

# *WHY DO THESE KIDS LOVE SCHOOL?*

A film by Dorothy Fadiman

## STUDY GUIDE

### CONTENTS

The Story Behind <i>WHY DO THESE KIDS LOVE SCHOOL?</i> .....	2
The Roots of Alternative Education.....	3
Audience Involvement.....	5
Before-Viewing Activities.....	5
Images and Ideas: A Scene-by-Scene Tour.....	6
After-Viewing Activities.....	16
Next Steps: Creating Schools That Kids Love.....	18
Alternative Education Checklist.....	20
School Profiles.....	21
Resource Information.....	29

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## THE STORY BEHIND *WHY DO THESE KIDS LOVE SCHOOL?*

Several years ago, I set out to make a documentary about Peninsula School, a nursery through eighth grade independent school founded in California in 1925. My own children had thrived there. They, and the majority of their fellow students, continued to do well academically and socially in high school, college, and after. The challenge which so many educators and parents face — how do we engage students in school? — was not an issue in that environment. I felt impelled to document this example of a place where children love school.

With the support of KTEH, a local PBS station, I spent several years videotaping at Peninsula. As the project evolved, I realized that it was essential to include examples of innovative public schools from around the country. Through further research, I discovered public schools, from coast to coast, which demonstrated that it was indeed possible to transform individual classrooms, whole schools, even entire districts, into places which meet the deeper learning, social, physical and emotional needs of children.

This videotaping odyssey, which took me to schools in California, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Colorado, Massachusetts, and New York, documented the fact that vibrant, effective education, involving a wide range of ethnic and economic populations, is already happening. What I learned when I visited these schools is how creativity and energy are unleashed when a school community—relatively free of outside interference—is free to assess, and meet, its own needs. I observed that schools flourish when given individual freedom to determine the best programs and fund allocations for themselves.

All of the schools featured in the documentary share certain common elements with other progressive settings around the country. Among these are:

- That *learning is an active process*, based not only on thinking, both creatively and critically, but even more essentially, on personal experience.
- Ideally, *school is a supportive community* where the responsibility for what happens, (the frustrations and challenges, the successes and breakthroughs, the setting of goals, etc.) is shared by everyone involved: administrators, teachers, parents and students.
- The goal is to have *students enjoy learning, feel competent as learners, and feel good about themselves as individuals.*

The most significant single quality I saw in all of the schools I observed, no matter how different the approaches, was this: The adults who were responsible for the children's education trusted that these children, given the opportunity, could become active participants in their own educations.

—Dorothy Fadiman

## THE ROOTS OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Alternative education is not a fad. While the ideas presented in *Why Do These Kids Love School?* may seem innovative to many viewers, they have been developed and refined through two centuries of debate and experimentation. What follows is a capsule history. Those who want to know more about the origins and people who contributed to the evolution of these approaches will find a rich variety of resources in the bibliography.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, most American children received the basics of their education at home. The student-teacher ratio was 1:1. Instruction, by a parent or other relative, was individualized. The curriculum focused on real-world matters—food, shelter, clothing, moral behavior. Physical activity was an integral part of the process. The goal was to improve performance, rather than compare one child with another through the use of grades.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, all this had changed. The industrial revolution caused widespread migration from rural areas to cities. Children ages 6 to 16 were compelled by law to be in school—away from their primary caregivers. Influenced by the unprecedented efficiencies of mass production, education became "mass education," wherein one teacher had the responsibility for "shaping" dozens of students. This new educational system had the following features:

- Learning flowed in one direction—from teacher to students; thus, student questions and conversation about the material were seen as unnecessary and even distracting.
- Removed from everyday life, the content of learning became increasingly abstract and packaged in isolated units. Because students often failed to see the meaning or relevance of lessons, educators were led to invent extrinsic motivators such as stars, stickers, awards or the threat of failure and humiliation.
- The packaged, mass-produced curriculum required increasingly less teacher involvement in its creation, causing a decline in the status of teachers.
- Given the focus on the content, rather than on the learner, the pace of learning became predetermined—"so much material" had to be covered in "so much time." Children who were unable to keep up with the pre-established sequence were pejoratively labeled "slow learners." Other students, for whom the pace was agonizingly slow, often became bored, or even became troublemakers or wise guys.
- Evaluation became normative/comparative; students were graded—like mass-produced products.
- For ease of management, children were expected—and required—to remain inactive and quiet for long periods of time. For the sake of efficiency, children were separated according to age—despite the fact that throughout

history youngsters had always played a vital role in teaching each other.

- Gradually, control moved from those most directly involved in learning—students, teachers, and parents—to centralized administrations and to even more distant manufacturers of textbooks and educational materials.

- Essentially, through the system of education, children were being prepared to play their part in the industrial revolution.

At the turn of the twentieth century, certain educators and others recognized the negative implications of mass education. John Dewey (1859-1952), an educator and philosopher, became an articulate critic and activist, one voice in a growing movement committed to implementing humane reform in education. Dewey and his colleagues characterized the system as "joyless, anti-creative, anti-democratic, and ultimately counter-productive." They outlined alternatives to the existing system, based on the assumption that children were natural learners who took real pleasure in mastering ideas, tools, and materials.

Among the major contributors to this movement, which had its roots in 17th century Europe, are John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) who advocated universal education, with equal access for women; Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1712-1778) who affirmed children's natural goodness; the Swiss humanitarian J.H. Pestalozzi (1746-1827) who emphasized the balance of "head, heart and body" in education; Joseph Neef (1770-1854), William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), A. Bronson Alcott—father of Louisa May Alcott (1799-1888), Francis W. Parker (1837-1902); Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), founder of the kindergarten system; social philosopher Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925), and Maria Montessori (1870-1952) who held that children's development issues came from within themselves.

The work of all of these educators, and their many colleagues who are not listed here, emphasized that learning could be active, practical, cooperative, joyful, and integrated. For them, learning was a process that extended beyond the walls of school and that was integral with one's life. This vision, as it evolved, did not seek a return to a pre-industrial "Golden Age." On the contrary, it was "progressive." We can now see that it anticipated the kind of dynamic learning found in today's most productive businesses, laboratories, and think-tanks.

These educators anticipated the pitfalls of sterile, anti-human, mass-oriented schools. They would not be surprised by today's dropout statistics, nor by the despair of so many teachers, nor by the low level of academic achievement found in many sectors of the nation.

At the same time, they would be buoyed by the continued and daring experimentation of many teachers and parents, innovators who see education in human—rather than mechanistic—terms. They would honor schools that measure their worth not primarily through test scores, but more through the attitude the children have about learning.

*Why Do These Kids Love School?* was made to celebrate this vision and to honor the people who have kept it alive.

## AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT

*Why Do These Kids Love School?* was originally created as a TV special. You might simply choose to let the hour-long program play, then afterwards, discuss ideas which it stimulated. However, if you wish to create a more structured viewing experience, the following easy-to-arrange activities may prove valuable. The intention of what follows is to get people thinking about their own experiences, in personal terms, and about the nature of schooling in general. Hopefully, viewers will also be stimulated to think about what changes would be valuable, and what might they want to do in order to become part of this larger vision of change toward more humane education.

To maximize participation, we recommend dividing the audience into small groups for discussion.

## BEFORE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

The following activities can be done immediately before the screening. Or, if the program is being shown as part of a class, you might ask participants to write their responses ahead of time, then discuss the responses during class time.

- **Memories:** Have participants share positive and negative memories of school. What are their strongest memories? In discussing these, observe patterns about what are common features people have liked and disliked about school.

- **Word association:** Have audience members write or share aloud what comes to mind when presented with some or all of the following words:

report cards/grades	being late
getting/doing homework	taking tests
asking questions	passing notes
sitting at your desk	friends
being called on	discipline/punishment
creative writing	cheating
math	whispering
art/music/drama	teachers
gym class	stars (or other rewards)
picking teams	the principal
sports	laughter/tears
failing	success

(add words to the list which might open provocative associations)

Discuss what features make school appealing or unappealing...and why.

- **Teachers' Hall of Fame:** Ask participants to recall their favorite teachers and then list qualities that make those teachers special. It might be useful, also, to

list the qualities of the least liked teachers and compare those features as well.

- **Learning Success Stories:** Ask participants to list skills of which they are proud or areas in which they feel especially competent, then describe the circumstances under which these developed. What are some of the common factors: peer relationships? individualized instruction? mentors or examples? time alone? cooperative learning? workbooks? grades? outside reading? field trips? direct experiences?

- **Viewing Pointers:** List key themes and activities such as individualized instruction, teacher autonomy, hands-on learning, etc., and look for examples of these during the showing of the program. Use the following Scene-by-Scene Tour as a guide.

## **IMAGES AND IDEAS:**

### **A Scene-by-Scene Tour of *Why Do These Kids Love School?***

In *Why Do These Kids Love School?* the ideas are woven into a series of scenes. While the program delivers a holistic view of education, understanding the individual concepts may be enhanced by looking closely at specific scenes in the program. The following outline will provide a springboard for discussion, by highlighting one or more relevant ideas in each scene.

#### **SCENE 1. Nursery School: Children painting**

##### **Learning to make choices**

- With the support of adults who help them recognize what they want, children become skillful in making choices. This skill requires practice in a variety of situations where a child has a chance to exercise real options.

##### **Introducing communication skills**

- Developing the ability to communicate effectively with other people begins at an early age. As early as nursery school, children are able to work on expressing themselves clearly in order to resolve problems.

#### **SCENE 2. Kindergarten: Body tracing**

##### **Celebrating individuality**

- A simple, inexpensive activity—body outlining—can be used to acknowledge the uniqueness of each child. Ideally, reinforcing each child's distinctive nature begins early and is continued throughout the years.

##### **Building self-esteem**

- There are many ways to help children build a positive self-image. Giving them individual attention is the most direct. Even within a limited budget

there are ways to do this. Among them would be: encouraging parents to come into the classroom more often; arranging for seniors to volunteer a few hours a week; planning times for the children to give individual attention to each other; inviting college students to spend time at school; etc.

### **SCENE 3. Singing class (Grade 1)**

#### **Supporting ways of doing things differently**

- A child-centered teacher will always try to "make room" for individual capacities. By allowing a student to sing "...in his key," rather than insisting that he conform, the music teacher respects this child's own creative expression. Holistic instruction focuses less on the product, and more on the producer.

### **SCENE 4. Reading (Grade 1)**

#### **Having fun**

- Integrating pleasure with learning increases academic success.

#### **Offering a variety of techniques**

- Recognizing the needs of different learners, teachers employ a wide range of methods and materials.

#### **Parental involvement**

- When parents become involved as an integral part of the program, they can offer valuable assistance in the classroom.

### **SCENE 5. Science Lab (Grade 1)**

#### **Exercising the power of observation**

- In this science lab, the children begin with "ordinary" materials and an opportunity to make "simple" observations. Allowing students to discover the point of the lesson invites them to be young scientists, rather than just recipients of information.

#### **Creating chances for discovery**

- Young children can be introduced to the fact that science is not a collection of facts, but rather a process of discovery. As Einstein put it, "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

#### **Treating childrens' ideas as contributions**

- Any lesson, in any subject area, can provide a chance to honor the students' contributions, such as when the teacher says to her class: "You're the ones who showed me how to do this."

### **SCENE 6. Teachers' Meeting**

#### **Collegiality**

- Cooperation is a process that can—and should—involve everyone in the school community. Teachers, particularly, need time to be in dialogue with each other. Cooperation does not necessarily mean "group think". To be creative,

teachers need a forum to exercise their individuality, just as the students do.

### **Flexible curriculum**

- The curriculum of a school—like the culture of a community—can be a living, shared "invention".
- Learning activities need not be age-limited; e.g., "This is supposed to be for junior high kids, but I think that..." As Bruner suggests, any lesson can—with imagination—be adapted for children of any age.

## **SCENE 7. Math (Grade 2)**

### **Independent learning—freedom and responsibility**

- If children are to love math, they must experience for themselves the thrills of finding truths in math. The math facts that we prize and want students to prize came to humankind by the process of discovery.
- Because most textbooks require conformity, the teachers must take responsibility for fostering independent learning, in addition to, or even instead of, textbooks.

### **Freedom to move in class...while learning!**

- Mathematics has its roots in physical activity; i.e., measurement. Children need the same kind of kinesthetic learning in their classrooms. Thus, the freedom to move around and talk with fellow learners may be productive.

## **SCENE 8. Creative writing (Grade 3)**

### **Writing as a creative process**

- Effective self-expression evolves from the difficult—sometimes scary—process of struggling with ideas. Students may need guidance to get started. Then, they can ask for help, if they need it, while they work. The conversation between students and teachers remains active throughout the grades. The students learn that writing can be both a social, as well as a solo, activity. For many writers, the ability to ask questions is the source of their work. To nurture powerful writers, means teaching children to be willing to ask questions.

### **Making mistakes as part of learning**

- Correction of grammar, spelling, and punctuation is necessary. But fear of making mistakes can hamper a child from having the courage to write creatively. It is important that what a child has to say is valued, before it is criticized.

## **SCENE 9. Students reading their own stories (Grade 3)**

### **Developing personal courage for self-expression**

- Writing, ultimately, is not only about what gets put onto paper or onto the computer screen. It is also what happens between the writer and the reader, or the writer and the person who listens. To borrow from Martin Buber, it is an "I-

thou" activity. Thus, a key element in writing instruction is giving students opportunities to share their work with peers, not for criticism, but for pleasure.

**Cultivating "the fine art of listening"**

- Sharing aloud not only cultivates self-confidence for the speaker, but also gives the other students a chance to practice the art of listening.

**SCENE 10. Parent concerned about no report cards**

**Creative forms of evaluation, such as progress reports, rather than letter grades or numerical scores**

- Alternative schools try to avoid competitive evaluation systems, and seek to find other ways to give important feedback about how a child is doing, such as written or oral progress reports with an evaluation relative to a child's capacity, interest and situation.

**Parental support crucial in non-traditional situations**

- The case for non-competitive student reports is compelling. However, for some parents, this approach may cause anxiety. Interaction with parents is crucial, if parents are to understand — and support — a system of ungraded evaluations.

**SCENE 11. Crafts Workshops (Mixed grades)**

**Experimenting with the Arts provides learning opportunities for young people, not only in using their imaginations, but in preparation for "real life" as well.**

*Woodshop*

- Creative activity is not merely about creativity. It is a powerful means of developing self-confidence for functioning resourcefully in the world. Being comfortable with real tools, for example, is vital in a technological society. This exposure can begin as early as 1st grade, which is the age of the children using the hammers in the documentary.

- Developing hand-eye coordination lays the foundation for other fine and gross motor control activities, both in school and in work situations later.

*Weaving*

- Staying with a tedious task, such as warping a loom and then completing a weaving, teaches perseverance.

- When math has a clear application for a pleasurable elective, numbers and mathematical processes become relevant, and gain new meaning.

*Metal Shop*

- To foster individual autonomy, the teacher must encourage students to make their own decisions. This can be done through the simplest kinds of verbal interactions, such as when the teacher asks "Are you sure? Is this the way you want it?"

- Developing self-confidence means, at times, deferring to the child's desires and opinions, even if the teacher might know a "better" way: "You stop when it's the way you want it."

## SCENE 12. Workjobs

### **Do effective schools necessarily cost more?**

- "Good education does not need to cost more." While having a bigger budget helps any institution with its program, more money is not the factor which makes any of the schools in *Why Do These Kids Love School?* effective. Rather, it was the spirit and the vision of each school, and, based on that, the way money was then spent.

### **Participating in the maintenance of the school**

- In terms of cost-cutting, having children and parents help with chores at the school can amount to a major savings.
- Having children help maintain the school and take pride in it is also an effective-and inexpensive-antidote to vandalism.
- One way to create and maintain a democratic environment within the school community is to have everybody share in regular chores.

## SCENE 13. Carnival (Grade 4)

### **Developing community spirit**

- If we want children to become nurturing adults, we must give them opportunities to practice the art of nurturing. What better place to do this than in the school?
  - Cross-age interaction increases the number of teachers available in a school. It also benefits the older children who act as teachers, for, as Seneca wrote centuries ago: "While we teach, we learn."
  - Carefully structured, so-called "extra-curricular" activities can have enormous educational value. For example, the carnival gives children a chance to plan activities for others, manage money, practice building skills, troubleshoot, clean up when it is over, and so on.

## SCENE 14. Mask making (Grade 4)

### **Building trust and comfort with class members**

- A cooperative classroom environment cannot be wished into existence. It is created through interactive activities, in which children actually learn to trust each other.
  - Touch—handshaking or hugging, for example—is a powerful route for building trust. Activities that permit students to touch each other can lay the foundation for a cooperative learning atmosphere throughout the whole school curriculum.

## SCENE 15. Sports/class meeting (Grade 5)

### **Conflict resolution as an integral part of the curriculum**

- If teachers or other authorities step in to resolve conflicts, students will not learn to solve problems themselves. Ideally, the teacher will structure

situations which enable young people to work out solutions with each other.

- Giving and accepting feedback are arts that can be learned. But like all arts, practitioners improve through practice. Such practice requires a safe environment, such as regularly scheduled meetings.

- Regular meetings enable students to air grievances, articulate suggestions and, perhaps most importantly, build a community of mutual care and concern for each other.

#### **SCENE 16. Geography: making model mountains (Grade 4)**

##### **Hands-on activities**

- A learning-by-doing lesson requires materials that invite direct involvement. While interacting with such materials, students can relate the content of a lesson to the world they see and touch.

- Tangible results enhance learning. Holistic teachers demonstrate the power of the words of the great French scientist Claude Bernard: "A fact in itself is nothing."

##### **Integrated learning**

- Many disciplines can be brought to one subject...geography, measurement, the arts, learning cooperative group skills.

#### **SCENE 17. A graduate in his seventies**

##### **Appreciating the historical context for this education**

- This approach to education has withstood the test of time, and is still evolving. The idea of integrating disciplines, for example, has been one of the foundations of this philosophy of education since its inception.

#### **SCENE 18. Medieval history (Mixed Grades 6-8)**

##### **Self-directed learning**

- Many adult vocations involve participating in self-directed groups. Learning to be self-motivated, and how to be a productive member of that kind of group, is an asset in any undertaking or profession.

##### **Connecting social skills to learning**

- An atmosphere where academics and social development are combined makes both kinds of learning more meaningful.

#### **SCENE 19. Economics lesson-auction (Grade 8)**

##### **Student interest as one of the most essential motivators**

- Beginning with children's interests—e.g. food, as in the auction—is an ideal starting point for building a motivating lesson.

- No subject is inherently dull. Teachers in these settings are continually challenged to provide a dynamic and, if possible, fun context for the material to be learned.

#### **SCENE 20. Evaluation meeting (Grade 7)**

### **Self-evaluation**

- Student-centered learning must extend to the process of evaluation in order for students to reflect on their own experiences, on the material they've been given, and on their teachers. If the teacher is the only one to evaluate the learning experience, extremely relevant information is lost, and the students become passive learners. Self-evaluation is a valuable life-skill that a rich school curriculum can nurture.

## **SCENE 21. Transition to a traditional school: grad night, interview with a parent, interview with a high school teacher**

### **Oral tradition—"passing on" information**

- Parents of students from alternative schools frequently worry about the academic challenges that must be faced in non-alternative settings. There are natural expectations and, often, questions about future performance. Because of alternative evaluation procedures, it may not be possible to know exactly how well prepared alternative students are. Though most students go through an initial period of adjustment, they generally do extremely well, because they have learned how to learn. However, it makes sense to have past students and parents talk about how it was for them to travel the road ahead.

### **Why do graduates of these programs do well in structured settings?**

- Teachers in more traditional schools often report that students from innovative settings tend to be independent, creative thinkers, who can work on their own and are good problem solvers.

## **SCENE 22. Building the playhouse (Grade 8)**

### **Contributing to the community**

- Working together to make something to give to the school is a culmination of learned skills. It is also a ritual, preparing students to go on in their lives, to become contributing citizens in society at large.

### **Applying skills**

- Using learned skills for a real purpose helps students recognize the value of what they have learned.

## **SCENE 23. Graduation**

### **Ritual and ceremony**

- The ceremony of graduation serves to acknowledge the completion of one period, and celebrate entering a new phase, bringing attention to a young person's approaching adulthood.

## **SCENE 24. John Chubb's interview**

### **School autonomy**

- Researchers are finding that schools which have greater autonomy are more likely to create programs that work for their populations. At the same time, to quote John Chubb of the Brookings Institution, due to a number of issues, "Autonomy does not come easily to America's schools." With that caveat in mind, it is important to note that there is a strong and growing movement in the United States toward innovation and greater autonomy for schools and teachers. There are a number of relevant resources (organizations, newsletters, magazines, books, etc.) supporting this direction in education.

#### **SCENE 25. Carlos Medina, former Superintendent of Dist. 4 in E. Harlem**

**Alternative schools are proving to effectively address a spectrum of real challenges**

- Alternative programs now outnumber traditional programs in East Harlem. They have grown in popularity because they have demonstrated success in educating core disadvantaged populations, who have traditionally had a high dropout rate. The fundamental change is that these are programs in which students feel engaged in what goes on in school, and genuinely like being there.

#### **SCENE 26. Central Park East II Elementary School, East Harlem, NY**

**Validating children's communications**

- Learning how to communicate is the foundation of learning at schools like CPE II. This approach involves encouraging children to share what they learned at home in their own day-to-day worlds.

- The simple act of writing down what children say validates their knowledge and builds self-esteem. It says to the youngsters: "Your ideas are important. You are important."

#### **SCENE 27. City Magnet, Lowell, Massachusetts**

**Academic content has relevance when students are involved**

- Studying math in a bank, for example, allows the processes to become genuinely useful activities, as opposed to rote memorizations.

**Involving students in the disciplinary process**

- Discipline makes sense—and is seen as something positive—when it is a process in which children get involved—writing laws, judging cases—rather than a structure imposed from the outside.

#### **SCENE 28. Clara Barton, Minneapolis**

**Honoring individual learning styles**

- Every child has a unique learning style. To reach each learner therefore, requires flexibility in teaching methods and materials; for example, for "kinesthetic" learners, using their bodies in a geometry lesson is ideal.

- Creating lessons that involve all the senses—visual, tactile auditory, auditory kinesthetic—maximizes the odds that learning will occur for each

individual.

- Multi-sensory lessons tend to be more exciting for children.

### **SCENE 29. Davis Alternative, Jackson, Mississippi**

#### **Cooperative learning**

- It takes considerable planning to set up a cooperative learning environment. However, the investment pays off in that this method creates a fertile atmosphere for all learning.

- Cooperative methods reduce discipline problems since children learn to focus on helping each other.

### **SCENE 30. Tanglewood Open Living School, Jefferson, Colorado**

#### **Responsive curriculum**

- The best way to create a curriculum that truly interests young people is to start with their actual interests, and build from there.

- Any subject that interests children can serve as a vehicle for teaching all of the traditional school subjects. Integrated learning is not a pedagogical trick. It happens because real-world topics, by their nature, connect with a host of related topics.

#### **Opportunities for service**

- Genuine learning involves giving, and not just receiving. Inviting children to share what they know—through internships, cross-age instruction, and so on—makes learning whole and natural.

- Giving students opportunities to share, and to do some form of service, meets one of their deepest needs—the need to be needed. Satisfying that need is one of the surest ways to head off behavior problems. When people are valued for what they do, they don't have the same desire to assert their power through indirect, disruptive means.

### **SCENE 31. Graham and Parks, Cambridge, Massachusetts**

#### **Teachers are central to the evolution of the curriculum**

- An involving curriculum cannot be purchased. It must be created by and for those who will experience it. Most teachers would like to, and are able to create imaginative lessons, which will suit their teaching styles. In many situations, teachers are not given the freedom to do this.

- Allowing teachers to create their own curriculum is a powerful way to head off teacher burnout. Teachers who invent their own lessons are more likely to be excited, and to develop the courage to "close the textbook and teach."

#### **Participation of everyone in the school community**

- Parent involvement is infectiously appealing. When children see that their parents and teachers are actively involved and participating in the learning process, they become more involved themselves.

## **SCENE 32. Central Park East High School, East Harlem**

### **Encouraging and practicing leadership skills**

- Leadership is not a prize to be won by the most popular or most adept student. Leadership is an experience that every child must have a chance to practice, for it is a major way to empower young people.

### **Teacher collaboration**

- When teachers overcome isolation—by talking about what they teach and how they teach—they inevitably gain respect for each other and for themselves.

Emphasizing the value of education

- Creating bridges between school and the world outside not only makes lessons more interesting, it helps create responsible, self-respecting adults who believe what they think and feel matters. Writing to elected officials is a real action, not just an exercise.

## **SCENE 33. New Orleans Free School**

### **The struggle for school autonomy**

- Every school must have some autonomy in order to create its own program, but creating alternative approaches in traditional systems is not easy.

### **The importance of giving older students a chance to choose and follow their preferences, and to exercise the power of choice**

- Placing a "choice program" at the heart of a school ensures variety and increased self-confidence. Options among activities make it more likely that school will appeal to a wide range of children, to a wide range of their needs and talents—and to a spectrum of teachers as well.

### **The need for patience in establishing alternatives**

- The task of creating and establishing alternatives is not the work of a day. It is an ongoing struggle of the sort that characterizes any truly creative act.

## **SCENE 34. Interview with Bill Thomas, Assistant Superintendent**

### **The importance of communicating with people who are uninformed about alternatives**

- Effective alternative programs can be learning—transforming—experiences for administrators.

## **SCENE 35. Interview with Bob Ferris**

### **The essential nature of school-site decision making**

- Real program development must happen at the school level in order for a program to meet the real needs of its community.

## **SCENE 36. Singing "LEAN ON ME" with sign language**

### **Expanding young people's worlds**

- One of the most profound effects of exposing students to a rich and varied curriculum is giving them an expanded sense of themselves, as capable, multi-faceted beings, with much to offer.

## **AFTER--VIEWING ACTIVITIES**

- **Criteria for good education:** Brainstorm a list of features that participants would anticipate finding in an effective learning situation.

- **Invent a school that kids love:** Ask each viewer to write and share their own idealized "10 Commandments" for creating a humane school.

- **Self-evaluation:** If you are working with members of a particular school—teachers, parents, students—you might consider discussing some of the following topics:

#### **Community:**

- Is there too much competition in our school?
- Do we provide students with models for cooperative learning?
- Do we have opportunities to work together as a community?

#### **Discipline:**

- Do we teach students how to handle problems or are our responses reactions to crises?
- Could we give students more responsibility in evaluating the behavior of their peers?

#### **Environment:**

- Do we value quiet for quiet's sake? Are the classrooms as comfortable as they could be?
- Could the "decor" be softened or made to look more natural?

#### **Faculty/Administration:**

- Should there be more time for sharing among teachers? If yes, how can we make that happen?
- Could responsibilities be divided more equitably, between teachers and administrators? How?

#### **Parental involvement:**

- How frequently are parents seen in our classrooms?
- Do teachers invite parents to help with the academic program?
- Is homework designed to involve parents?

#### **Self-esteem:**

- What opportunities do our students have to study what interests them?
- Do we help students find ways to serve their peers and the school?
- How do we reward positive behavior/academic performance?

♦ **A Final Suggestion: Look Again**

The most useful post-viewing activity might be to see the program a second time, particularly if the scene-by-scene outline is referred to before and/or after the screening. For many viewers, a second viewing proves even more valuable than the first in terms of clarifying specific issues, picking up subtle points and suggesting strategies for next steps.

## NEXT STEPS: CREATING SCHOOLS THAT KIDS LOVE

After viewing *Why Do These Kids Love School?* you may wish to revitalize an existing school or start a new one. As you might guess, imagining a school is far easier than actually starting one in reality. However, an increasing number of brave souls are accepting this challenge. So, if you have decided to read on, here are some practical steps to consider:

### **A) Form a planning group.**

Creating—or recreating—a school is not a one-person job. It requires cooperation and community building. You'll want a core group of teachers, parents, students, and others who care about learning. You might begin by inviting prospective planners to a showing of *Why Do These Kids Love School?*, followed by a discussion and a chance for people to share their own dream about a school.

### **B) Create a "vision statement."**

Discussions about education sometimes end up as gripe sessions: cathartic but not productive. If you want results, have the group brainstorm the features of a school they would value. Make the ingredients as specific as possible. For ideas, use the "Alternative Education Checklist" at the end of this section.

### **C) Learn more.**

Your "vision statement" will undoubtedly suggest areas requiring further study. A good bibliography will help you get started. Form sub-committees, and ask group members to report on various topics. Also invite experts from the local school district or college to make presentations to your group. Consider attending workshops sponsored by one or more of the organizations listed in the resource catalogue. You may also want to subscribe to the newsletters listed there. (Information about ordering an extensive alternative education bibliography and resource catalogue are listed at the end of this study guide.)

### **D) Assess educational options already available.**

People often have only a vague idea of the educational options open to them. To avoid reinventing the wheel, get to know the schools in your area. Begin by contacting local school districts and independent schools. In a letter or over the phone, briefly indicate the type of school you are looking for. This description can be based on your vision statement.

There are two straightforward ways to investigate a school that claims to offer the type of program in which you're interested. First, you can visit the school yourself and draw your own conclusions. Also, you can have someone who knows the school fill out the "Alternative Education Checklist (see page 20).

### **E) Clarify your needs.**

Your survey of available programs may reveal that the program you want already exists. Maybe the only need is for that program to become better known.

On the other hand, your research may convince you that an alternative is needed. If so, read on.

**F) Decide whether you want your alternative to be a private school or to be part of the public school system.**

If you are going to create a private alternative school, your first consideration will be funding. Schools are expensive to start (building, furniture, etc.) and to operate (salaries, insurance, materials). Invest time in learning the economic realities by visiting with several private schools and by reading about the operation of such schools.

If you want to establish a public alternative school, you'll eventually need to meet with the district administrator in charge of program planning. This might be the superintendent or one of the assistant superintendents. Your initial meeting will have two functions: first, to explain what kind of alternative you are looking for, and second, to find out about the district's procedures for starting alternatives. Proposing an alternative is a delicate matter. The better prepared you are, the more likely the chances of success. One way to ready yourself is to read *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Starting a Public Alternative School* by Nancy J. Hall and Douglas Jenner (COLORADO OPTIONS IN EDUCATION 98 N. Wadsworth #127 Box 191 Lakewood CO 80215.) This 57-page booklet covers basic steps such as:

- Establishing a program-development time line
- Creating an effective political organization
- Establishing a working relationship with the district's staff
- Overcoming objections from the power structure
- Publicizing your program
- Troubleshooting your plan before trouble happens
- Developing a realistic budget
- Choosing a site
- Recruiting students
- Hiring the staff
- Opening the school
- Evaluating the program
- Networking with other public alternative schools

An outstanding comprehensive bibliography of research on alternative schools is available from: Dr. Mary Anne Raywid, Center for the Study of Educational Alternatives, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11550.

Starting, or restructuring a school is tough work. All of the schools in the documentary were started, or restructured, by people with extraordinary determination. In every case, their commitment was fueled by their passion to realize a dream, and sustained by the support they got from people who shared their vision.

## **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION CHECKLIST**

This list provides an overview of some of the key characteristics of successful schools. These features can be used to evaluate an existing program, or review one which is being envisioned.

### **LEARNING ATMOSPHERE**

- A primary goal is for students to like being at school, and to enjoy learning.
- Learning is an active, rather than passive, process.
- Learning involves direct, personal experiences for the students.
- Individual learning styles and paces are respected.
- Learning often happens cooperatively, and takes place in groups.
- Teachers encourage feedback and questions.
- Original thinking, both critical and creative, is encouraged.
- Discussion engages students in what they are studying.
- The approach to subject matter is interdisciplinary.
- Teachers strive for understanding—not memorization.
- Many lessons are planned so that children may move freely around the classroom.
- Alternatives to numerical scores and letter grades are considered options.

### **CURRICULUM**

- Course material is relevant and engaging.
- Service activities are encouraged within the school and community.
- Curriculum includes courses such as environmental studies, peace education, ethnic history, and awareness of global interdependence.
- Arts, crafts, music, drama, trips, sports, etc. are valued activities.
- Students' needs and interests help shape the curriculum.
- Teachers participate in curriculum building, as well as text selection.

### **EMOTIONAL NEEDS AND PERSONAL GROWTH**

- Each child's uniqueness is honored and encouraged.
- The ability to make choices is developed throughout the curriculum.
- Evaluation focuses on an individual's achievement, relative to ability, and is not comparative.
- Class meetings build community and address concerns.
- Discipline is not arbitrary. Students are involved in the process of discussing appropriate penalties.

### **THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

- The staff provides opportunities for cross-age interaction.
- Parental participation in classrooms is encouraged and supported.
- Mutually respectful relationships are cultivated throughout the school, among students, among teachers and students, between faculty members, etc.
- The skills of conflict resolution are both used and taught.
- Teachers, students, parents, and administrators share responsibility.

## SCHOOL PROFILES

### **PENINSULA SCHOOL, Menlo Park, CA** (Nursery thru 8th grade)

**Founding.** Peninsula School was founded in 1925 by a small group of parents. They joined forces to create a school environment where learning would be directly related to children's natural talents and interests.

**Class Size/Funding.** Average class size is 20 students. Funding comes from a combination of sources: tuition payments, two annual fundraising events put on by everyone in the school, a "guided giving" program (people give according to their means—which in turn provides scholarships). Many parents work at the school in exchange for tuition credits.

**Challenges.** A challenge Peninsula has faced from the beginning is that of being misunderstood. Because the children do not usually sit at desks, or because they might spend an hour or more a day doing crafts, some people assume that the students, therefore, don't learn anything "useful." In reality, the majority of Peninsula's graduates enter advanced standing academic classes in high school. As this fact becomes better known, attitudes about Peninsula are changing. A continuing challenge is financial: how to keep tuition moderate in order to attract a broad based economic population, while paying competitive teacher's salaries and keeping up the maintenance on an aging facility.

**Mission.** Peninsula's vision is for each child to discover and develop his or her own unique strengths, while learning to be a contributing member of the community.

**Contact:** Kacy McClure, Peninsula School, Peninsula Way, Menlo Park CA 94025

### **CENTRAL PARK EAST (CPE II), East Harlem, NY** (Pre-kindergarten to 6th grade)

**Founding.** At the time of CPE II's founding in 1979, there was a lengthy as waiting list for CPE I, a school fashioned after the British Infant Schools and the progressive schools envisioned by John Dewey. CPE II grew from the need to provide the community with another school that would be modeled on the developmentally interactive model of CPE I, which was proving to be so effective with a wide range of populations—for functionally and/or financially disadvantaged, as well as gifted students.

**Class Size/Funding.** As in other schools in the district, average class size

is 28. In addition to receiving the same basic budget as other schools, CPE II uses tax levy monies, and applies for grants. Each year, the school receives about \$15,000 from grants and approximately \$4,000 from fundraisers.

**Challenges.** In 1989, the school suffered from a combination of difficult events, which were stressful to the students, staff and parents, but from which they gained strength. For instance, a roof collapse necessitated relocation to smaller quarters, followed by the tragic death of an important and beloved staff member. Using interactive coping strategies, school members were able to pull together. Parents formed a supportive activist group, which has gone on to become a voice in the larger community. Students were encouraged to discuss these events, and as a result, they developed a "Bill of Needs" declaring the needs of each student in the school. The staff also used this situation to reassess the school, and out of their discussions, administrative duties were redistributed based on a collaborative model.

**Mission.** CPE II aims at creating a community atmosphere, where students, staff, and parents work together to design a flexible, innovative program. Of utmost importance is continually reassessing the methods of operation and finding new ways of promoting critical thinking in students. The non-competitive learning environment is complemented by the communal setting. The school emphasizes learning outside the school environment, through an active apprenticeship program.

**Contact:** Kyle Haver, CPE II, 215 East 99th. NYC NY 10029

**CLEMENT MCDONOUGH CITY MAGNET SCHOOL, Lowell, MA**  
(Kindergarten to 8th grade)

**Founding.** In 1980, a parent steering committee, the Superintendent and several consultants, surveyed parents in the school system for themes they would like to see incorporated into the education system. In the spring of 1981 a group of teachers volunteered to develop the most popular theme city into a new school. The outcome was City Magnet, in which a micro society would serve as the medium through which basic skills would be taught.

**Class Size/Funding.** The City Magnet School has approximately 27 students per class, as do other schools in the district. In addition to the basic budget given to all public schools, staff and parents raise approximately one quarter of the funds spent. The school is eligible for Chapter 636 State Desegregation funds. State School Improvement money is used and the school receives some grants, ranging from \$400 to \$1000.

**Challenges.** The challenge has been developing a unique micro-society

curriculum, fully integrating the basic skills while resisting more conventional educational philosophies. This has not been easy. At first some staff were reluctant to accept parent input into the management of the school. They are now more comfortable with the concept of shared governance. The City Magnet School also faced some difficulties in becoming accepted within the larger community. As one of the first "schools of choice" in the city it was initially viewed by some people with apprehension. The staff and parents have worked diligently, with great success, at dispelling suspicion and developing a positive reputation for the school. This school is a young work-in-progress, and will continue to grow and change as the program matures.

**Mission.** The City Magnet School aims at teaching basic skills through innovative methods, and supporting a sense of community among student staff and parents. They work together to create an environment in which what students learn is meaningful and relevant, not just information.

**Contact:** Tom Malone, Clement McDounough City Magnet School, 43 French Street, Lowell, MA 01852

### **CLARA BARTON OPEN SCHOOL, Minneapolis, MN** (Kindergarten to 8th grade)

**Founding.** In 1982, the Minneapolis School District combined two small alternative schools to form the Clara Barton Open School. Alternative schools have been a part of the Minneapolis desegregation plan since 1971. The Clara Barton School evolved from this background.

**Class Size/Funding.** The average class size is 30, similar to that of other schools in the district. The school operates on the same basic budget as the other schools. Additional funds come from fundraising by parents.

**Challenges.** The school has faced continuous challenges. One of our greatest problems is overcrowding. As a result of large classes and the kind of creative teaching we do, many of our classes actually take place in the halls. We have also had a series of personnel changes, including hiring several new principals and a variety of staff members. Fortunately, the core vision has remained intact through these changes, because certain deeply committed staff members have maintained continuity of purpose.

**Mission.** Barton is built on a foundation of choices, responsibility, and decision-making. Here, learning takes place through an integrated curriculum, cooperative groups, and experimentation. Classrooms are multi-graded, and the curriculum develops from spontaneous interests of children together with teacher-planned activities. Goal setting is at the core of the curriculum, and is an

essential activity. There is an emphasis on "whole brain learning," using all the senses and honoring each child's unique learning style. Student attendance at this school is very high in comparison to that of other schools in the city (greater than 90%).

**Contact:** Launa Ellison, Clara Barton School, 4237 Colfax Avenue, South, Minneapolis, MN 55406

**DAVIS ALTERNATIVE MAGNET SCHOOL, Jackson, MS**  
(Kindergarten to 6th grade)

**Founding.** Davis Alternative was started in 1977 by the Jackson Municipal School District at the request of a group of parents, who wanted their children to learn in a non-traditional setting, incorporating the educational philosophy and methods of the British Infant Schools and American open schools.

**Class Size/Funding.** The school is divided into multi-grade classrooms of approximately 27 students in each class. Groupings within classrooms are flexible, reflecting the individual needs and interests of the students. Davis operates on the same budget as other district schools. Additional materials and equipment have been provided by parent efforts, through fund-raising and workdays. From 1987 through 1989, a Federal Magnet Schools Assistance Grant provided additional resources.

**Challenges.** Davis has evolved from a precarious program within Jackson Public Schools, which was constantly in danger of closing, to a well-established and respected Magnet school. Some of the greatest challenges have involved gaining district and public support in a region where "traditional" basic instruction is entrenched. We are also challenged in searching for effective, site-based staff development which enables our teachers to move from traditional methods of instruction and management to more "open" child-centered approaches. For example, finding appropriate methods for balancing freedom and choice with responsibility and non-punitive disciplinary practices.

**Mission.** The staff at Davis believe that each student wants to learn and that learning is most effective when it relates directly to students' interests and real-life experiences. Currently, Davis is exploring "brain compatible education," which incorporates physiological research on how the brain functions into on planning curriculum.

**Contact:** Paula Keller, Davis Alternative Elementary, 750 Congress, Jackson MS 39202

**Tanglewood Open Living School**  
**JEFFERSON COUNTY OPEN SCHOOL, Jefferson County, CO**  
(Pre-school to 9th grade)

**Founding.** Tanglewood Open Living School (now part of Jefferson County Open School through 12th grade) came into being as the successor of two open elementary school pilot projects begun in 1970. A coalition of parents, public school teachers, and interested Board of Education members shared a vision that because children are innately motivated to explore, a natural educational environment is based on learning by doing.

**Class Size/Funding.** The average class size of 25 and basic budget are comparable to that of other schools in the district. Additional funds are applied for, and from time to time have come as grants. Grants received have been used to develop programs, such as apprenticeships in the community. In addition, parents raise about \$5,000 yearly to provide supplemental funding.

**Challenges.** Jefferson School has been challenged by change. There has been a tendency within the school to say: "Since established procedures have led to success, why change?" A major change we have faced is that there has been an increase in the student body from 150 to 650 in 20 years. In addition, the school has moved six times since its inception. Throughout its history, there have been fluctuations in support from the larger community, but at this time, school administrators see a growth in interest. Community outreach to educators, the Board of Education, and the press has been important for the continuation of the school. School staff have a commitment to convey to these groups a realistic, positive view of the program's value and successes.

**Mission/Successes.** Tanglewood is committed to keeping students and their families involved in the educational process. Here, learning takes place within a community, primarily through "experiential learning," in classrooms where mutual respect among students, staff and parents is emphasized. A successful advisor/advisee program is the focus of student/staff interaction.

**Contact:** Ruth Steele, Jefferson County Open School, 76655 W. 10th Avenue, Lakewood. CO 80215

**Attention:** Doug Jenner

**GRAHAM & PARKS ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL, Cambridge, MA**  
(Kindergarten through 8th grade)

**Founding.** Graham and Parks was founded in 1972 by a group of parents who saw the need for an open classroom public school with a varied cultural and socio-economic student body, one that involved parents and staff in shared

decision-making.

**Class Size/Funding.** The average class size is 23 — greater than that of other schools in the district. This school receives the same basic budget as other schools in the school district. The budget is supplemented by grants and substantial parent fund-raising efforts.

**Challenges.** Initially, the community's response to the idea of an alternative school was extremely negative, and negotiations to reach mutual understanding were extensive. In 1980, when Graham and Parks' program was still quite small, we joined with a small traditional neighborhood school and created a 350-pupil alternative school. It was necessary that the children from the new school, who were not functioning at the same level as the original children, be given a period of rigorous instruction when the schools merged. Following that, the school was forced to relocate twice in two years while facilities were being renovated. Graham and Parks, now well-established in the community, faces new challenges stemming from its own growth and the growth of its immigrant population. In the past two years, the number of students in the Haitian Bilingual Program has tripled, straining the ability of the school's administration to provide services for this population. They often have had no previous schooling, and are usually economically disadvantaged. Developing new management structures that ensure staff and parent involvement in this situation is proving to be a major challenge.

**Mission/Successes.** Staff and parents here believe that children learn best in a diverse socio-economic and ethnic environment. To this end, an effort is made to balance the student population of the school by sex, ethnic background, and economic; 50% males/50% females; 50% non-European ancestry/50% European ancestry; 70% working class/30% middle class. The academic program is highly individualized, with an emphasis on teaching basic skills in creative ways through a non-standardized curriculum, developed by the teachers.

**Contact:** Len Solo, Graham and Parks, 15 Upton Street, Cambridge, MA 02139

**CENTRAL PARK EAST SECONDARY SCHOOL, New York, NY**  
(7th through 12th grade)

**Founding.** CPESS was founded in 1985, as a secondary school program that would complement the alternative elementary program in the area. The school encourages student responsibility: interacting with adults in responsible ways, making thoughtful decisions and learning to work collaboratively. It strives to break the cycle of apathy which is an intrinsic part of Harlem adolescents' and their families' educational experience.

**Class Size/Funding.** Under 20 per class. This small size is possible because the schedule allows all teachers to be teaching at the same time. Teachers have few, if any, non-teaching responsibilities. In addition, there are fewer professional administrators (no assistant principals, out of class specialists, etc.). As with other new schools, some additional funding was provided for the first few years.

**Challenges.** We offer fewer non-academic electives, due to financial limitations and to the structure of our day, which is to focus classes in two-hour blocks. The challenge, then, is for the teachers to add drama, music, art, video, etc. into their classroom work. Also, though we do cover the same basic disciplines as other programs, our curriculum is not as broad. What we do cover, however, is handled in greater depth and detail. Our form of assessment, demonstration by exhibition, is not always understood by people who need to see results measured in formal grading procedures. We do not tailor courses to match the material in City or State tests. We find that, despite these non-traditional features, our students have the know-how to successfully present themselves to colleges, prospective employers, etc.

**Mission.** The school's mission is aligned with the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, which include: students learning to use their minds well; that the tone of school should be unanxious expectation of trust and decency; "student-as-worker", rather than the more familiar "teacher-as-deliverer-of-instructional-services." To this end, the teaching is individualized and versatile. Group presentations, seminars, one-on-one coaching, and independent work are all used to create a comprehensive educational experience.

**Contact:** Deborah Meier, CPE Secondary, 1573 Madison Avenue, New York City, NY 10029 24

### **NEW ORLEANS FREE SCHOOL, New Orleans, IA** (Kindergarten through 8th grade)

**Founding.** The New Orleans Free School is a small, public alternative school founded in 1971 in response to a need for an environment where children would be active participants in their learning process. Originally, NOFS was an independent school, and was later "adopted" into the public school system.

**Class Size/Funding.** The school has 300 students. Average class size is 25, also average for the district. More than 80% of these students are on a free lunch program. The only extra funding comes from a yearly benefit the school puts on which raises between \$1,000 to 3,000 to defray the cost of the yearly school camping trip.

**Challenges.** Each year a few parents or teachers may leave out of frustration, confusion, or because they had difficulty fully understanding the

philosophy of the school. We have other problems, such as adolescent disrespect from older students. However, the community atmosphere at the school enables us to work with these students personally, on a one-to-one basis, instead of just disciplining them. One of our ongoing struggles is having our non-traditional program accepted by the District office. For example, for twenty years we have had to defend our procedure of written narrative reports, instead of letter grades. But letter grades are not an appropriate measure in a setting where everybody, child and adult, is seen as "an inventor, a discoverer, a questioner, an explorer, a seeker, and a lover of knowledge."

**Mission.** At The New Orleans Free School students are encouraged to inquire, discover, and learn. In addition to a carefully structured academic program, the most unique feature is the "Sign-up" creative program through which the students choose from a wide variety of options — sign language, photography, needlecraft, yoga, folk dancing, chess, toymaking, creative role-playing, gardening, and many other possibilities. The atmosphere is characterized by informality, where everyone is on a first name basis and the teachers dress for ease of movement when working with students.

**Contact:** Bob Ferris, New Orleans Free School, 3601 Camp St., New Orleans, LA 70115

## RESOURCE INFORMATION

Additional material on alternative, progressive, innovative, holistic education is available from Holistic Education Press:

- A comprehensive *Guide to Resources in Holistic Education* which includes names, addresses and phone numbers of membership organizations, networks, newsletters, magazines and other publications, peace and global education materials, children's rights groups, hands-on materials suppliers, home schooling information, and more. Each catalog entry is followed by a full description of what that particular resource does and/or offers.
- An extensive annotated bibliography, which includes classics in the field as well as newly published works. Topics covered include philosophy of education, descriptive reports of various educational experiments, learning styles research, classroom applications and exercises, history of major movements, biographies of important educators, etc.

To order the *Resource Guide* or the *ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY: Selections in Alternative, Progressive, and Holistic Education*, send \$2.00 for each booklet (includes postage and handling) to:

Holistic Education Press  
39 Pearl St.  
Brandon, VT 05733-1007  
(802) 247-8312

For further information on arranging speeches or other presentations, scheduling workshops, or names of consultants, contact:

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