

THE SUDBURY MODEL OF EDUCATION

The Hudson Valley Sudbury School in Woodstock, NY is a radically different form of education based on self-initiated learning, democratic governance and individual responsibility. Our inspiration comes from the highly successful Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, MA, which was started in 1968 on the principle that people learn best when they are self-motivated.

THE RESPONSIBILITY SPECTRUM

The fundamental difference between a Sudbury school and any other type of school is the student's level of responsibility. In a Sudbury school the students are solely responsible for their education, their learning methods, their evaluation and their environment.

In a public school, the state takes responsibility for most aspects of a student's education including curriculum and evaluation. The student is left with little responsibility except to learn what is taught, how it is taught, in the environment in which it is taught and then to reiterate it back at evaluation time.

In a non-Sudbury private school, the school administrators take a larger role in determining a student's curriculum than in a public school. In some private schools, the school takes responsibility for evaluation, while in others the school administers the state tests. In most private schools, as with public schools, a student has personal responsibility only for learning what someone else determines is important to learn, at a time they think it is important to learn it, in a way someone else has determined it should be taught, in an environment designed by someone else, and they must do this well enough to pass the evaluations written and graded by someone else.

In a home schooling environment, parents take most of the responsibility for the student's education. In New York and many other states, however, the state still takes some responsibility for determining the home scholar's curriculum and for evaluating the home scholar. Home scholar's are required to take the state mandated tests, and home schooling parents are required to fill out and submit progress reports to the local school district four times a year. Like public schools and most private schools, the responsibility is not with the student.

These educational options describe a range of responsibility. This range of responsibility starts with the student and extends to the parents, the school, the community, the state government and the federal government. We refer to this as the Responsibility Spectrum. Educational options with a compulsory curriculum (e.g. most public schools) tend to be on one end of the spectrum. Private schools span a large portion of the spectrum, with the school's specific educational philosophy determining exactly where it falls on the spectrum. Home schooling also spans a large portion of the spectrum, with the parent's specific educational philosophy determining the student's level of responsibility. A Sudbury school is the only educational option where all of the responsibility is with the student.

THE SUDBURY PHILOSOPHY

Sudbury school students have total control over what they learn, how they learn, their educational environment and how they are evaluated. They choose their curriculum. They choose their method of instruction. They choose, through a democratic process, how their environment operates. They choose with whom to interact. They choose if, how and when to be evaluated – often they choose to evaluate themselves. This is radically different from any other form of education and this is what differentiates a Sudbury school.

Why does a Sudbury school give this level of responsibility to the student? It is because Sudbury educators believe that children are capable of assuming this level of responsibility. It is not a type of pedagogical tool used to motivate the students. The responsibility is real; the students absolutely have the ultimate say in their education. Giving real responsibility to the students allows them to gain experience making decisions and handling the consequences of their choices. In this way, the students gain experience and maturity.

Much of the current effort in education is spent attempting to motivate students to learn. A Sudbury school doesn't spend any time attempting to motivate students; we believe that they are inherently motivated. We believe this because all the evidence of childhood development supports it. Anyone who has observed a baby attempting to take his or her first steps or learn to talk can clearly see this. They struggle and fail and continue to struggle and fail until they finally – on their own – get it right and start walking and talking. If not suppressed, this inherent motivation to grow and develop does not die when the child reaches school age.

External motivation is only necessary when someone else determines what the student should learn. When the students determine their own curriculum, external motivation is not necessary. Studies have shown that when people determine for themselves what to learn, they retain the subject significantly better than if someone else determines what they should learn.¹

The general consensus in our society seems to be that if left to their own devices children would never learn anything. They must be told what is important to learn and when to learn it. At a Sudbury school, the staff and parents believe that the students are the ones to decide what is important for themselves to learn. They are the ones responsible for choosing their interests and, eventually, their life goals. There are a number of examples of this in a Sudbury school. One of the clearest examples is the case of a young girl who, in the judgment of the Sudbury school staff, had a tremendous writing talent. For years after the girl started at the Sudbury school, the staff thought that they should encourage the girl to focus on her writing skills. Instead the girl spent the time socializing with her peers. After a few years of writing little or nothing, the girl returned to writing and her writing ability had taken a significant leap forward in depth and the understanding of human emotions. It became clear to the staff that her years socializing were not “wasted”. They had been spent, consciously or unconsciously, learning about people. When the staff reflected on this, they realized that the girl had spent her time exactly the way she needed to spend it. If they had forced, or even subtly encouraged, her to spend her time writing, she would have probably improved the mechanics of her writing skill, but would have lost the depth and the feeling that her writing developed by being able to socialize with and understand other people.

No one at a Sudbury school will tell the students what they have to learn. No one will exert any pressure on a student to learn a subject. No one will even suggest that it would be a good idea that students learn a subject. The entire responsibility is left to the students; we refer to this as Student Initiated Learning. When students are left to decide for themselves what to do and what to learn, they spend much of their time socializing. Unlike compulsory curriculum schools, a Sudbury school believes the time spent socializing is invaluable to a student's education and growth.

One of the common questions asked of Sudbury educators is, “what happens if a child doesn't want to learn to read?” Our answer is that this just doesn't happen. It is akin to asking, “what happens if a child doesn't want to learn to talk?” In our society reading is an important communication tool. People are inherently motivated to expand their ability to communicate, and this inherent motivation will result in children learning to read. However, in a Sudbury school, reading is seldom “taught” in the way we think of reading being taught. No teacher stands in front of 5 and 6 year olds and breaks words into their phonetic elements. Instead, reading is part of the culture – just as talking is part of the culture. Students learn to read, and largely teach themselves to read, because they want to be able to more fully participate in the world. The

original Sudbury school, the Sudbury Valley School, has been in existence for 36 years. During this time, they have had thousands of students. No child has failed to learn to read in the school's entire history, and yet they have never had a formal reading class. This same experience is seen in learning other "basics", such as writing and math. The students learn them because they recognize that they need to learn them in order to survive and prosper in the culture.

Sudbury schools do not have formal evaluations of their students. There are no grades and there are no tests. We believe that the best person to evaluate a student's progress is the student. Students know when they understand a subject or a skill and when they do not. Experience has shown that when a student self-evaluates, they have a much higher standard than when someone is evaluating them. They tend to measure themselves against perfection - not against "good enough". Occasionally a student will ask for outside evaluation from either a staff member or another student. When they do this, they demand an honest critique. They are not interested in being lied to. They are striving for perfection and want to know if they have reached it.

In a Sudbury school, there is no separation by age. All of the students are free to mix with other students of any age. In a school with a compulsory curriculum it is necessary to separate students by ability so that they can all be instructed at the same time – the easiest way to do this is to assume that children of the same age have the same abilities and interests. This can lead to some students becoming bored if the pace of instruction is too slow, and some students becoming stressed and eventually disenfranchised if the pace of instruction is too fast. In a Sudbury school, the students can pursue their education at their own pace so there is no reason to separate students by age.

Sudbury schools believe that there is a great advantage gained by being able to allow students of different ages to freely mix. In fact, age mixing has been called a Sudbury school's "secret weapon". There are emotional, social and educational advantages to allowing different ages to mix. Emotionally, older students can play the role of big brother or sister to the younger students. Younger students gain security and comfort in this relationship. Age mixing provides a safe environment for students to work on their social skills. Students that are not confident of their social skills can practice them and work to improve them by interacting with other students; whether older, younger or the same age. Students of all ages can look to more mature students or the staff as role models.

In Sudbury Schools, it is very common for students to learn from other students. Sometimes the teaching student is older than the learning student, sometimes the teacher is younger than the learner, and sometimes they are the same age. The only constant is that both the teacher and the learner improve their knowledge of the subject. One of the best ways to improve knowledge of a subject is to teach it to someone else.

In order for the students to be able to be totally responsible for their education, they must have – or at least share – the responsibility for creating their learning environment. This means that Sudbury schools are run as a participatory democracy. All of the students and staff (together known as the School Meeting) are part of the democracy and all of the students have an equal voice in discussions and an equal vote in decisions. In other words, a 5 year old student has the same voice and power in the school as a staff member. The staff have no veto power of decisions made by the School Meeting. The only limit placed on the School Meeting is that they cannot make a law that would violate local or state laws and they cannot make a rule that would put the school community at risk.

Through participation in the school's democratic process, the students gain experience working with others to make decisions. They gain experience advocating their positions on important issues that effect their day-to-day life. They come to understand that their opinions matter and that they can have an effect on the larger community.

DAY-TO-DAY OPERATION OF A SUDBURY SCHOOL

Sudbury schools operate very differently than any other type of school. In order to create an environment where the students are responsible for their education, the structure of the school had to change. The most striking difference is that there are no “classrooms” and there are no “teachers” – at least not in the traditional sense of the words. Students are free to determine how they spend their time each day, they are not limited to a classroom where an adult tells them what they have to learn. They might work on an art project, play sports, cook, dance, read, talk to other students or staff, build a fort, watch birds, do a science experiment, climb a tree, write a story, play a computer game, or work with an off-campus mentor. When students decide they want to learn something new, whether it is an academic subject or not, they either ask a staff member for help, ask another student, or simply learn it on their own.

Each week there is a meeting, the School Meeting, where most of the day-to-day issues of operating the school are discussed and voted on. The School Meeting is run like a New England Town Hall Meeting. The School Meeting is run by the School Meeting Chair and the minutes are taken by the School Meeting Secretary. In most cases, the School Meeting Chair and Secretary are students who have been elected by the other students and staff. An agenda is published prior to the meeting and all students and staff members are welcome to attend the School Meeting. All students and staff have an equal voice in the discussions and an equal vote on the decisions.

The School Meeting has the final authority over all matters of a Sudbury school’s operation with the only exceptions being the yearly budget, the staff pay scale, graduation requirements and the Open Campus policy. These issues are the responsibility of the Assembly. The Assembly is composed of the students, their parents or guardians and the staff and is also operated as a participatory democracy. The Assembly typically meets once a year to approve the following year’s budget. The Assembly gives parents an important voice in vital issues pertaining to the school.

One of the most important aspects of running any institution is enforcement of the institution’s rules. In a Sudbury school, the School Meeting is responsible for making and enforcing these rules. This responsibility is often delegated to a smaller group of students and staff known as the Judicial Committee or JC. In most Sudbury schools, the Judicial Committee is composed of two JC Clerks, 3-5 students from different age groups and one staff member. The JC Clerks are typically students and are elected by the School Meeting and usually serve for two months. It is their job to ensure that the JC runs smoothly. The students from the different age groups serve on a rotating basis – similar to jury duty. The staff member is typically rotated on a daily basis.

When a student or staff member believes that a school rule has been violated, he or she fills out a JC complaint form. The complaint describes what happened, where and when it happened and any witnesses. The JC meets on a daily basis and reviews all of the current JC complaints. For each complaint, the JC investigates the incident, writes a report of their investigation and determines if any school rules have been violated. If they determine that a rule has been violated, they press charges against the person (student or staff member) who they believe violated the rule. The person can then plead guilty or innocent. If a guilty plea is entered, the JC determines the appropriate sentence for the violation. If an innocent plea is entered, a trial takes place. Just as in the School Meeting, each member of the JC has an equal voice and vote.

One of the most important responsibilities of the School Meeting is to determine the staff. This is done each year by voting on whether current staff members should be re-hired for the next year. It is a very radical idea that students are allowed to help determine the staff of a school, but it is a necessity if they are to be given true responsibility for their education. There is no such thing as a partial responsibility. The students are either responsible or they are not. They are either trusted or they are not. If the students were not allowed to participate in the selection of the staff members, one of the most important aspects of the

school's environment and operation would be taken from them. The message would be that they are not trusted with the responsibility of making really important decisions.

If the staff members are not responsible for directing a student's education what are they responsible for? What is the role of staff? At a Sudbury school, the staff members are responsible for the continuing operation of the school. The staff members are expected to be role models of responsible adult behavior. They are expected to offer their insights and experience to School Meeting discussions. They are expected to be available to the students when they ask for assistance and guidance. Most of all they are expected to help ensure the continued operation and success of the school by providing continuity in the school community and culture.

One of the most striking aspects of a Sudbury school is the relationship between the staff and the students. Sudbury school staff members have high expectations of the students. They expect them to be able to take responsibility. They interact with the students as if they were adults – perhaps young and inexperienced adults, but adults none-the-less. They listen to the students.

At times, students in a Sudbury school will decide that they want to learn a subject or they will decide that they want to pursue an educational or career path. When they decide this, the staff is there to support their choice and to help them achieve their goals. This can be done by actively teaching a subject, recommending a book or other reference material, identifying an outside resource or setting up an internship. An example from our school is a student who is very clear that she wants to become a veterinarian. She approached the staff and asked what she would need to do in order to get into a good college as a pre-veterinarian major. The staff helped identify the subjects she would have to know. The staff also helped her set up a short program with a local veterinarian. During this program the student visited the veterinarian's office during school hours. When the program was finished, the veterinarian was very positive about the experience and indicated that the student would be welcome to come back for an internship once she reached the legal age of employment. The key to all of this is that the student knows what she wants. The staff is there to support and to encourage her along her path, but not to determine her path.

RESULTS OF A SUDBURY EDUCATION

Because the Sudbury Model of Education is so different from any other form of education, many people wonder about the results of a Sudbury education. Specifically, they wonder if Sudbury graduates will be able to get into college or if they will be able to handle the "real" world. In short, Sudbury graduates have historically done very well when applying for college. The Sudbury Valley School has done an extensive study of their former students². The results of their study show that a large majority (87%) of the graduates continue on to some form of further education; 4-year college, community college, performing arts school, culinary institute, etc.

Unlike Compulsory Education schools, graduates of a Sudbury school do not get into a college based on their transcript and their extracurricular activities. Sudbury school graduates get into colleges because they tend to be very focused on their career choice. This results in college applications that stand out from the crowd. Sudbury student's have had the time during their high school years to investigate different options and to discover what they are passionate about.

One of the most striking facts discovered in Sudbury Valley School's study of their former students is that 42% of the students who responded to the survey are either self employed or involved in entrepreneurial situations.² This is understandable given the educational philosophy of a Sudbury school. The students have been able to develop their interests and to develop their ability to take responsibility. Once accustomed to having responsibility, it is difficult to abdicate responsibility to someone else.

CONCLUSION

One of the common misconceptions about a Sudbury school is that it must be easy – after all, the students are free to do what they want to do without a teacher telling them what to do. This could not be further from the truth. A Sudbury school is hard for exactly the same reason people think it is easy. With no one telling the students what to do, the students are left with no choice but to decide what to do on their own. This is much more difficult than simply following instructions.

Once people understand the Sudbury philosophy, they often ask “why doesn’t everyone send their children to a Sudbury school?” My answer is simply that many parents do not believe or trust that their children are motivated to learn. I cannot count the number of times that a parent has told me, “it sounds great, but my child would just play all day and never learn anything – she needs to be pushed”. Out of politeness, I do not question this belief. In my mind however, my response is, “if your child is not motivated, she would still be lying in her crib, crying for food when she was hungry”. The child was motivated enough to learn how to walk, how to eat solid food, how to talk and many, many other skills. It would truly be easier for children to just lie in the crib and cry for food, but they choose to take the harder path of learning to move from babyhood to childhood. Likewise, children will choose to take the difficult and empowering path of moving from childhood to adulthood.

(Footnotes)

¹ Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R. M. (2002). *The paradox of achievement: The harder you push, the worse it gets*. In J. Aronson (Ed.)

² Greenberg, D., & Sadofsky, M. *Legacy of Trust: Life After the Sudbury Valley School Experience* (1992) (Sudbury Valley School Press; Framingham, MA) pp. 249.

FURTHER READING

THE FOLLOWING BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE FROM SUDBURY VALLEY SCHOOL PRESS

For information on prices and ordering, write Sudbury Valley School Press, 2 Winch Street, Framingham, MA 01701, call (508) 877-3030 or check their website: www.sudval.org.

THE SUDBURY VALLEY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE, 2ND ED.

A collection of essays, articles and vignettes describing the philosophy of Sudbury Valley School, its organization, and its atmosphere. An excellent introduction to the life and style of the school.

REFLECTIONS ON THE SUDBURY SCHOOL CONCEPT

EDITED BY MIMSY SADOFSKY AND DANIEL GREENBERG

Articles written by current and former Sudbury Valley School students and staff giving a deeper look into the Sudbury school model.

FREE AT LAST: THE SUDBURY VALLEY SCHOOL, 2ND ED.

BY DANIEL GREENBERG

The spirit and flavor of daily life at Sudbury Valley School come alive in this book, written in a light anecdotal style. Illustrated with photographs by Michael Greenberg, Carol Palmer and Andy Brilliant.

KINGDOM OF CHILDHOOD

EDITED BY MIMSY SADOFSKY AND DANIEL GREENBERG

A remarkable series of vivid personal recollections of school as told by former students. Drawn from reflective interviews, each account presents a picture of school days from the unique perspective of a student, telling what they did, and how they felt about the Sudbury Valley School experience.

A CLEARER VIEW: NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE SUDBURY SCHOOL MODEL

BY DANIEL GREENBERG

A series of six talks was presented showing how the people who struggled to implement this new educational model deepened their understanding of topics such as play, conversation, and democracy. Particularly valuable for parents considering Sudbury education for their children.

THE CRISIS IN AMERICAN EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS AND A PROPOSAL

An educational classic written in 1970, this book discusses several central features of Sudbury Valley School's philosophy, set against the background of American social and political traditions and the current educational scene.

LEGACY OF TRUST: LIFE AFTER THE SUDBURY VALLEY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

BY DANIEL GREENBERG AND MIMSY SADOFSKY

A comprehensive study of the personal and professional histories of 188 former students, along with extensive comments on how they feel the school influenced their lives.

OUTLINE OF A NEW PHILOSOPHY, 2ND ED.

BY DANIEL GREENBERG

A presentation of the author's general philosophy, including an exposition on the philosophy of education.

A NEW LOOK AT SCHOOLS

BY DANIEL GREENBERG

The continuing difficulties that schools are having in fulfilling their mission is analyzed against a broad background of cultural and socio-economic theory. An analysis is presented of the type of schooling appropriate to the future of the United States. Illustrated by Nancy Hann.

“ANNOUNCING A NEW SCHOOL. . .”: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE BEGINNINGS OF THE SUDBURY VALLEY SCHOOL

BY DANIEL GREENBERG

A history of the early planning for the school, and of the first year of the school’s operation (1968-69) written by a member of the founding group.

THERE IS ALSO A WEALTH OF INFORMATION ON DIFFERENT SUDBURY SCHOOL’S WEB SITES. INCLUDING:

SUDBURY VALLEY SCHOOL:

www.sudval.org

HUDSON VALLEY SUDBURY SCHOOL:

www.hudsonvalleyschool.org

SUDBURY SCHOOLS

ALPINE VALLEY SCHOOL

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THE BEACH SCHOOL

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BIG ROCK SUDBURY SCHOOL

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THE BOOROBIN SUDBURY

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BRAZOS VALLEY SUDBURY SCHOOL

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FULL CIRCLE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

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HIGHLAND SCHOOL

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