

# PERSPECTIVES ON SUDBURY EDUCATION

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## A note from the editors . . .

*The time was 1967. A small group of parents living in the Greater Framingham area had been hunting all over the country for a school that met our requirements. We had travelled far and wide, visited and read about all sorts of places — and had come up empty-handed.*

*The main thing we all had in common was a deep conviction that the existing educational system would do our children irreparable harm. We felt we had to do whatever was necessary to provide the kind of environment we wished our children to have.*

*So it was the Sudbury Valley School was founded in 1968.*

*The starting point for all our thinking was the apparently revolutionary idea that a child is a person, worthy of full respect as a human being. These are simple words with devastatingly complex consequences, chief of which is that the child's agenda for its own life is as important as anyone else's agenda — parents, family, friends, or even the community. In the school we wanted for our children, their inner needs would have to be given priority in their education at every point.*

*The Sudbury Valley School Press, *The Sudbury Valley School Experience*, (The Sudbury Valley School Press, 1992)*

The Sudbury Valley School has been the inspiration for the founding of over a dozen schools, both in the U.S.A. and internationally. Some schools, already up and running, have adopted the Sudbury philosophy.

The intent of the Sudbury Education Resource Network and *Perspectives on Sudbury Education* is to support the ongoing work that is being done to both preserve and expand the Sudbury model of education.

Articles that contribute to that end are accepted, with gratitude, for consideration in this publication. The deadline for the next issue is September 30, 2001. Please send them to the editors:

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If you'd like to subscribe to an on-line discussion of the Sudbury model, it's fairly easy and generally an interesting exchange.

Send an e-mail to: [majordomo@sudval.org](mailto:majordomo@sudval.org). In the body of the message, type: `subscribe discuss-sudbury-model`. To unsubscribe, follow as above but type: `unsubscribe discuss-sudbury-model`.

To submit to the discussion, e-mail to: [discuss-sudbury-model@sudval.org](mailto:discuss-sudbury-model@sudval.org). It's a good idea to identify yourself in the opening of your message. Keep an eye on the subject line as well; and keep in mind that this is a private list, not endorsed by the Sudbury Valley School. Archives can be found at: [www.sudval.org/~sdg/archives](http://www.sudval.org/~sdg/archives).

The Sudbury Education Resource Network is an independent organization that is neither sponsored by nor under the auspices of any Sudbury model school.

*Perspectives* is dedicated to the people who make this extraordinary experience available for the students enrolled in these schools. Thank you.

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# On the Importance of Being: Why My Children Attend a Democratic School

*by Christine Andersen, Greenwood Sudbury School*

Crawling into bed one night, five years back, my life was a motherly web of kindergarten, chicken pox, playgroups, house dust and Dr. Seuss. I was overwhelmed and sad. I had lost recently a close friend; my husband was preoccupied with teaching and attaining his doctorate; and I was heavy into re-evaluating who my parents were, and were not.

That night, I gazed out our bedroom window at the silent, distant moon — perfectly round, iridescent, spotlighting the colorful autumn woods as if they were on display. It was one of those crisp October nights when you can drink down the harvest air like wine and fall intoxicated into sleep beneath heavy quilts without thought of winter's snow. I sat for a very long time.

As I rallied in the autumn breeze, I was struck, as if for the first time, by the immensity of the sky and the unfathomable distance to the planets and stars beyond. How finite a view I had from one small window. Even so, my sight was large enough to show me that in the grand design of the universe, the fettered busyness of my present life seemed ridiculous and insignificant. I began what was to become a long, existential contemplation of what is truly important, and what is probably not. In a world over-run with media and technology, inscrutable politics and even more inscrutable politicians, religious admonitions instead of spiritual celebrations, and rigid societal norms, it's been difficult to simplify my life which is a part of the greater society, and yet which yearns to stand apart. I crave the absence of tedious busyness. I crave meaningful relationships. I like quiet, so I can hear the wind blow, so I can follow my muse, so I can hear earth sounds rather than automobiles. I want to read books written by people who had ideas in the middle of the night, and had to rise to write them down. I want time to gaze at the sky.

*It is my hope that the home and education we provide will foster joyful being and unguarded self-reliance, now and throughout their days.*

Our children, at very different stages of living and knowing, are attracted to everything that glitters, and to all things technological and sugar-coated. But I cannot impose all I've come to think and feel because they may arrive at different conclusions. I don't wish them to stumble over me. They have to find their own way because their journeys will become a part of who they are. It is their right to make their own decisions about spirituality, politics, education, societal norms, and self-identity. I gave birth to my children from my body and from my heart, but they are not my possessions to mold. I live next to them and through our mutual engagement they will grow to be who they are, and I will grow and go on becoming. It is my hope that we will like one another, and not dread visits when we live apart. It is my hope that the home and education we provide will foster joyful being and unguarded self-reliance, now and throughout their days.

So why a democratic school?

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What I hope for from Greenwood is that my children will learn early that they are free individuals in charge of their own destinies with the right to be and the right to do, in their own time, in their own way. I hope they learn that who they are is more important than what they do; and what they do best will indeed flow from who they are. Discipline imposed is control; self-discipline is power. I hope they learn early that there is no such thing as useful knowledge in the absence of self-knowledge, and that a sense of being precedes meaningful doing. Following that, I hope they understand community, empathy, fairness and compromise. I wish for them long hours of behaving like children so they will no longer feel the need to be childish when they are grown, while continuing to nurture their playful child-spirits into their later years.

My children are in a democratic school because I can teach them arithmetic in twenty hours instead of eight years; because literature and history and grammar can be absorbed from numerous texts whenever; because I can't remember who discovered the Mississippi River or what year Magellan sailed. (I'm really more interested in the soul journeys of the first explorers anyway, rather than where they went - what made them take the risk?) But I cannot teach my children in a lesson who they are or who they're going to be. I cannot tell them about their personal power unless they live it. I cannot describe being, or child-spirit, or map out self-reliance if I don't grant them the experience. They cannot tire of glitter if I limit their exposure. But mostly I cannot convince them of my unconditional love and trust unless I bestow it.

Children cannot follow the path of the sun unless they can choose to spend their days outside. And no one can embrace a moonlit night if a home hangs curtains over tightly closed windows.

My children attend a democratic school because we choose to sleep with undressed windows open.

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## **When Students Are Treated As People**

*by Bruce Smith, Alpine Valley School*

When I'm discussing Alpine Valley, I usually avoid saying a lot about my former career in public education. I prefer instead to focus on the unique advantages of AVS. However, it occurred to me recently that comparing my interactions with students in traditional and Sudbury environments can shed some light on the benefits of the Sudbury model.

As a high school teacher, I held the power (and duty) to reward and punish students. Every day, I evaluated their performance on tasks I had set. The bulk of my job involved cajoling, coercing, and otherwise manipulating young people into narrow, adult-approved tracks. Too frequently, even my happier interactions, which usually occurred outside of class, were too shallow.

This was not the fault of my students or myself; our interactions were inherently restricted. I did attempt to treat my students as people, but how could they fully ignore my power and their vulnerability to it? We could never be completely ourselves with each other, and instead became caricatures. Too few of my students exhibited outstanding initiative, creativity, or maturity; too many seemed dependent on my favor and/or direction. For my part, I must have seemed quite the taskmaster to many

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of them.

What created these distorted perceptions and interactions? Beyond issues of power and authority, there's the distance most schools maintain between adults and children. By policy, habit and logistics, teachers are typically unable to form deep and lasting relationships with students. The adults at my school spent most of their free time with other adults. Students entered our work rooms and lounges infrequently. Teachers regularly face overwhelming numbers of students and an air-tight schedule, and they rarely know their students longer than one year. The culture of too many schools prevents familiarity between adults and children; this fosters stereotypes and inhibits understanding.

There is a deeper explanation, however, for this lack of understanding: the ease with which most adults assume they know more than children. In a sense, adults do know more, in that they have more experience. But I've found that this advantage is often overrated. Adults often act as though only they know what's best, trusting more in their ability to guide children than in the considerable powers of perception and understanding held by children. I would argue that much of the immaturity and irresponsibility in traditionally-schooled students is artificial, created by the very lack of responsibility and respect given to them. Responsibility and maturity take a lot of time and practice to develop. In most educational settings, students get very little.

In contrast, when children are given real respect and responsibility, their interactions with adults take on a completely different aspect. (By "real" responsibility, I mean the challenge of making one's own choices — not just accountability when those choices displease someone.) Far from discouraging familiarity between students and staff, our school is based on having people of all ages treat each other as people, not "student" or "staff," "child" or "adult," but rather as individuals, worthy of respect. And this is a reality at AVS. One student told me recently that the lack of distance between students and staff is one of the best things about our school. Another said she views the staff more or less as peers.

At Alpine Valley, the student-staff relationship provides students with role models and support as they undertake the challenges of real learning — figuring out how to identify and achieve goals, how to relate to people, how to express themselves and how to solve problems. Since staff members hold no arbitrary authority, student-staff relations aren't driven by the alienation, fear and dependence too prevalent in traditional schools. AVS offers everyone, staff and students alike, ample opportunities for direct, honest and on-going interaction.

Here at AVS, instead of imposing a shallow, external responsibility on children, I expect them to be responsible for themselves. Instead of compelling students to learn things of questionable value, I help — when asked — as they pursue their own interests. When I see students acting inappropriately, I simply talk to them, person to person, or resort to the school's judicial process. Furthermore, since our students' time is their own, and they can be enrolled for up to fourteen years, relationships have time to develop. There are plenty of benefits in this for the staff, too. We learn how to stay young, interacting with kids of all ages, and we can enjoy knowing and watching them as they grow up.

This isn't a piece of cake, though. When it comes to deciding what goes on at

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school, staff don't have any greater rights or privileges than students, who are always free to argue their own point of view. Life at Alpine Valley isn't always pretty — we see our share of immature and irresponsible behavior. After all, these are real people and real life we're dealing with. But here, students have the chance to learn from their mistakes; here, I find the resulting growth in responsibility, maturity, awareness and respect to be quite exciting.

This is the key: respect and responsibility are self-perpetuating, as are their opposites. It is conventional wisdom that you reap what you sow, and that you have to give respect in order to get it. Yet the so-called common sense of traditional schooling holds that children cannot be fully trusted or be fully responsible; that, given real control of their lives, they will only make a mess of things. How can we be surprised when students act out these self-fulfilling prophecies? How can we fault them for not exhibiting initiative, creativity or responsibility if these qualities are not allowed and encouraged?

At Alpine Valley, our students and staff are freed from unnecessary power struggles and arbitrary expectations. Consequently, we know and relate to each other as individuals. We enjoy a wide range of healthy interactions which, in addition to being enjoyable, also foster tremendous personal growth.

When students are treated as people, they respond in kind. When young people are allowed full participation in the decisions shaping their lives, they are much more likely to act respectfully and responsibly.

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## Respect: What Children Get in Democratic Schools

*by Daniel Greenberg, Sudbury Valley School*

An exciting new movement is stirring the world of education — a movement that promises, at last, to make children participants in the revolutionary changes that swept the world in the late 20th century. The emergence of democratic schools all over the US, as well as in Israel, Australia, Denmark, England, and Canada, is finally bringing respect and equality to people under the age of 18, respect that is blind to race, gender, culture, or belief — the same respect that adults have struggled to win for themselves.

Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts — a school that I helped found in 1968 — was the first fully democratic school in the US. Others have now been founded all over this country and in many other parts of the world. The schools share a deep commitment to the idea that children deserve nothing less than the full set of rights and freedoms that adults receive in our society, and that in such a setting children have the best opportunity to learn, to develop their sense of responsibility, to define their value systems, and to grow into productive, self-motivated adults.

### *What Does It Mean?*

The root ideas of a democratic education are as simple as they are radical: children should be accorded the same human rights and freedoms as adults; they should be granted responsibility for the conduct of their affairs; and they should be full participants in the life of their community. Democratic schools provide an environ-

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ment where children can live their formative years in exactly the same manner as they will live out their mature years — as free citizens of a society devoted to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The world these children will inhabit as adults will be a familiar one, a world that has been part and parcel of their childhood.

Like the old colonial towns that nurtured our country's political traditions, democratic schools are self-governing. Children of all ages are entitled to participate in all decisions affecting the school, without exception. They have a full and equal vote in deciding expenditures, in hiring and firing all employees (including teachers), and in making and enforcing the rules of the community. In democratic schools, there is no residual authority vested in adults, no veto power lurking in the background.

In practice, democratic schools look more like a cross-section of real life, more like a vibrant town or village, than like traditional schools. There are no assigned groups or rooms, no specified activities or time periods, no preferred curriculum or dress code, no agenda for pressuring children into endless compromise and compliance. Here children decide for themselves how to spend their time, what to do, and when and with whom to do it.

Play is a big part of daily life, and it is the prime factor in learning. Nothing compares to play as an instrument of learning, least of all courses given by a teacher. Most of the students, especially the younger ones, are too busy playing all the time to rest or even to eat. By late afternoon, they're ready for a huge meal and a good night's sleep. They've worked long and hard.

Lessons learned here become tools for a lifetime. What is mastered is the ability to concentrate and focus attention unsparingly on the task at hand, without regard for limitations — no tiredness, no rushing, no need to abandon a hot idea in the middle to go on to something else. This “lesson” is retained for life.

#### *How Does It Work?*

Typically, rules are made and business is handled at a weekly School Meeting, where each student, like each staff member, has one vote. Democratic schools make rules about littering, as well as about the use of fire; they make rules that govern which rooms people can eat in, as well as which ones they can play the radio in; and, most importantly, they make rules protecting individual rights. The School Meeting debates candidates for staff, votes on them in schoolwide secret balloting, and awards contracts according to needs determined by this balloting. School Meetings also approve requests from groups that want budgets or space to pursue special interests.

Anyone who thinks that young children are not wise about these matters need only attend a few such School Meetings. Kids know that it takes a commitment from their families to send them to a democratic school, and they are stern judges of what is — or is not — a necessary expense. When a rule is passed at the School Meeting, it's often after weeks of soul-searching debate.

Instead of deciding everything as a group, the School Meeting delegates some tasks to sub-groups or to people elected by them to carry out certain responsibilities. One sub-group may be composed of people interested in the school's public relations; another may take care of the school's bookkeeping. Someone may be elected to see to the grounds' maintenance, another person to keep computer records of all of the

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judicial activities. All of the people so elected are accountable to the School Meeting — and they are aware of this accountability at all times.

One sub-group, a judicial committee, is always set up to deal with rule infractions. Its function is to investigate written complaints about possible rule violations and to see that justice is served, while constantly being careful about due process. Rules are often broken, but the culprits are usually good-natured about both admitting what has happened and accepting the consequences. Peer justice is amazingly effective.

#### *What Does It Feel Like?*

What is it like to attend a democratic school? Perhaps the best summation was given by one graduate, who said that, for him, school was just “life” for ten years. “I woke up in the morning and said, ‘I’m going to school, and I’m living life. This is my life, and I’m in it.’ All my learning came about without really having it set up. It sort of unfolded.”

The absence of fear is what epitomizes democratic schools and makes their atmosphere so unique. At Sudbury Valley we say, “It’s one of the things you can’t help noticing in the school — that little kids look adults straight in the eye.” Adults aren’t authority figures, and we are very proud of the beautiful results of age-mixing. It goes without saying that when you mix ages people are going to learn from each other because they have different levels of experience. That happens everywhere. The beauty of age-mixing at democratic schools is that it is without fear. Four-year-olds walk up to 17-year-olds and have no anxiety in relating to them.

#### *The Legacy of Democratic Schools*

A university researcher periodically interviewed Sudbury students over a seven-year period. The researcher noted that although parents often had reservations about sending a child to a school that does not “prepare” them for particular career goals, those who emerge from Sudbury have gotten further with these concerns than those who haven’t learned self-reliance. While still in school, they seem to reach stages of maturity most people do not achieve until after they graduate from college. They don’t seem to be plagued by the feelings of uncertainty, confusion, or despair that characterize so many people on the verge of assuming adult responsibilities. They examine their motives and activities thoroughly and continually, regardless of what particular thing they are doing, and they are not afraid of obstacles or failure.

#### *Finding Out More*

Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts, the first fully democratic school, was founded in 1968. Over the years, it has produced a rich collection of literature describing its operation, including the following: the widely acclaimed *Free At Last* and *The Sudbury Valley School Experience*, which explain, among other things, how creativity and learning flourish in this environment; *Legacy of Trust*, an in-depth study of the adult lives of almost 200 of the school’s former students; *Kingdom of Childhood*, a series of engaging descriptions of daily life at the school in the words of those who were students there; and other books and tapes on the philosophy and practice of democratic education.

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## *Discussing Sudbury — on the Internet\**

The other day while in the store, someone told me my child shouldn't be touching the fruit. My immediate thought was, "Well, you are allowed to touch the fruit, and I am allowed to touch the fruit, so why not children?"

This kind of thing happens frequently. Many people don't think of kids as people who deserve respect, and have rights just as you or I do. This made me think . . . .

Imagine you, at the age you are now, being told you had to go somewhere every day for the next twelve years, except weekends. You would meet someone there who would be there to tell you what to do; not just when you were in trouble or confused but all day long. When you were in the middle of a daydream, when you wanted to build something, when you were in the middle of a conversation — they would stop you and tell you what to do. In fact, it would be important for you to listen to them carefully because they would be upset with you if you didn't listen to them. They may even say disrespectful things to you, separate you from your group, or sit down with you in a private room to talk about how important it is that you do what that person wants you to do.

That person, your "boss," might belittle you or yell at you, not always — as long as you did what she wanted you to do — and you could not choose to quit or leave that place. Imagine asking permission to go to the bathroom, or hearing a loud bell every now and then, learning to go where

the bell told you to go. Imagine giving up, and trying your best to do what you are told, and then being rewarded with a sticker, or if you were older, a letter or a piece of paper telling you that you did well. Imagine not doing what they wanted you to do, and being told you were inferior to the others.

What would you do then?

Imagine writing, reading, even cleaning, for twelve years, not getting paid a cent. After these twelve years, how much of you would be left?

*Allan Saugstad*

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I put my son in a traditional first-grade class after a time at Fairhaven. As I was walking down the hallways to pick him up on his first day, the most depressing feeling came over me. What I saw, heard and felt was outright oppression.

When I reached my son's classroom, he saw me, ran for his backpack, and couldn't get out of there fast enough. The teacher started stuffing all this coloring junk into his backpack (one of them said, "color neatly").

He said, "I don't want that stuff."

The teacher said, "You'll need to bring this back tomorrow."

He said, "I'm not coming back tomorrow. I'm not coming back ever."

She said, "Oh, yes, you are."

He said, "Why?"

She said, "Because if you don't, I'll miss you."

He looked her straight in the eye and said, "I'm *not* coming back here tomorrow."

She talked with me briefly, and

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*\*To learn more about the Sudbury Model Discussion on the Internet, see the Editor's Note on the inside front cover of this issue of Perspectives.*

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told me he got up from his seat when he wanted to, got water without asking, and even tried to go to the bathroom without permission (heaven forbid!).

Well, he didn't return. He was horrified and really did not want to go back there. The principal called me several days later, and asked me what had happened to him. She said, "He actually thinks he has a choice in this."

"He most certainly does," I replied. Dead silence for a time.

She said, "It's not healthy to give a young child that kind of responsibility."

I asked her why not. If she had a good reason, I was willing to listen. She had no answer with any substance. She asked what I'd do, and I said, "Something else."

She called me two times after that, concerned about Matthew's "welfare." I simply told her it was no longer her concern. She used the scare tactic: "By law, he must be educated."

I responded, "Mrs. \_\_, I'm much more fearful of leaving my son at your school than breaking the law." She was just astounded. I wasn't about to tell her about Fairhaven. It's not my job to enlighten her. It would be like spitting into the wind anyway.

*Kathleen Chavez-Richardson*

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As I discuss my dreams of starting a free school and the benefits children receive from being involved in such an environment, I always involve myself in a discussion of what "kind" of kid functions well in this environment vs. a "schooling" environment.

What I have come to believe is that any child can achieve their potential if they are raised in a great environment from birth and throughout life via the impact of their parents. I believe this is one of the reasons many of

the Sudbury sites refer to their desire to have parents "committed to providing a warm, stimulating, egalitarian learning environment" (quoted from the Sacramento Valley website). Outside of extremely bad educational environments, I think that any child raised in a "warm, stimulating, egalitarian learning environment" will succeed in school.

But what we must ask, given this situation, is what is the optimal, developmentally appropriate environment for education. This environment, undoubtedly, is the type offered by Sudbury Valley-based schools.

*Mike Goetz*

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*Children need a safe and interesting place to pursue their lives, and that place is a Sudbury school.*

Hanna Greenberg

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*. . . a sensible man says:  
If I keep from meddling with people,  
they take care of themselves.  
If I keep from commanding people,  
they behave themselves.  
If I keep from preaching at people,  
they improve themselves.  
If I keep from imposing on people,  
they become themselves.*

Lao Tzu

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*"Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with," the Mock Turtle replied, "and the different branches of Arithmetic — Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision."*

Lewis Carroll

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# Why A Sudbury Education Makes Sense

by Michelle Patzke, Chicago Sudbury School

When children are born, they come into the world with a limited ability to communicate with other people (basically crying and cooing) and limited mobility. Within the span of two years, however, they are naturally driven to learn to walk and talk. These are incredible accomplishments! And babies accomplish these tasks without being forced to by someone else and without going to school.

There are no walking schools in which the process of learning to walk is broken down and taught by experts with a required logical progression — head and shoulder lifting, rolling over, rocking, beginning crawling, advanced crawling, standing then walking. There is no testing of mastery prior to moving onto the next step (no pun intended). Young children gobble up the world because it is an innate and evolutionarily essential part of the lifelong process of humans to master their world and their destiny.

After a brief (and seemingly constantly shrinking) period of time where play is okay, children are moved into school where it becomes their job to *learn*. Traditional education is based on the premise that you must take certain classes which experts have determined will be important to your future life, and prove your mastery of the subject matter presented in those classes by passing or excelling at tests in order to be an effective adult. Traditional education says that the better you do this (i.e. the better your grades), the more successful you will be.

At its core, traditional education is based on two beliefs: A) that if students are allowed to choose for themselves they will choose badly and B) experts, because they have more experience, will make better choices in the long run than students so it is acceptable, if not essential, for students to be forced to learn what the experts say they need.

Let's look at the above a little more closely:

Experts will make better choices in the long run than students about what students need to become effective adults. Think back to your own schooling. Were the experts right? Have you used, or are you likely to use all the subjects you took in school in your adult life? Information is expanding at a geometric rate. There is just so much more to know these days. Beyond the basic aspects of literacy — the ability to read and write and do checkbook math — how do we choose what it is important to learn? How do we determine if it is more important to read classics or modern literature? How do we determine which classics are important to read? Does everyone really need to take algebra, calculus, biology, and so on? The truth is, “NO.” We live in a world where you cannot, nor do you need to, know everything.

Experts should determine what classes students need to take. A logical corollary of the belief that students if they are allowed to make choices for themselves will make bad choices, is the belief that experts SHOULD determine what students need. Clearly, if students cannot be trusted to make decisions, if others do know better, it makes perfect sense to have experts develop a curriculum to assure that students learn what they need to know. Because students need to know these things, it is perfectly logical to force them to learn it, for their own good.

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Why is it that we assume that infants who are effective learning dynamos in the first years of their life will lose this desire and ability to learn independently? Does that really make sense? And how does it affect children that the underlying assumption that permeates all aspects of traditional education is that, left to their own devices, they will fail; that they cannot be trusted to know what is best for themselves; that they should listen to others/experts who know what's best for them better they know themselves. Do these assumptions nurture dependence or independence, irresponsibility or responsibility?

*And how does it affect children that the underlying assumption that permeates all aspects of traditional education is that, left to their own devices, they will fail . . .*

If students are allowed to choose for themselves, they will choose badly. This belief teaches children that they are not to be trusted and should not trust themselves; that the answer is to trust others who know better. This belief teaches children that they are inferior to, not less experienced than, adults and experts. This belief fosters dependence (a dependency on experts that often continues for a person's entire life). It also fosters irresponsibility. Deep down in their heart of hearts, children come to accept the belief that they

are inept. This then gives them an excuse when they fail: they were either doing what others told them (i.e. just following orders) or inept anyway so why try?

I know the following is controversial, but . . . think about it. We put children in a system where, for twelve years, others tell them what to do, when to do it, what to think and what matters; a system that doesn't take into account what they think or want. Is it really so surprising that they are so alienated they go in and shoot their classmates and their teachers? Is it really so surprising that some of them go away to college and drink themselves to death? Is it really so surprising that they do not know what to do with their lives? Is it really so surprising that when they feel stuck they don't have the confidence to think there might be a better way, that they could change their life to make it better?

Because the above beliefs permeate traditional education, it is obvious that external evaluation will be the norm within that system. Students must prove to those who know that they have mastered the required subjects. The logical end result of the process is to achieve "success," which is also externally defined.

Tests prove mastery of a subject. As a lawyer, I've taken a lot of tests, all the way to the Bar Exam. Tests test your ability to take a test, and your ability to give the test designer the answer s/he wants. These are skills that have some merit in our society, but be clear, tests do not test what you really know about a subject. In any test, you need to be able to understand the question — this is not always as easy as it sounds — then you need to give the answer the test designer says is the correct answer. I will never forget the advice I received during the bar review exam preparation class. We were told: forget what you learned in law school; do not be creative; these are the components that make a good answer on the bar exam; choose not to follow them at your peril.

What is mastery? How long does it have to last to be mastery? If you get an A on the test and forget it next month, is that still mastery? Again, think back to your own

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schooling and think about a subject that is not related to your current job or interests. Could you pass the SAT portion on that subject matter today? How long did you retain what you learned? Yes, if you studied a bit, it would probably come back to you. But in the big scheme of things, looking back on it now, was it worth the time and aggravation it cost?

Regardless of what we do in the future, there are going to be gaps. For example, have you ever contemplated a career change (an almost inevitable reality for most people in this day and age)? If you know how to learn, and in the future you need a skill that you don't have, and you want it badly enough, gaining the knowledge or skill is attainable. In the process, you haven't wasted your time filling your head with things that you might need but, in the end, never use.

And the above applies to those students who accept the assumptions that underlie the traditional educational system, those who have reacted to the system by trying to excel within it. It does not even address the students who either turn off, fall through the cracks or rebel against the system. What do they learn and retain from a traditional education? Furthermore, while scoring well on a test may open the door (e.g. get you into a good college) and doing well in college may land you a good job, does it guarantee success in life?

It's accepted as common knowledge that doing well in school means you will be successful in life. The big question for me here is what do you mean by "successful?" Often socially speaking, success means a prestigious job that carries with it a high salary allowing you to buy lots of material goods even if you have to work many, many hours. Schools, as social institutions selling a commodity (a degree), also seem to subscribe to that definition of "success" The goal of every student should be to maximize their earning potential.

For me now "success" is being generally happy and satisfied with your life. This means that the meaning of success is different for each person. I was a high school honors student; graduated from Roosevelt University with a 4.0 out of a 4.0 grade average and graduated with honors from University of Chicago Law School. I obviously did all the right things to be "successful." I had a federal district court clerkship and then went to work as an attorney. I'd made it. I had accepted the traditional schooling educational philosophy and society's definition of "success." Work hard, get good grades, get a good job and you are successful. I kept telling myself I was successful; I should be happy; but, I wasn't. The reality was, I had accepted the expectations of others to such a degree, I did not even realize that their expectations might not be mine. Once I did, I had no idea what I thought. At age 35, my mid-life crisis began. I had abdicated responsibility for defining my life to someone else and if I was not happy, no one was going to tell me how to fix things. I had to figure that out for myself.

The educational philosophy of Chicago Sudbury School is based on a belief structure about children's nature which is diametrically opposed to the beliefs underlying traditional education. At Chicago Sudbury School (CSS, the midwest's first Sudbury School), we believe in students. We look at what they accomplish when they are young and believe that success (as I defined it above) is inevitable when backed by such drive. We trust in their ability to learn and to grow towards mature and respon-

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sible adults. We expect them to succeed because we know they want to, and are capable of, succeeding. We know mistakes will be made. We all make mistakes. However, we often learn more from our failures than our successes.

At CSS, we think the best way for students to learn to be responsible and to make good decisions is practice. We do not think others or experts have the answers for another person's life. We accept that it is fundamental that in the final analysis what kind of a person you are and what your life is like will always be up to you. If you are not happy with something about yourself, for change to be long-lasting, you must want, and commit, to change because it is important to you, not because someone else says you should.

At CSS, we give students a place to practice making decisions and being responsible because at CSS students are free to choose their activities and are responsible for their actions, their education and their life. Our students succeed in part because of the support they receive from, and the confidence they develop at, CSS which is a natural by-product of being raised in a supportive environment that believes in you and allows you to be truly responsible for every aspect of your life.

I helped found CSS because I wanted a place for children generally, and my son in particular, to figure out their lives for themselves. This is incredibly hard and often painful work. It requires soul searching. It requires down time. Often when one engages in an internal growth process, to outsiders it looks like the person is doing nothing. But deciding what kind of person you want to be, what to do with your life and how to make that dream a reality, is a very private process. Every child at CSS goes through this process. They feel the weight of that responsibility.

This process is especially hard for students who have transferred to CSS from a traditional school environment. They have to heal from the damage. At CSS, you can no longer rely on your role in school ("A" student, rebel, ghost, etc.) to define you and tell you how to behave. Grades no longer prove that you are smart/good, dumb/bad, not applying yourself or simply not capable. You are no longer a success for being obedient and doing what you are told. The former rebel has no one to rebel against. You have to evaluate yourself. You have to figure out for yourself what you think, what is right and what is wrong. You have to define yourself and chart your own course.

Because at CSS we have faith in students' capabilities and want to provide a place for them to practice being responsible and making decisions, we have structured our school environment to support these beliefs. Being responsible for yourself means making your own decisions and bearing the full consequences of your decisions. Students are free each and every day to choose what to do and when, where and how to do it, so long as they comply with the school's rules. Everyone at the school (students and adults, called staff, and parents) has an equal voice in running the school. Through the Assembly, parents, students and staff govern the financial issues of the school. Daily decisions about the school are made by students and staff at School Meeting. Meetings have a written agenda and operate basically according to Roberts Rules of Order.

If you do not like a school rule, come to School Meeting and argue for change. No one person is in charge. It is due process (the opportunity to have advance notice when decisions are being made, to have your opinion heard and to vote on all decisions) and the rule of law (the duty of every member of the community to comply

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with a law until it is repealed), as safeguarded by all members of the school community. Because students have a voice backed by a vote they feel a sense of empowerment, a sense of belonging and ownership about the school. CSS is a place where they and what they think are important; something they help build, direct and safeguard; something they are proud of; something they are a part of; something they cherish. Often in debate you hear: “This is *my school*.”

Laws are enforced by the Judicial Committee (JC). Students from various age categories serve on JC with one staff member. If you have a problem with someone you write up the details on a form and JC talks to everyone involved about what happened; determines what happened; decides if a rule has been broken; takes a plea from anyone accused of breaking a rule and either assesses a consequence after a guilty plea or there is a trial. These — School Meeting and JC — are the visible manifestations of our belief in our students' capabilities.

*It makes perfect sense to doubt our philosophy if you have accepted the belief structure of traditional education that students/people are not to be trusted and others/experts always know what is best.*

Now parents who attended traditional schooling in their youth and sometimes students in traditional schooling now, find our educational philosophy difficult to accept at times. It makes perfect sense to doubt our philosophy if you have accepted the belief structure of traditional education that students/people are not to be trusted and others/experts always know what is best.

It is true that when children are free to choose how to spend their time, most frequently they choose to play. At CSS, they play all the time. They play house, library, store, school, doctor, board games, card games, video games, capture the flag, tag . . . But, what are they really doing when they play? They are: being curious and creative; creating and living by a set of rules; trying out different roles; figuring out how to communicate with their team mates; learning how to lead, follow and cooperate. . . .

Now, would kids use these words to describe what they are doing? Maybe not. Do they think these things consciously? Again, maybe not. But, regardless, that is what they are doing. And while doing it, they are experiencing the consequences of their choices. Play is curiosity, creativity and learning in practice. Play is any activity where the outcome is unknown at the start. It is something humans do for their whole life. Over time, what people play at matures, becomes more sophisticated and complex. In truth, play is serious business. Adult play is often called invention or occurs in the research and development department.

Another major activity for students, especially teens, at CSS is conversation. Imagine a world without conversation. Think of an infant. Why is learning to talk one of the first human tasks? Because it helps you get what you want. Conversation is the exchange of information through words. Being able to say what you want and have others understand it makes getting through life appreciably easier.

Words, however, mean different things to different people. My son and I were playing a game once. He received a card asking him to explain a time when he felt “wanted.” He went into a long explanation of an incident in which he was accused of taking something that belonged to someone else and how it felt to be accused. And,

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I'm sitting there thinking, "What does that have to do with being wanted, loved, needed?" Words simply do not mean the same thing to each person.

How do you figure out what specific words mean to individual people? Conversation. Conversation allows you to get into someone else's head. Not only does conversation allow you to understand what specific words mean to another person, it also allows you to tap into all the knowledge they have about the world. Conversation is critical to life and the advancement of human culture. In such an exchange, each participant grows. Each participant takes in that external knowledge, integrates it into their preexisting knowledge about the world, makes modifications to that preexisting reality and goes back to do it again.

Now it is true that recently conversation has become more acceptable in traditional education. But in that setting, conversation is almost always focused on a certain topic chosen by the teacher/expert. It is not free-flowing conversation that starts out of choice from a point determined by the participants and meanders according to a natural flow. And it is here, in free-flowing conversation, that learning and innovation (like in play where the outcome is not known in advance) arise.

I remember hearing a report on National Public Radio about an interdisciplinary scientific conference. Eminent scientists from a number of different fields came together to dialogue (a fancy word for conversation). As a result of the conference, a quantum leap occurred in one field because of the fertile cross-pollination that occurred at the conference when people in that field heard about a process occurring in another area of science. Passionate people came together and talked, without a specific agenda. They left the process and cogitated on what had occurred. They saw how something from another place was the key to a puzzle in their own area of specialization.

As students spend time at CSS, they have the opportunity to explore things that they care about. They do what adults call "research." They talk to others about their passion; read about it; search the Internet; take a class; experiment; practice; critique themselves; teach others what they've learned. . . . They gather a body of knowledge that is relevant to their passion. They learn to evaluate information presented to them from a variety of sources. They develop their own theories; try them out; evaluate them and decide how to proceed. They learn the research methods that work best for them. When they are done, they move onto something else. Sometimes that takes an hour; sometimes many years. It depends. But they retain what they learn because they learned it like they learned walking and talking. They gobbled up their subject. And the researching and critical thinking skills they developed doing so are fully transferable to their next passion. Students at CSS gain the basic skills (literacy, communication, computer skills, etc.) because, just like walking and talking, they learn what they need by being an active participant in the world in which they live.

Students at CSS learn how to learn. They gain the confidence to try. They gain the strength of character to persevere and to fail. They learn that the only person responsible for your life is you. Just as when they were very young children, they gobble up life and they do it their whole lives long.

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## Okay, So You're Sort of Like . . .

by Romey Pittman, Fairhaven School

After hearing a short explanation of our school's philosophy, people naturally want to link it with something already familiar to them. The most frequently mentioned "so-you're-sort-of-likes" are listed below. These explanations are not exhaustive, but illustrate some of the differences between Sudbury-model schools and other educational philosophies.

*A Montessori School?* There are some ways in which the Sudbury model is similar to the Montessori approach. Children in both settings are allowed freedom to make decisions about what interests them and to set their own pace. Both models also hold the basic assumption that children are naturally curious and don't need to be forced to learn. Montessori educators believe that all children learn according to universal patterns and sequences, and Montessori children choose between options presented by the teacher. Montessori teachers offer activities based on observed interests and needs using materials developmentally appropriate for each age group.

Sudbury-model schools offer access to the full array of activities life presents and allows students to determine their own sequence of learning. This gives students the freedom to learn about what interests them at that moment, and gives the staff the freedom to respond to individual needs. Interest is the only criterion for engaging in any activity, and satisfaction is the only evaluation of success.

*A Waldorf School?* Like Waldorf schools, Sudbury schools care about the whole child. We are not only interested in academic success, but in the happiness and full human potential of each individual. Like Waldorf schools, we do not push children to read early. We both value play as crucial to the development of children's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual selves; play is regarded as the fundamental work of children. We both respect the intuitive wisdom of children, and take their world views and interests quite seriously. The primary difference between our two models is that the Waldorf model, created by Rudolf Steiner, teaches to a particular path of intellectual and spiritual growth. Waldorf education has a curriculum and is founded in the idea of anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner's theory of human evolution and spirituality (Atlantic Monthly, 8/99). Through the curriculum, Waldorf educators endeavor to guide children, and society in general, in a particular direction.

The Sudbury approach promotes no particular path of intellectual or spiritual growth. Rather than present a formal curriculum, we respond to each student's individual, self-determined needs. Sudbury schools seek to create an environment where children can recognize and pursue their own agenda. We trust children to make their own mistakes, work through their own problems, and come to their own solutions. The staff's role is to help, when the student feels that it is needed, but without the approach that adults know best. The Sudbury model simply aims to give children access to the full complexity of life and to respect their curiosity, confidence, and competence to participate in, and perhaps to change society, according to their own interests, experience, knowledge and goals.

*A Progressive School?* Sudbury schools believe, as progressive school reformers do, that traditional schooling is not working for all students. Both seek to reduce the

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stresses students experience when coerced into learning and evaluated by standardized testing. Progressive public schools try to prevent unhappiness by attempting to make learning fun and getting children to learn without noticing that they are learning. Some progressive schools offer an array of courses but do not require attendance. Both educational models recognize that children learn best when they are interested, whether or not the subject or activity at hand is part of a formal curriculum.

Sudbury-model schools extend this idea and give students free choice of curriculum and activities, not just every semester or every week, but every hour of the school day. Sudbury-model schools require attendance in school, but do not have standard offerings unless we are asked to by the student body. Classes and other forms of instruction and interaction are available to students on short notice, tailored to their individual needs. Learning something new can be hard work, and children are quite capable of hard work when they are working on something they want to do. When a student has a serious interest, there is no stopping her. Her internal motivation alone drives her, and she alone decides when she is done. Because learning is a process that continually permeates our lives, it is essential for children to learn skills that will help them schedule their own lives, wrestle with their own questions, learn how to seek the answers, and how to master their own destiny.

*Home-schooling?* There is a particular philosophy of home schooling, often referred to as “Unschooling,” which shares many similarities with the Sudbury model. John Holt was its best known proponent, and his writings have been invaluable to us in helping to explain just how learning can happen without teaching, and why on earth a child might choose to learn arithmetic or some other supposedly dreadful subject. Unschoolers believe, as we do, that children are born naturally curious about the world and eager to succeed in life. Unschoolers believe that kids learn best through experience and experimentation rather than by being told how and what to think. In the words of John Holt, “Real learning is a process of discovery, and if we want it to happen, we must create the kinds of conditions in which discoveries are made . . . They include time, freedom, and a lack of pressure.” Many Unschoolers see the family environment as the best place for children to grow.

While the Sudbury model recognizes the importance of the family, we also find truth in the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In the environment of a Sudbury school, students are supported by and held accountable to the entire community. They develop important social skills in a democratic school: the ability to tolerate diversity of opinion, to negotiate, to interact confidently with their peers and with adults, and to develop and carry out group projects. In most home schooling families, the parent sees him or herself as ultimately responsible for the child’s education, while at Sudbury schools, that responsibility rests squarely with the child.

*Student governments in traditional schools?* Students who have an interest in helping to make changes in their schools can participate in school government, both in traditional schools and at Sudbury schools. While student governments in traditional schools consist of students who represent the larger student body, they are rarely able to make decisions that are not subject to overrule by a higher school authority.

Sudbury-model schools are participatory democracies in which every student and staff member has the option of a real vote in every decision made. Democratic

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self-governance helps foster community identity and a sense of individual empowerment. Staff members are involved as equals with students. Staff often argue their policy positions with gusto, but they have no special rights to determine rules or to overturn due process, and they are equally bound to the rules of the school. As a free majority, students experience real control over their lives at school, and real consequences if they fail to meet the responsibilities such freedom requires of them. The many opportunities for students to actually make positive contributions to their schools is a hallmark of the Sudbury model. Sudbury schools seek to empower children not only through self-determination, but also by fostering an environment in which they may develop into confident, responsible citizens.

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## **The Lessons of Volition: Play Teaches Ownership and Choice at Fairhaven School**

*by Joe Jackson, Fairhaven School*

Several months ago a Talkabout was held at Fairhaven School, the topic of conversation being play. Play is a very important idea when talking about Sudbury model schools. A lot of it happens constantly, and the prevalence of it makes Fairhaven look different from any other school most people have seen. It's important because the relentless quality of play at Fairhaven is the key to what makes Fairhaven kids learn faster and more efficiently than their conventionally schooled counterparts.

During the Talkabout, a fascinating concept began to take root regarding the supposed differences between “work” and “play” that sprang from the realization that most of the “play” taking place at Fairhaven looks an awful lot like “work.” Based on this, what we realized is that whether something is called “work” or “play” has nothing to do with whether we like doing it. What determines our level of satisfaction in an activity is whether we have a choice to do it or not.

After all, the only real difference between a student learning math at Fairhaven and a student learning math at a conventional school is probably that the Fairhaven student is doing it voluntarily. If “play” equals satisfaction and “work” equals dissatisfaction then nobody would ever “work” at Fairhaven, because no one's going to force them to! That's why volition (whether a person is doing something voluntarily or involuntarily) is the single most significant factor influencing human behavior, not just at Fairhaven, but in the world.

Why is this factor so central? Ownership and choice are what make volition the most important principle governing human behavior.

In our “work” lives, the principle of ownership in and of itself virtually always governs whether a person likes or dislikes his or her job. Imagine two people both working for the same organization. The first person flawlessly performs all tasks assigned to him, but is tightly managed and only performs work he is required to do. The second considers the minimum requirements of her job to be a point of departure, assumes responsibility far beyond the extent of her assigned position, and has a boss that encourages self-motivation, creativity, and empowerment.

While the first person is possibly an excellent and trusted employee, the second

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person has a stake; she is an owner. Her sense of responsibility is driven by her stake in the organization, which is in turn driven by her sense of responsibility. The precious by-product in this self-propagating equation is that our second employee is almost certainly feeding off a very high level of job satisfaction.

During my career in the military, my colleagues and I smile when we hear someone in the middle of a four-year enlistment swear they will get out at the end of their term. Almost invariably, as they approach their moment of freedom and choice is once again a factor in their career decisions, they will “re-up,” almost as if a switch has gone off in their heads.

What is flipping that switch is the only difference in that person's life from mid-term to end-of-term: choice. We as humans derive pleasure equally from work and play only to the extent that we feel free to start and stop whenever we choose. Having mentally “let go” of the job, our colleague looks around him at his career choices. It's when he sees continuing in the military as just another one of his choices that the job appeals to him in the manner that brought him there originally. He can now choose to “return” to the job.

Most folks think that kids play video games because they are fun; however anyone who has really sat down and played or watched the complex strategy games of today knows they are quite simply work. The work my son has to do to move to the next level bears no resemblance to play: in order to progress he must slay a monster to get through a door which reveals a series of doors that will either have more monsters behind them or the key to open the door to the “boss” monster that must be vanquished in order to proceed.

The truly ironic truth is that sitting at desks 18 miles apart, my son and I essentially do the same thing all day: in order for me to move on to my next task I have to gather information from a variety of sources (some of which are available, some I have to leave messages for, some of which are dead ends). From this research I craft a document that undergoes several rounds of edits before it can go to the “boss” for approval. (Unlike my son, however, I am not required to defeat my “boss” in combat.)

Clearly what my son is doing is work: grueling, frustrating, and repetitive. So while skeptical neighbors or family members raise an eyebrow at his daily regimen of computer games, Lego, and freeze-tag, I marvel that he has learned something that most people three times his age haven't: to work really, really hard with no regard toward obstacles and setbacks.

So the truly beautiful thing about Fairhaven is not that it teaches Latin or sewing or video editing. The truly valuable thing is that in the Fairhaven environment a student can possibly never realize that there's a difference between playing Diablo six hours a day and writing a million-dollar computer application in C++.

At Fairhaven, the object of the lesson is ownership and choice, and the ruthless nature of grueling, frustrating, and repetitive “play” is the teacher.

*Clearly what my son is doing is work: grueling, frustrating, and repetitive. . . . I marvel that he has learned something that most people three times his age haven't: to work really, really hard . . .*

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Fax: (01364) 653666  
Email: [Enquiry@sandsschool.demon.co.uk](mailto:Enquiry@sandsschool.demon.co.uk)  
Web: [www.sandsschool.demon.co.uk](http://www.sandsschool.demon.co.uk)

Nova Scotia Sudbury Start-up  
c/o Greenbergs  
RR1 Port Williams Nova Scotia  
BOP 1T0 Canada  
Phone: (902) 542 4655  
Fax: available upon request  
Email: [davidg@glinx.com](mailto:davidg@glinx.com)

Summerhill  
Leiston, Suffolk  
IP16 4HY United Kingdom  
Phone: +44 (0)1728 830 540  
Fax: +44 (0)1728 830 540  
Email: [office@summerhillschool.co.uk](mailto:office@summerhillschool.co.uk)  
Web: [www.s-hill.demon.co.uk](http://www.s-hill.demon.co.uk)

The San Vicente Sudbury School  
103 South Cooper Street, Apt. 4  
Silver City, New Mexico 88061  
Phone: (505) 388-3879  
Email: [kaktus@zianet.com](mailto:kaktus@zianet.com)  
Web: [www.zianet.com/rickstan](http://www.zianet.com/rickstan)

Tamariki School  
86 St. John Street  
Woolston, Christchurch New Zealand  
Phone: 011 64 338 49014  
Fax: 011 64 338 49029  
Email: [tamariki@clear.net.nz](mailto:tamariki@clear.net.nz)

Sudbury School of Los Angeles  
c/o Susan Jarquin  
7852 Wentworth St.  
Sunland, CA 91040  
Phone: 818-434-1469  
Fax: 818-293-1060  
Email: [sudbury@sunlandtujung.com](mailto:sudbury@sunlandtujung.com)  
Web: [www.sunlandtujung.com/sudburyschoollosangeles](http://www.sunlandtujung.com/sudburyschoollosangeles)

The Tutorial School  
400 Brunn Road  
Santa Fe, NM 87505  
Phone: (505) 988-1859  
Fax: available upon request  
Email: [tutorial@prodigy.net](mailto:tutorial@prodigy.net)  
Web: [pages.prodigy.net/tutorial](http://pages.prodigy.net/tutorial)

**Other schools valuing democracy, individual choice, and personal responsibility**

Democratic School of Hadera  
Brandies Forest P.O. Box 335  
Hadera Israel  
Phone: 972-(0)6-6225261  
Fax: 972-(0)6-6344146  
Email: [Maralist@ort.org.il](mailto:Maralist@ort.org.il)  
Web: [www.geocities.com/Athens/Sparta/6892](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Sparta/6892)

Windsor House School  
440 Hendry Avenue  
North Vancouver, B.C. Canada V7L 4C5  
Phone: (604) 903-3366  
Fax: (604) 903-3367  
Email: [hhughes@idmail.com](mailto:hhughes@idmail.com)  
Web: [whs.at.org](http://whs.at.org)

The Highland School  
Rt. 83, Box 56  
Highland, WV 26346  
Phone: (304) 869-3250  
Fax: (304) 869-3253  
Email: [highland@ruralnet.org](mailto:highland@ruralnet.org)  
Web: [www.ruralnet.org/highlandschool](http://www.ruralnet.org/highlandschool)

**Other Resources and Networks**

The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO)  
417 Roslyn Road  
Roslyn Heights, NY 11577  
Phone: 1-800-769-4171 or 516-621-2195  
Fax: 516-625-3257  
Email: [info@educationrevolution.org](mailto:info@educationrevolution.org)  
Web: [www.educationrevolution.org](http://www.educationrevolution.org)

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Maintained by the Sudbury Education Resource Network (SERN).  
All information for each school is provided by the school.  
Schools are listed with permission only, and in the category of their choosing.  
Please send updates and additions to [sern@harkness.net](mailto:sern@harkness.net)

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