

# Education Revolution

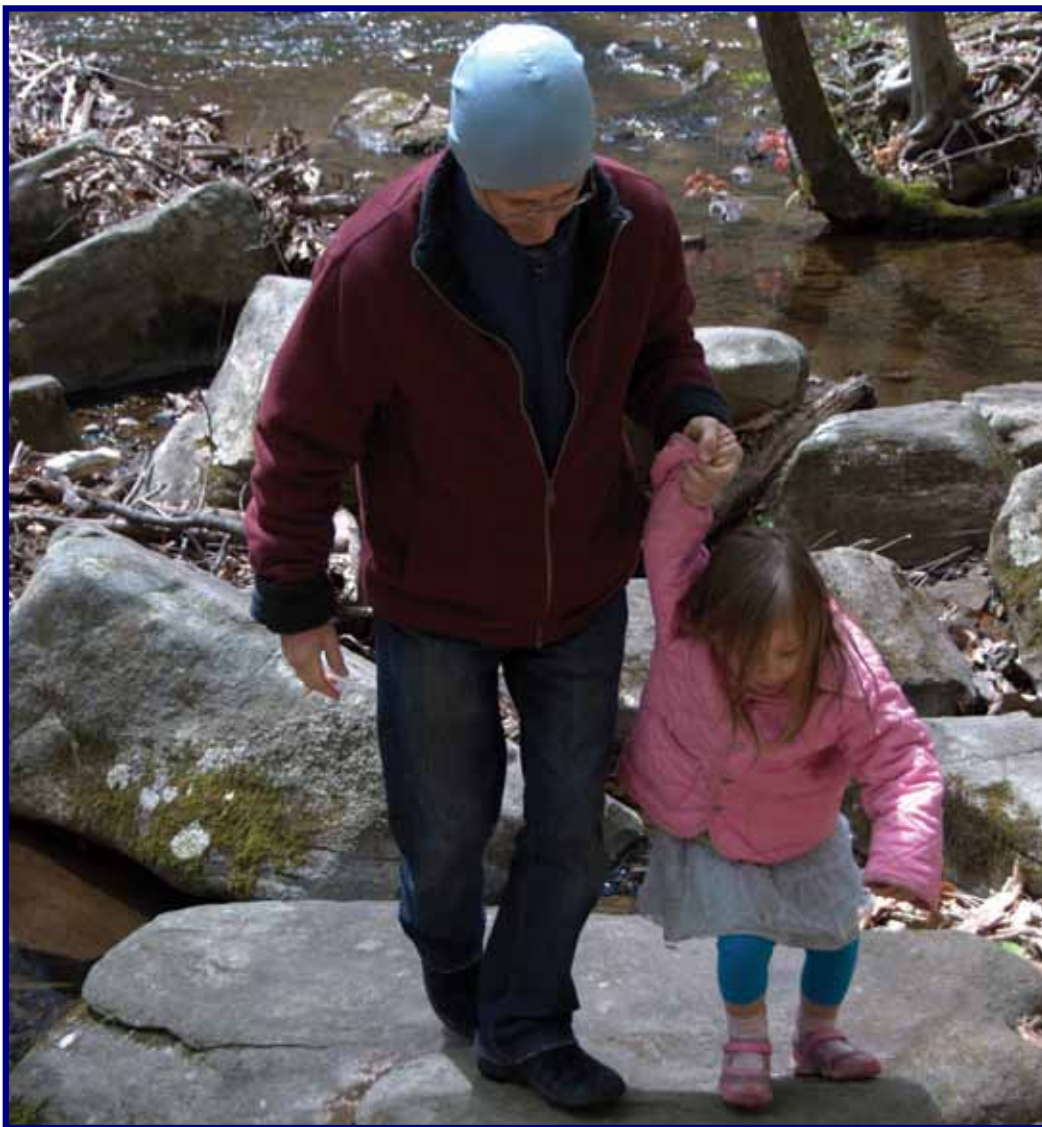
THE MAGAZINE OF EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES



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## Supporting Children's Freedom to Discover Themselves and Their World



### **INSIDE:**

Educating the whole child, using social media, taking responsibility for educational choice, and introducing the Institute for Democratic Education in America

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# Evolving towards IDEA

Introducing the Institute for Democratic Education in America

BY DANA BENNIS

This spring I worked with a team of colleagues to launch IDEA. The Institute for Democratic Education in America is a national organization dedicated to ensuring that all young people can participate meaningfully in their education and gain the tools to learn about who they are and build a just, democratic, and sustainable world.

I will explain more about why we founded IDEA and what it will be doing, but first I want to describe the path that led me to co-founding IDEA. I first learned about non-conventional education 10 years ago, while studying music education at the University of Michigan. Through experiences at schools and summer camps, I knew I greatly enjoyed helping young people grow as individuals. Yet I was turned off from teaching when my professors told me I should go by “Mr. Bennis” and use an iron fist for discipline and control.

Luckily I had one professor who mentioned Summerhill School and I quickly began reading everything I could find about student-centered and freedom-based education. I learned about AERO and found democratic and open schools in Michigan for student teaching. When I first discovered there was something beyond conventional schooling, I was hooked. The concepts of non-coercion and freedom in learning became my mantras and the root of what I saw as good education.

**I began to see that for some families, joining a democratic school was a huge risk, when the question of whether their children would learn the language and culture of power could determine whether those children would rise up out of the cycle of poverty and racism.**

In 2001, I joined the teaching staff of Albany Free School in New York. I learned a great deal from working at the school, especially about the role of the adult and the fundamental importance of building strong relationships between adults and youth. In my early explorations of democratic education, I believed that the adult must always step back and take extra care not to subtly influence young people. Gradually, I found that as I got to know students, I could bring my full self, with opinions and suggestions, into

the exchange, while they could still freely make their own choices.

As George Dennison describes in *The Lives of Children*, when trust is built between an adult and young person such that the student knows he or she can take or refuse a suggestion without guilt, the “natural authority” and experience of the adult is welcome and can be helpful. I began asking myself whether the neat and tidy distinction between what was coercive and what was a healthy exchange between adults and youth was really so simple and stark?

During my time in Albany, I also became more aware of the inequity, class divisions, and power dynamics present in our society and their impact on education and learning. Albany Free School, as many readers know, is located in a downtown, low-income, and racially diverse neighborhood — one of the few democratic schools in such a community.

Although it has taken me several years to understand it in this way, I was beginning, at the time, to consider my own privilege as a white male from a secure middle-class family. By virtue of this “invisible knapsack,”<sup>1</sup> I had an “in” to the culture of power in society, which is also largely white, male, and affluent. I knew how to speak standard English with “correct” grammar, I was not judged negatively due to the color of my skin, and I could fall back on the security net of my family if things didn’t work out for me.

Meanwhile, many of the students at Albany Free School (and in many lower income communities and communities of color around the country) do not have the same privileges and support mechanisms I had taken for granted. I began to see that for some families, joining a democratic school was a huge risk, when the question of whether their children would learn the language and culture of power could determine whether those children would rise up out of the cycle of poverty and racism.

I began to wonder, do we democratic education advocates lose an entire audience of teachers, students, and parents by speaking about freedom and choice without recognition of the history and impact of inequity, classism, and racism?

Does democratic education have to look the same in each community?

Can’t democratic education support young people in the development of the tools of literacy and communication while also practicing self-directed learning?

Can youth, without tools of literacy and communication, access the power structures in society as it currently exists?

And can we change society without empowering those who are disempowered, even if it means creating new concepts and shedding some older ones?

These questions stayed with me during my experiences in the following years organizing the 2003 International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC), visiting the education work in Israel led by Yaacov Hecht and the Institute for Democratic Education (IDE), and earning a masters degree in education.

My partner and fellow educator, Julie Hill, and my graduate advisor Connie Krosney, introduced me to the writings of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Lisa Delpit, each of whom examines the interconnected issues of freedom and justice in education. Connie challenged me to consider whether democratic education is only for the privileged few who can afford it, or if it could be relevant to the majority of young people in public schools.

I knew, then, that I wanted to work on a broad level for democratic education. And I knew this work had to address these essential questions.

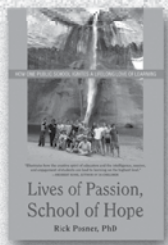
In 2008, Jonah Canner of Fertile Grounds Project in New York joined me at the IDEC in Vancouver ready to create an educational change organization that would face these questions head on. We joined with Scott Nine, Melia Dicker, Adam Fletcher, Laura Stine, and several others to plan the development of an organization that would dedicate itself to providing credibility and support for democratic education, that would ask these hard questions, work openly with those often seen as the “enemy,” and use social media, web technology, and pragmatic organizing to catalyze democratic educational change.

This organization is IDEA. The Institute for Democratic Education in America officially took flight in May, 2010. IDEA’s website is growing and our first video, “Democratic Education: Make Your Voice Heard,” has so far been seen over 3,000 times on YouTube and at more than 15 launch parties around the United States (links at end of article).

IDEA’s strategy is based on fueling an education double movement: both on the ground and through political and civic leadership. Three steps guide our work:

- 1 **Frame democratic education** as something just, nuanced, and accessible. Our website includes descriptions of this conception of democratic education; blogs by educators, students, parents, and others; and research materials that can be downloaded.
- 2 **Connect and listen** to a strong network of youth, teachers, youth workers, parents, and policy makers. We must engage with others in conversation and be humble enough to know that we do not have all the answers. This involves collaborating with others through local gatherings and social networking tools to raise awareness, build momentum, and inspire action.
- 3 **Catalyze action** by fueling the small fires that already exist to generate a more credible and potent capacity to make substantial change. We do this through identifying and supporting a dozen regional organizers around the country to

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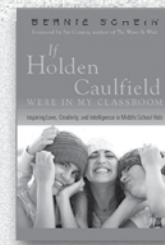
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listen, network, and support educational change processes. A pool of consultants will provide direct support for the specific needs of schools and communities. Workshops, training programs, and youth leadership development are all on the horizon.

IDEA's ultimate goal is to change the national culture and practice of education to one that values a broad definition of learning and success and that provides all young people with meaningful involvement in their learning. We believe that democratic education can and must grow in multiple settings. This includes individual schools that call themselves democratic as well as others, especially public schools, such as Jefferson County Open School in Colorado, the 40 EdVisions schools, and the 60 Big Picture Schools around the U.S. and the world, that practice student-directed learning in profound ways, yet do not use the term democratic school.

Democratic education is also found in the classrooms of courageous teachers who give their students a chance to actively participate and pursue their interests. Many non-profit and out-of-school programs working with youth use democratic education in practice, as do many progressive universities, early childhood programs, homeschooling networks, summer camps, youth advisory groups for elected officials, and even pioneering businesses and organizations that give their employees more autonomy and room for creativity.

IDEA is working to highlight, develop, and support the growth of democratic education in all these sectors. My colleagues and I recognize, as do Kirsten Olson and Ron Miller in their dialogue from the Spring 2010 issue of *Education Revolution*, that educational change is not an either/or: either work for change inside *or* outside the system. We resonate with Kirsten's point that "we radically disempower ourselves by withdrawing from mainstream talk – that stuff going on in mainstream educational publications, blogs, statehouses, and over at the Department of Education."

We believe it is not only possible, but necessary, for us to stay true to our roots of student freedom and democracy while working with allies in the public sector for deep educational and societal change. Indeed there are many potential allies who are frustrated with the continual march towards greater standardization. And most especially, we at IDEA believe strongly in the democratic goal of public education to provide all young people with a quality – that is, democratic and meaningful – educational experience.

We are not arrogant in thinking this will be easy. We know that change, and especially educational change, is very

difficult. We recognize and are humble in our awareness that many previous and current efforts for educational change, as Ron reminds us in the dialogue with Kirsten, have been thwarted by strong powers seeking to maintain the testing industry and other aspects of conventional education.

Yet, we believe that rapid social, economic, and environmental changes, new forms of technology, the current activism of young people, and the widespread frustration of educators, youth, and parents provide us with a strong opportunity to have a real impact.

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IDEA stands on the shoulders of those who have worked and continue to work for change in education, civil rights, women's rights, youth rights, and environmental protection. We see that these groups found success when humility, potency, strategy, accountability, and sacrifice stepped forward and dogma, division, and fear stepped down.

If these ideas and values resonate with you, please join us in this work. We know that we do not have the sufficient time, experience, or wisdom to do this on our own.

Visit our website. Watch our 3-minute video and send the link to your friends. Join the dialogue by commenting on our blogs and "liking" us on Facebook. Check out our online resources and send us research and activities to add. Get in touch with us to volunteer or intern, and consider applying on the website to be an IDEA Organizer.

Most especially, contact us anytime with suggestions, feedback, and criticism.

We look forward to hearing from you and working with you.

**Dana Bennis** is co-founder and Research and Policy Director of IDEA. He can be reached at [dbennis@democraticeducation.org](mailto:dbennis@democraticeducation.org).

#### Note

1. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," excerpted from Working Paper 189, published in *Peace and Freedom*: July/August 1989. ●

## Learn more about IDEA

WEBSITE: [www.democraticeducation.org](http://www.democraticeducation.org)

VIDEO: [www.bit.ly/idea-video](http://www.bit.ly/idea-video)

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