

# Education Revolution

THE MAGAZINE OF EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES



Winter 2010-11, Issue #63

Volume 22, Number 4

## Genuine Learning Can't Be Standardized!



### INSIDE

Public school alternatives • Quaker education • reflections by veteran activists

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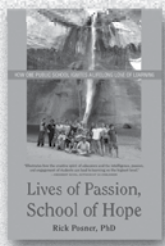
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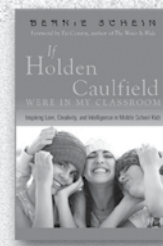
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# Education Revolution

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The **Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO)** was founded in 1989 by Jerry Mintz. AERO is a branch of the School of Living, a non-profit organization founded in 1934 by Ralph Borsodi. **AERO's** goal is to advance student-driven, learner-centered approaches to education. **AERO** is considered by many to be the primary hub of communications and support for educational alternatives around the world. Education Alternatives include, but are not limited to, Montessori, Waldorf (Steiner), Public Choice and At-Risk, Democratic, Homeschool, Open, Charter, Free, Sudbury, Holistic, Virtual, Magnet, Early Childhood, Reggio Emilia, Indigo, Krishnamurti, Quaker, Libertarian, Independent, Progressive, Community, Cooperative, and Unschooling. One of **AERO's** areas of expertise is democratic process and democratic education, but equally important is the networking of all forms of educational alternatives. It is through our work and mission that we hope to create an education revolution.

**AERO's** mission is to help create an education revolution to make student-centered alternatives available to everyone.

Towards this end, **AERO** provides information, resources and guidance to families, schools and organizations regarding their educational choices. **AERO** disseminates information internationally on topics such as: homeschooling, public and private alternative schools, and charter schools. **AERO's** long-term goal is to become a more effective catalyst for educational change by providing books, magazines, conferences, online courses, consultations, support groups, and organizational information and seminars in the field of alternative education.

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**Cover:** Students at the Environmental Studies Academy (see Rona Zollinger's article on page 11) participating in a backpacking trip to Yosemite National Park. Their trip was part of the WildLink program, which brings urban youth into the wilderness. Photo by Rona Zollinger.

# Being There

BY JERRY MINTZ

Staying involved with Brooklyn Free School, Manhattan Free School and coaching the democratic table tennis club at the local Boys and Girls Club helps keep me grounded, because so much of AERO's work is remote, by phone, Internet, Skype, etc. Last week I taught table tennis at Brooklyn Free School and last night I facilitated the board meeting. Last week I went to the board meeting of Manhattan Free School and gave a class on the school's history to the students. A few weeks earlier I brought groups from both schools to the "Democracy Now!" radio show (See sidebar and photo).

But in many ways it has been the work with the Boys and Girls Club that has been the most instructive to me, as the students all go to public school yet participate in our democratic table tennis club. In previous articles I have

described the democratic process at the table tennis club. For this story I want to talk about the experiences of some of my table tennis students in public school.

Most of my students are Hispanic in background, many from South America. One of my best table tennis students became an AERO intern. He wanted to be a film maker, so he picked up on an idea that we had been thinking about and started filming and editing cable access TV shows documenting our table tennis club, training, tournaments, etc. He made 18 episodes that have been aired several times.

But at the same time he was struggling in school. One reason may have been because of racism. After the school sent him a failing report card for 10th grade, at my urging he wrote this letter to his local superintendent:

Dear Superintendent:

Until this year I have been a good student. For example, last year I got all A's and B's. So this year I expected to do the same, but it didn't turn out this way. It was partly my fault but also I feel it was partly the teacher's and the school's fault.

This year I expected that I was going to pass with no problem. One of the biggest problems I had this year was the Earth Science class. The problem was mostly with the teacher and the way the class was being taught. I hate to say this but I believe that she discriminated against me and several other Spanish students, all boys. She would pick on me and the other Spanish students for talking. White students were talking also but she never said anything to them. She would kick us out of class three times a week for talking or not listening, but we can only think of one time she kicked out a white student all year. The class was about half Spanish and half white.

I went through this once before, in 7th grade, and ironically it was also an Earth Science teacher. My mother went to the school to complain, but the school didn't listen and took the teacher's side. That made me feel like it wasn't worth complaining again because I thought the administration wouldn't listen again. It made me feel like hating school and not wanting to go every day. I did manage to go most of the time.

I still hoped to pass the class. The teacher actually said she hoped I passed it because she didn't want me again next year. I asked her if I had a good chance to pass the class if I passed the Regents test and she said "yes." So I started studying for the Regents so I could pass the class (and leave her behind). I realized that I'd also had to make up labs that I missed. I had to go in after school to make them up. When I first walked in after school to make up the labs she thought I was joking. But when I handed them all in she knew I was serious.

I felt like I was going to pass when I took the Regents. In fact I got a 78. I had hoped to do even better, but I did have a lot to make up, since she usually kicked me out of class at least twice a week. One time I came up with the right answer to a question and she kicked me out because I was "interrupting others from learning!"

Some people start hating school when they are younger. But I didn't start hating it until this year. I guess I'm just a late bloomer! I knew I wasn't going to pass math, but I knew I would pass Earth Science and everything else. So I was shocked when I got my report card because I received no credit for two of the classes I had passed.

By this letter I am requesting that I get credit restored for those two classes, Earth Science and Physical Education.

Also, because of this experience I have decided that I would like to go to an alternative program. I found out about it from a friend who goes there. (Your) High School is not meeting my needs.

If I can't get in, I will probably drop out of school, as a result of my experiences this year. My mother is very upset. Please let me know within a week of your decision. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

AB

FROM THE

# Editor's Desk

BY RON MILLER

I began my career in alternative education thirty years ago, when I entered a training program to become a Montessori teacher. From the start, I intended to draw upon my teaching experience as a basis for research and writing, but little did I imagine the unusual directions my work would take over the ensuing three decades—not only writing, but also founding and editing journals, publishing and distributing books, lecturing, mentoring adult students in a progressive teacher training program, and starting a school that is still thriving fifteen years later.

It has been a fascinating and satisfying life's work. I have had the privilege of visiting dozens of wonderful alternative schools and meeting hundreds of parents, educators, and young people in many parts of the world. I have spoken at exciting conferences in Moscow (during Soviet days), Istanbul, Guadalajara, and even Albany! People in remote places, from China to Malaysia to Spain, have heard of my ideas and, thanks to the wonders of the Internet, have contacted me for advice. I have made many good friends along the way, most of whom are readers of this magazine.

If this is sounding like the beginnings of a farewell message, that's because it is. After many months of restless introspection, I have decided that it is time to close this chapter of my life and move on to something different.

Being a freelance, free spirited activist—an entrepreneur of radical ideas, launching new and original projects every year or two—has been a lot of fun, and it has expressed an authentic side of my personality. But as I age into my mid-fifties, I realize more and more that I need something else now—a sense of rootedness in a community, a sense of modest but concrete accomplishments rather than grand visions for changing the world. I am looking into possibilities for running a small business—maybe a bookstore—in a small Vermont town. On the surface this may look like the desperation of someone in a midlife crisis, but I'm quite sure that it's about nourishing other parts of my spirit that have not been well served by my quixotic and countercultural career.

Perhaps, too, this is a personal response to the persistent madness of the dominant culture. I'm just tired of fighting it. In the 1980s we really felt that a profound historical shift was about to happen, and that "holistic education" would be an integral part of an emerging culture. My career was inspired, and guided, by this expectation. However, after thirty years, after "A Nation at Risk" and "No Child Left Behind," after corporate globalization and George Bush, I have to admit that my youthful hopes were unrealistic. After thirty years, I am tired of struggling against the current.

But even though it is time for me to step back, I am very glad that a new generation of education activists is rising to carry the torch. I support and appreciate each of you who continues in this work. Carry on, my friends: eventually this movement will succeed, one way or another, because the dominant system in the world will someday collapse.

This is not yet my last issue of *Education Revolution*. I will complete the Spring issue, due out in March. So you'll hear from me one more time. Meanwhile, enjoy the great writings you'll find on the following pages. ●

While I was at the IDEC in Vancouver I received an urgent e mail from him saying that the principal wanted to meet with him the next day. "Good, you got their attention!" I said to him. I told him to tell them that he couldn't make it then, but would come in at a later date (two days after I returned) and would be bringing his mother and someone else with him.

I wore my suit and took my briefcase as I accompanied them to the high school. The 16- year old boy said later he could just sense the principal thinking "Who is this Spanish kid whose mother works at Taco Bell that she could bring a consultant?"

After some negotiation he got full credit for his year and was allowed to get into a special program for training in film editing and camera work. Very shortly he was the top student in the program and he graduated from high school this year.

Meanwhile his 12-year old cousin decided that he, too, wanted to learn how to play table tennis. After a year of intense work he became the New York State Junior Champion. But he also has serious school problems and I am currently working with him to solve them. Among other things he



Students from Brooklyn Free School, and Jerry Mintz, visiting Amy Goodman (center) at Democracy Now!

was put into an 8th grade math class that was way over his head, and the teacher refused to help him. He wrote this story about his attempt to change teachers:

"My name is Angelo and I'm 13 years old. I'm in 8th grade. I was having trouble with algebra and the algebra teacher. I've never been a good math student. Giving algebra in 8th grade is not smart. Some kids can't understand it. I was not able to understand anything in the algebra class. I asked the teacher for help and she said "I can't do it. You should get a tutor." My family could not afford a tutor.

One day when I brought in my homework, I didn't understand it. It was hard. My teacher said it was all wrong. So she gave me lunch detention for a week because it was wrong. I thought it was dumb because she could have helped me with it instead of punishing me. Another day when I was going to class I had to go to the bathroom. The bathroom on the floor she was on was locked and I didn't want to go to the class first because I knew she wouldn't let me go to the bathroom if I went to the class first. So I ran up the stairs to the bathroom on the floor above the class. When I was in the bathroom the bell rang. So, I ran back to the class and I was two minutes late. She said, "I hope you have a pass." I said "No, I do not have a pass. I'm late because I had to go to the bathroom." She said, "Get out of my classroom." So I left and I sat with this teacher who was in the hallway checking passes from kids for the rest of the period. I told him about my teacher and he was surprised. The next day when I went to the class, the teacher said, "Angelo, where is your homework?" I said, "I don't have my homework because you kicked me out of class." Then she gave me detention.

I tried to get out of this teacher's class and into another one. I asked my mother and some other adults to help me get out. My mom did not come in because she was working. So I decided to make my own appointment with the guidance counselor to try to make the change.

So I went to the meeting and my guidance counselor was there. I told him I would like to switch out of my algebra teacher's class. He said "No," because he thought I wasn't trying. I said that I was trying but I wasn't getting it. He said, "I think you could do better than that." I said, "No, I can't because it's too hard for me.

So then the principal walked in. I told the principal I'd like to switch out of the algebra class. He said no because he thought I could do better. So then I started disagreeing with him, too. Then I showed them the website for AERO, the Alternative Education network. Then I asked again if I could switch out of the class and they said OK! Then I shook their hand and asked if I could leave.

I was surprised that I could talk my guidance counselor and principal into making the change. I had the confidence to do this because of talks I had with Jerry about alternative education."

I think these stories exemplify the problems that children are having in today's public schools. They are simply not treated as fully human. If these things were done to adults,

such as not allowing them to go to the bathroom, lawsuits would quickly ensue. This is why the Education Revolution is needed as urgently as ever. ●

## A Visit to "Democracy Now"

by Ari Bernstein and Ben Schendler-Terry, both 13, of Brooklyn Free School

I (Ari) had to wake up at 5:30 AM, on the morning of the 15th of November, to catch the 6:45 AM train to Penn Station. The reason for this was because I would be going to the "Democracy Now" studio to watch a live broadcast.

When I got to the station, I saw Jerry Mintz (the guy who organized the whole tour). After standing outside with Jerry for 5 minutes, my friend from BFS (Brooklyn Free School), Ben, and his mom arrived. They also brought another kid from my school called Noah. We all went inside and into the elevator. Jerry pressed a floor and when we arrived, a sweet sight met our eyes. To our left were a bunch of people, all working on computers. To our right was a kitchen area and behind that, some computers. Nothing too cool about that. The awesome part was right in front of us: there was a couch and some chairs; behind that was a sheet of glass; behind that was the exact same set that you would see on TV, excluding a few cameras.

The same moment that the elevator door opened, a woman was there to meet us. I forgot her name, but she was very nice. She led us to the kitchen area and offered us muffins, cakes, coffee, and tea. She then took us through a hallway and into the editing room. We had to be silent because the show was about to start. After about 30 seconds of looking around, we had to run to the area with the couches and window, to watch the show.

That episode of "Democracy Now" was very interesting. It included a lot of stories, including one about how some of the main Germans responsible for World War II were sheltered by the CIA when the war was over, and this thing about reporters not being allowed in Morocco. When the show was done, the woman who had met us at the elevator gave us a tour. She showed us the archives (where they back up all of their previous shows), the editing room, and even the set itself.

While on the set, the news anchor came out and we got to chill with her for a while. After that, it was time to go back to school.

# Quaker Education Today

## Continuing Revelation

BY IRENE MCHENRY

A kindergartener was once asked by her parents what was particularly Quaker about her new school, and she responded, “We sit in circles. God is everywhere. There are no right answers.” Speaking from her lived experience, this child captures the essence of a Friends education.

The bold educational experiment that began in 17<sup>th</sup> century America, in the colony of Pennsylvania, was created by William Penn’s vision, stemming from the faith and practice of the Religious Society of Friends, and continues to recreate itself today in the United States and throughout the world. With roots in a religious movement that is experiential at its core, inquiry-based, and collaborative in its ongoing search for knowledge, wisdom, insight and inspiration, Friends schools today practice a “continually revealed” Quaker pedagogy.

Three Friends schools in and near Philadelphia trace their roots to the late 1600s; by 1931 there were 34 Friends schools in the United States. 1931 is significant as the year when a small group of Quaker educators in the Philadelphia region founded a national consultative organization to unite Friends schools under one integrated network -- the Friends Council on Education. Today, Friends Council membership includes 85 Friends schools in the United States with 4,260 teachers, 1,250 trustees, and 20,560 students. The lively Friends Council network extends to 11 Friends schools in England, Costa Rica, Palestine, Japan, Australia, Lebanon, and networks of Friends schools in Bolivia and Kenya, as well as Friends camps and educational organizations.

The Friends Council’s mission is to nurture the Quaker life of schools through professional development and publishing, to strengthen the national network of Friends schools, and to provide guidance for those establishing new Friends schools (19 new Friends schools have opened in the past 19 years). Today the Friends Council supports 20 peer networks, and provides workshops on best governance practices, Quaker pedagogy, and leadership development for Friends schools. Current initiatives focus on lifting up diversity work, strengthening school governance, and amplifying the national voice of Friends Education. The Friends Council’s website, [www.friendscouncil.org](http://www.friendscouncil.org), provides a wide variety of information and resources addressing the needs of trustees, administrators, teachers, and families. The Friends Council maintains a Directory of Schools, a job postings list and a web-based professional network for dialogue across Friends schools ([www.friendscouncil.net](http://www.friendscouncil.net)).

### **DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES OF FRIENDS EDUCATION**

*Historically, Quakers have placed a huge premium on education. This understanding follows from the view that there is that of God within each person and, therefore, each person is in a position*

*to seek, experience and share an understanding of our common humanity... Quakers also believe that knowledge and learning, both widespread and deep, are key ingredients to the achievement of peace and social justice.... There is another part of our Quaker practice – listening – that has a pronounced relevance when times are difficult and people are angry or fearful. Listening is a robust part of our Quaker school curriculum. We are listening when we sit together in silence during Meeting for Worship. We gather ourselves to listen to the soft, still voice within and, during Meeting, often, we are provided opportunities to listen to others as they put words to their journey, to their deepest feelings. But listening is not confined to two periods a week in the Meeting House. Listening to each other is the way that we demonstrate respect, tolerance and acceptance. Listening bestows dignity. And, of course, listening leads to understanding, to the airing of honest differences and to the possibility of genuine agreement.*<sup>1</sup>

**Living out the Quaker core values in a Friends school community leads to a culture of respect. Students, faculty, administrators, and trustees consistently name respect as a common theme.**

According to research, the ethos of Friends schools is perceived as caring, trusting and warm.<sup>2</sup> All members of the school community are involved in developing habits of care, connection, and contribution. In *Growing into Goodness*, Paul Lacey names this aspect of a Friends education “an ethos of involvement, an ethic of care.” The habit of involvement and care was described beautifully by a Media-Providence Friends School graduate in his eighth-grade commencement speech (2008): “I’ve learned more than just what is taught in the classroom; I’ve learned how to be a better person.”

Research on pedagogy in Friends schools shows an emphasis on the process of reflection and inquiry in school culture reflecting the fundamental Quaker belief in Truth as a process of continuing revelation. In his research on Friends schools, public schools and independent schools in the United States, Douglas Heath found that teaching the process of



Students installing a mural in the community garden at Frankford Friends School, Philadelphia. Photo courtesy of Friends Council on Education.

reflection was key. Teachers engage students in becoming aware of their own thinking and growth process. He also found that teachers in Friends schools give time and energy to the task of rigorously and honestly reflecting about their own learning from classroom interventions and innovations.<sup>3</sup>

Living out the Quaker core values in a Friends school community leads to a culture of respect. Students, faculty, administrators, and trustees consistently name respect as a common theme. A dean of students commented, "Respect is the coin of the realm. It is treasured, invested, expected. It is practiced in classrooms, in meetings for worship and meetings for business, in relationships, and in communication."<sup>4</sup>

Modern Friends schools operate in complex environments and have opened their doors to increasingly diverse communities while continuing to attract students from Quaker backgrounds. One challenge is that the number of Quakers in the United States and the number of Quakers in Friends schools have diminished over time, while the number of Friends schools and the breadth of diverse public they serve have increased. Most recent statistics (2009-2010) suggest that 6% is the overall average of Quaker schoolchildren attending Quaker schools in the United States, with a range from 1% in one school to as high as 17% (a day school) and 47% (a boarding school). In the single Australian school, Friends' School in Hobart, Tasmania, there are more students (1,340) than there are Quakers in all of Australia!

One current challenge in Friends education comes from the Quaker community itself, where some are concerned about

the issue of elitism and affluence in Friends schools. In a recent issue of *Friends Journal*, one Quaker not only questions Friends schools as institutions of privilege that may not be in harmony with Friends testimonies, he even suggests closing Friends schools to give their resources to educating the poor.<sup>5</sup>

The challenge, then, is for Friends schools to provide a strong orientation to the Quaker philosophy of education and its practice for incoming faculty, students, parents and trustees. Of equal importance is the need for Friends schools to make the Friends philosophy of education relevant to their religiously, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse learning communities. I believe that these challenges have not fundamentally altered the mission of Friends schools. Rather, they have provided the motivation for schools to strengthen that which they have in common: Quaker processes for worship and decision-making, core faith-based values of equality, simplicity, peacemaking, social justice, and a major commitment to service in the world.

The practice of meeting for worship in Friends school communities on a weekly (and in some schools daily) basis, continues to be the foundation for Quaker education today. A recent study on the impact of meeting for worship describes this Quaker practice in a very diverse (by race, religion, socioeconomic class) urban Friends school:

*At my Quaker school, I experienced something gratifying: a community under construction, a process where the whole is greater than its parts, and yet the parts matter, too. What I had witnessed during the 45 minutes of meeting for worship was a communally constructed "text" of freely offered stories, told by young and old,*



a genuine discourse on the enduring themes of love, friendship, and community. And it would happen again and again, this interweaving of trials and triumphs, these variations on universal themes. All educators and students at Friends schools have similar stories to tell—let the zip code be what it may. . . . The experience of meeting for worship [is] downright peculiar for the vast majority of the community. Yet week after week, it works—an engine, a catalyst, and a mirror for a host of complicated metamorphoses that schoolchildren undergo during their formative years. . . . Meeting for worship is a testament to the power of a Friends school education in the modern era, and one more example of Quakerism’s gift to the world.<sup>6</sup>

What makes a Friends school environment unique is that Quaker values are woven into daily life, both in and out of the classroom. As one 1994 graduate explained, “Students walk away with a strong sense of social understanding, skills to deal with adversity, tolerance and respect for others, and self-worth, so that they have the power to succeed.” This has been the case since the founding of the first Friends schools by 17<sup>th</sup> century Quakers. Then, as now, they taught a way of life based on simplicity and caring that is both visionary and practical, optimistic and deeply democratic.

### Notes

1. Tom Gibian blog, “Why Quaker Education is just what the doctor ordered,” September 30, 2010, (<http://wordpress.sfs.org/?p=409>)

2. Douglas Heath, in Paul Lacey. *Growing into Goodness – Essays on Quaker Education*, Pendle Hill Press, 1998.
3. Douglas Heath. *Schools of Hope*, Jossey-Bass, 1994.
4. Irene McHenry, et al. *Embracing the Tension: The Evidence for Conflict as the Locus of Moral Growth. A Study of Moral Growth in Friends High Schools*. Friends Council on Education, 1998.
5. Larry Ingle. “Class Privilege and Schools Among Modern Friends.” *Friends Journal*, October, 2010.
6. Mark Franek, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2007.

**Irene McHenry** is Executive Director of the Friends Council on Education, a licensed psychologist, school consultant, author/editor of numerous publications including the 2009 *Tuning In: Mindfulness in Teaching and Learning*. She was founding Head of Delaware Valley Friends School, co-founder of Greenwood Friends School, and founding faculty for Fielding Graduate University’s doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Change. She serves as board president for the Council for American Private Education, and a trustee for Haverford College. She has also taught for Lincoln University, Friends School Haverford and the William Penn Charter School and served on the boards of Gladwyne Montessori School and The Shipley School. ●



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# 100 Years War Against Learning

BY DON GLINES

**T**he 100 Years War—on and off between England and France (116 years: 1337-1453)—has been cited as the longest in history. However, this conflict pales when contrasted with the centuries old on/off *war against learning*. The battles continue between (1) traditionalist politicians and school people who favor reforming *schooling*, and (2) visionary societal and educational critics who advocate personalized *learning* environments.

These latter voices profess that one-size-fits-all schooling and testing does not benefit the great majority. The goal is to eradicate required edicts in favor of learner, mentor, family directed formats through options and choices. Research and experimental projects overwhelmingly support personalization. Why then are 95% of the mandated learners in America still subjected to traditionalist demands?

**The “academic” spread among “7th graders” reflects a ten-year range in achievement—from grade 3 to grade 13 scoring on traditional state tests. There can be no “7th grade” classification, yet it persists today as an edict from the gods.**

The visionaries have settled for defeat and a truce! Most are involved in writing and speaking, directing a program, organizing a conference, and their own lives; they have failed to unify an army of battlefield warriors to resume the war against *learning injustice*.

Political mandates such as No Child Left Behind, forced reading in kindergarten, required algebra for everyone and other traditionalist-style controls are allowed to exist when there is no learning validity to warrant such imposed wartime atrocities. The onslaught by the enemies has gained momentum through the Obama/Duncan plans for national standards and penalties. The visionaries have lost the courage of Joan of Arc (1412-1431), who at age 19 in the midst of the 100 Years War, donned a white suit of armor and personally led on the battlefield the French troops to victory at Orleans. The analogies in education to a shooting

war are valid, for though non-violent, it reflects the same mentality. There is a real struggle between the traditionalists who are the current conquerors, and the visionaries who are the suppressed.

Should not the visionaries be willing to risk personal sacrifices, don their white suits of armor, and openly challenge the wrath of the traditionalists? Should they not war against the ill-grounded policies of those trained for lawyer, business, farm, political, schoolpeople careers? Should they not openly fight for learner choices to overcome the 400-year mentality of same-size mandates for all? *Is it not interesting to note that schooling, the institution founded to promote democracy, is now the most undemocratic institution in America?*

Many younger potential leaders of personalized learning do not know enough educational history—not even the history of alternatives. Overlooked is the fact that in the early 60s/70s, devoted public school optimists led the education reform movement. Title III was passed by Congress, and signed in 1966 by President Lyndon Johnson, to provide federal money for innovation, experimentation, and research to determine changes which could create significantly better public schools. In conjunction, the Ford, Kettering, Danforth, and Chrysler Education Foundations provided sums of money to promote public school innovation, including the Model Schools Project and the Educational Facilities Laboratory.

In that era, the most innovative Pre-K to 12 and college learning system in America was the Wilson program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Sixty-nine changes away from traditional patterns to student-centered learning were made literally overnight at no additional cost and without firing teachers. The new designs forced the state department of education to waive all requirements and the legislature to change five education codes. The *Christian Science Monitor* described Wilson as a “cradle-to-grave personalized learning system under one roof,” offering a flow of mixed ages from pre-birth/pre-school to BS and MS college degrees and senior citizen options. Wilson and other similar efforts proved that traditional school rituals were not necessary; in fact, they hindered learning for most. The results of local heretics, as with the Mankato Wilson and St. Paul Open programs, led to Minnesota being the first state to approve charter schools.

The election of President Reagan began the counter-attack by the traditionalists and the return to apple pie schooling. Ironically, the policies of Presidents Clinton and Obama continued the buildup of the army of educational oppression. In contrast, veteran visionaries failed to lead an army to reverse the

losses of the past four decades, though the research is overwhelmingly on their side.

In 1959, Goodlad and Anderson (*Nongraded Elementary Schools*) published irrefutable evidence that the grade level self-contained classroom system, conceived in 1847 and adapted from a 1536 Prussian military system, was wrong. The twelve-year University of Oregon Medford Child Growth and Development Study (1957-1969) proved there is a six-year physiological spread among “7<sup>th</sup> graders”; some chronological 12-year-olds are physiologically only 9 or 10, while others are 14 or 15. The “academic” spread among “7<sup>th</sup> graders” reflects a ten-year range in achievement—from grade 3 to grade 13 scoring on traditional state tests. There can be no “7<sup>th</sup> grade” classification, yet it persists today as an edict from the gods, in spite of the *Eight-Year Study* (1932-1940) documenting that it makes no difference what courses are taken in secondary school related to success in life.

**Visionaries will not enforce, or will forcefully oppose, bad mandates such as reading for all in kindergarten/first grade, and massive expensive testing for reading and math programs which reveal nothing new; high economic neighborhoods have higher test scores.**

Similarly, kindergarten teachers are faced with a 24-month developmental spread among the children: 12-15 months chronologically (with transfer students), plus home environment, maturation, language development, and physique factors. The 1924 yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education stated conclusively, with data from six diverse geographic and economic communities, that homogeneous grouping did not help academically and hurt socially. Yet today 90% of the school districts follow a form of such organization.

Students may learn to read by age 3 while others may not until age 13. Most learn to read well by ages 8-9 if allowed to progress at their own rate and have choices of perhaps 23 self-selected approaches and materials. The need for remedial reading is caused by traditional approaches! Fortunately, schools do not teach walking or talking, or think of all the remedial classrooms!

In 1913 Edmond Holmes wrote of the schooling structure in England as *The Tragedy of Education*. In 1910, the Russell Sage Foundation report found the same tragedies in the United States. One hundred years later, in 2011, it is beyond time for the Joan of Arc passion to emerge within the ranks of the oppressed. Leaders are called to come forward with battle plans and weapons in place. *Action* is the only answer. There is no need for more books, articles, speeches, or conferences. How many of such avenues have been pursued just from 1950 to 2010? Enough is enough! The battle of *learning* versus *schooling* must be resumed.

## WHAT TO DO: SIX STEPS

① Four visionaries with Joan of Arc commitment accept leadership; these fighters invite 25 others who support learning philosophies as opposed to schooling mandates, to join in creating a plan to renew the war for educational choice, not mandates.

② No “speeches” or “debates” over implementation methods of personalized learning philosophies are allowed. The focus is an agreement to take action to overcome the losses in the longstanding conflict. The call for volunteers to join a committed army goes nationwide through visionaries’ outlets.

③ The battle plan creates a coordinated four week national “strike” against the controlling army of the political school establishment. Appeals for coverage reach media outlets as CNN, *New York Times*, Associated Press. The visionaries insist on extended hearings for their spokespersons to meet with the Congressional education committees. They meet individually with their representative members of Congress, supported by statements from the national army members.

④ Participating state groups meet with their legislators to confirm that they will no longer be a party to unjust demands, such as requiring Algebra I and II for graduation. The 900 members of the Minnesota Alternatives Association (MAAP), once the Joan of Arc leaders nationally, but now just part of the existing truce, once again rise and *risk!* Where possible, they close their schools for the march. The 900, accompanied by many parents and students, ascend the St. Paul capitol steps and remind all why Minnesota was once the number one state for educational innovation and improvement.

⑤ The national army leaders contact key politicians for support. The February 16, 1966 speech by Lyndon Johnson, presented to 10,000 school superintendents in Atlantic City, NJ, called for dramatic new visions. A “masterpiece,” it was the best education speech ever given by a sitting President. A copy, via political connections, is read by President Obama. He is asked to rethink his policies and the misguided direction of Secretary Duncan. A new “Title III,” but with teeth, is proposed. Johnson may have failed in Vietnam, but he was arguably the best President ever for education.

⑥ The visionary army leaders expand their arsenal of weapons:

**a.** In contacting politicians, teachers, and the public, they present an extensive portfolio of 100 research and experimentation results proving the fallacies of traditional schooling when mandated for *all learners*; “Startling, Disturbing, Delightful Research” by Wayne Jennings (*Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1977) provides a great start. The portfolio also contains methods by which schools, colleges, and education centers can be made significantly better for most learners. Evidence—such as the Medford “7<sup>th</sup> grade” investigation and the *Eight-Year Study*—is the key component.

**b.** Accompanying the research portfolio is a compilation of books, articles, CDs, and websites supporting personalized



# Relationality as an Educational Philosophy

BY RONA ZOLLINGER PH.D.

If schools are the places where the primary narratives of our culture are taught and passed on to the next generation of learners, what are the real stories, values, priorities, and methodologies students are learning inside the U.S. public school? Do those educational practices model a future that supports engagement, balance and renewal or do they support environmental degradation, war and a fear-based society?

Considering that each year one third of all students who enter U.S. public high schools drop out, how do I, as a teacher, model the ethical values of sustainable living in ways that genuinely engage my students? In this article, I will provide an overview of my investigation into this question and then discuss the outcomes of my doctoral research which examined the program I created to address these concerns.

## SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY CENTERS

The most popular reason students give for dropping out of high school is boredom. Ultimately, students are telling educators that they fail to see any real relevance to their lives. These questions and feelings overwhelmed me during my first years of teaching. At the end of my third year, I decided to continue my education at California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) to investigate learning modalities that modeled alternative ways of learning and teaching. At CIIS, I explored the evolution of consciousness, systems theory and the conditions that enable transformation to occur. I wanted to understand how to build cultures that support connection instead of fragmentation, health instead of dis-ease and partnership instead of competition.

For me, graduate school was a spiritual journey of personal transformation, as today I am a different kind of educator, one who sees the school as the connecting center of the community and a place where all involved can relearn how to live with relationality as the primary value. In this article, I refer to relationality as the dynamic process that connects people with each other and the world around them.

As a result of my graduate studies, I met and worked with many dedicated community members, all concerned with environmental and community health, and together we founded the Environmental Studies Academy (ESA). The program is located in the Martinez Unified School District approximately 30 miles southeast from San Francisco.

Structurally, the ESA is a self-contained high school classroom situated inside the Briones School of Independent

Study. The ESA is composed of 24 “at-risk” 9-12th grade students with one credentialed teacher.

The program curriculum is experiential in nature and is organized around the ecological principles of sustainable education and partnership education.<sup>1</sup> The curriculum utilizes the strategies and practices of (a) place-based learning,<sup>2</sup> (b) ecological service-learning,<sup>3</sup> (c) intergenerational mentoring,<sup>4</sup> (d) a rites of passage curriculum,<sup>5</sup> (e) transformative learning theory,<sup>6</sup> and (f) experiential learning theory,<sup>7</sup> all done through participation in a small learning community. Students participate in hands-on, ecologically-focused, community-based real-life projects in addition to their independent study coursework. The ESA mission seeks to foster socially empowered agents of change who work toward the nourishment and restoration of healthy life-styles, land, community, and schools through service, education, and outreach.

## PROCESSES THAT SUSTAIN ENGAGEMENT

After several years of experiencing remarkable student dedication and attracting astonishing community interest and awards, I decided to analyze the program by conducting a three year case study. The case study examined student, parent, community partner, administrative and teacher stakeholder perspectives as to what experiences and conditions fostered and/or maintain authentic engagement in the ESA. In addition, I wanted to see how stakeholder perceptions of the program matched conventional measurements of student success, such as test scores, attendance rates and grade point averages. Using narrative data previously collected through Appreciative Inquiry focus groups, a cooperative research methodology that gathers information about what gives life to an organization, I identified ten essential processes as necessary to foster or maintain successful engagement in the ESA.

The ten processes portray education as a system of inter-related relationships that when communally integrated and facilitated, with the classroom as the center of family and community life, learning activities not only sustain genuine student engagement, but contribute to community flourishing as well. Therefore, these ten processes must not be seen as isolated innovations, but as a school interwoven within the community culture. These processes, presented in order of importance to all stakeholders, are as follows:

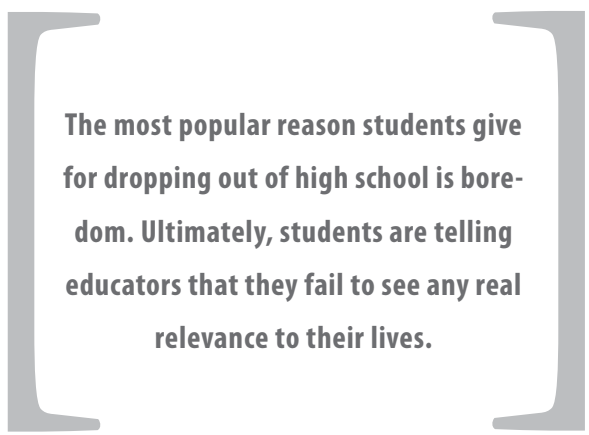
**Social action:** Action-oriented projects including (a) place-based learning practices; (b) experiential learning methods;

(c) hands-on, issue-based, real-life, service-learning projects (problems identified by students and the community simultaneously); and (d) environmentally-focused outdoor activities.

**Acceptance and diversity:** Processes that break down fears and/or barriers between people and communities, such as trust building exercises and team-building experiences.

**Mutual accountability:** The ESA functions as a team-based organization, with the teacher's primary role being that of a facilitator. Students are invited to teach as often as they are taught and have choice regarding their participation and role in almost every educational experience. Students report back their work to the funding agencies and partnering organization.

**Relational values:** The creation of a homelike classroom environment or a small learning community with a strong sense of connection was consistently mentioned by all stakeholders. Many remarked on the impact of chairs being set up in circles instead of rows.



**The most popular reason students give for dropping out of high school is boredom. Ultimately, students are telling educators that they fail to see any real relevance to their lives.**

**Purposeful, intergenerational relationships:** These relationships were described as consistent, purposeful, and mutually beneficial relationships to all involved. Intergenerational relationships between students and supporting administrators, community partners, and volunteers were named as essential in implementing the real-life, service-learning projects. However, the most noted relationship was the existence of a caring, personal relationship with one teacher.

**Inspirational appreciation:** Students inspire each other, stakeholders and the public through public demonstrations of student projects, group appreciation circles and yearly program evaluation Appreciative Inquiry research cycles.

**Critical thinking:** Practices identified included (a) partnership education curriculum; (b) systems theory and holistic approach to content; (c) facilitation of transformative learning cycles of reflection and action; and (d) consciously created rites of passage experiences for students.

**Emergent learning:** Stakeholders described emergent learning as the ability to pay attention to the transdisciplinary nature of the inquiry, as well as synergistic interests that are typically limited within traditional subject areas. In addition, they described the importance of the rotating cohort of mixed-age students, having a flexible school schedule adapted to yearly projects, and an independent study format.

**Personal and community health:** Stakeholders appreciated the holistic health focus inside the classroom and within the project activities. Noteworthy was the description of stress management techniques that were a part of core community daily rituals, nature-focused connective experiences and regular experiences of celebrating and eating together.

**Courage and renewal:** While developing the ESA, I was part of an Educator's Circle of Trust based upon the work of Parker Palmer. My participation in this group helped me to develop my own personal practice of emotional and spiritual renewal. This practice helped to deter experiences of professional burn-out. The flexibility of my job as an independent study teacher was also significant, because I was not limited by bells or large class sizes. I was also supported by an on-site environmental coordinator during the first 2 years of developing the ESA. He coordinated the projects until I learned how. Furthermore, all service projects were supported by a formalized network of community-based professionals.

## STUDENT ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Quantitatively ESA students experienced a 12% increase in attendance, 96% reduction in truancy, 85% reduction in discipline issues, and 45% increase in academic effort. Students' grade point averages increased by 1.34 points and scored 24% higher in standardized test proficiency rates compared to non-ESA students at the same school. In addition, 90% of students enrolled graduated from the program.


This case study suggests that a school engaged in processes that promote relationality, environmental sustainability, and community health can also be a place where students are academically successful. Many of the students in this study claim that they would have dropped out of school entirely if they had not found the ESA. In other research studies, many of the ten identified processes have been found to improve student achievement, but here these processes function as a relational system. This system supports a way of life and learning that models connectivity, problem-solving, teamwork, leadership development, environmental sustainability, and social-action.

In this model, students and the members of their community learn to live in ways that promote a culture of positive action, health and balance, while being taught in ways that deepen their academic engagement. While students develop the skills necessary to graduate from high school, they are also learning to address the real-life issues that plague

our world. Empowered with the ability to make a difference in their community, students in the ESA learn what it feels like to care deeply about the places they call home and why they may want to care about their education.

### SCHOOLS AS CULTURES OF RELATIONALITY

The possibility of creating a healthy and sustainable future lies within the choices we make on a daily basis as educators. Educators have the power to bring together the connections and conditions that enable transformation of culture to occur. When students learn at school how to be in true rela-



**A school engaged in processes that promote relationality, environmental sustainability, and community health can also be a place where students are academically successful.**

tionship with each other, with the natural world and within themselves, they learn how to recognize health and sustainability; therefore they become better skilled at making choices that support community and environmental health. When we choose to use our classrooms and schools as places to grow community connection and promote sustainable living, our choices will naturally evoke a greater culture of relationality. These actions will not only lead to greater school program sustainability with deeper stakeholder engagement, but will also lead toward greater environmental and community health. Perhaps with this focus, we can leave a legacy that we can be proud of.

### Notes

1. See S. Sterling, *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning learning and change* (Schumacher Briefings ed.). Devon, United Kingdom: Green Books, 2001 and R. Eisler, *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000.
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# Trauma Informed Care in Education

## An Alternative to National Standards

BY KIRK CUNNINGHAM

**T**rauma Informed Care (TIC) is a beacon of a dawning new day in education. It is the concept of working with students within the context of their traumas. Within the TIC framework trauma is defined as a two-fold event. First, it is a situation in which an individual experienced or witnessed an event that involved actual or threatened death, serious injury, or a threat to the integrity of self or others. The second aspect is the student's response to the situation. The individual's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.<sup>1</sup> If an event or events meet both criteria it was traumatic to the student. The impact of acknowledging the deep impact of trauma is an end to the "blame the victim" mentality and the beginning of a "how can we help" mentality. It provides a hopeful alternative to national standards.

TIC originated in state run residential facilities for children. A growing number of states have found it beneficial to focus on helping children cope with their traumas, rather than focusing on behaviors, rule compliance and punishment. The transition from focusing on compliance to focusing on coping strategies has resulted in more positive outcomes for children. The role of trauma in children's lives is being acknowledged and dealt with in a positive manner rather than a punitive one. To date the TIC movement has focused on residential treatment facilities and child welfare agencies; however the connection to education is clear. Given that school consumes a minimum of 6 hours of youths' days for a minimum of 180 days a year from ages 5-18, TIC must inevitably involve schools. Alternative schools, including mine, are looking at the implications for these successes in the realm of education. How would schools change if they took a TIC approach?

Previously, "trauma has not been recognized as a part of the daily, regular experience of many individuals, including children and adolescents," says Gordon Hodas, MD, Child Psychiatric Consultant.<sup>2</sup> Ignoring trauma grinds many students' academic growth to a halt. Small scale events can negatively impact learning and disposition towards peers, and build defense mechanisms which can lead to failure in the school environment. Both life changing events such as the loss of a family member or abuse, and events which do not appear as significant, such as achievement stress, bullying, and neglect, can create trauma for students. Events seemingly less significant than these can also be traumatic to students.

An example is when a teacher requires a student whose behaviors are non-compliant to take a brief "time-out" in a small,

but comfortable, non-punitive room across the hall. The problem for this student is that he/she is being forced into a confined space, and he/she was forced into a closet repeatedly as a child for being "bad" at home. For this child the "time-out" room triggers recall of horrid memories. The child panics and becomes enraged; the teacher asks for a psychiatric evaluation to see if the child is bipolar. This type of re-traumatization scenario plays out thousands of times every school day, and was avoidable if the teacher had engaged in TIC rather than behavior management.

The damage done to learning runs the risk of becoming permanent if, instead of the cause being remediated, it is allowed to persist over time. Consequently, standards are meaningless without direct intervention to deal with the pervasive long term issues associated with trauma.

Trauma is not always caused by dramatic events; it can be any event(s) which impose negatively on the psyche of students. Think of a food which you hate as an adult, because of events in your childhood. My grandmother was forced to eat oatmeal while at a "missionary" school established to "whiten" the "savage Indians." Her experience would certainly fall under the traditional definition of trauma, a dramatic life changing event. My food trauma was not life changing, yet the impact on my palate was identical. While at pre-school I was not allowed to leave my seat until I ate carrots and celery. To this day I cannot stand the smell of them! Obviously the life changing situation of my grandmother was far more devastating; yet when it comes to food, the impact was the same; she hates oatmeal, and I hate carrots and celery. We both experienced trauma. The deeper life changing trauma of my grandmother may require more compassion and time to work through effective coping strategies, but both types of trauma require our attention as teachers. To leave this role to social workers and therapists is a self-defeating approach.

Preceding academic goals there must be a transition towards TIC. "At the most basic level, trauma informed care involves the provision of services that do no harm—e.g., that do not inflict further trauma on the individual. Thus . . . trauma informed care is applicable to education."<sup>3</sup> The means to doing no harm starts with engaging in conversation with students. Find out what their interests are. Find out what their dreams are. Then engage in helping them achieve those dreams, while constantly remaining aware of trauma in their lives. This process creates a safe environment for students to open up regarding their traumas. The first pedagogical step is individualizing



instruction and most importantly beginning to gain an understanding of each student holistically. Individualized instruction is the antithesis of a one size fits all approach. No two students would be treated exactly alike. The logic is that each student has had his/her own individual traumas in life and therefore the approach to each student should be different.

In essence, TIC involves working with students on dealing with their social and emotional scars first. Failure to do so may result in re-traumatization and long term damage. When unabated, the cumulative effects of trauma often create an oppositional trait. This is commonly seen amongst “at-risk” students; their vocal hatred of school is one visible symptom of a trauma driven oppositional trait.

Brain development and functioning can be significantly altered in response to ongoing trauma. The child’s development becomes skewed by a state of chronic helplessness and hyperarousal, with the resultant development of what is referred to as ‘malignant memories’, which predispose the child to re-experiencing trauma.<sup>4</sup>

A final concern regarding current pedagogy is misdiagnosis of psychiatric disorders. Common symptoms associated with trauma are also common symptoms of ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, and Bipolar Disorder.<sup>5</sup> Without acknowledging the role of trauma, students will often incur unnecessary medication which largely incapacitates their potential for learning. Even without unnecessary medication the cost to students incurring misdiagnosis is great. Adults often misread such misdiagnosed children by presuming that their negative behaviors are intentional and willful, when in fact such behaviors are often a consequence of trauma. Further trauma is often brought to bear upon these students via life-long labels. These non-intentional traumas add to the long term costs to society.

The research results of a TIC outlook are overwhelmingly positive. Within a TIC environment, “Most children and adolescents...will recover almost completely from the fear and anxiety caused by a traumatic experience within a few weeks.”<sup>6</sup> The question for the education community and policy makers who control the purse strings of schools is, is TIC cost effective? The old adage, you can pay me now or you can pay me later, correlates to the data derived from studies of TIC. Students who are not provided with TIC, or a variant individualized program, are predisposed not only to long term oppositional traits, but also negative impacts on their health decision making. The costs of treatment, lost taxable wages, and potential incarceration are all borne by society in the long term, when TIC could potentially have averted future negative behaviors. TIC recommends assuming that all students have had trauma in their life; no harm can be done by treating students as the unique individuals that they are. The costs of re-traumatization are far greater than the costs of individualized curricula. The bottom line is, “children require individualized care, and cannot be treated in aggregate.”<sup>7</sup>

The goal of education geared towards TIC is the creation of a system that meets the individual holistic needs of students. Education would become strength based rather than deficit focused. Other changes would include:

- ❶ View negative behaviors as efforts to cope with trauma rather than viewing these behaviors as pathological or manipulative.
- ❷ Enhance flexibility and creativity within rules rather than focusing on compliance.
- ❸ Look for connections between current behaviors and past traumatic experiences.
- ❹ Focus on helping the child develop psychosocial skills rather than the traditional focus on behavior management.<sup>8</sup>

The findings of research by Hodas, as well as Randall, Swenson, and Henggeler<sup>9</sup> and others all confirm the effectiveness of TIC in advancing holistic growth, including academics, by students. Given this research base, effectiveness data, and the potential advantage to all students, advocates’ call for TIC in schools appears at a minimum worthy of consideration as an alternative to national standards.

## Notes

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3. Hodas, p. 6
4. Hodas, p. 12
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9. J.Randall, C. Swenson, and S. Henggeler. “Neighborhood Solutions for Neighborhood Problems: An Empirically Based Violence Prevention Program.” *Health, Education, and Behavior*, 26, 1999, pp. 806-820.

**Kirk Cunningham** is a 15 year veteran public school teacher currently teaching “urban at-risk” youth grades 3-12 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Previous research has centered on the potential advantages of a system wherein all students would have the opportunity to attend free schools. His research findings and application within a public “alternative” school were presented at AERO’s annual conference in 2008 and 2009. B.A. Florida Atlantic Univ., M.A. Carrol Univ., currently pursuing a PhD in Urban Education with an emphasis on Cultural Foundations at the Univ. Wisconsin-Milwaukee. ●

# “Real World Learning” in a Public High School

BY RON MILLER

The Conservation Leadership Institute is a learning option for students in the Woodstock (Vermont) Union High School. It is a place-based service learning program that engages young people in addressing environmental issues in their community. So far this year, students in the program have learned about transportation and energy problems through hands-on projects such as repairing donated bicycles, helping insulate old homes, and working with local forestry resources.

The program appeals to students whose interests and learning styles are not served by seat time in classrooms. “A lot of what you learn in school is pointless,” one of them observed. “Once you’re in the real world, you’re going to see that you won’t find all the answers in a textbook. You learn from hands-on experience.” The students gather in a small group with their teacher, Kat Coons, to discuss thought-provoking readings, reflect on their learning through personal journals, and get busy on their projects. “You’re actually doing something instead of just writing things down on paper,” said another student. He enjoys this approach to learning far more than “sitting in a cramped room just listening to a teacher” and finds it more useful and relevant.

Ms. Coons points out that working as a team, young people interact differently than they do in classroom settings. They are more free to express themselves and respond to each other honestly. Team-building is in fact a deliberate aspect and goal of the program. As a result, she says, these teens are making a positive contribution to the community, and adults in that community have noticed how they “carry themselves” differently.

The Institute is a collaborative venture between the high school, the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, and the National Park Service, which operates the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Woodstock. All three partners contribute to the program budget.

VYCC is a dynamic statewide organization that provides community service internship opportunities for youths, on summer crews and in a growing number of high schools during the academic year. Its programs emphasize team-building and hands-on learning through conservation and restoration projects (for example, they maintain trails, refurbish historical buildings, improve wildlife habitats and manage state parks). Its school programs have reawakened an interest in learning among students who were disenchanted and on the verge of dropping out.

The National Park Service is involved because education is an integral part of its mission. According to Christina Marts, the Assistant Superintendent of Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller park, the NPS can be seen as a network of 400 learning institutes for outdoor education; “We’re very interested in supporting schools getting kids outdoors,” she says. While this can be a challenge in many national parks located in remote wilderness areas, this park’s location in the center of town provides an ideal opportunity for the NPS to partner with local schools. The park has been offering educational programs on its beautiful managed woodlands in collaboration with VYCC since it first opened nine years ago.



The Conservation Leadership Institute in action. Photo by Kat Coons.

Ms. Marts is enthusiastic about the Conservation Leadership Institute because it offers “hands-on, real world learning that ignites students’ interest in learning. They are truly doing projects that make a difference in the world.” She sees the young people gaining confidence to take on challenges outside of school, becoming lifelong learners. Although the Institute ( like much of VYCC’s educational work) was originally conceived as an alternative for so-called “at risk” youths, Ms. Marts and others involved with it recognize that an approach like this is relevant to all young people. She believes that this model can be adopted by public schools in any community.

Still, there is a tension between a radically student-centered and community-based learning approach, and the curriculum-centered, standards-based model that policymakers—especially at the federal level—have forced on public education. In Woodstock, the tension shows up in the challenges of scheduling and recruitment. Teachers from the high school are not able to participate because of their inflexible schedules; Kat Coons is employed by VYCC. As something of an outsider, she does not have enough access to the student body to spread the word widely. Currently there are 8 students in the Conservation Leadership Institute, out of a school population of 420. Students in the Institute report that their peers do not

show much interest in, or understanding of, what they are doing. While the school does offer other service learning opportunities, it seems that there is a disparity of emphasis between mandated academic subjects and “real world learning,” reflecting this culture’s dominant definition of education and the purpose of schooling.

Christina Marts suggests that these two sides of education are compatible, that hands on learning is another way of helping students master academic content. The knowledge and skills gained through the Institute do fulfill curriculum standards, and students receive credit for participating. The program is evaluated seriously and the educators strive to adopt best practices. “At the end of the day,” Ms. Marts argues, “you have to prove that good education is happening.” So while students experience the Institute as a welcome relief from conventional academic routines that do not serve them, they are not missing out on “core content.”

In order to bring such innovative programs into public schools in the current political climate, it may indeed be necessary to pay homage to the mandated curriculum and not raise impertinent questions about what counts as “core content.” Nevertheless, leaving the classroom and textbook behind to engage in active, community-serving learning could be the start of a revolution in public education. According to The Center for Place-based Learning and Community Engagement, place-based learning “bucks the trend toward standardized, high-stakes testing of one-size-fits-all knowledge by immersing students in local heritage, regional cultures and landscapes” ([www.promiseofplace.org](http://www.promiseofplace.org)). This embrace of the local community and land is a powerful, if subtle, critique of politically mandated curricula and standards—and especially runs counter to the increasing federal control over schools. It is an organic alternative to an overly abstract conception of what education is about. The Conservation Leadership Institute may serve only a tiny minority of Woodstock’s student population, but anyone who hears those lucky few express their enthusiasm for learning will wonder why this kind of learning experience isn’t available to all young people.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- 1 The Conservation Leadership Institute has a blog at <http://school.vycc.org/school/wuhs/>.
- 2 More information about the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps is at [www.vycc.org](http://www.vycc.org).
- 3 The Center for Place-based Learning and Community Engagement, a partnership that includes the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, provides extensive resources on place-based learning at [www.promiseofplace.org](http://www.promiseofplace.org).

**Ron Miller** is the editor of *Education Revolution*. He is the author or editor of nine books on holistic education and the history of educational alternatives, most recently *The Self-Organizing Revolution*. Many of his writings can be found at [www.pathsoflearning.net](http://www.pathsoflearning.net). ●





# News Reports

COMPILED BY CAROL MORLEY AND RON MILLER

## National

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### **As Homeschooling Moves to Mainstream, Stigma Fades,**

by Vidya Rao, *MSNBC.com*: According to surveys by the National Center for Education Statistics from 2006 - 2007, 1.5 million students are now homeschooled, an increase of 74% in the past ten years. While 83% of the respondents say they home-school primarily for religious reasons, a growing number cite “dissatisfaction with the local school system, caring for special-needs kids, safety concerns, flexibility to travel and the chance to spend more time with their children.” Today’s homeschoolers are much less likely to fit the stereotype of “socially awkward, religiously dogmatic and ill-prepared for the real world.” Kedra Ishop, vice provost and director of admissions at University of Texas–Austin, says that in the past seven years, she has seen a steady increase in the number of home-schooled applicants, though the percentage is still minuscule. And those are only the home-schoolers who identify themselves as such. Overall, it’s hard to tell exactly how many apply, she explains. The blur over numbers doesn’t stop at the college level — nationally, there are various estimates as to how many home-schoolers there are.

**A Wake-Up Call for Parents and Teachers,** by Barry Garelick, *EducationNews.org*: “In *Raising a Left-brain Child in a Right-brain World*, (Trumpeter Books, 2009) Katharine Beals explores today’s classrooms and describes in detail why this approach is particularly destructive and ineffective for students who are shy, awkward, introspective, linear and analytic thinkers.” Left-brained students include those with Asperger’s Syndrome and high-function autism. Today’s teaching methods of minimal instruction, group discussions, and creative problem solving are inimical to the way these children learn. Left-brained kids, because of their inability to perform satisfactorily to current standards in the classroom, may be blocked from “entry to enrichment and honors classes, where they might finally find the challenge they need in a more structured setting .... They cannot possibly get the grades they need to advance into courses that would do them the most good, because they are held to standards that are either inconsequential or for these children, difficult to achieve: interact socially, participate, come up with more than one way to solve a problem, explain their reasoning.” Math suffers the most in the modern classroom, and all students, both right-brained and left-brained, are getting an inferior education as a result. “While they may get good grades and recommendations, their education is sub-standard. It is a mélange of student-led, teacher-facilitated instruction in which there are no correct answers and process trumps content. Unless children get supplemental help via tutoring, learning centers, or their parents,

they learn very little in school. Left-brained children are left out, and right-brained children are given little content and a false sense of accomplishment and ability.”

**The Federal Takeover of Education,** by Bill Costello, *American Thinker*: Federal control over education has been growing since the 1960s despite the fact that the word “education” does not appear in the Constitution of the United States. Now, as the current administration pushes for national education standards, federal control over education is about to expand considerably at the expense of state and local control. The Common Core State Standards Initiatives, which were developed a year ago, are the first and only common standards in education. States who adopted the standards early had a change of being awarded federal granted money; only 9 of the states and D.C. actually were awarded any funds although most states adopted the standards. States who do not adopt them risk losing Federal Title I funding (funds for low-income students). Proponents of Common Core claim adoption of the standards is voluntary; but attaching “federal financial strings” to that choice renders it no longer voluntary. “Typically, when federal financial strings are attached, control begins with a nudge. Then it’s a push. Then it’s a shove. Ultimately, it ends up becoming a takeover. For now, it’s a nudge to national education standards. Then it will be a push to national testing. Then it will be a shove to a national curriculum.” Just as No Child Left Behind has failed to improve quality of education, so too will Common Core fail, especially in light of the fact that in the rush to establish them, there was a total lack of transparency and public input had been severely limited. In the end, state and local governments will lose authority, and parents will lose any say in the education of their children.

**More Kids Are Getting Anti-Psychotic Drugs,** *Prevent-Disease.com*: A study in the March-April edition of *Ambulatory Pediatrics* found that between 1995 and 2002, about 2.5 million children were prescribed anti-psychotic medications, half of them for ADHD or other non-psychotic behavioral problems. “The findings are worrisome ‘because it looks like these medications are being used for large numbers of children in a setting where we don’t know if they work,’ said lead author Dr. William Cooper, a pediatrician at Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital.” Anti-psychotics are intended for use against schizophrenia and other psychotic illnesses. The increase in the use of these medications corresponds with the surge of marketing of the drugs. Their safety and effectiveness in kids have not yet been established. They can have serious side effects including weight gain, elevated cholesterol and

diabetes. “Dr. David Fassler, a University of Vermont psychiatry professor, said more research is needed before anti-psychotics should be considered standard treatment for attention deficit disorders in children. ‘Given the frequency with which these medications are being used, there’s no question that we need additional studies on both safety and efficacy in pediatric populations,’ Fassler said.”

**Doing Battle with the ADHD-Industrial Complex,** by Katherine Ellison, *Washington Post*: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ADHD cases in children increased by 22% between 2003 and 2007. “Grow-

ing along with those numbers is one of the most aggressive, lucrative, bewildering and often just plain useless forces humanity has ever seen – call it the ADHD-industrial complex.” A survey of parents of children with ADHD in 2003 revealed that 54% had tried non-medical treatments for the disorder in their search for help. While prescription medications have their pros and cons, so too do the alternatives. In addition to these, some of the simplest methods are often the best: education and understanding of the condition, praise, regular exercise and proper nutrition, keeping calm, and learning how to deal with teachers who often don’t understand ADHD.



Students at The Patchwork School delivering step stools. Photo by Tai Smiley.

In solidarity with people all over the country who took action for the “October 7th Strike & Day for Public Education,” **The Patchwork School, located in Louisville, Colorado,** kicked off its Children’s Step-Stool Campaign. This idea was sparked after hearing from some of the school’s parents, who expressed frustration regarding the fact that most public bathrooms lack step stools for children to use for hand-washing. On October 7th, in hopes of increasing children’s access to public bathrooms (and their sinks), Patchwork Elementary School students took step stools to businesses on Main Street in Louisville, Colorado. The Patchwork School chose to take action on that day around something that they are *for* and so, by donating step-stools, they were stating that they are *for* children being treated with respect and *for* chil-

dren being seen in the community. The Patchwork School’s philosophy is based on democratic education, Reggio Emilia and humane education. It currently serves children from ages 2.5 to 7 between their preschool and their NEW Elementary School; they plan to grow the school all the way to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The school’s mission statement is: “Located in East Boulder County, The Patchwork School works with children, families, and the community to preserve every person’s right to a life of self-direction, meaning, and joy. Within our educational environment, we place equal importance on both freedom and responsibility, and understand that all people, regardless of age, are agents for change when they engage critically and compassionately with the world.” Please look them up at <http://www.thepatchworkschool.com/>

# International

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## AUSTRALIA

**Still Lost in the Indigenous Gap**, by Caroline Milburn, *TheAge.com.au*: In Australia, one-third of indigenous 15-year olds in remote areas and one-fourth of 15-year olds in cities do not attend school. A report produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse finds that “some progress is being made to lift the number of indigenous students completing high school. The retention rate from years 7 and 8 to year 12 for indigenous students has improved over the past 10 years, rising from 35 per cent in 1999 to 45 per cent last year.” The report also says that programs to improve attendance and retention are largely ineffective, especially in the area of evaluations. One positive finding according to the report is that the most effective programs have a common feature: “Successful programs tended to be those which built strong links between public agencies and the community, often by engaging parents or community-based organisations.” The report’s authors, Nola Purdie and Sarah Buckley, were asked to investigate the gap in school attendance and retention between indigenous and non-indigenous students and to analyze the success of programs designed to narrow the gap. “We have many indigenous kids attending school irregularly and we have 20,000 kids, many of whom appear to be Aboriginal, who are not even enrolled in school,” says Dr. Purdie, director of indigenous research at the Australian Council for Educational Research. “The really worrying thing about that is that these children are not being given life choices. It’s not simply a failure of schools, parents and teachers, it’s a failure of systems and history in dealing with indigenous Australians.”

## UNITED KINGDOM

**Ofsted Praises Islamic Schools Which Oppose Western Lifestyle**, by Andrew Gilligan, *Telegraph.co.uk*: An investigation by *The Sunday Telegraph* has revealed that Ofsted has passed the inspection of dozens of Muslim schools to a new private “faith schools watchdog”, the Bridge Schools Inspectorate, which is co-controlled by Islamic schools’ own lobbying and trade body, the Association of Muslim Schools. The Bridge Schools Inspectorate allows Muslim head teachers to inspect each other’s schools. Some schools that Ofsted itself inspects are openly opposed to Western lifestyle and operate under sharia law; Ofsted has given these schools reports stating that their curricula are “broad and balanced.” Many of Ofsted’s positive reports of the Muslim schools were made by an inspector with ties to radical Islamist organizations. Another is the chief executive of a radical Muslim educational foundation. Hannah Stuart of the Center for Social Cohesion said that Ofsted’s reports on these Muslim schools are “deeply intellectually dishonest. You can clearly see that they knew exactly what went on, yet bent over backwards to cover their own backs .... A whole generation is being brought up to at the very least suspect, and perhaps even despise, the society

they will have to live in. This is deeply worrying for the future of community cohesion. By whitewashing these schools, Ofsted and the Charity Commission are being negligent in their responsibility to protect children in their formative years.”

**Schools that Go it Alone Do Best**, by Jeevan Vasagar, *The Guardian*: “The most successful schools ignore government advice and set their own standards for effective teaching, according to a think-tank report.” Teachers who share experiences, lesson plans, ideas and strategies are the most effective. “The best schools have an “open culture”, in which heads regularly pop into classrooms informally, the think-tank Reform says.” According to the report, class size is of little consequence and that government efforts to improve the quality of teaching is wasted. The report, *Every Teacher Matters*, claims that head teachers should be able to control staff size, quality, and pay. “The government should remove restrictions on free schools to substantially increase the number of new institutions and allow the effects of choice and competition to work,” the report says. Full parental choice would provide greater accountability and restrictions against choice and competition should be lifted. “Ministers need to remove this bureaucracy if schools are to find the zeal for improving teaching that is so badly needed,” said Dale Bassett, Research Director at Reform.

**Cooperative schools are on the rise in the UK**, according to Mervyn Wilson, writing in *Cooperative Business Journal* (Sept./Oct. 2010). With government budget cuts stressing public education, communities are working collaboratively to develop locally operated schools. Wilson calls the cooperative approach “a real alternative to the top-down, one-size-fits-all service, which has dominated in recent years. It balances the needs of consumers with those of providers, giving stakeholders a real voice in the services.” Local community schools are “mutual organizations, where members—pupils, staff, parents, and the local community—enjoy a far greater sense of ownership than in most schools.” Wilson reports that there are now over 100 such schools in England and their number is growing. There is more information about them at [www.co-op.ac.uk](http://www.co-op.ac.uk). ●

# Some interesting resources on the Web

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*In the last few months we have discovered some unusual, yet important, websites that offer useful perspectives and resources to anyone involved in educational alternatives.*

## <http://childhonouring.org/>

The Centre for Child Honouring was established in Canada (hence the spelling) by the popular singer/songwriter Raffi. “Child Honouring is a children-first approach to healing communities and restoring ecosystems. It views how we regard and treat our young as the key to building a humane and sustainable world. It is a novel idea—organizing society around the priority needs of its youngest members.” The Centre sponsors publishing projects, speakers, and direct appeals to policymakers, seeking to raise global awareness about the impact that modern societies have on children’s wellbeing and development.

## <http://shareable.net/tag/education>

This website is filled with ideas and resources for building collaborative communities. It promotes the “DIY” approach (“do it yourself”—an invitation for voluntaristic, locally rooted solutions) and the expansion of the “commons”—vital resources shared by communities. This particular section of the website focuses on grassroots educational initiatives including community schools, alternative colleges, and new ways to think about public education.

## [www.kidzera.com/Topics/KidzBillOfRights](http://www.kidzera.com/Topics/KidzBillOfRights)

The Kidz Bill of Rights is being created on this website, which aims to get kids interested and engaged in civics via news stories about children’s rights, kid-friendly educational material and an app that allows kids to write, discuss and vote on their own rights. Traditional curriculum teaches students that the Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable search and seizures, but kids today want to know whether or not their principal can search their locker, whether or not they have to pay taxes on their babysitting money or if they can actually be arrested for pirating MP3s. Most of all they want to have a say in what those rights are.

## [http://gyanpedia.in/tft/Resources/books\\_e.htm](http://gyanpedia.in/tft/Resources/books_e.htm)

This page, part of an extensive educational resource website from India, provides links to the *complete text* of many classic works in the educational alternatives literature. Entire books by George Dennison, John Holt, Herb Kohl, Ivan Illich, A.S. Neill, Frank Smith, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, and many others, are instantly accessible. There may be copyright issues in the posting of these texts, but the availability of so many important and increasingly neglected writings is valuable.

## [www.notwaitingforsuperman.org](http://www.notwaitingforsuperman.org)

An interactive website launched by Rethinking Schools to “talk back” to the widely promoted and discussed documentary film *Waiting for Superman*. The site features essays, discussion groups, and numerous links to other resources. In his introductory article, RS activist Stan Karp summarizes their criticism of the film: “Instead of helping people understand the many problems schools face and what it will take to address them, it presents misleading information and simplistic ‘solutions’ that will make it harder for those of us working to improve public education to succeed. We know firsthand how urgently change is needed. But by siding with a corporate reform agenda of teacher bashing, union busting, test-based ‘accountability’ and highly selective, privatized charters, the film pours gasoline on the public education bonfire started by No Child Left Behind and Race To the Top.”

## [www.creativechange.net/](http://www.creativechange.net/)

“Sustainability education” emphasizes how economic, environmental, and social well-being are linked, and how to apply this knowledge to better our lives and communities. Creative Change Educational Solutions is a nonprofit organization helping educators at all levels, in various settings, understand and apply principles of sustainability. CCES uses interdisciplinary curriculum, critical thinking, democratic values, and community engagement to provide a broad, holistic understanding of ecological issues. Their work addresses food and energy issues, climate change, ecological footprint awareness, and economics for the common good.

## [www.educationfutures.org](http://www.educationfutures.org)

This site features writings by Dr. Raymond H. Hartjen, author of *Empowering the Child: Nurturing the Hungry Mind*, a powerful argument for self-initiated learning first published in 1994. In all his writings, Hartjen invites readers to “think beyond the box of traditional education.” He is affiliated with the Sudbury schools movement, and some of his essays here reflect on the democratic, student-centered practices in those schools. He also writes about multiage learning environments, social interaction, self-actualization, and freedom. Excerpts from his book are posted, and a few other authors, including Daniel Greenberg (co-founder of the original Sudbury Valley School) are on this site. ●

# Education Activists React to “Waiting for Superman”

We asked several people in the AERO network to comment on this recent popular documentary film.

## JERRY MINTZ

The movie *Waiting For Superman* has polarized the education reform community. On the one hand its supporters say that it is a clarion call for changing the system. They support the creation of more charter schools to replace failing traditional public schools. They also say that accountability is needed through rigorous testing.

Their detractors say that the movie's solutions still support simplistic standardized testing and mindless teaching to the test, bashing teachers and demonizing teacher's unions as the cause of resistance to change. They say there is little evidence that these charters are any better than what they replace.

I have been struggling hard to find some common ground between these two positions. I think there is agreement that the current system does not meet the needs of many, if not the majority of students. I also agree that the teachers unions and tenure policies have tended to prevent change. But I don't think the teachers are the main problem. I think the main problem is that the system continues to follow the wrong paradigm, that student need to be forced to learn. No Child Left Behind and forced standardized testing, to me, are the worst and most destructive symptom of this approach.

If we believe, as modern brain research indicates, that children are natural learners, then the old system does indeed need to be scrapped. It clearly tends to extinguish that natural ability to learn and think creatively. Charter schools could also be one of the answers, but only if standardized testing was not required and the schools were allowed to be truly innovative and learner-centered.

*Waiting For Superman* may play a role in pointing out the problems and inequities of the current system, but its solution does not even begin to touch on the root causes and potential solutions.

*Jerry Mintz is the founder of the Alternative Education Resource Organization.*

## KIRSTEN OLSON

*Waiting For Superman* is a polemic—an argument, couched as a movie—aimed at proving the supremacy and irrefutability of its point of view. It is compelling, it is pounding, and unless you have a heart of stone, it will make you reach for tissues. Because the children and families portrayed in the film are so achingly real, it is chest-wrenching and tragic. To those of us in the school improvement business, it says nothing new. The film aims to unveil the game of school, and suggest that enrolling your kid your local public school—particularly if you are working class,

nonwhite, or a recent immigrant—will very possibly doom your child to neglect, under-service, and active preparation for failure. The demons in the tale, teachers unions and protectionist labor practices, are strikingly simplistic, as is the view of “good” learning and “good” teaching, where kids sit quietly, and if you teach ‘em louder and longer, they’ll get it.

I am a fan of polemics, and am often invigorated and tickled by them. The upshot of this one however, has been to polarize viewers into two competing, take-no-prisoners camps: those who think teachers and school systems should be more “accountable,” through public testing and merit pay, and those who see teachers as heroic and underappreciated victims. Teachers themselves have rallied around the second view with passion. In my own work, both points of view are threadbare and insufficient. Our decade-long testing regime has brought a disastrous flattening of an already intellectually bare, fatally boring, classroom environment. And, most of the teachers I work with do not have the training or background to offer truly inspiring and compelling instruction. They do not know how, and the institution constrains mightily against experimentation and growth of their practices.

Polemics should move people to action, through radical oversimplification and paring away to essence. So far this one has proved fodder for offense, grandstanding, and steamy side taking. As long as we fight each other, in bloody internecine warfare, we exhaust ourselves, generate bad feelings, and fail to work the real problem. We fight the future, which is that the institution itself must be radically transformed. We do not yet know what the future looks like, and this makes us afraid. So we fight each other. We're burning up a lot of energy getting nowhere.

We need each other to do the work that lies ahead.

*Kirsten Olson is a consultant and author of Wounded By School.*

## JOHN TAYLOR GATTO

That a blatant piece of propaganda like this can be ballyhooed everywhere as serious journalism *turns my stomach*. I became suspicious long before this thing's release when I began to see the enthusiastic notices from all sides of the political spectrum—a classic sign that a big-time public disinformation campaign was underway, and one that certainly cost a fortune to administer. This is Big Brother.

Like “home”work, charter schools are a brilliantly insidious invention of the universalist mind, a device to insert the scalpel of management more effectively into the life of families. “Factory-style mass institutional schooling has certainly failed, but perhaps we can invade the inner life more effectively through intimate assemblages” is the new strategy.

When the warm fuzzy glow of the original founders of these



places gives way to a second and third generation of heirs, bit by bit the purpose of *all* schooling—social control—will rise to the surface like scum on a polluted pond in these new-style traps for the young. Schooling children like fish is the problem, not the configuration of the bowl. And making unionism the villain is a crock of shit. Once unions lost the power to strike, and the slow-down option, they were converted into Judas goats, resonators of the official agenda. The best defense against real opposition developing.

*Author John Taylor Gatto is a leading voice in the movement for educational freedom.*

## DANA BENNIS

Before I saw *Waiting for Superman* I had read many reviews of the film, ranging from glowing reports by mainstream media to sharply critical assessments from educators and activists. In the weeks since I have read countless more. So perhaps it is not too odd that I have found myself thinking more about the reaction to the film than about the film itself.

For sure, while watching the film I noticed myself cringing frequently: at the animated graphic cutting open children's heads and pouring in "knowledge," the blame placed on teachers and unions, the lack of critique of charter schools without any images of good regular public schools, and the complete absence of discussion about how people learn.

In their reviews, many critics understandably railed against the film for these distortions and gaps, worrying that viewers would take them as truth. Yet I realized that as someone who thinks about education and learning for a living, these aspects of the film stood out more strongly to me than they might to those less involved in education. Rather than absorbing the film's ideas, I think the more likely result is that viewers may simply become more interested in education - which is a good thing. If people come away from the film more aware of the complex issues facing lower income families and communities of color and thinking about how to improve education, then perhaps *Waiting for Superman* has done the nation a service.

Also, while I understand and share critics' frustrations about the presentation of education in the film, I believe we hurt the cause of democratic educational reform by single-mindedly condemning filmmaker Davis Guggenheim or the models and educators highlighted in the film. No issue is completely black and white - not charter schools, teachers unions, or even Michelle Rhee. We are more likely to be taken seriously and invited to be part of the dialogue if we find points of agreement. Then once we are at the table we can present our ideas with humility, clarity, and supporting evidence.

I do, however, want to highlight one key issue I take with the film itself: the educational solutions it proposes are largely led by outside "experts" who come into a school and community with their ideas about how to change schools. Not once is it suggested that communities themselves - and the parents, teachers, students and others in those communities - have been engaged in advocacy campaigns for years and have led many successful change efforts. The stories are plentiful and can be found in urban, suburban, and rural communities around the country. By leaving these efforts out, the film implicitly suggests that only outside experts know how to fix schools - a deeply disempowering notion that is disrespectful to the context of each community and the lived experience of the people who live, work, study, and teach in those communities.

We need even more public engagement if we are to build schools and an education system that respects young people and can meet today's pressing challenges. My hope is that *Waiting for Superman* piques people's interest in schools and improving education. The solutions will not come from a few so-called experts - or a "Superman" - taking over schools. Reform and change happens by engaging entire schools and communities - especially teachers, students, and parents - as "Super People" who come together in a continual process of deliberation about schools, learning, and the role of education in building a more vibrant, just, and sustainable society.

*Dana Bennis is a co-founder of IDEA, the Institute for Democratic Education in America* ●

## A Stirring Manifesto for the Transformation of Education

*"marvelously lucid and thought-provoking"*

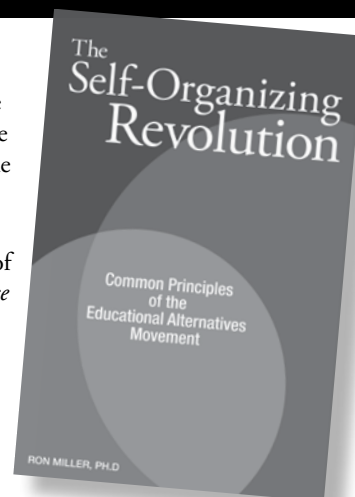
*"The Self-Organizing Revolution* provides the clearest and most perceptive description of alternative education movements I have read. Drawing on the wisdom of the great educational pioneers of the past as well as the emerging paradigms of today, Miller suggests how a new consciousness can guide the liberation of children's potentials and the restoration of life on the planet. This is a marvelously lucid and thought-provoking book."

—WILLIAM CRAIN, author of *Reclaiming Childhood* and editor of *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*

RON MILLER is the author of *What Are Schools For?* and other seminal works on holistic education. He is editor of *Education Revolution* magazine.

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# Book Review

## ***Seeds of Tomorrow: Solutions for Improving Our Children's Education***

By Angela Engel  
Paradigm Publishers, 2009  
[www.paradigmpublishers.com](http://www.paradigmpublishers.com)

REVIEWED BY RON MILLER

As Deborah Meier writes in the foreword to *Seeds of Tomorrow*, "It's about time someone wrote this book." Angela Engel speaks to the public at large, in understandable language, about the political and social forces that are ruining public education. She offers a well-researched, well-informed, and thorough analysis of the standards-and-testing crusade that has swept educational policymaking just about everywhere. Then she urges readers—parents,

citizens, and teachers—to join together in rejecting the agenda of standardization.

Engel shows how standardized education evolved, whose interests it serves (profitable corporations, not young people), and specifically how it dampens genuine learning. Engel was a public school teacher, and her stories from the trenches clearly illustrate what happens when a caring, creative, student-oriented educator runs into the impermeable barrier of federal and state mandates. "Students are categorized, measured, labeled, and completely disassociated from their own learning. . . . In the end, my experiences served to clarify how our attempts to quantify fail to address the qualities that matter most for our children and our society."

*Seeds of Tomorrow* dissects the flawed assumptions underlying the standards movement. Engel argues, passionately and persuasively, that genuine learning cannot be understood quantitatively because human beings are variable and purposeful. She denies that children are "raw material" for the social machine of industrialized schooling. And she exposes the profit motive lurking behind the drive for standardization and accountability, showing how policies of the past two decades serve an insidious agenda of corporate privatization, aided by government coercion.

These policies have undermined the democratic mission of public education; they "transform the function and purpose of our schools from educating children to reporting to government." She observes that education standardized to government requirements is an expression of *Fascist* ideology. "The idea of the federal government and its testing contracts controlling what our children will think, how they will learn, and what they will demonstrate counters the principles of liberty and democracy, ignoring the rich diversity and individualism that has distinguished America."

Engel's solution to standardized education is a democratic re-localization of responsibility and authority. Bureaucrats should not be judging students' learning "from behind their desks, especially on the basis of single data points." Engel places much more trust in the professional judgment of practicing educators—the teachers who work intimately, day after day, with young people and their families. She urges teachers, parents and young people to participate more actively in establishing educational goals and policies.

*Seeds of Tomorrow* can serve as a manifesto for a national movement that Engel is helping to organize. In her own state of Colorado, she has been an effective advocate for children and their learning, an organizer, speaker, and lobbyist. Now she is appealing to concerned parents, educators and citizens across the country; see her website <http://www.angelaengel.com/home> for more information. ●



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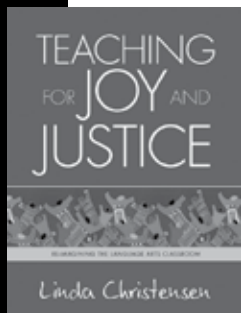


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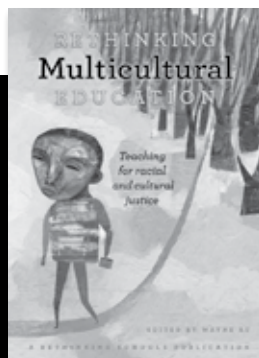
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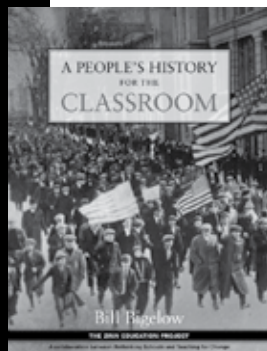
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