

Free Schools— Threatened by Success?

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Both the alternative public and independent alternative schools have significant roles to perform in the immediate future. The radical thrust of this movement must not be blunted.

FREE schools have had an effect on education in America. It is ironic that the results of their impact may become a threat to the survival of some free schools. As has been a tendency with other radical movements, efforts to provide a radical alternative to conventional schooling have been co-opted by liberal educators attempting to set up alternative schools under the aegis of local boards of education. In these circumstances, the constraints of conventional forces on free schools become a major concern.

According to the National Consortium for Options in Public Education (NCOPE), there were 464 alternative public schools in 1972.¹ That number continues to grow.

¹ National Consortium for Options in Public Education. *Changing Schools* #008. Bloomington: Indiana University, n.d. p. 5.

It cannot be denied that the free schools, many of which were set up by grassroots efforts in the mid-1960's, have stimulated boards of education to provide alternative learning experiences to conventional schools. Programs such as Berkeley's citywide system of alternative schools, Chicago's Metro High School, and Philadelphia's Parkway Program clearly support the significant concepts that not everyone can be mass-educated and the need for emotional as well as intellectual development as a function of schooling.² In effect, free schools rose as a protest to mass education, discipline-centered curricula in public schools.

ASCD reflected a reaction to the Sputnik backlash in several of its publications including *Humanizing Education: The Person in the Process* and again in its 1962 yearbook, *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming*. Other forces also helped sensitize educators to the need

² William E. Broderick. "A Tribute to A. S. Neill." *Phi Delta Kappan* 55 (10): 685; June 1974.

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for genuine alternatives. The late A. S. Neill, in many ways the patriarch of free schools, underscored the need for change in his criticism of conventional education: "in school, education starts at the neck and goes up."³ In striking contrast to the public schools the myriad of books, newsletters, and brochures on free schools emphasizes "personal knowledge" and the affective realm of human experience.⁴

Confusing Terminology

As is often the case, there is much confusion of terminology in the writing about

³ National Film Board of Canada. "Summerhill." (Contemporary Films.) New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970.

⁴ Probably the best resource for such descriptions under one cover is: Allen Graubard. *Free the Children: Radical Reform and the Free School Movement*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

free schools. What should we call these schools—free schools or alternative schools? Many free school people such as Bill Harwood of the New Schools Exchange⁵ prefer the term "alternative schools." For him and others it connotes the political emphasis these schools demonstrate in protest against conventional schools. Setting up a free/alternative school and enrolling a student in one of these schools is a "political" act. It is a process through which people take power into their own hands to choose a form of education alternative to that which the state provides.

There are, however, several kinds of alternative schools of which a free school is only one. A list might include community schools, storefront schools, street academies, liberation schools, Waldorf Schools, and some Montessori Schools. For example, in

⁵ New Schools Exchange, Pettigrew, Arkansas 72752.

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the 1973-74 *Directory of Alternative Schools*,⁶ the word "free" appears in the names of only a few of the several hundred schools listed.

At the present time, there is no standard "free school." The New Schools Exchange has developed a set of criteria, listed in their annual directory, to help define what is meant by the term.⁷ However, it is clear that the collectivity of free school people involves centralization of neither standards nor formal structure.

Terminology is further confused by the talk and writing generated in the alternative schools being set up in an increasing number of school districts across the country. Just as the New Schools Exchange recognizes a variety of types of free schools (or shall we call them independent alternative schools?), NCOPE recognizes a variety of alternative public schools, of which free schools are only one type.

A Basic Question Emerges

The questions "when is a school an alternative school?" and "when is a school a free school?" may be viewed as nothing more than interesting academic queries. A crucial question, however, for us to face is: "Can an alternative public school do what it is possible for an independent alternative school to do?"

This question is crucial because it relates to widespread misinterpretations of independent alternative schools. Students and parents who are seeking non-repressive schools may think that the two types of schools are the same. In fact, they most often are not.

The difference may rest in subtle philosophical nuances as is the case in Cincinnati, Ohio, with the private New Morning school and the public City Wide program. There may be many reasons in the minds of people tuned into those two alternatives that a tuition-charging school like New Morning

can compete and survive just up McMillan St. from free, tax-supported City Wide.

City Wide may indeed be meeting some of the basic needs of its students and is a most admirable program; and the same can be said for many other alternative public schools. Nevertheless, there is one reason for success that stands out above all others—namely, political independence. This factor merits careful examination in weighing the

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merits of private vs. public alternative schools. As Jonathan Kozol points out:

The school that flies the flag is, in the long run, accountable to that flag and to the power and to the values which it represents. That is, and must remain, the ultimate hang-up of all ventures which aspire to constitute, in one way or another, a radical alternative "within the system."⁸

Many Cincinnati people realize this, and New Morning retains their support. Some independent alternative schools, however, run the risk of losing students to public alternative schools. People in Dayton, Ohio, for example, will ask why they should send an adolescent to an independent alternative school, which charges a high tuition and which is apparently unaccredited. Available to the student is one of the public school's two alternative schools that are free (tax supported) and are legitimized by the school district's charter with the State Board of Education. The alternative public schools have a small enrollment and may therefore

⁶ *New Schools Exchange Newsletter*, #101. Pettigrew, Arkansas: New Schools Exchange, September 15, 1973.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ Jonathan Kozol. *Free Schools*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972. pp. 14-15.

be viewed as more student-centered and more relevant in curriculum than the conventional schools elsewhere in the district. But the program is no radical alternative in the best sense of an emerging body of free school theory and practice.

In the Dayton schools as well as the public schools of Cincinnati and other cities, a thorough examination of questions such as "what is the real nature of the class structure in an area of the city and what is the function of the schools in maintaining that structure?" cannot be asked in a school funded by a board of education. Or, if asked, such questions must be dealt with in an academic non-political way. Certain skills such as "developing a critical awareness of the reality of the class structure and learning how to take effective action in changing that class structure," cannot be fostered, many believe, in a school funded by a board of education.

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Free school people are amateurs. As Eric Davin notes, they are "unapologetically amateur."¹⁰ Their schools can act as guerilla sanctuaries, a refuge from the hostile technological ethos of the professional educator. In the independent alternative school, the irrational, the intuitive, the emotional of the human mystery can flow; new paths can be found which diverge from the systematic ways of doing things most efficiently.¹¹ Thus

⁹ Eric Davin. "On Combating Liberalism." *New Schools Exchange Newsletter* 94: 7; March 15, 1973. See also: "The Prospect: Education Reform and Social Change." Chapter 5 in Graubard, *Free the Children*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Davin, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹¹ Innumerable books and articles deal with the dehumanization of technological society and the role of schools as a factor in this process. One of interest is: Charles A. Tesconi, Jr., and Van Cleve Morris. *The Anti-Man Culture: Bureautechnocracy and the Schools*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

the amateur can act unprofessionally; it is she/he who opens up the windows to fresh winds.

A Look Ahead

Many people involved in independent alternative schools are sorely tempted to become affiliated with the public schools and thus gain some financial security. This quest for security, however, is like the quest for a chimera. Not only can the freedom and independence of the school be compromised, but there can be no certainty that the arrangement with a present board of education or school district administration will be lasting.

Herbert Kohl tells of an excellent innovative elementary school in Stockton, California. The enlightened, imaginative principal who made this program possible fell into disfavor with the power structure on the school board and was removed from his position as principal. He was replaced by a new principal with more traditional ideas, and the children went back to sitting at desks and writing in workbooks.¹² This can happen in any district. This year's progressive principal or superintendent can thrive under this year's school board; but the candidates who win next year's school board election may fire him or her and return to more conventional forms. Precise behavioral objectives may be the new bandwagon.

An alternative public school is not the same as an independent alternative free school. Alternative public schools clearly have many positive attributes, and for school districts to move in the direction of offering alternative programs is worthy. In these alternative public schools, however, there may be a wide gap between the rhetoric of what is supposed to be and the reality of what is. It is clear, therefore, that the independent alternative school has a significant role to perform in the immediate future of American education. Its radical thrust must not be blunted. □

¹² Herbert Kohl. "What Are the Real Risks When a School Tries To Change?" *Saturday Review* 55 (22): 48-54; May 27, 1972.

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