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# DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

EDUCATING STUDENTS TO THINK, CREATE, INITIATE

by Lisa Marshall

Is a more democratic model of schooling the answer to today's education crisis?

Ask Isaac Graves what seventh grade was like at The Free School in Albany, New York, and he paints a picture that would seem like a dream to many conventional middle schoolers—and a nightmare to their administrators. There were no tests, no homework and almost no schedules.

On a typical day, students of all ages would scatter around the refurbished inner-city tenement at will, some spontaneously engaging in a game of *Dungeons and Dragons* in one room, while others planned a trip to Puerto Rico, learned Spanish from a fellow student, or designed a literary magazine on the computer. At weekly, democratic, all-school meetings, they voted on everything from what optional classes the school should offer to what color to paint the walls; not once were they asked to fill in small circles with a number 2 pencil to prove they were learning something.

"We were, at a very young age, in control of our education," recalls Graves, a remarkably astute 23-year-old who now lives in Oregon and works as an event planner. "I had to figure out what I liked, what my passions were, and how to access information in a variety of ways. I had to interact with adults in a real way—not just as authority figures. I had to learn how to learn."

To many, the notion of a school without schedules where kids and adults have equal say and "test" is almost a dirty word seems utterly

unworkable in our present society, where education funding is increasingly tied to student academic performance. But years after the birth of The Free School, and the 1960s "democratic education" movement that inspired it, the nearly defunct philosophy appears to be making a comeback.

In May, a group of educators founded the Institute for Democratic Education in America (IDEA), which, through town meetings, social networking and online education, aims to help teachers infuse more student choice into what they see as an autocratic K-12 public school system. Meanwhile, new, private democratic schools have opened in Seattle, Portland, Denver, New York City and elsewhere, bringing the number to 85, according to the nonprofit Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO). In all, its online directory has swelled to 12,000 options, including those affiliated with Montessori, Waldorf, Democratic and other methods which, while they differ in curriculum, all share a dedication to a learner-centered approach.

By contrast, according to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of kids enrolled in an assigned public school dipped from 80 percent in 1993 to 73 percent in 2007. "We are at a



photo courtesy of IDEA

crucial point," says Jerry Mintz, who founded AERO in 1989. "Everybody knows there is something wrong with the current educational system, and people are now starting to realize they have choices."

## Old Factory Model of Schooling

When parents step into many public school classrooms today, they find neat rows of desks occupied by children, while a teacher in the front of the room presents



photo courtesy of Harriet Tubman Free School

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a lesson. When the bell rings, students file into another room, where the same scene plays out again. That structure, according to education historians, is no accident.

With the Industrial Revolution underway in the 1800s and waves of families moving from rural settings (where life followed a seasonal rhythm) to cities, education pioneers faced a formidable task. “Civic leaders realized that people were not well prepared for this new lifestyle of working in a factory,” explains Ron Miller, Ph.D., a widely published education historian.

“Public education was designed with the idea that people had to learn how to follow a set schedule, follow orders and come up with a product in the end. The day was broken up into time periods with a bell, because that was what factory work entailed.” Miller observes that the system served its purpose well. “The U.S. became a tremendously productive industrial society.”

But by the 1960s, some critics began to point to what they saw as a glaring hypocrisy: America claimed to be a democratic society, yet our youngest citizens were given no voice. In 1968, a group of parents in Sudbury, Massachusetts, founded the Sudbury Valley School, a K-12 learning center where adults were literally prohibited from initiating activities, while kids chose what to do, where and when (*SudVal.org*). One year later, a homeschooling

says the larger movement became usurped by the 1980s trend toward more standardization, with most democratic schools shutting their doors.

Now, growing discontent over standardization has inspired a revival. “The public school system tends to operate under the paradigm that kids are naturally lazy and must be forced to learn, so they need homework and testing to be motivated,” says Mintz. “Advocates of democratic education and other learner-centered approaches believe that children have a natural passion for learning and are good judges of what they need to learn. Our job as educators is to provide them resources.”

## Renewed Democracy in Action

Rebirth of the democratic school movement can be credited in part to Alan Berger, an idealistic New York teacher who, after reading an article about the 1960s Free School movement in 2002, was inspired to open The Brooklyn Free School in the basement of a small church. Today, the school is thriving, with a diverse student body of 60, a new five-story brownstone to call home, and a sliding fee scale that lets children of all economic backgrounds participate in an education they largely create themselves.

On a typical morning, students gather in the music room for impromptu Beatles jam sessions, do yoga in the

“Montessori really is a ‘no child left behind’ teaching philosophy. If you are ready to keep moving, you keep moving. If you aren’t, you can stay on task until you get it.”

~ Tanya Stutzman, whose six children have attended Montessori schools in Sarasota, Florida

“The reading, writing and academics all came out eventually, as day-to-day living required that they learned them.”

~ Wonshe, who “unschooled” both of her sons in rural Virginia

“Waldorf understands that there are many ways for a child to express oneself—not just through words and academics, but also through creativity.”

~ Patrice Maynerd, who enrolled her son in Waldorf education at age 3

hallway, scrawl art across a designated wall or curl up with a book in the well-stocked library. Some attend optional math and writing classes. For others, the year’s lesson plan evolves more organically out of a larger goal. For example, in preparation for a school trip to Tanzania, some students studied Swahili, African cuisine and the region’s history.

“There are just so many things that I love here,” raves student Erin Huang Schaffer in a new documentary about the school called *The Good, The True and The Beautiful*. “I love making art and drawing, and I’ve started making stories... I’m just finding out so much about the world.”

Thousands of miles away, at a new democratic preschool called The Patchwork School, in Louisville, Colorado,



Photo courtesy of Harriet Tubman Free School

D.D., surveyed 41 alumni from the democratic Jefferson County Open School in Denver (one of the oldest public alternative schools in the country) and found that 91 percent went to college, 85 percent completed degree programs and 25 percent earned graduate

degrees. Many lauded their K-12 education there: "Because of the school, I am much less influenced by the need to conform and I'm not afraid to take risks," said Adelle, a 1986 graduate who went on to become a project manager for an entertainment company.

Other comments were less glowing: "I found that I had to scramble to catch up with my peers; the school failed to provide me with even the most basic mathematical skills," said Mary, a 1991 graduate. Kristin, from the class of 1997 added, "When I was applying to colleges, I wished that I had some documentation other than self-assessment; I think this hurt me."

But still other democratic alumni contend that the struggle is only temporary and—in hindsight—well worth it.

Meghan Carrico, 47, attended a democratic school in North Vancouver from age 8 to 13. She told *Natural Awakenings* she did fine academically when she transitioned to a mainstream public high school, but found it "boring and socially barren," with teachers who didn't appreciate her tendency to question authority and venture beyond the status quo.

## Helpful Resources

[DemocraticEducation.org](http://DemocraticEducation.org)  
[DemocraticEducation.com](http://DemocraticEducation.com)  
[EducationRevolution.org](http://EducationRevolution.org)  
[FairTest.org](http://FairTest.org)

She dropped out in 11th grade, then dropped out of a community college for many of the same reasons.

"If I contradicted the professor, I got a bad grade," she recalls. Ultimately, Carrico made her way to the highly progressive Antioch College in Ohio (one of 815 colleges now willing to consider students with no high school test scores), where she ended up with a master's degree in leadership and training. She also landed a job that she loves, teaching in a democratic school.

While Carrico relates that her own early schooling may not have prepared her to fit in at a mainstream classroom or top-down workplace, it absolutely prepared her for a changing world in which factory jobs are dwindling and people must think outside the box.

"People who are really successful in the world today are not waiting around to be told what to do," she comments. Instead, "they are actively creating social networks and seeking out knowledge on their own; these are the very things they learn from kindergarten on in democratic schools."

College success and career paths aside, Miller believes the best way to determine if democratic education is working is to pay a visit to a school and ask the question: "Are the kids excited about school or not?"

On a recent May afternoon at Colorado's Jefferson County Open School, students lounged on puffy couches or sat on the steps with their principal, whom they casually called Wendy. The school year was officially over and warm weather beckoned, but they were in no rush to leave.

To Anna Reihmann, 17, a graduating senior who has attended there since preschool, excelled academically and is headed to college next year, it was a particularly bittersweet day. "I have learned so much about who I am as a person here. It has always felt like home," she said that day. Then she uttered the three words that many parents and teachers say that they don't hear often enough from students these days: "I love school."

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the same principles apply to even the youngest learners. On a recent day, a group of 5-year-olds held a vote and elected to spend the morning crafting miniature cardboard cities. Then their instructor, a precocious 5-year-old named Evan, led the way to the workroom, passing out paints, scissors, Popsicle sticks and glue as an adult watched quietly nearby.

"Everyone here has a voice," affirms Patchwork co-founder Elizabeth Baker, who was homeschooled in a democratic fashion herself. "If we can validate who they are as people now, they can go out into the world with confidence that their thoughts and opinions count."

But, will they be prepared for that world?

## Good Questions

Will children, given the freedom, choose to learn basic skills like reading and math? What will this revolutionary breed of students have to show a college entrance board if they have no test scores? And how will kids schooled with little structure and no hierarchy thrive in a professional world with so much of both? Skeptics abound, and they have pounced on such questions.

Meanwhile, informal surveys of democratic school graduates have yielded mixed answers.

For his new book, *Lives of Passion; School of Hope*, Rick Posner,

# Guide At A Glance

## Alternative Education Approaches

### MONTESSORI

The Montessori method was born in 1907 in the slums of Italy, when physician Maria Montessori founded *Casa dei Bambini*, or Children's House, a school for 50 preschoolers. She believed that children learn best when allowed to independently explore an orderly environment, stocked with hands-on materials that engage all five senses.

Today, the United States is home to 10,000 Montessori schools. More than 60 percent are for children under 6, with an increasing number extending through high school; kids are grouped in three-year age spans.

Classrooms for the youngest children come stocked with miniature furniture and kitchens, which enables them to make their own snacks and lunches. Independence and order are key, as students are free to move around the room, selecting from neatly arranged materials, like strings of beads that represent numbers or wooden blocks symbolizing letters.

"Montessori is hyper-intellectual," comments Tim Seldin, of the International Montessori Council. "We raise kids who are joyful scholars."

A 2006 study in *Science Magazine* found Montessori 5-year-olds were significantly better prepared in science and math than those who attended conventional preschools. They also tested better on executive function, defined as the ability to adapt in response to problems.

"They don't just make you memorize facts," says 15-year-old Natacha Stutzman, who attended a Montessori school in Sarasota, Florida, through 8th grade. "They teach you life lessons."

Find details at [Montessori.org](http://Montessori.org).

### WALDORF

The Waldorf movement began in 1919, when Austrian scientist Rudolf Steiner established a school for children of employees of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany. According to his philosophy, children evolve through three, seven-year stages, first absorbing the world through the senses in early childhood, and later through fantasy and imagination. Only after puberty comes the rational, abstract power of the intellect. Consequently, Waldorf's lower-grade classes emphasize free play and fantasy and discourage exposure to media. Most schools allow no computers in the classroom until middle school, and reading is not formally taught until second grade.

"At a time when kindergartens are becoming more academic, we are protecting the child's right to play," advises Patrice Maynerd, outreach director for the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America. She explains that rather than using textbooks, students create their own lesson books, which they build upon through high school. In contrast to the widespread elimination of art and music classes in public schools, Waldorf's philosophy centers on creating the "Renaissance child," encouraging every student to play an instrument and participate in theater.

Teachers follow their classes through the first eight grades, so that one child may have the same instructor for their entire experience. There are 165 Waldorf Schools in North America. A Waldorf-sponsored survey of 526 graduates found that 94 percent attended college, and 90 percent are highly satisfied with their careers.

Find details at [WhyWaldorfWorks.org](http://WhyWaldorfWorks.org).



### HOMESCHOOLING AND UNSCHOOLING

Today, more than 2 million students are homeschooled in the United States, up from 850,000 in 1999, according to the U.S. Department of Education. While roughly 90 percent of these students follow some set curriculum, about 10 percent adhere to an approach called unschooling, which, much like democratic education, allows students to choose what and how they wish to learn, and for how long.

"I define unschooling as allowing children as much freedom to learn in the world as their parents can comfortably bear," says Pat Farenga, president of Holt Associates Inc., a homeschooling consulting firm. "For instance, a young child's interest in hot rods might lead him or her to a study of how the engine works (science), how and when a car was built (history and business), and who built it (biography). They learn when it makes sense for them to do so."

Find details at [HomeEdMag.com](http://HomeEdMag.com), supplemented by [Unschooling.com](http://Unschooling.com).