Free Radicals

In the country's most alternative classrooms, there's no such thing as a report card.

By Amy Standen

Jamie Tyrrell was not your typical high school student. As other kids crammed for chemistry exams, Tyrrell spent her days painstakingly reconstructing the skeleton of a German shepherd she and some school friends had dug up. She and a few other students created the school's drama department from scratch, and wrote, made costumes for, and performed a sendup of Boccaccio's *Decameron.*

In addition to taking college classes and studying for the SAT, Tyrrell spent her sophomore and junior years creating a three-dimensional computer model of a violin, mastering the techniques of parametric modeling and rendering along the way, and as a senior, she served as the law clerk for the school's judicial system and as an admissions clerk. And yet, for all these self-directed projects, she never received a grade or a report card, never attended a formal class, and never had a teacher tell her what to do or when to do it.

Tyrrell spent those years at the Circle School, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, founded in 1984 on the model of the Sudbury Valley School, in Framingham, Massachusetts. Sudbury schools are only one variety of so-called free, or democratic, schools, which eschew most conventions of traditional education in favor of a much more radical program. At most free schools, literally every decision, from those about staff hiring and firing to determinations concerning rules, facilities, and budget issues, is made by the entire school community in a one-person, one-vote process. There are no tests, no report cards, no requirements, and no classes—and no curriculum, other than what students set for themselves.

It is a philosophy that may strike the uninitiated as far-fetched, if not irresponsible, but it seems to be working. At a time when mainstream public schools, under the No Child Left Behind Act, are growing ever more focused on standardized tests, state-mandated curricula, and accountability, free schools, which reject all such conventions, are on the rise.

Elements of the student-centered approach are even spilling over into a handful of public schools across the country, particularly through charters, though the push toward standardized content and testing constrains them. Most commonly, public schools adopt the free-school features of democratic governance and at least some student choice in curriculum.

"There has been a very considerable and rapid interest in the Sudbury model," says Daniel Greenberg, who, with several others, founded the Sudbury Valley School in 1968. Over the last five or six years, he says, Sudbury programs have "grown in number dramatically. And more and more groups are forming all the time." Worldwide, 176 schools identify themselves as democratic schools, according to the Alternative Education Resource Organization, including 71 in the United States. This list includes many but not all schools based on the Sudbury model, which has seen itself imitated at more than 30 schools worldwide, including in Israel's Golan Heights and in Belgium, Puerto Rico, and Japan. At the Circle School, says founder and staff member Jim Rietmulder, "we're growing like crazy. We've tripled in size in five years."

What feels like a revolution to free-school advocates, however, is just a blip on the educational radar. Most free schools, which enroll students ages four to eighteen, have well under 200 (and some as few as a dozen) students. It's a trace amount when you consider the 48 million elementary school and secondary school students nationwide. But the numbers are growing, part of a nationwide increase in enrollment at nonsectarian private schools, as well as in home schooling, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

A Radical Alternative

The first American free schools drew their inspiration from the Summerhill School, in Leiston, England, founded in 1921 by German educator A. S. Neill, who believed education was effective only when pursued based on the interests and motivations of children, not when made compulsory by teachers or parents. It was a radical and largely unpopular idea in Austria, where Neill relocated, and it was no better received—at first—in England, where he moved the school in 1923. It wasn't until 1960, when a collection of Neill's writings was published in the United States, that the philosophy really caught on.

In 1969, his book *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing,* appealing to an American readership already familiar with Montessori and Waldorf schools and other alternative, European-born teaching styles, sold more than 200,000 copies. That same year, the Albany Free School, in Albany, New York, was founded to do something Neill thought impossible: bring free-school principles to inner-city children, launching a tradition of urban-based democratic schools that continues to this day.

The differences between the Summerhill School, American free schools, democratic schools, and Sudbury schools are far less noticeable than their similarities. Though they may differ by degree, all offer an egalitarian school system and an open curriculum that aims to make children the architects of their own educations. Typically, tuition at free schools is less than that of private, nonsectarian schools, which makes them attractive to students struggling in the public school system. To these kids, free schools offer a radical alternative based on the conviction that mainstream education has, in striving for conformity and standardization, failed them by crushing their natural interests.

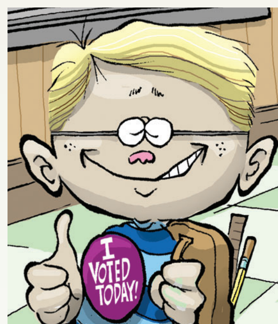
"Children are burning out," says Melanie Hiner, founder of the New School, a free school in Newark, Delaware, who sees attention deficit disorder, adolescent depression, and other problems as symptoms of a system that fails to respond to children's individual needs. "When children are doing pen-and-pencil work in kindergarten and are told they have to sit at a desk and prepare for first grade, rather than play in a sandbox, that's where you start to see problems," she says.

Again and again, free-school advocates point to testing as a prime example of where mainstream American education has gone awry. "Under No Child Left Behind, the gathering of information, rather than the ability to think critically, has become paramount," says Hiner. Trained to perform for tests, rather than engage in real-life situations, she says, children simply learn to work the system. "If they don't see a context, if they don't see the purpose, they'll resort to memorization, and that's a lower cognitive function than real, meaningful learning."

At the New School, testing does happen, but not in the way you'd expect. "Kids test themselves all the time," she says. "When a kid climbs a tree maybe a little higher than before, that's a test. When a student tries to write something and comes to me and says, 'What do you think?' that's a test. That's the right kind of test."

Playing video games, horsing around, or lazing around on a couch are viewed as a necessary part of a child's development, possibly even a gateway to a lifelong passion.

Ellen Winner, a professor of psychology at Boston College who studies children's development, agrees. "There's a lot of teaching to the test and learning for the test, which can take place without real genuine understanding," she says. When children are under the gun to perform well on a test, Winner explains, a different and lesser form of learning takes place. Students learn, she adds, to "spit back memorized information, rather than having a genuine understanding that would allow them to go beyond the information given and make real connections to the world."



BRIAN FARRINGTON

But without exams, how does anyone know how a child is faring? Whether it's a standardized test or a simple pop quiz, a test gives schools some accountability to the outside world, including to parents—a convention most free schools, and all Sudbury schools, reject. "If parents ask how kids are doing, the answer is simple and very clear: 'Ask your child,'" says Greenberg. "'And it works. Parents say, 'My ability to communicate with my children has blossomed.'" Circle School founder Jim Rietmulder concurs. "I'm not sure what it would mean to say a child is 'not doing well in school,'" he says. "It's probably more like 'not doing well in life,' and it's not like we need some sort of diagnostic technique to determine that."

This approach sounds good in principle, but what about the students, particularly adolescents, who often have relationships with their parents that are a long way from "blossoming"? No school, says Ted Sizer, an education reformer and a visiting professor at the Harvard School of Education, should take that much responsibility for a child's education.

For one thing, says Sizer, "it takes money to run schools, and that money isn't coming from teachers. It's coming from either parents or the school system, and those people have to know how the school is doing." Furthermore, testing helps students, too. "It's hard to teach a kid without giving him feedback," he adds. "And that means there have to be demonstrations of mastery." Even if he doesn't specifically ask for it, says Sizer, "a child has to be told, quite frankly, how close he is to mastering his subject."

More worrisome is the possibility of a student slipping without the knowledge of his or her parents, who could be, and often are, the first responders. "If I am concerned about a youngster's progress," says Sizer, "I've got to work in concert with the people who dominate the majority of that kid's time. For me to presume to go off in my own direction, or to leave it up to the kid, is just irresponsible. These kids are minors."

Even those parents with sufficient faith in the system may balk at the prospect of paying tuition to a school where their child will be allowed to pass an entire day playing video games, horsing around, or lazing around on a couch. To free-school educators, those activities are viewed as a necessary part of a child's development, possibly even a potential gateway to a lifelong passion. But critics fear the free-school system may cheat less motivated students. "For some kids, the ones who teach themselves, free schools are great," says Boston College's Ellen Winner. "But for the typical kid, they might say, 'I don't have to do anything, so I won't.' You don't want to wait and discover at age thirty all

the things you could have been learning."

Winner fears that a free-school education can allow children to waste their most learning-rich years on doing nothing. "We know, for instance, that learning a second language is far easier before puberty," she says. "We don't know for sure whether that's also true with other subjects, but it's very likely that the early years, starting around age six, are when the brain soaks up education."

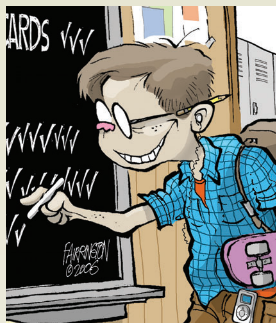
Such fears make free schools a hard sell to many parents. Five years ago, the students and staff at the Red Cedar School, a Sudbury-type school in rural Vermont, formally voted to move to a more conventional, curriculum-based program. In this progressive but rural community, the school's philosophy had become a turnoff for many families, and enrollment hovered at around 20 students. "We always felt like we were swimming upstream," recalls Jacquie Werner-Gavrin, one of the school's founders.

Some Red Cedar students complained that their education was simply moving too slowly. "There was always this struggle with the fact that their peers in other schools were doing things, and often learning things, that the Red Cedar students didn't know yet," Werner-Gavrin says. "There was this insecurity that they weren't getting what they needed." She believes most of the kids would, eventually, have learned what they need to know—and at a much faster pace, she says, having come to that lesson out of curiosity, not obligation—but concludes that the Sudbury model wasn't ever going to hold wide enough appeal.

Mixing It Up

A hybrid model—part free, part conventional—has found success in a handful of public schools. In Alameda, California, for example, the charter Alameda Community Learning Center sets aside up to half of each student's day as project time, during which kids may choose to work on projects, read quietly, or hang out with friends. Students, who are in grades 6–12, make up a quarter of the legislative and executive bodies and more than three-fourths of the judicial panel that run the school. Development Director Paul Bentz says applications to the ACLC outnumber available slots four to one, and the Alameda Unified School District recently renewed its charter for five years.

Like the ACLC, many public alternative schools do provide direct instruction in certain subjects, particularly those likely to appear on state tests. An exception is the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, in Providence, Rhode Island, where students work twice a week in professional internships and spend the rest of their time on entirely individualized project-based-learning plans. With help from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Met model has been replicated at 28 other urban sites nationwide, and 20 more are planned. (See "High School's New Face," November/December 2004.)



However, Eric Premack, codirector of the Charter Schools Development Center, in Sacramento, California, says schools such as the Met remain rare because they're "incredibly work intensive and require exceptionally capable staff." More common, he says, is for schools to offer multiple options, such as traditional or constructivist math.

At the Alternative Education Resource Organization, a nonprofit organization in Roslyn Heights, New York, that promotes learner-centered education, founder and director Jerry Mintz says that though he knows of at least ten charter schools in the United States that incorporate democratic governance and some individual choice in curriculum, those models won't be the main catalysts for broader change. If reform is to come, he believes, the staging ground is in home schooling and in the independent-study schools many school districts offer. Sudbury Valley School cofounder Daniel Greenberg goes even further, arguing that the Sudbury model cannot be "broken into discrete elements and adopted piecemeal in other settings."

For those who stick it out in private models, Greenberg says, free schools offer preparation for the real world, where personal passion is often the best career guide. "The justification of the traditional system is that there is a limited number of things you have to know to make it in the world," says Greenberg. "That's gone down the drain. In this day and age, anything is possible. Pretty much any interest that is pursued effectively can lead to a challenging and interesting life. Why do Sudbury graduates do great? Because they've learned a whole bunch of things that teach them how to live—what their interests are and how to pursue the things they're interested in."

Many students, particularly those fresh from a public school education, may at first exploit the freedom of a free school by sitting around doing nothing, he adds, but eventually they all find something to do—and what they pursue, they pursue with a zest. "One of the assumptions that's made about children is that unless they're prodded, they're lazy," Greenberg says. "And anyone who has dealt with infants knows that's ridiculous. They're dying to crawl; there is no boundary they won't struggle to overcome. That persistence in what you're passionate about carries through life if you don't squelch it."

No formal accounting of free-school graduates has been done, but a recent study of Sudbury graduates shows that most do continue on to college. Though some Sudbury schools offer students the option to build a traditional high school transcript, most graduate the way Jamie Tyrrell did: with no Advanced Placement credits and no formal academic record. Apparently, it doesn't stop them.

Last year, Greenberg, along with Sudbury Valley School cofounder Mimsy Sadofsky, published *The Pursuit of Happiness: The Lives of Sudbury Valley Alumni*, a follow-up to a 1992 book tracking the progress of 50 Sudbury graduates. In the recent book, the authors have the benefit of a larger sample size: the book tracks about 100 ex-students, 82 percent of whom have gone on to pursue a college degree and most of the rest professing satisfaction in their career choices despite their lack of higher education.

That the sample size remains so small for a school that's been around for thirty-eight years is significant, and probably illustrates what Winner and Hiner have observed: Some kids will thrive in free schools, and some won't. Judging by the numbers, the kids who don't thrive won't make it to graduation. But if Jamie Tyrrell is any indication, those who do will graduate with an original and fulfilling school experience and the confidence to take their passions with them.e

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