the full range of careers. They are more likely to go into science and technology (33 percent) than any other field. 60 percent of them are traditionally employed, while only 2 percent are unemployed. Interestingly, they are more likely to be self-employed (13 percent) than the average American (estimated between 6 and 10 percent).

At The Open School, we don't think of college as the only possible path. Instead, we hope that students will follow their passions, whether that means going to college, starting a business, participating in an internship, making art, traveling the world, or something else.



06



