

*The Magazine of Alternative Education*

# *Education Revolution*

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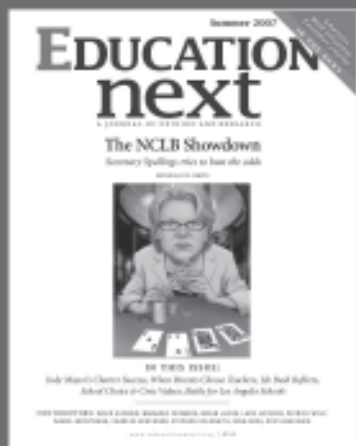
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# Education Revolution

The Magazine of Alternative Education

## Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO)

AERO, which produces this magazine quarterly, is firmly established as a leader in the field of educational alternatives. Founded in 1989 in an effort to promote learner-centered education and influence change in the education system, AERO is an arm of the School of Living, a non-profit organization. AERO provides information, resources and guidance to students, parents, schools and organizations regarding their educational choices.

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Cover photos by Zoëann Murphy

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The Mission of *Education Revolution Magazine* is based on that of the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO):

**“Building the critical mass for the education revolution by providing resources which support self-determination in learning and the natural genius in everyone.”**

Towards this end, this magazine includes the latest news and communications regarding the broad spectrum of educational alternatives: public alternatives, independent and private alternatives, home education, international alternatives, and more. The common feature in all these educational options is that they are *learner-centered*, focused on the interest of the child rather than on an arbitrary curriculum.

## Education Revolution

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# Being There

with Jerry Mintz

## The Passing of an Educational Pioneer

Alexander Tubelsky was a man far ahead of his time. Well before the breakup of the Soviet Union he somehow convinced authorities to allow him to convert a large, inner city Moscow public school into what he named “The School of Self Determination.” It became and remains the largest democratic school in the world with over 600 students. Among other things the students had a constitutional right to leave any class without explanation. The school was a continuous hotbed of activity, with acting classes and machine shops staying open long into the night. My friend Alla Dennisenko helped him with the miraculous transformation of the school and was the foreign language director for more than a decade.



I first met Tubelsky when I traveled to Russia to go to the First New Schools Festival of the Soviet Union in 1991. He showed us around Moscow and we took the train on to the Crimea for the Festival. It was also the last festival, as there was no more Soviet Union a week later. After the conference, our group stood with Tubelsky in Moscow in front of Yeltzin’s “Whitehouse.” The next day the tanks rolled into that very spot and Yestzin stopped the coup, ending the USSR.

Tubelsky then helped to spearhead a dramatic change in education in Russia, legalizing homeschooling, inspiring the creation of many more democratic schools.

Born Jewish, before coming to education he was an actor, with skills he never lost in working with children. When I subsequently brought various groups to Russia, they would stand transfixed when “Sasha” spoke, although they couldn’t understand a word of Russian. They understood the passion, the drama.

When Tubelsky visited the United States several years ago he was shaken by what he saw at the National Testing Service in Princeton and the foreshadowing omens of what became No child Left Behind. He said that all of us must fight against this rigid approach, which he felt could cripple democratic and innovative education.

Yaacov Hecht, director of the Institute of Democratic Education in Israel said, “Alexander Tubelsky was not only a builder of democratic schools, he was also a deep philosopher and pedagogue of democratic education. More than this, he was a man that loved people.”

We lost a wonderful man, a courageous pioneer in democratic education, and I also lost a good friend.

Link to School of Self Determination  
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# *From the Editor's Desk*

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*by Ron Miller*

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## **Reflecting on the 2007 AERO Conference**

I spent three happy and inspiring days with old friends, widely scattered colleagues, and wonderful new acquaintances at the fourth annual AERO conference this summer. As I told my wife when she called to check in, “I’m with my tribe.” It seemed to me, more than at any time before, that here was the nucleus of a dynamic, determined, and very significant grassroots movement that the culture at large knows almost nothing about. Here was a group of extraordinarily caring, concerned, and resourceful people, from teens and young activists to elders who’ve been involved for forty or more years, engaged in the uncharted and thankless task of building a new society.

In this brief retrospective, I won’t even try to summarize the various keynote presentations, workshops, and informal group and one-on-one conversations that provided rich stimulation and encouragement to more than 350 people. To really get it, you had to be there. (Contact AERO to order DVDs of the major presentations—and set aside the last week of June, 2008 to make sure you don’t miss the next conference!)

What I would like to do is reflect on a question that intrigued me throughout the gathering—what is the *context* that holds this tribe together? Despite the diversity of educational practices represented, what values or goals do we hold in common? I’ve been looking for this common ground for over twenty years, and I’ve written quite a lot about the philosophical orientation of “holistic education” which I thought could embrace the core principles of the emerging education revolution. But at the conference, I began to understand that the context is more diffuse, more nebulous, yet more fundamental than any intellectual formulation.

People used words like “democracy,” “choice,” and “child-centered” a lot. And what they mean by these terms is really quite simple. Humanity has entered a historical period of technocracy—a global corporate empire in which power and authority (along with wealth) are increasingly concentrated in the hands of an elite few. The education revolution is essentially about decentralizing power and authority—returning it to human-scale communities, families, and individuals. It ultimately doesn’t matter whether a family chooses unschooling or a carefully structured Waldorf school for their children, whether community learning centers

## From the Editor's Desk (cont.)

are sponsored by public entities (charter or public schools, libraries) or by nonprofit or even local for-profit entities. The important principles are decentralization, diversity, and democratic community.

The education revolution may never reach agreement on what strategies of activism are most effective or what political positions are most in line with our vision (indeed, while the overall flavor of the conference could be described as “progressive,” there were a few conservative Republicans who participated fully and seemed to feel very much among friends). The context I was seeking is both simpler and more profound. It is no coincidence that I spontaneously used the term “tribe”—a pre-industrial social structure—to describe the community with whom I feel a close affinity. This term is now commonly used to indicate the authentic human connections that more and more of us are seeking as an antidote to empire and technocracy.

It is, again, no coincidence that I've recently become more aware of the secession movement that is brewing not only in my home state of Vermont but in many

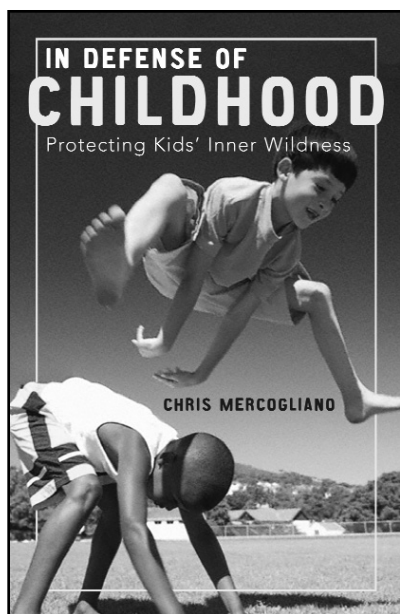
places. That's right—secession from the USA, an outlandish idea that brings to mind the racist Confederacy but which some very thoughtful people are now advocating as a logical response to the bloated American empire. They argue that we urgently need to decentralize power, to re-establish local, human-scale, democratically governable entities. See, for example, the provocative writings on the website of the Middlebury Institute: <http://middleburyinstitute.org/>. Our struggle against the authoritarian educational system is indeed part of a context, something bigger that is happening out there in the world. I could say a great deal more about all this, but I'll save it for my new book.

Let me say a few words about this issue of *Education Revolution*:

This is the 50<sup>th</sup> issue of this publication, and we thought it would be fun to celebrate by reprinting selections from the past. So most of the rest of this issue will be devoted to a historical journey that gives us a sense about where this movement has been heading for the last 17 years. We'll resume our regular features and articles (and introduce some new ones) in our next issue. Enjoy!

## “BEAUTIFUL, SEARCHING, AND INSPIRING.”

—William Crain, author of *Reclaiming Childhood: Letting Children Be Children in Our Achievement-Oriented Society*



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**IN DEFENSE OF CHILDHOOD** examines American youth, arguing passionately that the “domestication of childhood” is robbing children of “that irreplaceable period in their lives that our culture has set aside for exploration and innocent discovery.”

“Chris Mercogliano’s provocative meditation on childhood sets up a dialectic among maple-sugaring, swan-diving in forest pools, shooting slingshots, and adventuring on the one hand, and the adult-supervised ‘play’ of the Little League, the Boy Scouts, the YMCA, and the Playground Movement on the other. Along the way are insights about the functions of solitude and self-organization that lead the reader to conclude: no self-organization means that no self worthy of the name will emerge.”

—John Taylor Gatto, author of *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*

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It is hard to believe that this is our 50th issue of Education Revolution Magazine, after eighteen years of operation of the Alternative Education Resource Organization! Of course the magazine started as a slim newsletter to a small group of friends who supported our mission. For a while it was called AEROGramme until our mission became broader and we needed something more than an internal newsletter. Education Revolution Magazine has evolved through many stages since then. Several years ago Albert Lamb became the editor and brought the magazine to a new level. Now Ron Miller has taken over and has done a wonderful job. Isaac Graves has also been helping with the formatting. And Carol Morley has been editing the Mail and Communication section for more than a decade. I first met Carol when I helped her to start homeschooling her son many years ago.

There is no way we can know how many lives we have affected and how many schools we have helped people to start. In the period of time that we have had a website, over 11 years, we have had more than a million visitors. We have had an 800 hotline even longer.

Very often we give people advice and contacts without even knowing their names. During our tenure the number of homeschoolers in the USA has grown from about 200,000 to two million. The first charter school was created in 1991 and there are now more than 3500. The number of democratic schools has more than quadrupled. We were in the founding group of a dozen people at the first meeting in 1993 of what has become the annual International Democratic Education Conference. We hosted the IDEC in 2003, with over 600 people from 25 states and 25 countries attending, including 100 from Third World countries. This led to the creation of the AERO conference, which just had its fourth gathering with over 375 attending from 32 states and 10 countries. In fact, over the four years we have had people from 42 states and 15 countries. We host a special listserv for people who want to start new schools. There are about 35 school starters on the list at any given time. They become mentors once their schools start. We also host the IDEC listserv, which is the only organizing body for the IDEC. We have an e newsletter which now has 7500 subscribers in every state and more than 60 countries.

## *Education Revolution # 50: 'AERO's first eighteen years*

*by Jerry Mintz*

It is interesting to see which excerpts Ron Miller picked out from our archives to put in this issue. Of course, the project to help the Kee Way Win tribe establish a school in Northern Ontario was our first major activity. A school was ultimately established which was recognized by the government. They received funding and got electricity and running water, and the school has thrived.

Columbine was a pivotal moment, and we were right at ground zero at the time, in Jefferson County. Were lessons learned from that tragedy? Sometimes it seems not, as Columbine reopened as a large school with the same philosophy.

Perhaps there will be an impact from one of AERO's latest projects: to help establish a new think tank to work on legislation and public relations. It grew out of AERO's listserv discussions and will be established as an independent nonprofit. We had our first face-to-face meeting this summer in Minnesota.

What is the future of AERO? What will its impact be on education? Will it help foment the Education Revolution? Only time will tell. But of course you, dear readers, can help shape that future, and not just be along for the ride!

## *Building an education revolution:*

1989

*AERO-Gramme Newsletter* is established. Without government assistance for housing or education, Kee Way Win Indian Chief, Geordi Kakeptum, turns to AERO to help establish a school on their Sandy Lake reserve in Ontario. AERO secures funds, supplies, and clothing, and helps the tribe organize their own curriculum which includes the teaching of tribal traditions from the elders.

1990

AERO's Alternative Education Teacher Training program is proposed to alternative universities and organizations.

1991

AERO founder, Jerry Mintz, introduces "Organic Curriculum," a highly effective, learner-directed approach to curriculum development and experiential learning that is fully individualized. With the support of former Soviet leader, Boris Yeltsin, Jerry is invited by the Creative Teachers Union as a keynote speaker to the first New Schools Festival in Russia on the democratization of education.

1992

AERO's Alternative Education Teacher Training seminar is held in Russia, sponsored by Eureka Free University—Russia's first private University.

1993

In Jerusalem, Jerry chairs the symposium on "Democratization of Schools: Types and Ways" at the International Conference on Education for Democracy in a Multi-Cultural Society.

1994

AERO's presentation of the Alternative Education Handbook at the International Alternative Education Conference at Drake University provides important data and historical information about the alternative education movement and is a giant first step toward the unification of the alternative education movement.

1995

After helping to establish a United States branch of the Eureka Free University of Moscow, AERO and Eureka USA offer a certification course and internship program for teachers in alternative education.

1996

At the First Annual Conference on Higher Education, Jerry facilitates the organizational meeting of the Alternative Higher Education Network—the first organized primarily by students at alternative colleges. The state of Iowa requires every school district to have an alternative education program. AERO is contracted to train teachers and administrators.



## *AERO's first eighteen years*

### 1997

AERO's Virgin Island Consulting Project trains staff at at-risk public alternative schools on the islands. AERO secures over \$25,000 in grants from the Edward Foundation on behalf of four schools in financial crisis: Stork Family School in Vinnitsa, Ukraine; Rogers Person-Centered School in Budapest, Hungary; Free School in Albany, New York; and Moscow International Film School. At the Growing Without Schooling 20th Anniversary Conference, AERO's discussion on "International Homeschooling and Alternative Schools" inspires the formation of LOYO (Learn On Your Own), the first homeschool organization run by and for homeschooled students.

### 1998

AERO participates in the Parent Choice in Education Conference organized to acquaint inner-city parents with options for their children's education. Having learned the democratic process in one of AERO's demonstration workshops, 5-,6-,and 7-year old students of the Renaissance School in Florida take initiative and ask to interview their prospective teacher—then vote on her!

### 1999

While the Columbine massacre takes place, AERO, parents, students and educators are just miles away at the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools Conference involved in a variety of personal development activities including conflict resolution. Hundreds of letters, phone calls, and e-mails flood the AERO office from adults and children seeking information on educational alternatives. *AERO-Gramme Newsletter* becomes the *Education Revolution Magazine* with color cover and national distribution to newsstands.

### 2000

Featured presenter at Home Educators Seaside Festival in England, demonstrating democratic decision-making process to 900 home educators, 500 home educated students. Key organizer of the International Democratic Education Conference in Japan, the largest ever, with over 1000 participants from 15 countries, \$120,000 raised to help bring participants from democratic schools in third world countries. Jerry facilitates workshop for 45 principals, teachers, students, juvenile justice workers and a judge in Jacksonville, Florida, to help them trouble shoot problems they were having with their alternative schools and to create new alternatives. AERO develops Homeschool resource Center Starting Kit.

### 2001

Jerry is invited special guest at 10th Anniversary Celebration of the Stork Family School in Vinnitsa, Ukraine, does radio tour of 25 radio shows in three days, in top markets in the USA, promoting AERO, alternative education and parental choice. AERO now has virtual staff members in England, Arizona and Vermont in addition to those at the office in New York.

## 2002

AERO has a training seminar to help start a new homeschool resource center on Long Island. It organizes a demonstration mini-center as part of the process. It participates in another Homeschool Seaside Festival and a Small Schools Conference in England. AERO sets up its school-starters program, including a special listserve for that purpose, takes a group of seven to the IDEC in New Zealand and makes a successful bid to host the 2003 IDEC in the United States.

## 2003

Under conference Director Dana Bennis AERO co-hosts the 2003 IDEC with Albany Free School at Russell Sage College in Troy, NY, with 650 attendees from 25 states and 25 countries. We also raise \$65,000 so that 100 low income and Third World participants can come. There are 17 keynoters, including Bill Ayers, Pat Montgomery, Michael and Susan Klonsky, John Gatto, Zoë Readhead from Summerhill, etc. Later Jerry attends the Coalition of Essential Schools conference in Columbus, Ohio, connecting with people such as alternative schools pioneer Debby Meier and Gates Foundation Director Tom Vander Ark. Jerry's book, *No Homework and Recess All Day: How to Have Freedom and Democracy in Education*, is released.

## 2004

AERO celebrates its 15th Anniversary with its first solo conference. It is again at Russell Sage College, with John Gatto, Pat Farenga, Jerry Mintz and Chris Mercogliano as keynoters. 17 year old homeschooler and Free School graduate Isaac Graves is the conference coordinator. It is so successful that participants demand that it become an annual event. After a year of participating in organizational meetings, AERO helps to start Brooklyn Free School, the first democratic school in New York City in decades. Late in the year two AERO staff members participate in the IDEC in Bhubaneswar, India.

## 2005

AERO produces a documentary of Butterflies, a democratic program in Delhi, India, for working homeless children. Jerry is brought to Guatemala by NELEB School, helps them establish democratic process. The second AERO conference is held, "A Spectrum of Alternatives." AERO helps the IDEC in Berlin Germany.

## 2006

Jerry does his third consultation for the DAV schools, India to help them establish democratic process in their 700 schools, and a similar consultation for Unity Charter School in NJ. The third AERO conference, "Finding our commonalities, Celebrating our differences," is the most successful to date. Out of the conference a new online course for school starters is established. 28 students take the first course, world-wide. The IDEC is held in Australia for the first time. Ouida Mintz, Jerry's mother and long time AERO volunteer, passes away. Ron Miller becomes editor of *Education Revolution Magazine*.

## *Fifty issues:*

*covering the education revolution for 18 years*

### **Excerpts from AERO-Gramme and Education Revolution**

#### ***AERO-Gramme #1 November, 1989.***

Jerry reported on his work with alternative schools and presentations at several conferences. "In August I went to the **8th Assembly of the Fourth World** in Toronto where I got to meet **Ivan Illich**. This group consists primarily of decentralists. It was at this conference where I connected with the **School of Living**." He commented that there still is really no training center for students interested in teaching in alternative schools. The newsletter featured "Mail and Communications" from about 20 educators around the U.S. and several other countries.

#### ***#2 January 1990:***

Jerry wrote:

Last Summer, when I was in Toronto for an education conference, I first read about the Kee Way Win tribe, of Sandy Lake, Ontario. Chief Geordi Kakepetum told of the plight of his people, who had not received any help from the government in the areas of housing and education. Since moving to Kee Way Win in 1985, the children had no school.

When the Kee Way Wins returned to their ancestral land on the eastern side of Sandy Lake in 1985, they were told by David Crombie, the then-Indian Affairs Minister that reserve status would be forthcoming. Unfortunately Crombie was later transferred, and the status was never granted, leaving the tribe in limbo.

Chief Kakepetum, communicating to me by a battery powered, microwave telephone, confirmed the details of the article. I suggested that I might be able to show them how to start a school, using the alternative schools model that I was familiar with. Chief Kakepetum went to his tribal council with the suggestion, and informed me that they were enthusiastic about the idea.

I had to wait for the lake to "freeze up," so that I could travel the final 28 miles by ski-do. Traveling first by train to Sioux Lookout, the next leg of the journey was by Bearskin Air, covering over 200 miles of frozen lakes and countless pine trees, to Sandy Lake.

The Sandy Lake reserve is at the western end of the Lake. It is the official reserve, the one in which the Canadian government tried to lump all of the Indians of the area together. About 1500 now live here, creating a community that includes a small airport, electricity, public water, a small branch of The Bay and a public school.

The school is in a modern group of buildings which are warm and well lighted. In the face of this relative oasis in a rather forbidding land, it was hard for me to understand why a group of residents would want to leave such a comfortable community and relocate across the lake, thirty miles away .

Because of the extreme hardships that winter still presents at Kee Way Win, many people retreat to the Sandy Lake Reserve in the winter. The Kee Way Wins are allowed to stay there, but the Sandy Lake tribal council has forbidden the Kee Way Wins to have any official meetings. When I met with the Kee Way Win education committee at a house at the Sandy Lake Reserve, it was an illegal meeting. In fact, they were supposed to have reported my presence to the authorities and I was warned that if they found out, I would "be on the next plane out of here." Suddenly I felt like I was in Eastern Europe before the 80's. I could understand why the Kee Way Wins wanted to return to their own land.

I met 12 year old Denny, who was temporarily at Sandy Lake. He was very personable, and had spent most of his life in a Kee Way Win settlement. At Denny's

settlement there is no one to teach the children, and the parents haven't been able to do it. He told me that he still doesn't know how to read.

To get to Kee Way Win I traveled the longest 28 miles in my memory, over the frozen slush and snow of Sandy Lake. Despite the -30 temperatures, the weight of the snow had created cracks in the ice surface through which fresh water had surged. This created an uneven sometimes treacherous surface for traveling. The path was marked with tree branches, particularly in the hairy sections.

Once at Kee Way Win, we went into the small office building and started a fire. The office epitomized a lot of what Kee Way Win is about: A small, spare, room with a barrel for a heater, and the battery powered telephone sitting on the desk. That system cost the Kee Way Wins \$10,000 to install, and shows the strength of their commitment to the future. We looked into the one room, log "schoolhouse" that had recently been built, and saw the assortment of tents, shacks, and log houses that make up Kee Way Win.

I met with the education council, and I stressed the idea of using the abilities of the community members, and organizing a curriculum that combined the new with the old; including a tribal council decision making process for the school itself.

David Thompson, a Kee Way Win council member, asked what he could do personally, and I suggested that he could tutor kids individually in reading.

It was as if the idea had never occurred to him before, but now he was excited about it. He began furiously taking notes, as he realized the possibilities of the approach. The elders know such things as syllabics, the Cree written language, traditional trapping techniques, tribal history, crafts, etc.

The children had heard that I was a good ping pong player and asked me to teach them how to play. By 7 PM we had the fire going, and a dozen children participated in an impromptu model of a workable approach to education. By the time we were done, past midnight, I had brought them from the point of not even knowing the rules or how to hit a ball over the net, to playing, singles, doubles, and having a mini-tournament.

They wanted to do the same thing the next night, my last night at Sandy Lake. But I had meetings scheduled with some council members. So I told them they would have to organize the whole thing themselves, and that I would come over later. Cain Linklater, a 12 year old from the Kee Way Wind Band, organized the event. I had my meeting with the council, and later went over to the pingpong, which was going strong. The group had



Chris Mercogliano (left) and Matt Hern (right) telling stories at the 2007 AERO conference. *Photo by Zoeann Murphy.*

learned to organize this activity by themselves. These are determined people and bright children. Before I left, I asked David Thompson if he thought that a school would start. He answered, "The school HAS started." That was the response that I was hoping for.

### #3 April 1990

In some ways I think I agree with **Ted Sizer** of the **Coalition of Essential Schools** who said at the **Minnesota Changing Schools Conference** that he “hoped to do away with all alternative schools!” After the crowd of alternative educators had gasped, he continued: “I think ALL children have the right to be empowered, treated with respect, and experience the things that you provide. It shouldn’t just be “alternative.”

### #5 Jan-Feb 1991

#### **WHY DO ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION GROUPS FIGHT AGAINST THEMSELVES?**

In the Fall, 1990 issue of *Changing Schools*, Mary Ann Raywid, a Professor at Hofstra University and expert on public alternative schools, wrote in detail about the conflict within the International Affiliation of Alternative Schools and Personnel. It is essentially between practitioners of “choice” schools, public alternatives open to all students, and “at risk” schools and programs, those primarily for children with social or educational problems. At a meeting of the participants in the National Alternative Education Conference at Stanford University on July 1, 1990, there was strong disagreement, even about supporting a national alternative education day. This conflict was based on differing definitions of alternative education. For example, the “choice” advocates feel that a program cannot be called alternative if the students do not have significant decision-making power. The “at risk” advocates feel that a program is alternative if it exists as another approach available for a student having difficulties, even if there is not decision-making power within the program. The following letter was written to *Changing Schools* in response to the Raywid article, and is reprinted with their permission.

Applause to Mary Anne Raywid for writing and Mary Ellen Sweeney for printing the story of the philosophical conflict within the International Affiliation of Alternative Schools and Personnel (IAASAP). Ever since Dave Lehman proposed that a national organization be created in 1985, this has been an area of controversy. In other organizations internal conflicts are covered up or swept under the rug while decisions are made by a central few.

Raywid’s article gives the readers of *Changing Schools* and the participants in the IAASAP a chance to analyze the situation, and perhaps to come up with some creative solutions.

It is certainly clear that the IAASAP is one of the most unorganized organizations one could ever encounter. By design it has no funds, no spokesman, no office, staff, or journal. It is even difficult to remember the name.

However, if one compares this group to others involved with countercultural ideas, it may be faring pretty well. For the fact is, many of these groups seem to be in disarray, fighting among themselves, shooting down anyone who dares to lead them, and losing track of their mission.

This was well documented in a recent story about the U.S. Green movement by Mark Satin in his publication, *New Options* (#70). He was so shaken by the anger and internal destructiveness that he witnessed at the Green Gathering in Colorado that he ended up questioning the whole direction of his life. “Their life choices are my life choices... To accept that the Greens are never going to make it is tantamount to accepting that my life choices were not so smart.” This kind of internal destructiveness has also been the experience of the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools, the Association for Humanistic Psychology, the homeschooling movement, and others.

It seems crucial, then, to ask the obvious question: What is the cause of this phenomenon? Here is a theory:

All of these organizations generally consist of people who did not grow up in freedom, or as products of the alternative and liberating philosophies the members often espouse. In fact, the people involved with them often created their alternative and liberating schools and programs in REACTION to having been repressed and oppressed themselves. In further fact, the success of many of these programs has been a direct result of their own stubborn, sometimes charismatic, democratic leadership. In a society that has been pushing punctuality, conformity, dependence, and discouragement of creativity, it seems to take an individual who has the almost angry ability to re-empower people to make such

a program work. This has worked well for the individual programs, truly empowering the students in them.

However, when these same people form an adult organization, that mutual empowerment seems to open up a lot of the unresolved, residual anger, with conflicting strong personalities, and subsequent destructiveness. Authoritarian organizations seem to reach their goals far more efficiently. Ironically, these open and democratic ones seem to go nowhere, not even modeling the sensitivity and humanity that they promote. es seem to go nowhere, not even modeling the sensitivity and humanity that they promote.

At the NCACS conferences of the last few years, there were more student than adult participants. In essence, the students created their own sub-conference,

establishing connections, arranging exchanges and sharing information, without conflict. Meanwhile, many of the adults, particularly those with decision making power, were in continuous turmoil.

Even historically, in his book about anarchist educators, *The Modern School Movement*, Paul Avrigh describes how the Modern School Association came apart through the political and philosophical in-fighting in the 1940's. The movement was started in 1910, and was dissolved in the 1950's. Yet the GRADUATES of the Modern School continue to meet every year, and most of them are now in their 70's and 80's!

Perhaps if our organizations consisted of members who grew up with real freedom and empowerment, things would work differently. One rare example of this

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# 25 Autumn, 1998

#### LETTER FROM NAT NEEDLE IN JAPAN

Greetings from Kyoto, Japan. Thank you for that wonderful AERO-GRAMME #24, which I devoured cover-to-cover (after reading it, of course). The other day I picked up an English-language newspaper, and I noticed that President Clinton had given a speech to group of Hispanic students (in New Orleans, if I'm not mistaken). Encouraging them to work hard in school, he said, "The 21st century will be ruthless." He meant that in a global economy, in which everyone in the world competes against everyone else for material security and sheer survival, only those who succeed in school will win: all others will lose. Comments like "The 21st century will be ruthless" are always made, it seems, with the tone of inevitability usually reserved for natural phenomena: "The eclipse will occur at 2:25 pm," or "California had better be ready for the next big earthquake."

I believe Mr. Clinton means well; he wants those Hispanic kids to be winners instead of losers. Nonetheless, let's not forget that if the 21st century becomes the story of human beings around the world pitted against one another in a struggle for well-being, even survival, this will only be because we failed to imagine something better and insist on it for ourselves and our children.

In thinking about the 21st century, I'd like to hope that the most important debate will be between two different ideas about human development. On the one hand, we have the view which seems to underlie

**If the 21st century becomes the story of human beings around the world pitted against one another in a struggle for well-being, this will only be because we failed to imagine something better. . .**

Nat Needle, 1998

**In a society that has been pushing punctuality, conformity, dependence, and discouragement of creativity, it seems to take an individual who has the almost angry ability to re-empower people to make such a program work.** Jerry Mintz, 1991

is Zoë Neill Readhead, daughter of A.S. Neill, who grew up at Summerhill and is now its Head. Under her quiet direction, Summerhill is running smoothly, and is reaching out internationally to other educational alternatives (her father would never have done that).

So what is the solution? Run these organizations in a more authoritarian way? Have no leadership or structure at all? Find a charismatic democratic leader? Forget about organizations and coalitions and just work independently? Or turn everything over to the students? There are no easy answers. But perhaps if this has shed some light on the problems of the past we may be better at avoiding them in the future.

Jerry Mintz

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mainstream thinking today: that people develop primarily through the victory of the strong over the weak, in which the weak are eliminated, and in which the victors deserve our adulation for setting the pace for the rest of us. On the other hand, there is the view, which is at the root of all the great wisdom traditions, that the strongest are those who devote themselves to strengthening the weak, to keeping the whole community afloat, to plowing their gifts back into the common field through service to others.

Certainly competition among relative equals can be a useful and even exhilarating way to hone abilities and set higher standards for ourselves. Without a larger context of mutual aid which leaves no one out, however, neither the strong nor the weak can bring out their ultimate best. Clinton, with his threat of ruthlessness, wants to convince students that the 21st century will not be kind to the lazy. Yet it is possible that most people grow lazy, not because they can rely on help from others, but because they hate being stacked up against others.

I don't care to motivate my children by telling them that they will have to be strong to survive the ruthless competition. I'd rather tell them that the world needs their wisdom, their talents, and their kindness, so much so that the possibilities for a life of service are without limits of any kind. I'd like to share with them the open secret that this is the path to receiving what one needs in this lifetime, and to becoming truly strong.

If they have this kind of motivation, then, if succeeding in conventional school is what they want to do, more power to them, so to speak. Perhaps it's too easy for winners of the educational contest, like myself, to talk about abandoning it. (Perhaps if you're a poor Hispanic kid in New Orleans, it's the only game in town.) All the more reason, though, to blaze alternative pathways to adulthood in which not only my own kids, but kids like those Bill Clinton spoke to, could deal head-on with the problem of making a dignified living in this world without forgetting that each of us is only as strong as the weakest of us.

## #26 Winter 1999

With this issue we celebrate the beginning of **AERO**'s tenth year with a name change for our magazine. Our publication has made a gradual transformation from a letter to friends, to a newsletter, an in-house magazine, and now to a magazine with a more general audience. With our incorporation of *Changing Schools* into **AERO-Gramme**, we began to run longer and more in-depth articles. Finally, we have decided to rename **AERO-Gramme** with the name of our two radio shows, the *Education Revolution*, reflecting our mission, and the reality of the changes for which we hope to be both a reporter and catalyst.

## #27 Summer, 1999

### **COLORADO TRIP: THE NCACS CONFERENCE AND COLUMBINE, TOO**

I got on the train at Penn Station in New York City on the way to the **National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools**' national conference in Evergreen, Colorado. In Albany I met up with the group from **Albany's Free School**. There were including nine students and three staff. They had raised \$4,000 for the trip with community dinners, raffles and other events.

[After we reached Denver,] we discovered that the Columbine massacre had just taken place. All of Denver, as well as most of the rest of the nation, was in shock over this event. I managed to reach Arnie Langberg, the founder of **Jefferson County Open School**. He came on my radio show to give his take on what had happened at Columbine High School. He said he believed that one of the biggest problems was the anonymity of students at big schools: "This couldn't happen at an alternative school because their small size encourages closeness between adults and children, and because the schools have conflict resolution strategies," explained Arnie.

Ironically, by pre-arrangement, the students from the Free School group stayed overnight that very evening in the gym of the Jefferson County Open School (see following report by **Chris Mercogliano**). Security was

so tight that they were locked in the building and had to call security any time they wanted to go outside.

We arrived at the conference in Evergreen, in the mountains just west of Denver, at the 8,000-foot level. It was warm and beautiful, but we heard in the weather forecast that it was going to snow. It seemed impossible to us at the time, but we did receive a foot-and-a-half of snow during the conference! The kids loved it, particularly those from California. About 15 schools came to the conference, mostly with students. Altogether there were about 200 participants from California, New Mexico, Virginia, Florida, Maine, Vermont, Washington, Colorado, Pennsylvania, New York, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Spain and Japan.

There were many exciting workshops. Three special guests were Joseph Chilton Pearce, Rabbi Yehuda Fine and Joseph Schaefer. Pearce gave an all day workshop on new research into human learning. He said it has been discovered that sixty-five percent of the heart consists of neurons just like those found in the brain, which seem to coordinate a lot of the organs of the body, indicating another locus and type of intelligence. He also talked about the destructive effect television has on the learning process. His presentation will soon be available in its entirety on videotape from the NCACS. Rabbi Fine spoke movingly about the work he has done with runaways and "throwaways" in NYC.

On a student forum about stereotypes, prejudice and privilege, Jennifer, a Puerto Rican student from Antonia Pantoja High School in Chicago had spoken eloquently about her own stereotypes of the white students at the conference. She said she was wrong to stereotype, and she apologized. A wonderful moment followed: A white girl in the audience admitted she had had the same kind of prejudice and that she felt like hugging Jennifer. With little encouragement, the girl in the audience did come to the front, and they embraced. Later I did another radio show in which I interviewed Jennifer, the new NCACS directors and several others involved with the Coalition. Jennifer talked about what life is like as a minority student trying to find her own identity.

One final, ironic footnote: At the Denver train station, one of the Clonlara School kids, dressed in a black

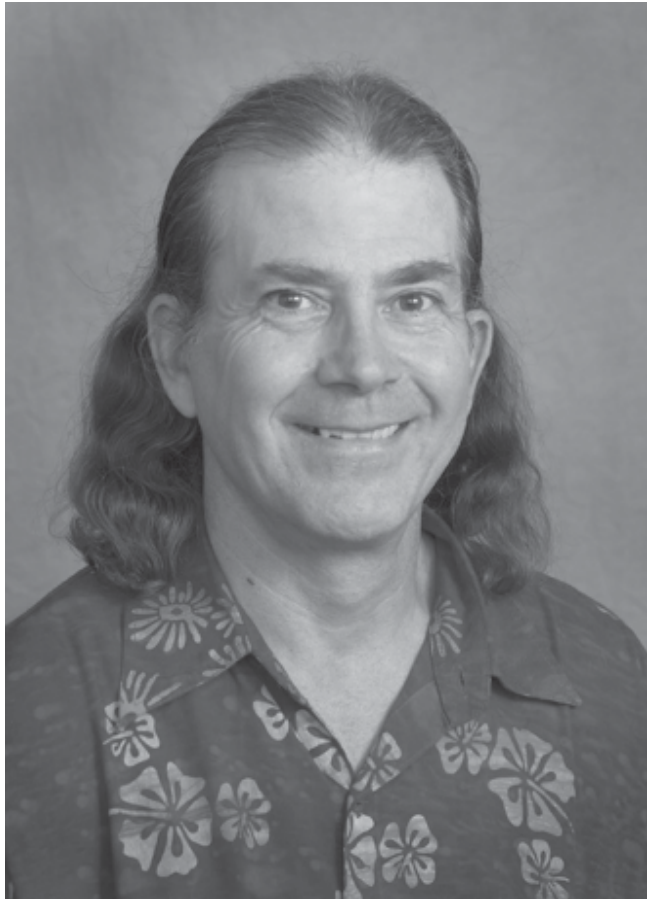


trench coat and dark glasses, caused some of the people in the station to panic. They insisted that security search him for bombs and weapons. Security refused to search him, and we boarded the train.

## THE TEACHINGS OF TRAGEDY

By Chris Mercogliano

Will we remember where we were the day the Littleton massacre went down, like those of us from a generation ago when JFK was shot? I hope so. Though it's only the latest in a string of school mass murders, we must make



this tragedy the one that freezes time long enough for the information encrypted in the event to be decoded. We have got to get the message. Enough is enough.

So much has already been said and written about the tragedy. The Tom Brokaws and the *Times* and *Newsweeks* quickly turned it into the Littleton Show. For days afterwards the Denver dailies featured entire special sections on the killers and their victims. But as the immediacy begins to fade, will the public discourse move

beyond the hype, the hysteria, the scapegoating, the layers of denial into some deeper understanding that might help prevent another such disaster? If history is our guide, then there's little reason to be optimistic. How does one come to terms with the causes of such an abominable event?

There are so many areas to search for reasons and contributing factors: the psyches of the killers, their parents, the surrounding culture, the ready availability of high-powered weaponry, and always at the bottom of the list, it seems, the school. This is where my attention remains, not because I believe it is the school's fault that the blood of dozens was spilled upon its tiled floors, but because this is where no one wants to take that long, hard look. Education, you see, is our most sacred of sacred cows. The system is built upon a mountain of assumptions, notions that we don't even question any more such as compulsory attendance and learning, age segregation, rating and sorting students by performance—pitting one against another, punishment for non-compliance, exclusionary labeling for non-conformity, and a hierarchy of authority. The list could go on.

Even the students are buying into the prevailing mythology. This I discovered when I happened to catch a snippet of a talk show featuring a group of Columbine students. The subject was cliques, a very relevant topic since the killers had made it all too clear that revenge for their outcast status was one of their primary motives. Cliques, reflected each student commentator, are a natural ingredient of high school life. Everybody belongs to one.

I beg to differ. Cliques are a stress response, a symptom. When humans feel threatened, the most primitive portion of the brain (the reptilian brain) takes over. The reptilian brain concerns itself with survival, with defending its turf, with dominance over rival groups. Teenagers join cliques in school because their schools are hostile, high-pressure environments, places of overcrowded captivity, competition, judgment. Their motivation, rarely conscious, is security, and a sense of identity and belonging. Just like urban youth gangs. Cliques are anything but natural. Even if a hundred Frenchmen belong to them, it doesn't make it so.

I'll never forget where I was when the surreal, manic killing began. As fate would have it, I was only five miles up Wadsworth Boulevard on the outskirts of Denver, visiting the public high school in the adjacent suburban enclave known as Lakewood. We had just arrived, ten seventh and eighth grade students and three teachers from the **Albany Free School**. It was a cool late-April morning. High, wispy cirrus clouds signaled an approaching snow storm. A big one, they were saying. Our itinerary had us spending a day and a night at the **Jefferson County Open School**, a stopover on our way to the **National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools** conference being held about three thousand feet above Denver on the edge of the Continental Divide.

Just before lunch I went into the library to read over a friend's manuscript, while our kids were in the gym unwinding from the thirty-six hour train ride. I was immediately puzzled by the number of school staff huddled around a TV set in the librarian's office. And there was a strange mood attached to the scurrying in and out, a concern so hushed that it seemed out of place even in a library. People had initially been so friendly. Now all of a sudden I seemed to be invisible. Finally, the librarian noticed me and came quietly over to the table where I was working and wondering what was going on. She diplomatically clued me in on the unfolding madness.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Not again.

As the initial media chaos slowly sorted itself out, it became clear that this was the worst ever. God help us if they ever come up with a Richter scale for school violence. By 2:00 PM the horrible news had whispered its way through Jefferson County Open. I watched teachers and students alike slide into a state of semi-shock. They all knew someone at Columbine High. And they must have all been thinking silently to themselves, "Could this have happened here?"

I found myself inwardly posing the very same question. An answer came quickly. No, I don't think the brutal attacks would have occurred at the Jefferson County Open School because it is a very different kind of school, a publicly-funded alternative founded in the early seventies on a very different set of principles. To begin

with, JCOS is smaller (fewer than a thousand students) and it spans all twelve grades instead of just the usual three or four. It truly is an open space, architecturally and otherwise. While I was there I observed students strolling the halls without passes. They chatted informally with their teachers and called them by their first names. Many of them were working independently on projects, both academic and artistic. Grades didn't appear to be the prime motivator either. The students were enjoying what they were doing. And they clearly had a say in the life of the school; in fact, before the end of that awful day a senior was already busy organizing a student meeting to address the crisis at Columbine. This was her own idea. She wasn't going to get extra credit for it. Here was a spontaneous expression of ownership and responsibility—and caring.



Arnie Langberg, founder of Jefferson County Open School, at the 2007 AERO conference

By the way, I saw no evidence of cliques while I was there. Graduation from JCOS isn't based on the compilation of credits. Instead, students must successfully complete seven "passages," each designed to demonstrate the mastery of a skill that is integral to living a good life. Self-assessment counts as much as the teacher's. Above all, this genuine alternative to conventional schooling, which is a model based on centralized control and Skinnerian rewards and punishments, is a community of sorts. Not the euphemistic kind, like the "Italian community," or the "academic community," but a real community based on commonly held concerns. Faculty and students have a collaborative relationship. They meet together as a whole body once a week to discuss issues of relevance. This differs from most so-called "student councils," which include only a chosen few, are merely symbolic of democracy, and tend to deal in trivialities. The truth of the matter is that students in conventional high schools have no power whatsoever. And they know it.

One last, very important detail: every student at Jefferson County Open has a mentor, so that no one goes unnoticed. Each child is valued for his or her personhood. Contrast all of this with what **John Taylor Gatto** recently reported to me. Author of *Dumbing Us Down* and outspoken critic of the tyranny of compulsory education, he received several phone calls from Littleton residents in the aftermath of the tragedy. More than once he was told that students escaping the blood bath at Columbine were heard to have said when they reached safety, "We're only products there; that's all they care about." Funny, I don't remember reading that in *Time* magazine.

Of course I can't really claim with any authority that the massacre couldn't have occurred at Jefferson County Open. A member of the staff there shook her head from side to side when I shared this thought with her late in the day, saying, "There are a couple of students here that I worry about. They are angry and defiant a lot, and don't seem to care about anything."

"But," I responded, "you're aware of those kids. You and your colleagues are paying attention to them." This time she nodded affirmatively. "And besides," I

continued, "there's an insufficient level of tension and animosity in your school to provoke such a monstrous act." Another nod.

**Students escaping the blood bath at Columbine were heard to have said when they reached safety, "We're only products there; that's all they care about." Funny, I don't remember reading that in *Time* magazine.**

**Chris Mercogliano, 1999**

I refuse to accept the idea that the Columbine killings were a random act, the isolated handiwork of sick individuals. The perpetrators' choice of setting in which to vent their murderous rage was thoroughly premeditated. This fact has been documented ad nauseam. They harbored deeply held grievances against their fellow students and the social climate of their school that had gone ignored for years. They left a trail of warnings that no one picked up on. God help us if we ever discover that such inhuman behavior just springs up overnight, out of nowhere. That is not a world I would want to inhabit, or raise children in.

No, I firmly believe that mass murder will never take place at Jefferson County Open School, or any school where relationships and interconnectedness are fostered, where the work is meaningful and cooperative, and where everyone feels they belong.

Here is my short-take on the Columbine murders: It's another case of "kid-on-kid" violence. Just as the killing of black males one by another in the nation's ghettos has been identified by some as "black on black" violence, all of the school shootings are on a certain level examples of kids aiming (quite literally) their venom and frustration at each other, rather than at home, school and society where it rightfully belongs. So often the oppressed attack each other instead of joining forces against their oppressor.

What are the teachings of this tragedy? I ask the question because if we can learn enough from this one to prevent yet another, then those young people will not have died for nothing. Consider the words of Marcy Musgrave, from a column she wrote for the May 2 edition of the *Dallas Morning News*. A junior at Texas A&M University, she proposes that her yet-to-be-named generation, which follows Generation X, be called Generation Why. Explains Marcy (formatting changed for this article):

After the massacre in Littleton, I realized that as a member of this generation that kills without remorse, I had a duty to challenge all of my elders to explain why they have allowed things to become so bad ...

- Why did most of you lie when you made the vow of ‘til death do us part?
- Why did you fall victim to the notion that kids are just as well-off being raised by total strangers at a day care center than by their own mothers or fathers?
- Why is work more important than your own family?
- Why does the television do the most talking at family meals?
- Why is money regarded as more important than relationships?
- Why is “quality time” generally no longer than a five- to 10-minute conversation each day?
- Why do you try to make up for the lack of time you spend with us by giving us more and more material objects that we really don’t need?
- Why haven’t you lived moral lives that we could model our own after?
- Why do you allow us to spend unlimited amounts of time on the internet but still are shocked about our knowledge of how to build bombs?
- Why are you so afraid to tell us “no” sometimes?
- Why is it so hard for you to realize that school shootings, and other violent juvenile behavior, result from a lack of your attention more than anything else?

Rude awakenings like the Littleton massacre probably will continue until you begin to answer our questions and make the changes to put us, your kids, first. You might not think we are worth it, but I guarantee that Littleton will look like a drop in the bucket when a neglected Generation Why comes to power.

Tough insights from one so young. I am a parent of teenagers and I could feel the sting of every lash-like question. Why indeed. Perhaps Marcy was among the fortunate minority who was homeschooled or who attended schools that were on her side, so that her penetrating gaze passed over our institutions of education and the invisible ways in which they impact American youth. But mine won’t because I work with children every day, many of them rejects and refugees of the system. And my eldest is just finishing her second year at

## **Why have we allowed schools to become so hyped with standards that they pay no attention to the emotional well-being of our children?**

our local public high school, which I suspect differs little from Columbine, except in the demographics of the students. I am one of the fortunate dads whose daughter doesn’t just answer “Fine” when I ask her how things are going in school. She tells me how “stressed out” her teachers are. Only one or two ever take the time to speak to her individually. Instead, everyone’s mantra is, “You’ve got to hurry up and get ready for the state exams.” It was my daughter’s choice to go to our centralized, citywide high school. She wanted to be in a diverse setting with all different kinds of kids. And yet, despite her outgoing nature, in two years she hasn’t made all that many new friends. There isn’t any time or opportunity for socializing. They are kept interminably busy. The halls are crowded and under constant surveillance by hall monitors and cameras. The students are separated by rigid routine and endless competition. Nothing facilitates their getting together.

My daughter, an honor roll student, one of two sophomores in a class of over seven hundred and fifty to be nominated for a statewide award, is seriously considering quitting. She has my blessings. Inspired by Marcy Musgrave, I will leave you now to ponder my questions about schools:

- Why have we let our schools become warehouses for youthful energy, creativity and purpose—why have we so walled them off from the outside world?
- Why have we turned teachers into overwhelmed taskmasters, instead of enabling them to serve as mentors, guides and role models?
- Why have we allowed schools to become so hyped with standards that they pay no attention to the emotional well-being of our children?
- Why have we let them turn education into the regurgitation of homogenized data, rather than a search for knowledge based on experimentation and real experience?
- Why isn't learning a cooperative enterprise, and why aren't students included in the design and the maintenance of the system?
- Why do we accept the level of fear that surrounds the learning process?
- Why are teenage expressions of boredom, anger and alienation only met with intensified management and control?

- Why do we go on believing that our schools just need minor tinkering, rather than a fundamental reevaluation and revisioning?

Do I think Columbine High School caused the tragedy that occurred there? Or those two young men's parents? Absolutely not. This is no time for blaming. It's an occasion for deep reflection, for three- and four- and five-dimensional looks at the whole picture. For questions that don't receive fast, unilateral answers.

As I consider one last time Marcy's challenge to parents and mine to schools, I think I detect a common denominator: attention. Isn't that the core of the message, that Generation Why is crying out for attention, and that the two most likely sources, home and school, are altogether too reluctant or preoccupied to provide it?

But, as Marcy warns, we'd better start paying attention soon.

## #29 Spring 2000

### **SUMMERHILL WINS IN COURT!**

*On March 20th, 2000, Summerhill School won an important court victory, giving them the right to continue operating the school with A.S. Neill's philosophy of freedom in Education. The following is excerpted from an interview with Zoë Readhead, Neill's daughter and current Summerhill Head, by Jerry Mintz on his Talk America Network radio show.*

**JERRY:** This week an event took place that sent shock waves around the world. All of you concerned about government interference with individuals should know that Summerhill has been under attack for a year because it would not conform to the rigid English national curriculum. They have a national curriculum that everyone in all the schools is supposed to follow there. Summerhill brought the government to court to assert their right to run the school according to the philosophy of their founder, AS Neill, a child-centered approach. In the final week there was a tribunal and they actually brought the whole school into court.

**ZOË:** For the last 9 years, the Inspectors from the government department have visited Summerhill every year. Ordinary schools get an inspection every four to five years. We felt we were under attack. In March of 1999 we had 8 inspectors come and visit us for three days, bearing in mind there were only about 57 children at the time. When the report was finally written it was a sensational piece of writing, fit for the tabloid newspapers and not fit to be a serious government report. It even appeared to be *designed* for the tabloids. It was a very nasty piece of writing indeed. It used words like "foul mouth" and "the children were in pursuit of idleness." It accused the school of health and safety problems and that the children were not learning sufficiently. And then the Secretary of State for Education issued a notice of complaint to the school, which means that the school was required to follow the changes that were demanded.

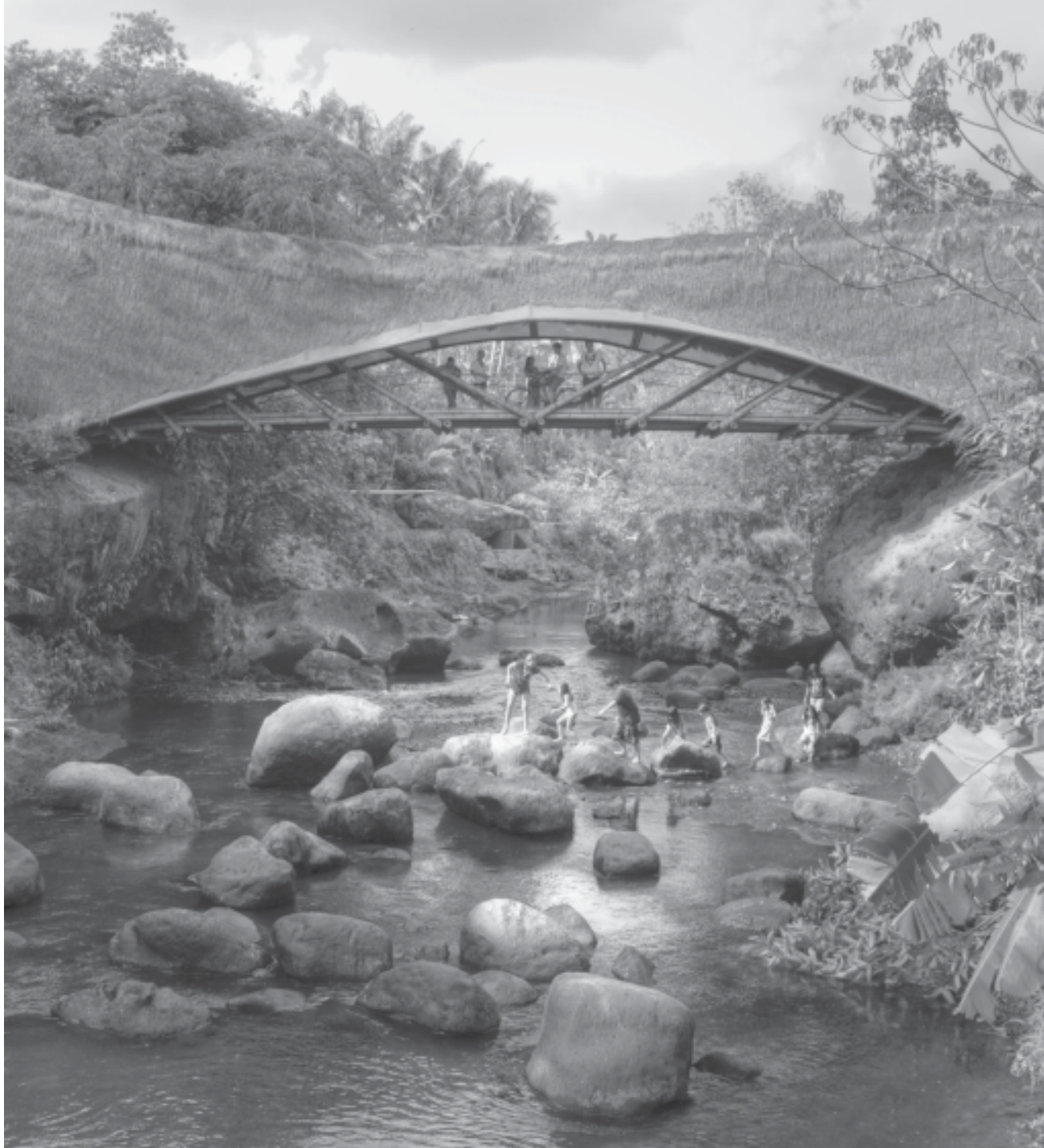
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**JERRY:** Why do you think that they would want to attack Summerhill in this way? The government has established a national curriculum in which every student in England is supposed to participate, is that right?

**ZOË:** The national curriculum is not compulsory for independent schools although they use the national curriculum as their benchmark; so in fact, we are obliged to follow the national curriculum though legally we don't have to.

**JERRY:** Summerhill took an approach that was entirely different from what the government does with the national curriculum. At Summerhill students are not required to go to classes, decisions are made democratically, and that's been going on ever since the school started. In a sense, if Summerhill was successful it would almost show the government that what they were doing was not necessary.

**ZOË:** One wonders about that. It's very difficult to know where all this came from. Whether it was just blundering bureaucracy or whether it was something more sinister, we'll never know. Through all our inspections it was very clear that these people not only misunderstood Summerhill, but many of them were strongly prejudiced against it when they came. So during the last few years, we have seen inspectors showing real anger towards us while they were in the process of inspecting us, which is a totally unprofessional thing to do. The report itself also made many accusations against the school, which were totally unfounded. So the evidence that they had was very small.

**Through all our inspections it was very clear that these people not only misunderstood Summerhill, but many of them were strongly prejudiced against it when they came.**

The notice of complaint had 6 items on it and we had to comply within a given time or they are able to strike the school off the register so it could no longer function as a school. They tell you what the complaint is and they tell you what the recommendation is. There were three that we felt we could comply with. One was to do with some floor covering that needed re-doing. One was to do with making sure there were more health and safety checks on the kids' rooms so the meeting elected a committee and they go every couple of weeks and they check out all the rooms. A local electrician has trained them. The other one concerned some problems we had in Class 2, which is what we call Key Stage 3: ten to twelve year olds. It's an age where anybody who is involved in democratic schools will know they tend not to want to go to class very much anyway; they want to be out doing exciting things. So we tried to see if we could improve the teaching facility and the general makeup of Class 2. We put together a really good package and we are very happy with the way things are going.

We contested one of the complaints, which was about good old toilets. Now, I know that's something of a joke and the rest of the world think that the Brits have got an obsession with toilets, and I think that they probably have. At Summerhill we live like a family; it's a boarding school so the community all lives in the school. We don't have separate toilets for boys, girls, or adults. The

government said we had to have separate toilets for boys, girls, and adults. They've been telling us this since 1992, and we haven't done it. Every year we've written back and told them we're not prepared to do that and gave them our reasons. We have children's welfare and safety in hand through our democratic process and through the fact that the children know that they have a voice and that they can be heard. That was one of the big, contentious things and it sounds silly. People have said to me it's really petty, why not just put notices on the doors but it actually is a really important issue here. It's about our right to govern ourselves within our community, so we stuck out for that one.

The other one was about lessons. It didn't actually say in the complaint that we had to have compulsory lessons. What it actually said was we have to *ensure* the children are engaged in learning, either in timetabled lessons or in prescribed self-supported study programs. That word, *ensure* is a very short word but it actually had a lot of punch for us. When we got into court our lawyer spent almost a whole day talking to the witness for the other side and finding out exactly what they meant by this word, *ensure*. So that was the other one that we contested.

The last one was about assessment. In Summerhill, we only assess kids when they are in class, so if you go to class, we assume that you're ready to be assessed. Obviously, when someone is teaching you they need to be assessing you as they go along in order to teach you further. But if you don't go to class, we don't assess you. When you're not in class, you're your own person and that's fine and they don't like that. They demanded that we have better assessments and more full assessments.

**JERRY:** Of course, we assume that you don't give grades.

**ZOË:** No, in England you don't give grades anyway; you just do your final GCSE – the General Certificate of Secondary Education – exams. Most children take those at the age of 15, turning 16. They usually sit all of them at once, between four and nine, and they cover most subjects. Then you have those certificates when you leave. But at Summerhill we take them staggered over several years. We take them at very different times, whenever the kid wants to, and some kids may never want to take any. It's completely optional.



Zoe Neill Readhead at the 2007 AERO conference



**JERRY:** If they want to go on to college, they pretty much have to pass these, is that right?

**ZOË:** Yes they do, but this idea that you have to have 100 of them is a bit of a fallacy. What our kids often find is that if they want to go to college, they find out how many they will need, and they work hard on the ones that they need. They're evidence of your knowledge of a subject, but they are not evidence of your knowledge as a person.

**JERRY:** And Summerhill actually has an above-average rate of students passing these tests and going on to college...

**ZOË:** Well, our GCSE pass rate is higher than the national average, but I don't know how the national average compares with other independent schools. We never professed to be a school that you're going to send your kid to if you want them to be the most academic achieving. If they want to do that, that's great, and we have many students who pass lots of GCSEs and very happily go on to University and get good degrees. But we also have kids who don't want to do that, and that's fine with us too.

**JERRY:** We'll set the scene: the school has protested against two of the complaints and said they were not willing to comply with them, and said that if they run out of appeals, they would close the school. They have taken the government to court. Now the week comes, and the tribunal starts. What was that like?

**ZOË:** Well, obviously the school was very wound up and tense about the whole thing. We had a fantastic legal team. This is a process that all schools have a right to if they're not happy with the notice of complaint which they receive, but they don't get any funding to help fight it. So Summerhill had to raise money for this. We were represented in court by **Jeffrey Robertson, QC**, who is one of the world's most famous human rights lawyers. He's an Australian, and he's fought many cases against governments on human rights issues. We were very happy to have him on board. On Monday all the kids, the staff, the cook, and the cleaners came up to the courtroom. It was held in the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand in London, a very big, imposing building full of courtrooms. When they got to the courtroom, there wasn't enough room so the judge allowed the children to come and sit on the floor. The gallery was full and then there were kids all sitting down the aisles on the floor watching the case. The whole thing looked a bit like a Summerhill meeting, which was great.

**JERRY:** How old were those kids?

**ZOË:** Our very smallest ones didn't come, but I think the youngest one was probably 10.

**JERRY:** So these kids from 10 years old on came to the court. What was their behavior in the courtroom?

**ZOË:** Well, just fantastic. One of the boys was crying and some people were a bit upset, but basically they were all quiet and they listened and were attentive. They were really interested.

**JERRY:** What seemed to be the reaction of the court to having these kids in there?

**ZOË:** There was a very warm feeling from the bench; I think they liked it. I don't know whether the opposition liked it very much, but certainly our team really liked it. It was certainly an understanding. The judges had been to visit the school, as had the opposition. I think the judges had obviously felt how important the meeting was; they attended one of our meetings. Obviously it was something they felt was important – the kids should be allowed to be there.

**JERRY:** So the Tribunal started that Monday. And how did that day go?

**ZOË:** The first witness on the stand was Michael Fitz, who is the Chief Registrar of Independent Schools. Jeffery Robertson was cross-examining him and it was a very interesting process. Basically, the points that he was making were: first of all, what this word *ensure* means, because in an earlier draft which Ofsted (the Office of Standards of Education) had sent to the Secretary of State of the Department for Education recommended that we should have compulsory lessons. He had decided that he'd only ask us to *ensure* involvement in learning. So there was some difference of opinion between the Department for Education and Ofsted. So our QC spent a lot of time establishing with Michael Fitz exactly what the word *ensure* means. Of course, it became very clear that you cannot ensure something without making it compulsory.

**JERRY:** So that point was made. On the second day, what happened?

**ZOË:** It became very clear that although the government said they were not demanding that we change our philosophy, they very clearly were. On the second day Mr. Fitz was on the stand again for the whole day. Things were coming to light, for instance, the fact that Summerhill had been on a list called TBW: To Be Watched. There are 250 schools in the country on this TBW list, but none of the schools know they're on it. We knew we were being inspected every year but we didn't know that we were on a TBW list. That was something else that our QC was making real headway with in showing that the governments at the time had put Summerhill on this hit list and were intent on inspecting it every year. The judge seemed very unhappy about the idea that the school should be on this list without being aware that they're on it.

**JERRY:** Let's just talk about the final scene after two days of testimony in which the government's case was beginning to look pretty bad, what did they do?

**ZOË:** Their case was clearly crumbling and one's impression was that they didn't really want to get more of the witnesses on the stand. We hadn't even begun to give our evidence yet. They had read all our information; our evidence was very strong indeed. So after the first two days, they indicated to our counsel that they wanted to get into discussions for settlement. The point is, with an Independent Schools Tribunal they don't have very much power. They have the power to close the school immediately, they have the power to annul the notice of complaint but that's the only power they have. They can't give you anything. They can't make any kind of guidelines or anything else. In the settlement that we finally agreed to, we have many more safety areas in place which will be backed up by our lawyers in the future as well. Part of that clause has been to recognize that Summerhill has a different philosophy and that it can follow its philosophy. It says here "The government concedes that Neill's philosophy must henceforth govern Ofsted's approach to the school. It will not subject the school to another full inspection for at least four years." And most dramatically for children's rights, "It accepts the pupils voice should be fully represented in any evaluation of the quality of education at Summerhill." It also agrees that "learning is not confined to lessons and acknowledges the right of children not to attend them." Those things are

written into the agreement that we have. Obviously the Tribunal would not have been able to give us those things.

**JERRY** They came up with this proposal and then it was supposed to be decided by a democratic school meeting of Summerhill. And where did that meeting take place?

**ZOË:** Our legal people asked the judges if we could use the courtroom to have one of our general school meetings. As they had visited and knew the importance of the meetings, they agreed to do that. The court was cleared, the judges went out — I mean we're talking about a *very* formal courtroom here in the *Royal Courts of Justice* in London! The chair of the meeting went and sat in the judge's chair, and her vice chair and secretary sat on either side of her.

**JERRY:** And the chair is how old?

**ZOË:** She's just 15... she's an experienced chair at school. We read the press statement and then we voted on whether the people who had been put outside — not the judges, obviously — would be allowed in. One of them was actually one of the school inspectors. It was still carried that she should come in as well. There was one inspector and two of their solicitors who actually came into the courtroom. The school voted that they could come in and listen to the rest of the meeting. Then Jeffrey Robertson, our QC, read out the terms of the agreement. Lots of the Summerhill kids and staff asked him questions about it and when he'd answered them sufficiently one of the pupils proposed that we would accept these terms. And it was carried unanimously. At one point the court usher had to come in and ask us if we could be quiet because when we read out the agreement the children and everybody all cheered shouted. She came and said, "Look, I'm really sorry, but there's a family court case going on next door." So everybody said they were sorry and were quiet. Then the judges came back in again and the court was back in session. The treasury solicitor who was our opponent read out the terms of the agreement and the judges acknowledged that this was good for them and then the whole courtroom came to a close.



Jerry Mintz, 2007      Photo by Eileen Cheong

**JERRY:** Well, this has been cheered all over the world. Summerhill has had a list serve of former students and so on; it's been fascinating to watch. Everyone was so excited – people as far away as New Zealand and Australia were watching this case. I want to talk about what you think the significance of this decision is for education in England and around the world because I think it's very important and has a connection with the standards movement that is happening here in the United States. What do you think is the significance of this decision for other schools?

**ZOË:** Well, I think that when a legal case like this comes about, it's written in cement in a way. It's written legally, it's important, and it is not something that people can just pretend didn't happen. It was a benchmark. I think that on many planes, the fact that a school has been able to challenge Ofsted and the Department for Education and has won is really important. That applies to countries all over the world with their education authorities. Also, for children's rights it's of huge importance because now the children have actually gotten it written into this agreement that the children shall be listened to. The inspectors never sat down and had discussions with the kids about how they felt about their school. So the kids felt very disempowered by it all.

**JERRY:** One of the things that was established from this is that learning takes place all the time and not necessarily just in classes.

**ZOË:** That's right. One of the things that we're really anxious to show here is that they have to look at the whole Summerhill picture. The things you learn, as well, are not necessarily the things they would expect to be the most important. What we have written into this agreement is that when we have inspections, we can have our own independent report written as well. And they have to take account of that.

**JERRY:** When I went to the New York State Alternative Education Association, a lot of the schools were complaining that the Commissioner of Education for NYS had turned down their request for a continuing waiver from the NYS Regents tests. I announced the Summerhill victory and said, "You know, what you really have to do is stand up to these bullies and hopefully you'll be able to get the same kind of results."

**ZOË:** I think the sad thing about it from the point of view of bureaucracy and government is that Summerhill is very lucky because Summerhill's very very famous. Whereas another small school just has to shut up and do as it's told because they haven't got those resources and they haven't got the years and fame that Summerhill has. It's a tragedy.

**For children's rights it's of huge importance because now the children have actually gotten it written into this agreement that the children shall be listened to.**

#34, Spring, 2002

## SOME THOUGHTS ON VOUCHERS

John Taylor Gatto  
Patrick Farenga  
Jonathan Kozol

Let me start by saying that in spite of any apparent drawbacks, I'm 100% behind the concept of vouchers, even in its worst manifestation. As a person who's spent ten years in around-the-clock investigation of the inner structures of American schooling, I can say with confidence that - as the teacher union correctly deduces- forced institutional schooling will be hard-pressed to survive any voucher project, even a bad one. And

wrecking this monopoly ought to be the prime target of any serious school reform effort; the folks who spend their time mooning about Pestalozzi and Rousseau, or worse, trying to build a better math, reading (or whatever) mouse-trap, are no friends of school reform (although I'll grant that they don't understand the huge amount of harm they do). Destroying the state monopoly is where the game is at, and vouchers are one way to bring that about. Not the whole strategy, but an important part of one.

John Taylor Gatto

Photo by Zoëann Murphy



Giving vouchers for schooling seems to me like giving parents vouchers for fast food: a choice among McDonald's, Burger King, or Wendy's is hardly a choice. Since it is unlikely vouchers would support anything but conventional schooling, I think it unlikely that homeschoolers and alternative schools would benefit from supporting them. Demands for accountability for public education expenditures are increasingly tied to test scores; the higher the score on statewide and federal assessments, the better the chances are for your school to receive continued funding from these sources. Schools and home schools who are accountable to the needs of the individual children and families rather than to the needs of standardized tests are probably not going to benefit from vouchers. If we really want to change the nature of schooling, to allow a wide variety of people, places, and things for children to learn with and from, we need to think well beyond education vouchers.

Patrick Farenga  
Holt Associates

Vouchers represent a dagger in the heart of public education. They're like "life boats" for a fraction of the population. The vast majority of children would remain in public schools and they'd be more impoverished. The least poor of the poor - the children of the most aggressive parents - are the ones who benefit from vouchers. Once they enter private schools, their parents of course no longer advocate for those who have been left behind.

Vouchers would rip apart the social fabric of our nation. We are already divided; but the public schools, at least in principle, represent a common ground on which our kids may someday meet. Under vouchers, there would be no common ground. We would have burned the last bridge that connects us to each other as a nation.

Jonathan Kozol  
Author



*Photo by Zoeann Murphy*

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# *Education in the News*

*Edited by Carol Morley & Ron Miller*

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**From *Seeing No Progress, Some Schools Drop Laptops*, *NY Times*:** The Liverpool Central School District, just outside Syracuse, has decided to phase out laptops starting this fall, joining a handful of other schools around the country that adopted one-to-one computing programs and are now abandoning them as educationally empty — and worse. Many of these districts had sought to prepare their students for a technology-driven world and close the so-called digital divide between students who had computers at home and those who did not. “After seven years, there was literally no evidence it had any impact on student achievement — none,” said Mark Lawson, the school board president here in Liverpool, one of the first districts in New York State to experiment with putting technology directly into students’ hands. “The teachers were telling us when there’s a one-to-one relationship between the student and the laptop, the box gets in the way. It’s a distraction to the educational process.” Liverpool’s turnabout comes as more and more school districts nationwide continue to bring laptops into the classroom. Federal education officials do not keep track of how many schools have such programs, but two educational consultants, Hayes Connection and the Greaves Group, conducted a study of the nation’s 2,500 largest school districts last year and found that a quarter of the 1,000 respondents already had one-to-one computing, and fully half expected to by 2011.

Yet school officials here and in several other places said laptops had been abused by students, did not fit into lesson plans, and showed little, if any, measurable effect on grades and test scores at a time of increased pressure to meet state standards. Districts have dropped laptop programs after resistance from teachers, logistical and technical problems, and escalating maintenance costs. Such disappointments are the latest example of how technology is often embraced by philanthropists and political leaders as a quick fix, only to leave teachers flummoxed about how best to integrate the new gadgets into curriculums. Last month, the United States Department of Education released a study showing no

difference in academic achievement between students who used educational software programs for math and reading and those who did not.

**From *How Nebraska Leaves No Child Behind*, by Sonja Steptoe:** Most state education officials grumble that the pressure-packed annual tests and rigid adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets engendered by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law are flawed means of measuring student proficiency, raising academic standards, holding schools accountable and fostering learning. But since the penalty for defying the law is loss of federal funds, most treat NCLB’s prescriptives like bitter medicine they can’t afford to spit out. All, that is, except the iconoclasts who run the public schools in Nebraska. Eschewing the Washington-created remedy, they have developed a homemade model called the School-based Teacher-led Assessment Reporting System (STARS) that has yielded impressive results, been praised by education scholars and attracted interest from Edward Kennedy, NCLB’s Senate custodian. “We just told the Department of Education that if they were really trying to [serve] all kids and close the proficiency gap that high-stakes testing isn’t the way to do it,” says Doug Christensen, state commissioner of education. “We told them we would show them that we had a better way.”

Under Nebraska’s model, the state sets curriculum standards, but gives teachers free reign on instruction and lets local school districts design their own tests to measure how well students are meeting the grade-level norms. And unlike the vast majority of states, which rely solely on multiple-choice exams to measure student achievement and determine yearly progress, Nebraska’s students also write essays as part of a unique statewide writing exam. Districts can also include student oral presentations, demonstrations and projects in their battery of assessments. Since the system was installed eight years ago, Christensen says, the statewide writing scores on average have lined up “almost perfectly” with results on both math and reading proficiency tests. “Ours



is a bottom-up model,” he says. “It begins in the classroom with instruction that’s aligned to our standards and extends to assessments developed locally that are tied to how well students apply concepts and problem solve, rather than simply memorize facts and figures and dates that they can’t remember 10 minutes later.”

For Nebraska officials, high doses of local input and low regard for memorization skills are points of distinction, and pride. And the consistently high scores their students receive reassure them that — they are indeed proficient in reading, math and writing. “Nebraska is a place where the concepts of family and community still work,” Christensen says. “Our public schools are embedded in those communities and those families. So why wouldn’t we first trust those folks? We believe you create the capacity at the local level to do the right thing in the first place, and then you don’t need the state or federal government looking over your shoulder.”

### **Judge orders DOE to pay \$155,000 to MCAS critic**

By Associated Press, Friday, May 4, 2007: The state education department must pay \$155,000 to an MCAS critic after officials violated his First Amendment rights when they kept him from speaking at a public education conference, a Superior Court judge has ruled.

The compensation will cover attorneys fees and costs for retracting a speaking invitation made to Alfie Kohn in 2001, Judge Hiller Zobel said Wednesday in a decision that finalizes an Aug. 1 ruling against the department, the American Civil Liberties Union said in a statement released Thursday.

Kohn, who had been scheduled to deliver a keynote address at a two-day conference in Northampton, sued the DOE in Middlesex Superior Court claiming that organizers violated his rights and deprived others from hearing his views.

Kohn was asked to discuss his views on standardized tests, including the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Systems test, at the “Public Schooling in Western Massachusetts” conference.

But when organizers learned Kohn’s topic would focus on his opposition to the MCAS, they canceled his appearance.

DOE officials said they canceled Kohn’s talk because his topic did not coincide with the guidelines of a grant used to pay for the conference.

“It’s too bad that the Department of Education was so committed to its agenda of high-stakes testing that it would violate the Constitution to silence those who disagree,” Kohn said in a statement.

State education officials, however, still believe they did not violate Kohn’s First Amendment rights, “but clearly the judge didn’t agree and we lost,” DOE spokeswoman Heidi Guarino said.

### **The Neuroscience of Joyful Education**, by Judy Willis

([www.publiceducation.org/20070706\\_ASCDjoyfuleducation.asp](http://www.publiceducation.org/20070706_ASCDjoyfuleducation.asp))

: Most children can’t wait to start kindergarten and they approach the beginning of school with awe and anticipation. Kindergartners and first graders often talk passionately about what they learn and do in school. Unfortunately, the current emphasis on standardized testing and rote learning encroaches upon many students’ joy. In their zeal to raise test scores, too many policymakers wrongly assume that students who are laughing, interacting in groups, or being creative with art, music, or dance are not doing real academic work. The result is that some teachers feel pressure to preside over more sedate classrooms with students on the same page in the same book, sitting in straight rows, facing straight ahead. The truth is that when we scrub joy and comfort from the classroom, we distance our students from effective information processing and long-term memory storage. Instead of taking pleasure from learning, students become bored, anxious, and anything but engaged. They ultimately learn to feel bad about school and lose the joy they once felt. Current brain-based research suggests that superior learning takes place when classroom experiences are enjoyable and relevant to students’ lives, interests, and experiences. Many education theorists, writes Judy Willis in *Educational Leadership* magazine, have proposed that students retain what they learn when the learning is associated with strong positive emotion. Classrooms can be the safe haven where academic practices and classroom strategies provide students with emotional comfort and pleasure as well as knowledge. When teachers use strategies to reduce stress and build a positive emotional environment, students gain emotional resilience and learn more efficiently.

## Homeschool Facts

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Homeschool Facts has just completed a major renovation to the website: [www.Homeschoolfacts.com](http://www.Homeschoolfacts.com). Please check out the website, your feedback is greatly appreciated.

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Thanks, in advance, for your contributions.

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## Correspondence

Only now did I read the sad news that Alexander Tubelsky is not with us. I don't know how to express it, but this is so sad to me. I feel that I have had a great honor to know and meet Alexander Tubelsky, because I think he was one of the great, brave, and pioneering people in the field of democratic education in I feel.

Alexander began as a principal in a regular school, and he began to make democratization process in a huge school of more than a thousand students, and I think that it is the biggest democratic school that we know today in the world. But as I understand, Alexander Tubelsky was not only a professional of building democratic schools, he was a deep philosopher and pedagogic of democratic education. But more than this, he was a man that loved people. This is my deepest memory of him.

I want to send to his family and friends all over the world a lot of warm love and honorship of Alexander Tubelsky and his ideas and actions.

Love,  
Yaacov Hecht

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My studies at The International University Asia Pacific (TIU) have been one of the most empowering learning experiences of my life. Before TIU, I was an elementary school teacher searching for a new kind of classroom. I felt deeply that there are systemic problems with the top-down structure of our mainstream educational system but was unable to explain it to others or myself. Through my Masters program, Education for Personal and Social Transformation, which TIU gave the flexibility to co-design, I have gained a much deeper understanding of the societal underpinnings contributing to our educational system that disconnects learners from their natural and social communities and from their own personal geniuses.

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