

*The Magazine of Alternative Education*

# *Education Revolution*

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# Education Revolution

The Magazine of Alternative Education

Summer 2007 - Issue Number Forty Nine - [www.educationrevolution.org](http://www.educationrevolution.org)

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

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

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

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

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## Education Revolution

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# *From the Editor's Desk*

*By Ron Miller*



*Ron Miller*

A marvelous essay by Paul Hawken, recently published in *Orion* magazine ([www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/265](http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/265)), is being circulated among activists who are finding much hope and inspiration in it. In “To Remake the World,” Hawken observes that the millions of people now working around the planet for peace, justice, sustainability and conservation, democracy, human rights, and a fair economy constitute a massive grassroots uprising that will almost certainly change the world for the better.

Hawken is a visionary entrepreneur, author, and global activist who has spoken with thousands of people about their projects and organizations over the past several years. He has concluded that, “by conventional definition, this is not a movement. Movements have leaders and ideologies. You *join* movements, study tracts, and identify yourself with a group. . . Movements have followers, but this movement doesn’t work that way. It is dispersed, inchoate, and fiercely independent. There is no manifesto or doctrine, no authority to check with. I sought a name for it, but there isn’t one.”

This description perfectly applies to our “movement” for educational alternatives! Thousands of people are creating spaces for authentic and meaningful learning, giving young people opportunities to experience personal autonomy and democratic communities. Except for some rather loose affiliations among philosophically similar endeavors, there are really no leaders or doctrines, and we’ve never been able to agree on a name.

Hawken notes that this cultural revolution is pretty much “eluding the radar of mainstream culture,” and this is especially true of educational activism. In our small, local, independent ventures, we are changing the world one community, one family, even one child at a time. Sometimes the media will run a feature story about homeschoolers, treating them as a curiosity, but the significance of our efforts is almost entirely under this culture’s radar.

What is important to remember is that we *are* part of something larger—much larger. Every example we offer to the world—every homeschooling family and unconventional school and democratic oasis in public education—sows a seed of the new civilization that is undeniably emerging. Whenever we wonder what effect our work might have, let us recall, as Hawken states, that we are aligned with “tens of millions of ordinary and not-so-ordinary people willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in order to restore some semblance of grace, justice, and beauty to this world.”

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“*When you sit in a parents’ meeting and parent after parent blesses you for starting the school and some get all teary-eyed when they think of how happy their kids are and how unhappy they used to be, it will definitely feel like it’s been worth it.*”

Alan Berger

Founder/Director, Brooklyn Free School

# Being There

with Jerry Mintz



Ray Morley Speaks at IAAE Conference

## School Starter Presentation at Iowa Conference

After 34 years in alternative education in Iowa, much of it as Iowa's State director of alternative education, Ray Morley is retiring. This was the most dramatic aspect of the Iowa Association of Alternative Education conference in Des Moines, April 11-13. Many teary eyed teachers and administrators spoke after Morley's final keynote talk to the over 350 attendees at the conference. Iowa stands at the forefront in the field of public educational alternatives as a result of Morley's work. Morley has grown and changed over the years as we have seen him participating in the International Democratic Education Conference. He has embraced the concepts of a spectrum of educational choices and the use of democratic process, despite the pressure to focus on at-risk students and behavior modification approaches.

This was clearly demonstrated by the remarkable breadth of keynote speakers and presenters at the conference. For example, the first Keynote speaker was Ron Newell, the Learning program Director of EdVisions Schools. He had with him the director of the Minnesota New Country School, a pioneering charter school. The second keynoter was Elliot Washor, one of the founders of the Met Schools and the Big Picture Company. These speakers all have connections with the Gates Foundation. The Met schools are truly radical, with an individual learning plan for each student rather than a set curriculum, democratic decision making process, and a limit of 130 students per school. They have now created more than 50 Met Schools around the country and around the world.

Washor is one of the mentors on the AERO startup listserve. One of the reasons I was brought there was to make presentations about the AERO school starter course and about AERO itself. Now that Ray Morley is "retiring," he is creating a private organization to promote educational alternatives, start new alternative schools, and to train teachers to work in them. His ideas are so similar to the projects AERO is working on that he has decided to partner with AERO and contract with us to provide courses and other resources for his new organization.

At my presentations I actually went to our course website and showed the kinds of rare materials we have on the site, including excerpts from books which are no longer in print and videos that cannot be acquired by any other means. We then went through the individual situations with teachers and administrators who

want to start new alternatives or employ democratic process in their schools.

Iowa is one of a handful of states with a very dynamic public alternative school community and annual conference. The results of his work were clearly apparent. Not only do they have this annual conference but they have another annual one day conference with over 500 attendees. That is one reason why he and others are concerned that Iowa has not yet committed to hiring a replacement for his position. This seems crucial to continuing the legacy he has created during his tenure. There was clear consensus that these kinds of groups are crucial to ending the misdirected No Child Left Behind mentality that has crippled the nations schools, orienting them toward arbitrary curriculum and testing rather than individualized learning programs.

Although the AERO School Starters' online course is oriented toward independent schools and democratic process, Morley believes that these ideas are very important for people to understand who are involved with public alternatives.

For those interested in taking the AERO School Starters course, it is now available on a continuous enrollment basis, which people can take at their own pace. A half dozen are enrolled at any given time. The enrollees also get free copies of Chris Mecoglian's How to Grow a School, Jerry Mintz's No Homework and Recess All Day, the DVD set of five school starter's workshops at the 2006 AERO conference, and free subscription to the AEROstartup listserve.

To explore enrolling in the AERO School Starters online course go to: <http://www.educationrevolution.org/course.html>

Other Resources Individually:

-AEROstartup listserve:

<http://www.educationrevolution.org/startschool.html>

-How to Grow a School book:

<http://www.educationrevolution.org/grow.html>

-No Homework and Recess All Day:

<http://www.educationrevolution.org/nohomework.html>

-School Starters 5-Part Workshop DVD:

<http://www.educationrevolution.org/schoolstarter.html>

# An Appeal to the Texas Legislature

## End the Tyranny of Standardized Testing!

by Representative Cheri Isett (R-Lubbock)



Cheri Isett

### Some Background

I have a heart for and a love of teenagers which goes back to my early college years when I joined the staff of Youth for Christ working with high school and junior high school students in Lubbock. That heart of love and ministry was reignited as my older children grew into their teen years and their friends began to fill our home and our lives.

I began to notice a phenomenon which I've continued to observe and validate as the years grow on. The one single dampening factor in all the kids' lives, including my own children, which was powerful enough to kill their creativity, their individuality, even their dreams, seemed to be the education system. I observed that this phenomenon crossed all boundaries and types of education – public, private, and homeschool. As I looked more closely, I realized it wasn't education itself – actually the pursuit of learning was invigorating – rather, the culprit was the standardization of all schooling and the implementation of mandated coursework which squeezed out almost all forms of independent study and inquiry.

I began to question the validity of forcing every American child to learn the same things, the same way, at the same time, 6 – 8 hours a day for 12 years. I began to question whether high-pressure standardized tests were a valid measure of mastery in any subject of study.

In December, 2005, my husband, State Representative Carl Isett, also a Commander in the U.S. Naval Reserves, was called to active duty in Iraq. Carl asked me to serve in the Texas House of Representatives in his place when Governor Perry called a special session in April, 2006. The primary issue of the session was a shifting of taxation burden away from the local level to the state level – not school reform related at all. However, included in the final passage of the enabling legislation were provisions for more standardized testing in schools and more mandated course work in the form of another required Math and Science course for all Texas high schoolers. I was deeply saddened as I could feel in my bones the life being further sucked out of Texas school children and their teachers.

Under Carl's guidance from across the globe, I asked for and was granted the ability to make a personal privilege speech to the Texas House the day after the bill, known as HB1, passed. The speech was given on Friday afternoon, May, 12, 2006. Much to my surprise, I received an overwhelming ovation. I was trembling so much when I finished that I had to get to the back of the room. When I got there, the Sergeant at Arms who guards the door to the House was there in tears. He told me that he'd heard a lot of

grand talk in his tenure, but nothing had ever been said in that room more important than what I said. He told me, "I was one of those kids."

The inside capitol "rag" called *Quorum Report* immediately reprinted the speech in its entirety in its online version. Harvey Kronberg, the editor, still tells me I'm his hero. I instantly became the sweetheart of the Democratic Caucus even though they all knew that Carl and I both are conservative Republicans. Truth knows no party. The Republican Governor was in a rather heated race for his seat with 2 challengers both lambasting him on standardized testing in schools. So the response I got publicly from the Republicans was reserved, but again truth knows no party and they expressed heartfelt agreement when they could pull me aside individually.

One lobbyist, who knows just about everybody in Austin, sent the live download of the speech to her entire email list. The Houston Chronicle ran a big article on it that evening. The Austin American Statesman, very liberal and very Republican-hating ran a story w/ the only negative jab attached which was that I homeschool my children so they probably couldn't pass the tests anyway.

About a hundred emails poured into Carl's office from across the nation. One of most notable was from a CAD Drawing teacher in the Houston schools. His program was off the Recommended Track which means that he was getting students who were write-offs. They weren't going to college and nobody cared anymore. He described how his program got kids so fired-up about architecture related activities that when they graduated, 80% of his written-off students did indeed go to college — a statistic that the Recommended Track couldn't boast! Did any decision-maker recognize the correlation? Nada.

It seems that I wasn't alone in my sentiments. It became evident that there is a ground-swell in this country to do better for our children and our nation in this area called education.

Today, I continue in my own research and inquiry. This school year, Carl and I opened the Center for Free Learning, an alternative school for ages 12-19. The school will serve as an incubator for some of the innovations in education which we've discovered in the last few years of research. Its mission is to provide a place of learning which is centered on its student's own inquiries and independent studies. The students themselves have established the governance of the school including graduation requirements,



*Student Paints at Spring New York State Democratic Schools Gathering*

assessments, disciplinary functions, and a clearing house for learning opportunities. They are currently working on the Center for Free Learning website. Most of the students are also enrolled part-time in public or private schools. They are encouraged to seek out education opportunities from all sectors of the education world whether they be traditional classroom, apprenticeships, independent research and exploration, or group study.

### **Address to the Legislature May 12, 2006**

I recognize that I am the most junior member of the House and for me to speak in this manner, I know, is highly unusual. However, this may be the only opportunity I have to address this body on a matter that I feel is of utmost importance and lies deep within my heart. In fact, what I'm about to say to you, I believe, is so important that I'm going to read it rather than speak freely as I'm accustomed to doing.

HB1 is a good bill. I am wholeheartedly behind reducing and restraining the growth on the egregious burden of property taxes in Texas. I was glad to vote for it. Carl stayed up way past his bedtime to watch the passage of HB1 and be a part of this historic legislation which you all have worked so hard on.

But there is something in this bill which grieves my heart. Something I believe we will pay dearly for in generations to come.

That is the education reform measures which, although well meaning, will be to the detriment of Texas children. I am eager to see Texas children grow and increase in knowledge and education. My goodness, I have seven of them. I earnestly desire for the generation being raised up now to have greater opportunities than there were for the generation before them. But I believe we are on a misguided path with increases in standardized testing and mandated course work.

I know, we all know, the utter frustration from parents and teachers and students over increased regimentation and standardized testing. I believe we would all agree that studying to a test and regurgitating is not a true education. We would all agree that the minds of Albert Einstein, Ben Franklin, Thomas Edison, Samuel Morse, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Michael Dell would never have tolerated such infliction upon them. They would never have allowed their creativity and their courage to step into unknown territories to be held back by the boxes that we force our school children to conform into.

These children were created by God to be unique individuals with unique gifts and talents. They are aching to break free from the tyranny of standardized tests and curriculum "scope and sequence" and express those gifts and talents. But we have legislated them out. We have told the artist that he has to pull back and cut back on blossoming in his chosen art because he doesn't have time. He has to take another math and science class. We have told the very, very bright entrepreneur that his pursuits are worthless because he is not a good test taker and pulls our school ratings down. We have told our teachers that they are not good teachers and don't deserve merits for their efforts because the artists and entrepreneurs in their classes don't deliver the goods in test results.

There is a whole world of knowledge and all of history to study. We could never impart all of it to every child. There's just too much of it. So who has the right to determine what body of knowledge has merit? Who was it anyway that said "every seventh grader needs to know all the parts of the cell and their function"? Why is that more important than, say, the intricacies of weather systems? And why are either of those more important than any other body of knowledge which delights the heart of a child? Who gives merit to one body of knowledge over another? And yet, through our essential skills and standardized tests, we praise one type of learner and condemn another. We tell our classroom teachers that it doesn't matter that you want to reach the heart of a child. We want you to mold his mind to conform to what we believe is a productive, college-prepped student.

I challenge you, members, in sessions to come as you discuss these crucially important matters, to break out of the box. We can no longer afford to measure education success in terms of test results and rigorous curriculum. In that arena, countries like China clearly have us beat. They are disciplined, they are structured, they can produce multiples of what we can produce cheaper—not better, but more of it and cheaper.

The one thing other cultures lack which we possess and which we must fight to hold on to is creativity, imagination, and courage. These are the things which we must foster in education if our children and our nation are to survive. We need minds that are nurtured in discovery, not rote memorization. We need individuals who are able to muster the courage to go where others have never gone. We need to quit trying to cookie cutter every child in Texas schools and let the God given, God led creativity and excellence flow out. We need to trust teachers to do what they have been called to do and quit micro-managing them.

When it comes to accountability measures in exchange for state funding, we need to hold school administrators responsible for their stewardship of those monies, not place the onerous burden of performance on the shoulders of those who at this point are victims in this debate, the students and their teachers. We need to quit telling parents that their child is a failure because he's not raising our school's ratings with his test results.

What I'm challenging you with will in itself require creativity and courage to do. In the sessions to come, I'm challenging you to trust that children are naturally curious and creative. Trust that if

we as adults get out of their way, they will discover and grow in their world every bit as much between the ages of 6 and 18 as they did from birth to age 5. We need to give the teachers in their classrooms the support and discretionary funding to explore and discover with their students. Not funding for more bureaucracy, but funding to buy state of the art equipment to learn on, funding to backpack over Guadalupe Peak, funding to build a boat from scratch and sail it across a big lake. We need to appreciate the value of apprenticeships and accordingly, to loosen child labor laws enough to provide for them. We need to stop burdening children with standardized testing which we would all have to honestly agree is not the measure of a true education.

Members, this is a big challenge. I've seen more intellectual firepower in this room in the last three weeks than I've ever seen in one place before. For the sake of our children, for the sake of our nation, let's use that firepower to find a better, more creative, more productive way to approach education reform than the road we've been on.

Thank you for allowing me to speak from my heart.

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# Has Pioneering A Future?

by A.S. Neill

From *Perseus*, a British magazine produced by members of Podgate Training College for teachers in aid of the War on Want. March, 1964.



A.S. Neill with Student at Summerhill

## Introduction by Albert Lamb

A.S. Neill's book, *Summerhill, A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, published in 1960, had become a runaway bestseller in the U.S. by 1964. Neill, born in Scotland in 1883, was finally becoming famous around the world. His first book on education had been published in England way back in 1915. Four more books were to be published before he opened his own school, which came to be called Summerhill, in 1921. After that his school was usually the star of the show in his many entertaining and thought provoking books. In fact Summerhill, as he wrote about it, had some of the charm of Peter Pan's Neverland – in the story and play by J.M. Barrie, Neill's early literary hero.

It was not until he had a massive hit in the U.S. that Neill became really famous in the U.K. Of course, Neill is not so well known now as he was in the 1960's. These days there is a worldwide movement of democratic schools and Summerhill is not so unique. And some aspects of his writing have inevitably dated. Neill's writing style was always a crafty mix of the humorous and evangelical and he helped generations of parents to rethink their relations with their children. His writing style fitted his gadfly role. He would not be held down to a rigid structure but preferred to move freely about from topic to topic and from story to story.

This was particularly true of Neill in his old age. Many of the references in this article are local and topical, but all would have been understood by his readers in England at the time. (Current readers may wish to know that in March, 1964, the fleet-of-foot boxer, Cassius Clay, won the world championship against Sonny Liston; he later changed his name to Muhammad Ali.)

His last books about the school were *Freedom, Not License*, published in the U.S. in 1966, and *Speaking of Summerhill*,

published in the UK in 1967. The former was a book of questions and answers put together by his American publisher (and editor) Harold Hart. Neill hated the book, with all his shortened and Americanized responses and a bland tone throughout. An expanded version, based on his original text for the book, came out the next year in England and is one of his best books, full of good things. In some ways his writing got better and better as he went along.

So here he is, full of fight, trying to sort out the future of pioneering schools. Neill worried until the end about whether Summerhill would go on without him. As it worked out his wife Ena, with no degree to her name, was able to steer the school into the future until the day came when their daughter, Zoë Readhead, was ready to take over the job.

I wish that Neill could be here to visit some of the democratic schools around the world and see how many of them have thrived. He would be heartened to see that the role of the originating, pioneering leader is often not found to be necessary to the continuance of a radical institution. Not even at his beloved Summerhill.

Thanks to Bryn Purdy for holding onto this article down the years.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now that I am eighty I naturally think of the venture I began in 1921, wondering about the future of Summerhill. Wondering also about the old question: Could the school go on without me? I do not think personality matters very much when a school has a long tradition. I fancy that Eton would remain Eton whoever was headmaster. The Establishment appoints heads who will not smash an old system. But the Little Commonwealth died when Homer Lane ceased to run it. I have no knowledge of other pioneer ventures... Alec Bloom, E. F. O'Neill. Did their work continue under new management? It may be that what begins as radical gets less radical with time and new headmasters: it should be the other way round. A new head in his forties should be ahead of a retiring head of seventy, but apparently he often isn't. Nor are government departments likely to be more enlightened than their predecessors.

The Little Commonwealth was a great demonstration of how to treat delinquent children with love, with trust, with self-determination. Lane died in 1925 and, so far as I know, no Home Office colony is run on similar lines. Private colonies yes . . . George Lyward, Otto Shaw, David Wills all run schools or homes that depend primarily on love and not fear and punishment. The State cannot be too radical. Democracy means votes and behind



every political action must be the thought: Will we lose the Baptist, Roman Catholic, Moral Rearmament, or what not vote? Hence the difficulty in abolishing or modifying our cruel and stupid laws about homosexuality, divorce, abortion. Hence the sad conviction that no government, right or left, could give moral and financial support to ... well, say Summerhill. I fear that as everything becomes more centralized all private attempts to give children freedom will be forbidden. Just imagine a Summerhill in Russia or Spain.

Private enterprise has its injustices. Hotel dinners costing more than an old couple's monthly pension, luxury cars, etc. On the other hand, only under private enterprise can one experiment in education; true a State school will allow much experiment with teaching but not with living. Bloom could allow much freedom but he had to toe the line about religious instruction, timetables, school subjects. It is almost laughable that Summerhill has been protected by Eton and Harrow, for, as long as the class Public Schools have their prep school feeders, private enterprise in boarding schools will be sacrosanct to the Establishment . . . and in the matter of education a Labour Government might well be as Establishmental as the Tories are, even though its hate of class could make the life of boarding schools difficult.

So far I have seen no evidence that the Labour leaders are a whit more enlightened about real education than the Tory leaders are. Both parties are keen on the best schools for everyone, wonderful labs, engineering shops, playing fields... in short, opportunities for making a living rather than for living. Both sides believe that children have to be molded, trained, disciplined, have to have moral instruction.

Hence my pessimism. True that Britain is still the freest country in the world: nowhere else could I have been able to run Summerhill without interference by State and Church and Mrs. Grundy. Personally I have nothing to complain about. It is the future that worries me. I cannot live much longer. My wife with the staff would and could carry on without changing the system by compromise. Whether a ministry would go on tolerating a school in which a child could play all day and all year I do not know. I am looking ahead. In due course my wife and staff will end their work. What then?

Now I am not Cassius Clay . . . not so downright honest maybe. I cannot cry: I am the last word in education; I cannot claim that all I say and do is of value. Reality forces one to give up theories. Years ago I wrote that children will do handwork only if they can attach a fantasy to it, making guns, planes, boats, swords and scorning the handwork I used to do alongside of them—hammered brass. I argued that because a boy cannot sail the seas or shoot a gangster with a copper ashtray, he won't make one. A theory founded on observation I thought. But now my stepson, Peter Wood, trained by Bernard Leach, has a pottery going. It is full all day and the pupils are producing ware that looks professional to me. Hence I modify my theory.

Modifications about teaching and learning will and must take place. But Summerhill is not a school; as an American woman put it, it is a way of life, and the question arises: must we modify a way of living? Summerhill has tried something new in education—cutting out molding, moralizing, fear; letting each child grow at his or her own pace. New has been the insistence that childhood is playhood and the child must be allowed to play and play until the interest in play transfers to an interest in work.

Of course I know that the vast majority of people is against real freedom for children, and there lies the rub, for the compact majority rules as strongly now as it did in Ibsen's day. And that brings me back to where I came in . . . can there be pioneering without personalities? Can a committee ever agree to doing something new and fundamental? Can a ship have a committee as captain? My wife would carry on Summerhill in its original freedom because she agrees with the fundamentals that I share, but then it would be private enterprise again. And I feel it ought not to be.

To me the giving a child freedom to be himself is very simple; I can not understand why millions of parents and teachers don't do it. If I went away lecturing for a year Summerhill would not change. I founded it; I laid down the lines on which it was to run. I used the methods of trial and error. For years I thought the cure for a problem child was analysis, then I was convinced that the best cure is effected by freedom. And I cannot see how one can adapt freedom. A child is either free or conditioned. I claim that Summerhill has proved conclusively that freedom works; it produces happiness and calmness, both medicines of the best quality. But when you begin to temper freedom with authority, be it ever so mild, you are curbing child nature, encouraging a personality that requires a crutch, a personality that finds it hard to challenge.

I wish I knew how freedom could be carried on without a leader. Leader is not the right word, for freedom needs no leader, indeed the best way to kill freedom is to get a Hitler. Surely I am not the only guy who has the ability to stand by and let children grow. The snag is that schools are run by teachers, and so very many cannot imagine life without teaching something to someone. We need a new type of teacher, one that will ignore all the stupid knowledge that passes for learning . . . vide the *Top of the Form* encyclopedic facts; one that will follow children's interests, refusing to suggest, to guide, to moralize.

My pessimism springs from the knowledge that freedom cannot enter the schools so long as teachers and parents think in terms of subjects, exams, degrees instead of in terms of happiness, creation, joy in living with no imposed fears. As the world smiled and ignored the great prophet Blake, I fear it will give this quite minor prophet the same treatment. And I await the critical addition of the words—a minor prophet with the feet of Cassius Clay.

# Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education

by Leslie Mulcahy

## How It All Began

Fairhope, Alabama seems an unlikely setting for what may be the oldest continuously operating progressive school in the nation. The town was founded in 1894 as an experimental utopian community based on Henry George's book Progress and Poverty and embraced the radical concept known as the "Single Tax Colony". The Colony still exists today and owns most of the original settlement where humble cottages and stately homes alike rest on lots leased for a period of 99 years.

Many of the town's founders were Socialists, including a Minnesota teacher named Marietta Johnson. She saw the open-minded town to be the perfect setting for her unconventional school and, with a little financial assistance from her friends and the support of the community, The School of Organic Education was founded in September of 1907. The term organic stems from Mrs. Johnson's belief that learning involves the entire organism – mind, body and spirit, and that one must educate the entire organism in a non-competitive environment.

A contemporary of Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, Mrs. Johnson traveled the world advocating her unique form of progressive education and raising much needed funding to keep the school going from year to year. In 1913 John Dewey visited the school and was so impressed he devoted a chapter about it in his book Schools of Tomorrow.

Mrs. Johnson died in 1938 but her legacy and her school have remained alive. Recently an old file folder was found tucked away in the back of a forgotten cabinet. It included copies of Mrs. Johnson's correspondence during her last few years. Many of the same questions asked today were answered in much the same way then.



*Then and now the gullies of Fairhope provide excellent environments for nature study. Early students used sticks to carve their writing and math lessons into the clay.*

## Testing and Grades

From a letter dated August 28, 1933, Mrs. Johnson wrote, "*I am very happy to say that we do not have any report cards whatsoever. I am also delighted to say that we have no grades or standards for promotion . . . We believe that grades and marks and promotions and all external standards make for insincerity and are inimical to character.*" In a 1937 correspondence to Francis I. DuPont of Wilmington, Delaware, she wrote, "*We believe that all external standards prevent equality of opportunity, and believe that the school should strive to meet the needs of growth at every stage in the development of the young.*" In yet another letter, Mrs. Johnson wrote, "*teachers may fail, children – never.*"

Today we occasionally "assess" whether or not children are learning the concepts we teach but we do this for the purpose of testing our effectiveness, not for assigning a grade to the student. Some subjects, such as spelling and math, require frequent assessment. A child's spelling words remain his words for as brief or long a period as he needs to master them. We also provide a quarterly narrative report to parents regarding their child's mastery of skills. In order to insure a smooth transition to other schools, we do maintain a "permanent record" for each child.

## Curriculum

On December 6, 1937, Mrs. Johnson wrote, "*We have no printed course of study, our work is not a system nor a method but rather an effort to work from a new point of view. We believe it is the business of education to try to meet the needs of the growing child. We insist that all children need singing, dancing, hand work, story, nature and free play. We believe that reading and writing should be postponed until at least eight years of age . . . There should be no external standards but an internal standard be developed, that of providing conditions which bring about the best physical, mental and spiritual growth.*"

Today we use the Alabama Course of Study as our starting point for planning. We have the luxury of meeting each child where he or she may be academically and progressing through the course of study at his or her own pace as well as fostering each individual's areas of interest and talent. When students pose questions that deviate from the lesson plan, we make every effort to address their questions and satisfy their natural curiosity. Lesson plans fly out the window in deference to those lessons requested by our students. We are not bound to the classroom for study but rather take every opportunity to go outdoors. Our campus is still mostly wooded and we engage in nature study much the same as Organic School students have done for the past hundred years.

Rather than focus on testing to measure the child's attainment of goals, we find practical applications and projects which enable the child to use his hands to solve problems and learn concepts. These projects build self-confidence and give students a sense of accomplishment and achievement. Our academics are very much the same as those taught in any school. We do; however, still find the time to include such subjects as cooking, woodworking, drama, music, dance, art and ceramics into each week's schedule and often incorporate academic concepts into the arts program.

Occasionally we are accused of just being a "play" school where children make the rules and little learning takes place. This could not be further from the truth now and certainly wasn't the case in Mrs. Johnson's day as evidenced by her letter of August, 1934 in which she wrote, "*We are not a do-as-you-please program. Children and young people need guidance, control, association, instruction and inspiration. In the measure that the school program provides conditions which tend to produce a sound, accomplished, beautiful body, an intelligent, sympathetic mind, and a sweet, sincere emotional life, it is educational.*"

This is not to say that we do not value play. Mrs. Johnson firmly believed that "*the greatest minds are those able to use the spirit of play in their work.*" We provide time each day for our children to engage in the free play so vital in social skill development. In July of 1937 Mrs. Johnson wrote to a former student, "*The weather is pretty hot but children are always happy if they are free.*" At our school we strive to extend the freedom of childhood for as long as we possibly can.

### **Transition to Other Schools**

In March, 1936, Mrs. Johnson wrote to the President of Clifton College (Texas), "*Students going to other schools have found very little if any difficulty in adjusting to the examination system there. In many cases they have superior confidence in themselves which carries them through any difficulties they may meet.*" The question of transition from our school and future success in public or more traditional private schools is almost always asked by prospective parents. We firmly believe that by nurturing each child's curiosity and eagerness to learn new things, we prepare him for the world of tests and measurements. Our students leave us with a love of

learning and desire to meet new challenges. Testimonials from past parents and students alike confirm that our students, even those who come to us after experiencing failure and anxiety in other schools, are successful in their future studies.

### **A Final Word**

At the Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education we are excited about beginning our next century of nurturing children to develop a love of learning. Alumni of all ages describe their schooling as the best time of their lives and without fail describe Christmas and summer vacations as long periods of drudgery between exciting terms of school. This year one of our families visited Disneyworld the week after Thanksgiving and, upon their return, the mom announced that she would never make that mistake again. "First thing each morning my first grader wanted to know why he couldn't go to school instead," she told us. Our teachers, too, relish the freedom to teach without the constraints of approved lesson plans, curriculum guides and testing. When asked what she liked best about teaching at the Organic School, one teacher wrote, "I love the family atmosphere. I have a part in everyone's education, not just my own class." At our school we are a family – one that spans 100 years and includes graduates who still return from time to time much as distant relatives return to the old home place.



*Maypole Dance, Spring Festival, April 13, 2007.*

# The 4th Annual AERO Conference

## "Widening the Circle"

June 28th - July 1st, 2007 Russell Sage College Troy, NY, U.S.A.

The AERO conference brings together educators, students, parents, and many others interested and/or involved in educational alternatives from around the U.S., Canada, and the world. Many educational alternatives will be represented along with individuals from traditional schools and education backgrounds. Examples of the educational alternatives that will be represented include Public Alternatives, Unschooling, Montessori, Waldorf, Steiner, Choice, Democratic, Homeschooling, Open, Charter, Free, Sudbury, Holistic, Virtual, Magnet, Early Childhood, Reggio Emilia, Indigo, Krishnamurti, Quaker, Libertarian, Independent, Progressive, Community, Cooperative, and many more!

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## Zoë Readhead

Principal of World Renowned Summerhill School &  
Contributor to the Latest Edition of A.S. Neill's  
Bestselling *Summerhill*

## John Taylor Gatto

Former New York State Teacher of the Year & Author of  
*Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of  
Compulsory Schooling & The Underground History of  
American Education*

## Matt Hern

Author, of *Field Day: Getting Society Out of School,  
Deschooling Our Lives, & Watch Yourself:  
Why Safer Isn't Always Better*

## Joel Spring

Author of Over 20 Titles & Textbooks Including:  
*How Educational Ideologies are Shaping Global Society,  
American Education (13th Edition), & Wheels in the  
Head: Educational Philosophies of Authority, Freedom,  
and Culture from Socrates to Human Rights*

## Arnie Langberg & Lynn Stoddard

Langberg and Stoddard Bring Immense Experience as  
Veteran Educators Who Have: Founded Schools & Other  
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# Networking the Networks

*Exciting New Initiatives Stretching the Limits of Public Education*

## **Education Based on Human Rights**

The Spring, 2007 issue of *Yes! Magazine* focused on the theme “Is the U.S. Ready for Human Rights?” (See <http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=1646>) Several provocative articles examined ways in which U.S. policies fall short of the nation’s founding ideals and, more specifically, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948.

The Declaration explicitly proclaims, in Article 26, that education is a fundamental human right. Significantly, it describes a particular kind of education:

“Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”

Even further, the Declaration states that “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”

We in the educational alternatives movement can readily see that conventional schooling, with its standardized curricula, oppressive testing, and authoritarian style of management and discipline, often fails to live up to these ideals. Recently, a new movement has emerged among public school activists who have also come to see that *current school policies systematically violate young people’s basic human rights*. One of the articles in *YES!*, “Education, By Rights,” by Liz Sullivan and Cecilia Blewer, describes a parent-led campaign in New York City called ICOPE—the Independent Commission on Public Education—that is calling the system to account.

“Our children are being denied their human rights by a school system focused on raising test scores and policing school hallways instead of supporting the full development of children,” said one activist quoted in the article.

Here is a description of ICOPE from its website, <http://www.icope.org>:

ICOPE is a volunteer collective of parents, educators and activists who are dedicated to building a human rights based system of public education for NYC.



## ***SELF-ED***

***A concept of student-powered alternative K-12 Education for***

**INNER CITY, SUBURBAN, RURAL, OR REMOTE SCHOOLS  
*including***

**HOME SCHOOL, HONORS, AT-RISK, CORRECTIONAL, OR PROGRAMS**

- Students create and pursue their own personal curriculum
- Students advance at their own best pace in each subject area, free of age-based standards
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- Education is driven by the student’s need to learn rather than by the teacher’s obligation to teach
  - Classrooms serve as theme-based resource centers and labs
  - Standard 50-minute classes are replaced by a continual flow of individual study
- There is an extensive certified school volunteer program. The community serves as the extended classroom
  - A democratically elected student government handles most school community issues
  - A formal quarterly evaluation of the school’s progress is conducted by students, parents, and teachers
    - Students take substantial responsibilities in the operations of their school

SELF-ED is an out-of-the-box concept of alternative democratic education created by David D. Douglas

For complete information see **[www.self-ed.org](http://www.self-ed.org)**

This new vision for public schools should be guided by the following human rights standards [ed. note: this is an abridged list]:

The individual rights of every child to a quality education must be promoted through curricula, teaching methods and services that adapt to meet each child's specific needs.

The aims of education must be to help children reach their full potential to participate in society, to do rewarding work for a living wage, and to continue learning. Education must develop each child's respect for his or her family, language and culture.

The dignity of every child must be guaranteed by creating an environment of respect and tolerance in schools, preventing practices and disciplinary policies that cause harm or humiliation to children, and promoting self-confidence and self-expression.

The meaningful participation of students, parents and communities must be guaranteed in decisions that affect their schools and their right to education.

ICOPE is affiliated with an organization called the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative. NESRI promotes a human rights vision for the United States that ensures dignity and access to the basic resources needed for human development and civic participation. The Human Right to Education Program at NESRI works with education advocates and organizers to promote policy change in public education using human rights standards and strategies. NESRI believes that human rights offer a framework for how to transform our public schools based on internationally recognized standards of equality, accountability, dignity and community participation.

NESRI recently released a report titled *Deprived of Dignity: Degrading Treatment and Abusive Discipline in New York City And Los Angeles Public Schools*. Using a human rights framework, the report documents the use of suspensions, law enforcement and other punitive disciplinary strategies that ignore students' educational and emotional needs. For more information, see [www.nesri.org](http://www.nesri.org).

### **Educating the Whole Child in Public Schools**

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) is a major national organization supporting professional development and policy analysis for public school administrators and teachers. It publishes numerous books and influential periodicals such as *Educational Leadership*. ASCD advocates a strong public school system, yet it has sought to introduce mainstream education to unconventional ideas from the margins.

Recently, ASCD introduced its "Whole Child Initiative," which "proposes a broader definition of achievement and accountability that promotes the development of children who are **healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged**." Going beyond narrow definitions of academic achievement, the group's report states that

"When we commit to educating whole children within the context of whole communities and whole schools, we commit to designing learning environments that weave together the threads that connect not only math, science, the arts, and humanities, but also mind, heart, body, and spirit—connections that tend to be fragmented in our current approach."

Although the report does not exactly envision "democratic schools" as we understand them, it does point in their direction:

"Meaningful student involvement in school includes opportunities to provide leadership, engage in decision making, and participate in planning learning experiences. It reinforces critical thinking, active problem solving, civic participation, and an appreciation for diverse opinions."

For complete information see:  
<http://www.wholechildeducation.org/about>

### **Here is another radical voice from the world of mainstream schooling**

The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL), an official assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, is open to all those interested in extending the frontiers of teaching and learning beyond traditional disciplines and methodologies.

AEPL provides a common ground for theorists, researchers, and practitioners to explore ideas and their efforts with others in related disciplines. The *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (JAEPL)* provides a forum to encourage research, theory, and classroom practice involving expanded concepts of language and cutting-edge approaches to teaching and learning. *JAEPL* is especially interested in helping those teachers who experiment with new strategies of learning to share their practices and confirm their validity through publication in professional journals.

Topics of interest include but are not limited to: intuition, inspiration, insight, imagery, meditation, silence, archetypes, emotion, attitudes, values, spirituality, motivation, body wisdom, and felt sense. Articles may be practical, research-oriented, theoretical, bibliographical, professional, and/or exploratory/personal.

Send editorial inquiries to Kristie S. Fleckenstein, *JAEPL* Co-Editor, English Department, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306. Email [kfleckenstein@english.fsu.edu](mailto:kfleckenstein@english.fsu.edu).

For more information, see [www.sworps.utk.edu/aepl/JAEPL/japdes2.htm](http://www.sworps.utk.edu/aepl/JAEPL/japdes2.htm)

# *Education in the News*

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*Edited by Carol Morley & Ron Miller*

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**New Study Explores the Nature of Online Learning in K-12 Schools:** The Sloan Consortium's first ever survey of online learning in elementary and secondary education, "K-12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators," predicts rapid growth in online education. The nationwide survey, conducted during the 2005-2006 academic year, finds that almost two out of three (63 %) school districts had one or more students enrolled in either a fully online or a blended course, which combines online learning with traditional face-to-face instruction. The new study estimates that 700,000 K-12 students were engaged in online courses in the 2005-2006 academic year. The Sloan Consortium's K-12 online survey, developed in collaboration with Hunter College and Babson College and funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, consists of responses from 366 public school district chief administrators representing two million students nationwide.

Survey results show online learning is meeting the specific needs of a range of students including those who need extra help, those who want to take more advanced courses and those whose districts do not have enough teachers to offer certain subjects. "Perhaps the voices heard most clearly in this survey were those of small rural school districts," said Anthony G. Picciano, professor, School of Education, Hunter College and Graduate Center of the City University of New York. "For them, the availability of online learning is most important in order to provide students with course choices and, in some cases, the basic courses that should be part of every curriculum." Picciano says these rural districts are potentially good models for districts facing teacher shortages in high-need subject areas such as high school science and mathematics. The complete survey is available at [www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/index.asp](http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/index.asp).

**From Dozens in GOP Turn Against Bush's Prized 'No Child' Act,** by Jonathan Weisman and Amit R. Paley: More than 50 GOP members of the House and Senate – including the House's second-ranking Republican – will introduce legislation that could severely undercut President Bush's signature domestic achievement, the No Child Left Behind Act, by allowing states to opt out of its testing mandates. Many voters in affluent suburban and exurban districts – GOP strongholds – think their schools have been adversely affected by the law. Once-innovative public schools have increasingly become captive to federal testing mandates, jettisoning education programs not covered by those tests, siphoning funds from programs for the talented and gifted, and discouraging creativity, critics say. Rep. Peter Hoekstra (R-Mich.), author of the new House bill, said the number of Republicans already backing the new measure exceeds the 41 House

Republicans and Democrats who voted against the original legislation in 2001. Of the House bill's co-sponsors, at least eight voted for the president's plan six years ago. "President Bush and I just see education fundamentally differently," said Hoekstra, a longtime opponent of the law. "The president believes in empowering bureaucrats in Washington, and I believe in local and parental control."

Under Hoekstra's bill, any state could essentially opt out of No Child Left Behind. The Senate bill is slightly less permissive, but it would allow a state to negotiate a "charter" with the federal government to get away from the law's mandates. In both cases, the states that opt out would still be eligible for federal funding, but those states could exempt any education program but special education from No Child Left Behind strictures. Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) said that advocates do not intend to repeal the No Child Left Behind Act. Instead, they want to give states more flexibility to meet the president's goals of education achievement, he said. As a House member in 2001, DeMint opposed No Child Left Behind when it first came to a vote, but he voted for it on final passage. "So many people are frustrated with the shackles of No Child Left Behind," DeMint said. "I don't think anyone argues with measuring what we're doing, but the fact is, even the education community . . . sees us just testing, testing, testing, and reshaping the curriculum so we look good."

Parent unrest in places such as Scarsdale, N.Y., and parts of suburban Michigan could affect members of Congress. Connecticut has sued the government over the law, while legislatures in Virginia, Colorado and heavily Republican Utah have moved to supersede it. *Washington Post* 3/15/07

**Five New York Democratic Schools Meet.** On April 19 Longview School in Cortlandt Manor, New York, hosted a meeting of nearly 100 students and staff of the five democratic, free schools in New York State: Longview School, Hudson Valley Sudbury School, Brooklyn Free School, Albany Free School and the Harriet Tubman Free School. Seven years ago, there was just one democratic school in New York, the Albany Free School, but there has been a resurgence of democratic, free schooling in recent years.

At the gathering, students created a schedule of the days proceedings which included recreational activities, discussing topics including shifting from consensus to democratic decision-making, greater involvement of students in speaking out for educational change and the formation of a Northeast Association of Independent Democratic Schools.



*Materials Science Class at Harriet Tubman Free School (Albany, NY)*

**U.S. Schools Weigh Extending Hours, Year**, by Nancy Zuckerbrod and Melizza Trujillo, AP: Fletcher-Maynard Academy, a combined public elementary and middle school in Cambridge, Mass., is experimenting with an extended, eight-hour school day. The school, which serves mostly poor, minority students, is one of 10 in the state experimenting with a longer day as part of a \$6.5 million program. While Massachusetts is leading in putting in place the longer-day model, lawmakers in Minnesota, New Mexico, New York and Washington, D.C., also have debated whether to lengthen the school day or year. In addition, individual districts such as Miami-Dade in Florida are experimenting with added hours in some schools. On average, U.S. students go to school 6.5 hours a day, 180 days a year, fewer than in many other industrialized countries, according to a report by the Education Sector, a Washington-based think tank. One model that traditional public schools are looking to is the Knowledge is Power Program, which oversees public charter schools nationwide. Students generally go from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the week and for a few hours every other Saturday. They also go to school for several weeks in the summer. That amounts to at least 50 percent more instructional time for students in such programs than in traditional public schools, according to the report. An important impetus for the debate around extending school hours is the federal No Child Left Behind law. Kathy Christie, a policy analyst at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, said that law “has put enough pressure on more people to realize that the traditional

school day is not enough to catch kids up.” Christie, whose Denver-based nonprofit focuses on school reform, added, “You can’t keep taking away recess.” Schools that are experimenting with longer days are adding more down time and enrichment courses, as well as reading and math.

**Modern-Day 3Rs: Rules, Rules, Rules:** A culture of control has high school campuses in an ever-tightening grip, many students say, extending beyond the long-standing restrictions on provocative clothing, cellphone use and classtime bathroom visits. Akin to the omnipresent “helicopter parents,” these students say, are helicopter administrators who home in on their smallest moves, no matter how guileless or mundane. Some administrators acknowledge that the list of rules meant to ban, limit or deter potentially inappropriate or dangerous actions is steadily growing. But teenagers, nothing if not skilled in the art of asserting their adulthood, say the accumulation of these little laws can be the most frustrating part of their high school experience. They feel micromanaged and nitpicked at every turn, reports Ian Shapira for the Washington Post. The rules are especially maddening when one school prohibits something that another allows. Or when the rules contradict themselves and students can’t tell which one they should obey.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/10/AR2007031001475.html>

## HOMESCHOOLING NEWS

From **Public universities increasingly easing application policies for homeschoolers**, by Ana Beatriz Cholo, AP: The University of California system is known for being tough on nontraditionally schooled applicants. For them, the best ticket to UC has been transferring after taking community college classes or posting near-perfect scores on college entrance exams. Last fall, however, UC Riverside joined a growing number of colleges around the country that are revamping application policies to accommodate homeschooled students. Under UC Riverside’s new policy, homeschoolers can apply by submitting a lengthy portfolio detailing their studies and other educational experiences. The U.S. Department of Education reports that 1.1 million, or 2.2 percent of all students in the nation, are homeschooled. Some private colleges have eagerly recruited those students for years and tailored application processes to include them. Homeschoolers still face challenges when applying to many public universities, but their chances of being considered are improving. In 2000, 52 percent of all colleges in the country had a formal evaluation policy for applications from homeschoolers, said David Hawkins, director of public policy for the National Association for College Admission Counseling. Four years later, the number jumped to 83 percent. During that time, 45 percent of colleges reported receiving more applications from homeschoolers, he said. Major schools that now post application procedures for homeschoolers on their Web sites include Michigan State University, Oregon State University and the University of Texas. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is also willing to consider homeschoolers. The highly regarded school does not require a high school



diploma. As part of its admissions process, it considers scores from college entrance exams and asks applicants to submit a 500-word essay, detail five extracurricular activities and offer two teacher evaluations.

*Stanford Magazine* recently published an informative article by Christine Foster on the homeschooling movement and the growing number of homeschoolers applying to colleges.

“As a result of the movement’s vocal—and still predominant—religious wing, many Americans continue to picture homeschooling as a mother and her children gathered around the kitchen table, alternating between a math workbook and a Bible. But an increasing number of families cite education, not religion, as their primary reason for abandoning conventional schools. These are parents who simply feel that neither public nor private schools will meet their kids’ needs. They want the freedom to focus on each child’s strengths and weaknesses and to let maturing students chart their own intellectual journeys.

Of course, there comes a point when even the most self-directed learner can use guidance from scholarly instructors. When high-achieving homeschoolers reach that threshold, many look to top-tier colleges and universities. In competing for admission, they

want the same sort of academic recognition enjoyed by their more conventionally educated peers, even though they’re short on formal credentials.

Among the nation’s elite universities, Stanford has been one of the most eager to embrace them. Despite the uncertainties of admitting students with no transcripts or teacher recommendations, the University welcomes at least a handful every year. Stanford has found that the brightest homeschoolers bring a mix of unusual experiences, special motivation and intellectual independence. . .

So why is the University interested? Admission officers sum it up in two words: intellectual vitality. . . It’s the spark, the passion, that sets the truly exceptional student—the one driven to pursue independent research and explore difficult concepts from a very early age—apart from your typical bright kid. Stanford wants students who have it.”

<http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2000/novdec/articles/homeschooling.html>



*Baking Fun at New York State Democratic Schools Gathering Held at Longview School in Cortlandt Manor*

# Correspondence

## The Benefits of Doing Nothing at All

Any free and democratic school worth its salt allows its students the option of spending the day doing nothing at all. Without the freedom to make no choice at all, being required to pick one defeats the credibility of a student-driven education. A teenage girl in one well known alternative school I visited told me she did nothing at all her first year at the school. She told me she was relieved to escape her previous public school that was run like a prison with forced teaching and the constant pressure to conform and obey. A staff member told me she was decompressing, a term I hadn't heard before.

It's kind of nice to lie under a tree and contemplate the meaning of life for a while. But for a whole year? Being the hyper-active type, I wouldn't last for more than half an hour. When I have trouble falling asleep I try to make my mind a blank by thinking of absolutely nothing—a trick that takes a lot of concentration for someone who isn't a Yogi. I can't imagine what it would be like to be locked up in solitary confinement for a year. I do enjoy hiking in the mountains by myself, and took a solo motorcycle trip across the country a while ago. But being alone isn't the same thing as doing nothing. A free school where a student could do nothing all year has to be a pretty boring place.

Even if you have a school buzzing with fascinating and challenging educational choices, there will be times when a student does need to veg-out for a while. Where does she go to do nothing? I would suggest having a 'nothing room' that would be absolutely empty, with nothing at all to do, bare walls, and no diversions. It might have a few cots for sleeping. Talking with others there would be out because that is doing something. A quiet empty room in a cellar without locks on the door would suffice. Perhaps you could call it 'the think-tank.' The student could be challenged to see how long she could stay there, and report on her experience. At least the student would be out of the way of others who have more ambitious intentions for the day. Kids hate being bored. It can be a great motivator.

At my fortieth prep school reunion I found it depressing to see how much pressure the students were under. I could see it in their eyes "like deer in the headlights. Their parents probably expect that a school that cost a lot, and is far away, should produce an education second to none. They sure wouldn't stand for their child doin' nuttin' all year. What are the expectations of parents who send their kids to an alternative democratic school? Perhaps there are a few who would be satisfied just to get their kids out of the house and out of trouble. To see them getting a little excited about their education would be a plus. Of course the expectations that count the most are those the students have for themselves "not the school's or the parent's.

A free school filled with high self-expectations and a lot of initiative couldn't possibly be a boring place. The free school environment should be filled with all sorts of choices, some great, some maybe not so great, but hopefully none that are useless. Choosing to do nothing at all is one of the useless ones. Ignition requires compression, not decompression. Ages 6-19 is hardly a time for waiting to grow up. There is constructive pressure, and there is counter-productive pressure. When the stress is on to make that goal and win the state championship, the moment will be relished, unless a missed shot in the last minutes lost the day and resulted in months of regret. The risk of suffering the stress of losing isn't a good reason not to play the game. Stress born of high self-expectations never hurt anyone of strong character.

Accountability is not a four letter word. Some advocates of free education regard the A-word as a need to fulfill other people's expectations "an affront to personal freedom. The world is driven by the need to be accountable. For teens I have known on the streets, being accountable to no one is not a lot of fun. Neither is being an orphan. Being accountable to yourself of course is the best kind, particularly if others who care about you share those expectations. Doin' nuttin' isn't decompression. It's decomposition.

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## "Why We Banned Legos" Backlash

In early April, national Fox "News" ran a TV spot attacking early childhood teachers and *Rethinking Schools* writers, Ann Pelo and Kendra Pelojoaquin, for the article we featured on the cover of the Winter 2006-07 issue of *Rethinking Schools*: "Why We Banned Legos." The Fox News story comes on the heels of attacks by Rush Limbaugh, right-wing AM talk show hosts around the country, and numerous conservative bloggers. As a result, Pelo and Pelojoaquin, as well as Hilltop Early Childhood Center in Seattle, where they work, have been bombarded with vitriolic emails and phone calls.

Of course, anyone who bothers to read the article will discover that its title is simply a playful and provocative promotion for an important essay that explores how children come to regard issues of wealth, ownership, and power. (Legos are not "banned" at Hilltop, and never were.) Interestingly, many of the attacks began to appear simply on the basis of the article's title, included in pre-publication publicity — before these critics had even read the piece. If you are a *Rethinking Schools* subscriber — and, of course, we hope you are — please take a moment to read "Why We Banned Legos" in the Winter issue and see what all the excitement is about. If you are not a subscriber, we've now posted the article at our website and you can read it there: [http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/21\\_02/lego212.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/21_02/lego212.shtml).

There is more to say about this controversy than we can put in a short email, but it's worth hearing a bit of the article's critique to appreciate what some readers find so unsettling. In a March 27 posting at the National Review Online, writer John J. Miller is upset to learn that youngsters at Hilltop sometimes use Legos to construct "community meeting places." Miller says his kids would never dream of something so "rotten," as he calls it. (We're not making this up.) "Instead, they make monster trucks, space ships, and war machines. These little creations are usually loaded with ion guns, nuclear missiles, bunker-busting bombs, force-field projectors, and death-ray cannons. Alien empires have risen and fallen in epic conflicts waged in the upstairs bedrooms of my home." If children don't play war and empire then evidently the "latte-sipping guardians" in Seattle have led kids astray.

At the root of the right-wing critique is an aversion to the notion that everything that goes on in school — including play — teaches values. Our critics appear content to let children absorb without reflection the values from the broader society's values of competition, militarism, consumerism, aggression, selfishness. "Why We Banned Legos" tells the story of the Hilltop teachers who found an opportunity to help children reflect about "the

meaning of power and ways to organize communities which are equitable and just." Read more about the Hilltop approach to early childhood teaching and the center's response to the Legos controversy at <http://www.hilltopcc.com/news/2007/03/14/response-to-why-we-banned-legos/>.

*Rethinking Schools* is honored to be associated with outstanding educators like Ann Pelo and Kendra Pelojoaquin. In our new expanded edition of *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*, we feature Ann Pelo's excellent article, "Playing with Gender: Lessons from an Early Childhood Center," (for more detail see <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/publication/roc1>.) In fact, Ann is working with us on a new *Rethinking Schools* book on early childhood teaching and social justice.

Thanks for supporting *Rethinking Schools*. It'll take more than Fox News and Rush Limbaugh to deter us from the essential social justice education work we've engaged in for the past twenty plus years.

Bill Bigelow for *Rethinking Schools*



*Discussion of Democracy and Consensus Decision-Making Processes at New York State Democratic Schools Gathering*

# Books etc.

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## *Awareness through the Body*

By Aloka Marti and Joan Sala

Auroville, India: Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research, 2006

Review by Anne Adams, Ph.D.

*Awareness through the Body* is a seminal book for living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The authors, Aloka Marti and Joan (pronounced joo an) Sala bring their own embodied wisdom to revealing the intelligence of the body. They are long standing practitioners of “integral yoga,” the Indian sage Sri Aurobindo’s approach to living a life in which the development and integration of our mental, physical, emotional and spiritual intelligence are held as vital to what it means to be a conscious human being. Their program “provide[s] tools for individuals to expand their consciousness, explore the different planes of their being and discover their inner selves...” (p. 19).

Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires being a different kind of person...one who is able to be with the complexity of the time - the uncertainty, ambiguity and paradoxes of life. It includes being able to think inside and outside of the changes occurring today; knowing the relationship between parts and wholes, i.e., all parts are really wholes that are aspects of other wholes; embracing opposites, e.g., respecting the unity that exists in our diversity; order and disorder and relating powerfully to the multi dimensionality of life. Living in our world today calls for engaged, connected individuals who know they are essential to what is being created and know that who they are is the creator of their own life and the co creator of what is emerging in the world.

Because the physical body is a fundamental access to consciousness, participants in the Awareness through the Body program are given many varied experiences of the connections that exist in their lives. The connections their own body has within itself, e.g., organs, cells, circulatory system, senses, etc.; the connections they have with people, animals, plants, nature, the elements – air, fire, water, ether, earth; and the energetic connections existing beyond their immediate physical sensations. Through exercises of projection into and identification with other objects, both animate and inanimate, Joan and Aloka introduce the relatedness that exists between their students and the universe. People who experience their “connectedness” relate to uncertainty, ambiguity and paradox in life with a more reed-like stability and flexibility.

Being “present” in one’s body is essential to conscious participation and yet it is an awareness that is often undistinguished in most physical educational programs. Bringing that understanding into one’s everyday life brings a quality of

presence and consciousness that has the ability to reinterpret one’s perception of reality. In this approach, teaching and learning are experienced in a dialogic environment that invites one to discover one’s own subjective sensory landmarks, e.g., personal memories of how one’s body feels during different states of consciousness; students find meaning through their own experimentation. Areas such as fear, anxiety, restlessness, impatience, anger, trust, partnership and dealing with different life situations are addressed.

The witness attitude is introduced and practiced throughout the program, giving participants opportunities to use their senses to take in both particulars and a wider perspective – to gain mastery in being an observer from within and without. A consciousness is brought to the perceptions, which unfolds into self discovery, self reflection, self awareness, self directedness, self responsibility and ultimately self mastery.

The results of educating students in the awareness through their body are powerful and uniquely stand out by the possible future they invite if this program were more broadly available. Two clear examples, one concerning aggression and the other, intimacy, provide a hint of what might be possible if young people entered their adolescence and early adulthood grounded in the distinctions presented in *Awareness through the Body*. In an interview, one of the parents of students in the program said, “Through this program my sons could see that actually their body is the same as their friends’ body and there is no difference and that it is the same matter. They can respect the others as themselves. Around here, there was never an incidence of violence.” Students working with one other throughout their education, from K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, learn how to touch another with awareness, care and an appreciation of the humanness of another person. The mood is one of learning, curiosity, appropriateness and openness rather than embarrassment or awkwardness. These young people are comfortable and natural in their own bodies and therefore they have a naturalness in relating to another’s body.

## *How to Raise an Amazing Child: the Montessori Way*

by Tim Seldin

Review by Matthew Rich

Nahoon Montessori School, South Africa

This publication almost seems to jump off the shelf and is possessed of all the charm, color, and clarity that those who work with young people have come to expect from Dorling Kindersley publications. All children are born with amazing hidden capabilities and this book directs parents in how to preserve and nurture these invisible capacities in a way which enables every child to grow towards becoming the best possible version of him/herself. It achieves this in a way which is both classical and original, both scholarly and anecdotal, and which is – above all – highly accessible. This is a trademark that we have come to expect from Tim Seldin whose previous publications include *The Montessori Way* (co-authored by Dr. Paul Epstein) which is, in the reviewer’s opinion, the best general introduction to contemporary Montessori education available.

Although Tim's book is based on the scientific approach pioneered by Maria Montessori, which research over the last century has consistently shown to aid development in all domains<sup>1</sup>, it consists of accessible and relevant information which is useful and appropriate for all loving parents. Much of what Tim writes is based on classic works in the field of child development including Silvana Quattrocchi Montanaro<sup>2</sup>, Paula Polk Lillard<sup>3</sup>, and Susan Stephenson<sup>4</sup> (to whom he pays special homage in his acknowledgements<sup>5</sup>), however unlike these excellent - and often encyclopedic - reference books *How to Raise an Amazing Child* can be easily used by any parent from any background.

Rather than painting broad strokes in the language of principle or waxing lyrical on the finer points of philosophy Tim has adopted a style which is clear and grounded whilst remaining comprehensive in its detail. The colorful photographs by the incredibly gifted Vanessa Davies are used to great effect in taking the reader step by step through a number of important exercises in preparing the environment for the young child and presenting and creating learning materials in the home. This creates a sense of rapport and clarity that makes you feel as though you are consulting with the author in person. It is noteworthy that Mr. Seldin has clearly made every attempt to avoid jargon and when he has used more specialized language he has made it not only comprehensible but also relevant. However, what is even more exceptional is that he achieves this while still being able to uphold - and indeed pay homage to - the integrity and purity of Montessori's vision.

Montessori named the first cycle of development (approximately 0-7 years) the period of the 'absorbent mind'. Children during this phase of development are like sponges that soak up all sorts of information in a way which is qualitatively different to the ways in which they process in later more abstract developmental planes. Through this developmental approach she developed an understanding of various sensitive periods for the acquisition of various competencies. Some of these sensitivities or needs are easily observable - such as the needs for movement and language acquisition - and tend not to be overlooked, but other sensitivities such as order, grace and courtesy, and small detail are far more difficult to cater for. Montessori saw the desire of the child's heart as being, "Help me do this myself". Seldin's book makes helping children meet their developmental needs in a way in which they are self-sufficient and purposeful. He shows you a whole lot of the 'tricks of the trade' which really come alive when your practice is informed by a correct philosophical understanding.

A book of this sort is not without its difficulties, especially considering the diverse readership which it is likely to attract. It concerns me that some of the activities presented here may be misinterpreted and used in a contrived way by people who are not initiated in an ethic of following the child. Ultimately like any handbook of this sort its usefulness is dependant upon the consistency of its use. If the reader attempts to simply glean handy hints from this book (and there are many hidden between its pages) they will find their presentations of the activities somewhat less successful than if they had taken the time to

understand the straightforward principles and pervasive ethos upon which the book is based.

For instance, the three period lesson introduced on p 167 of the text is a superb method for teaching basic vocabulary, however this kind of activity would prove to be of limited value if children were compelled to take part in these lessons against their will (see e.g. pp 108 ff in the text) or if they were coerced into doing it through the threat of punishment (see e.g. pp 118 ff, especially at p 121). Along this line - and I believe Mr. Seldin would agree with me in this regard - there is an increasing need for texts, which possess the clarity and accessibility of this book, and are aimed more specifically at engendering an ethos of peace, respect, and partnership in parent-child relationships.

In summary, I believe that *How to Raise an Amazing Child* is one of those rare books (in a field assailed with drivel) which every person involved with early childhood development would do well to get their hands on. It attempts to take a philosophy and method which, despite a century of unparalleled accomplishment, has remained obscure in the eyes of the public and make it not only accessible but also practicable in the home of every parent who cares enough to listen. In the reviewer's opinion the author and publisher succeed admirably. At the very least Tim Seldin has created a highly practical handbook that makes being child-friendly parent-friendly and, as far as I'm concerned, that in itself makes this a book of exceptional distinction.

#### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> See for example: Angeline Stoll Lillard, *Montessori: the science behind the genius* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> E.g.

*Understanding the Human Being: the importance of the first three years of life* (1991)

<sup>3</sup> E.g. *Montessori from the Start: the child at home from birth to age three* (2003)

<sup>4</sup> Of the Michael Olaf Company who authored *Child of the World* and *Joyful Child*

<sup>5</sup> At page 192.

#### **Montessori – The Science Behind the Genius**

By Angeline Stoll Lillard

Review by Helga Stokes

In March, *Education Week* published an article by Linda Jacobson (2007) in which she raises concerns about the negative impact of stringent standardized testing requirements on Montessori programs in public schools. The current trend towards standardization and high-stakes testing runs counter to the Montessori approach of individual initiative, choice, following interests, peer learning, self-evaluation, integrated curriculum, and critical thinking, to name just a few Montessori classroom practices.

In this hostile policy environment, it seems to be even more necessary to cement Maria Montessori's insights in current research from the realm of learning psychology and developmental

psychology. For this task, Angeline Stoll Lillard's (2005) book *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius* could well prove to be an invaluable resource.

Lillard distills a number of principles in Montessori Education. I list just some of them here:

- Movement and cognition are closely entwined, and movement can enhance thinking and learning
- Learning and well-being are improved when people have a sense of control over their lives
- Tying extrinsic rewards to an activity, like money for reading or high grades for tests, negatively impacts motivation to engage in that activity when the reward is withdrawn (p. 29)

These principles can be readily observed in a Montessori classroom. Children move around freely and are in charge of the environment. Maria Montessori found that children are more interested in their work when they do not receive rewards and frequently even disregard or reject them.

Copious current research, largely from outside the Montessori school context, is then reviewed and related to Montessori practices. Each study is briefly summarized, as this example on choice and control illustrates:

In one experiment, 7-to-9-year-olds were asked to solve anagrams, and one group was allowed to choose from among six categories of anagrams, such as animals, foods, or parties (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). A second group was told the experimenter has chosen their categories, and the third was told their mother had made the choice. Categories were in fact yoked, so all the children had the free-choice group's anagrams.

There were two significant findings of interest here. First, the children who had chosen their own category solved twice as many anagrams as children who thought their mother or the experimenter had chosen their category. Second, during an optional free-play period after the initial anagram task, the children who had chosen their own category spent much more time freely choosing to solve anagrams than did children whose category had been chosen for them (ibid, p. 83).

The bibliography of approximately thirty pages is a testimony to the huge number of studies reviewed. It is the most comprehensive collection of such studies I have ever read. The results confirm Maria Montessori's insights, one after another, and also demonstrate that the current common practices such as grading, competition, grade cohorts, constant prescription of activities, etc. stymie the children's development. The research results could not only support and defend practices in Montessori schools, but should they be used to influence the design of a new education system, we would witness the emergence of a system that does not at all resemble our current, obsolete factory model of schooling.

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*Morning Meeting at Harriet Tubman Free School*

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