

LEAVE SCHOOL

**what teachers
can't tell you**

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DEDICATION

For every young person trapped in school who feels bored, ignored, bullied, controlled, left behind, lost in the shuffle, uninspired, or is just plain tired of having so much homework that they don't have a life outside of school.

You are not alone.

You are not the problem.

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HELLO, UNIVERSE

Welcome to my first-ever book, titled *LEAVE SCHOOL: what teachers can't tell you*.

This sort of feels like my first day as a high school teacher, where I'm supposed to write my name on the board, assign you to your seat, and hand out my classroom policies. In short: my name is Jim Flannery, sit wherever you want, and there are no rules here.

Whenever I listen to a new podcast or watch a new video, I usually decide within the first minute whether I'm going to watch the whole thing. Having just finished pouring countless hours of my life into writing this book, it's a lot of pressure to know I have to do something attention-grabbing to hook you in, or else I'll lose your interest entirely.

Rather than being shocking or funny, I'll just be straightforward and honest: the contents of this book are far more valuable than anything I'd ever be allowed to teach in a classroom. It's a great irony, then, that these ideas are not

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welcome in any classroom. Any teacher who shared all this information with their students would definitely be fired, though it's probably also true that any teacher who knew all of this information would probably quit teaching before they had a chance to share it with their students.

You might wonder how it is then, that I know these things which most teachers don't. The truth is, this information was not easy to find. While it may seem like everything should be discoverable with a simple Google search, you really need to know what terms to punch into Google to get the right results. As a simple example, you get *very* different results if you Google "alternative school" instead of "alternatives *to* school".

Even after finding information online, much of what I read online felt lifeless, and only came to life when I met people in-person, all around the United States and internationally, who actually practice the ideas presented in this book. In fact, there are tens of thousands of teens, just in the United States, who are thriving without school. And you can too.

Specifically, *LEAVE SCHOOL* is a guide to radically change your thinking about education, shifting the power structure away from the conventional approach of the teacher being in charge, and toward the student being in charge of their own learning.

Right now, you are your parents' property and your education is your school's responsibility. If you want to live a more liberated existence, you'll need to take ownership of your life and responsibility for your learning. This book will show you how.

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This may sound like some kind of old-fashioned alpha male speech your grandfather might give you about responsibility. It's not, I assure you. By taking ownership of your education, you'll be empowered to give yourself permission to stop being so hard on yourself, to stop letting others in authority set the expectations for you, to satisfy yourself, to accept yourself, to know that you are good enough, and to know that you are enough. Responsibility and ownership, and acceptance and compassion, can coexist.

Though the ideas in this book focus on education and learning, this book is also about living. In order to implement these ideas, you will have to fundamentally change the way you view your role in the world; away from being a passive recipient of knowledge, riding on the conveyor belt of school that is assembling you into a finished adult human, and instead, toward being an active, engaged, living, breathing, hungry, struggling, fighting, and thriving human in this world.

The book can be thought of as having three *parts* consisting of eight *chapters*. We begin Part I by laying the groundwork in chapters 1 and 2, where I explain how I got involved in education, what the main problems are with school, and the character traits you will need to implement the ideas in this book. In Part II, I use chapters 3-5 to dive into the technical details of what alternatives to school look like and how you can pursue them. The book culminates in Part III, with chapters 6-8, which is my outline for how we can make these alternatives to school accessible to all young people. Finally, I close out with some final thoughts and my long list of thank you's to all the people who

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helped make this book possible.

I encourage you to check out all the reference links which I include to support the facts and statistics I present, so that you can see this is not just some crazy idea I came up with; there is a whole movement supporting these ideas. I also encourage you to complete the Actions I suggest at the end of each chapter.

Of course, there's no way for me to know whether you've done any of this... there's no quizzes... no grades... I offer no punishments for not completing the work... and I offer no rewards for your participation. The only reward is in the knowledge you'll gain from this book, which, for some of you, will be absolutely life changing.

If you are curious to learn more, I'll tell you everything I know. Let's get started.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

WHY?

Anytime you read a book, especially a controversial one, you should always ask yourself: what is the author's motivation?

In my case, I'm motivated by a burning desire to lead a meaningful life and make a positive impact on the world. Through all my life experiences, I've concluded that one of the most meaningful ways I can make a positive impact is by helping to transform education. Though, to be transparent and clear, my ambitions extend beyond simply improving the way young people learn.

While this may sound overly eager, my ambitions will make more sense if I share some background about my life experiences that explain how and why I decided to get involved in the world of education in the first place. I'll also explain how I came to believe my uncompromising and controversial position about education, which is that learning should not be forced on anyone, it should be consensual.

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I'll confess, I'm a little nervous starting this book off talking about myself, because this book is supposed to be about you, not me. My goal in sharing my story is not necessarily for you to relate to me, but for you to understand me. We all have a different story and different experience; I just want you to understand who I am and why I am doing what I do. If you relate to me, that's great, but that's not my purpose nor is it a requirement to grasp the concepts in this book.

Despite my nervousness, I'm taking the risk of starting with my personal story because I believe in the research of Simon Sinek, who presented a powerful TED Talk in 2009 titled "How great leaders inspire action." He analyzed how great leaders throughout history *communicated* and concluded that "people don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it - and what you do simply proves what you believe."¹ So I will take Simon's advice and start our journey together by sharing my "Why".²

MY OWN SCHOOLING

I haven't always been a fanatic about changing the world, nor have I always been interested in education.

For most of my youth, I was self-centered and focused on advancing myself and my career. It's interesting the way the word "career" is supposed to mean the work one does professionally as an adult, but it seems to have quietly crept into our childhood.

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As early as middle school, I remember the idea of “doing things because I can put it on a college transcript” became pervasive. The whole idea of accumulating accomplishments and credentials in a linear sequence in order to impress the gatekeepers who could permit me to climb the ladder of life into some desirable future happiness where my identity was based entirely on my job actually seemed pretty reasonable. After all, it was all the adults in my life telling me that was the way things worked, and who else could I trust for life guidance?

The fact that I was very good at climbing this ladder only inflated my ego, and made me more invested in the idea that this path of achievement was important, meaningful, and the “right” way to live.

As a high-achieving student, I grew up with many adults feeding me compliments, saying that I was smart (or worse, “gifted”), and that as long as I continued achieving such high standards, I would get a great job and live a happy adult life. I was never comfortable with the label of “gifted,” which came with it a feeling of being an “other,” and no doubt led to an unhealthy blend of superiority and alienation. There’s nothing more toxic for an ego than to think, “‘I don’t fit in’ but it’s ok because ‘I’m better than everyone.’”

I will admit, despite the long-term damage this praise did to my mental health, at the time, I relished in the approval from adults that I was “doing things right” and I would be “successful.”

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Looking back, however, I realize most of this encouragement came from adults who had not achieved high academic success themselves. Their advice was well-intentioned but was based on their uninformed assumptions of what education is all about, and even more so, the idea that my academic success would lead to my happiness.

In particular, I recall the constant reinforcement that pursuing science and engineering was superior to any other path one could take. The fact that I was good at math and science only furthered the encouragement from others to pursue this field. That's not to say that I didn't enjoy math and science, but I was regularly pushed in that direction with no consideration being given to any possible interest in other fields.

At the time this was all going on, I didn't really question anything around me. The only real complaint I had about school was the authoritarian nature of the system, namely certain principals or teachers. I always felt very uncomfortable and agitated at being told by teachers that what I was doing was "inappropriate" or "unacceptable", especially when I was being publicly shamed or threatened with punishments in front of my peers.

It may be that I deserved to be reprimanded, I was talkative, shouted out a lot of things during class, made lots of inappropriate jokes, and didn't like being told what to do. My hijinks were enough that my classmates voted me "Teacher's Nightmare" in our school yearbook, which does indicate I had this coming to me.

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But my memories of this controlling environment go back as early as 2nd grade, when I was far from being a rebellious teen. The teacher read us a boring story about a beaver who built a dam. We were then told to write five sentences, each sentence telling something we learned from the book. I took the instructions literally and I felt paralyzed: I didn't learn anything from the book. I could not complete the assignment.

I wasn't wise enough to know that I could have put anything I wanted on the page and the teacher would have checked it off. I told the teacher I couldn't do the assignment because I didn't learn anything and she was upset with me. I had to go sit at a table in the class all alone and she took my assignment and scribbled a note to my parents about how I "refused" to do the work, sealed it in an envelope, and told me to take it home to my parents. I still remember that feeling of being shamed in front of my peers and separated from them - all for telling the truth.

Though rebelling against authority became more enjoyable and prideful when I was a teen, these encounters with authority were overwhelmingly negative, especially given that I had no power in the situation. The fact that my grades were all good was my saving grace every time I would get into trouble with teachers. Though it didn't prevent me from getting grounded regularly by my parents for receiving phone calls home from my teachers complaining about my behavior, it felt like a "trump" card to be able to point out that none of these punishments from teachers were meaningful or would affect my life because, after all, I was getting a good grade in their class.

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To be clear, my misbehaving in school was always mischievous, never malicious. For example, I remember, losing “computer privileges” at my high school because I used a so-called “inappropriate” image for the cover of my poetry portfolio.

The cover of the portfolio was supposed to have a photo with a metaphor for your life. Not only was I given detention for using the image, but I was also forced to create a new, “acceptable” metaphor for my life. While I completely understand that some people could find my work distasteful, it seems outrageous for an adult to be able to dictate to a teenager that the metaphor they’ve used to describe their life is “incorrect” or “inappropriate”.

Beyond getting a detention, a new policy was instituted saying I couldn’t save files on the school computer network and I had a special floppy disk on the table of the computer lab with my name on it. Though it felt like public shaming, I did my best to embrace the shame and wear it proudly. I remember the computer lab manager telling me, in front of the whole class, that “90% of the school hated me.” Fortunately, I was quick enough to retort that “that’s ok because that 10% really loves me”, but that remark has always stayed with me, always wondering if she meant teachers or students.

One more clarification: while I do support mischief, I don’t support malice. If you are being mean to others and think that’s cool - it’s not. I had experiences in elementary, middle, and high school with textbooks cases of bullying that involved physical threats against me and that really sucked. I also had experience with the more common, and

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subtle form of bullying which is ‘picking on people’. I confess that I was both on the receiving end and the giving side of that. I wasn’t super self-aware of it at the time, but be sure to check in with yourself and be self-aware enough to judge whether you are being genuinely playful with your friends when you’re jabbing one another or if you are putting people down.

Looking back now, it is surreal remembering that by the midpoint of my sophomore year of high school, I was in all honors classes and getting good grades, but because I was deemed “too disruptive,” I was no longer allowed to be in study halls or eat in the cafeteria. I was forced to get papers signed off each week by all of my teachers documenting my behavior. At home, I was grounded as a punishment for the trouble I was getting into at school, which only further tightened the reins and added more pressure. I can’t even fathom, given how much freedom I have now in life, that I ever survived in such a constrained environment. But sometimes it’s hard to realize what you are experiencing when you have nothing to compare it to.

I’m reminded of a speech by Laura Delano, who runs the Inner Compass Initiative, from the 2018 Alternatives Conference in Washington, DC, where she shared about her experiences with the mental health system. In particular, there was a powerful moment in her speech where she recalled the moment that she realized that she was being heavily controlled by the mental health system. After spending a decade being a compliant participant, doing whatever her doctors told her, having no awareness that she was being controlled at all, she began to say ‘no’ to things and received a huge amount of pushback from doctors. I

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may not have the quote perfect because I don't have a recording of her speech, but essentially, she said, "You only realize just how controlled you are when you start saying 'no' to people in power."³

I was fortunate that around this time I was having the most challenges at school, a math and science magnet school opened up in Hartford (The Greater Hartford Academy of Math and Science), and I was accepted as a part-time, afternoon student. This meant that for my junior and senior years of high school, I spent my morning at my regular school taking my English, language, and history classes, then I'd drive into the city at lunchtime and take my math and science classes in the afternoon. This midday freedom seemed to help me feel more human.

The actual approach to learning at the magnet school was much the same as it was at my regular school, but they had fancier labs and equipment. There were still regular classes, grades, homework, quizzes, and tests. One distinct characteristic of the magnet school was that everyone chose to be there instead of their regular school, so it attracted a lot of overachieving people who enjoyed learning, who I enjoyed being around. The downside of this is that bringing the overachievers together created a more anxious environment where people were more stressed out about their grades.

Despite all the good grades that inflated my ego, there was clearly something missing in my soul. I remember during my senior year of high school, making what felt like an embarrassing confession to my mother, "I don't understand... I've got great grades, I'm one of the captains

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of the basketball team, I've got friends, I've got a girlfriend, I'm accepted into college.... I've got everything any kid could want... but I'm not happy." Despite this realization, it never occurred to me anything was wrong with the school system, I assumed the problem was with me.

The only real insight I had about something being wrong with school was noticing the differences in how different students were treated. I remember around high school graduation time that I gained a sense of discomfort in realizing that the students at the very top got a lot of extra attention to help them get into top- tier colleges, and students at the very bottom got extra support to ensure they graduated, while most of the students in the middle seemed to be shuffled through unnoticed. Though I noticed this disparity, I never questioned the actual method of teaching or the school system as a whole. After all, I was being rewarded with praise for my good grades, why would I question something which was constantly rewarding me? I just assumed that by attending a public school in an upper-middle class community in the northeastern United States that I was getting the best education that was available. Even the Academy of Math and Science I attended for my last two years of high school was considered a state-of-the-art facility. It seemed inconceivable that I was getting anything less than the best.

In fact, I'd even go out on a limb and say that as far as schools go, I probably did attend one of the "best". Despite my complaints about the school *system*, most of my teachers were really amazing people. I think it is the fact that I've experienced the "best", which actually gives more

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credibility to my criticisms. Most communities that are frustrated with their schools probably look to a school like Wethersfield High School or the Greater Hartford Academy of Math and Science with envy, not realizing that even these environments are plagued with many of the same systemic problems of all schools.

After spending my K-12 years attending public schools, I went on to get an engineering degree from a highly-rated university (Boston University) where I continued to focus my efforts on myself and my so-called "career." In going to university, I left behind my friends, family, and girlfriend to move to a city where I thought I'd get the best education I could.

I have a lot of great memories of my time in college, most of which were with my friends. While I had the most fun with them, I also felt like I learned a lot from them. My actual college classes were fairly impersonal, though they were challenging and the subject-matter was interesting. College was mostly a process of going to some lectures and doing weekly problem sets, with the occasional lab mixed in.

While it was definitely more challenging than high school, I don't know if I would say it was any "better", despite the high cost. I remember actually re-taking Calculus in college, which I already took in high school, thinking that it wasn't possible my high school class would be as good as what I could get from a prestigious university, but my college class was actually far worse! The high school version of the class was much more engaging and interesting, though the format was still pretty similar of

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having a combination of lectures and weekly problem sets to complete.

This isn't to say all my college classes were like this. Just as in high school, on average, I only had one professor I'd call "bad" each semester. In general, most of my professors were really amazing, brilliant, hard-working, kind people, who were very generous with their time.

One of their greatest contributions to my personal development, which they don't get any credit for, is the fact that so many of them were biomedical engineering professors without degrees in biomedical engineering. This may sound like a negative, but it's actually an incredible positive for me. You see, most of my professors who were teaching biomedical engineering were people who were trained as electrical engineers or computer engineers or mechanical engineers, whose curiosity led them to begin solving biology problems with their engineering skills. These were the pioneers of the field; they created a field which did not previously exist! It was incredibly powerful to have these professors as a model that set a standard of what "normal" was: it was being intellectually curious and breaking barriers.

I also recall the culture I was surrounded by during college was incredibly re-enforcing of this idea that scientists and engineers were superior; both for their great contributions to society and their superior intellect. You can imagine the chip on my shoulder from studying biomedical engineering, which was regarded as the most challenging of all the engineering disciplines. While these are all clearly elitist ideas, they reinforced all my decisions and boosted my ego

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further.

This isn't to say that things come easily to me. I worked hard throughout college, took advantage of every opportunity I could to get work experience to build my resume, and graduated *magna cum laude*. I completed all of the items on the checklist that society provided me for success and all metrics indicated I absolutely crushed life to this point. The only thing left was to get a well-paying job as a biomedical engineer where I'd use technology to solve the world's problems and begin my happy adult life.

But I realized that wasn't what I wanted.

REALIZING SOMETHING IS WRONG

Throughout my life, I'd been fed the notion that I had the capability to do anything I wanted, to achieve my dreams, and change the world. The slogan for Boston University's College of Engineering even used to be "we change the way the world works." What I came to find, however, was that the system I was living within was not designed to help me change the world, it was designed to lead me get a job working toward someone else's vision of what the world should be. They could have changed their slogan to "we *work for people* who change the way the world works."

This is not to take away from people who get jobs working for other people. I'm not trying to put them down. I'm trying to emphasize the simple reality that if someone else hasn't created the organization which is doing the work you believe in, then you will be stuck working on something

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you don't necessarily believe in. You may even end up working on something that is not compatible with your values, ethics, or desired lifestyle. We all know plenty of really good people who do work they are not proud of because they need to feed themselves and/or to feed their families.

The only way out of this trap is to create your own opportunities, and students are never taught the skills and knowledge of how to do this. School generally teaches you how to follow orders, not take initiative. Alfie Kohn wrote extensively about the problems with school micromanaging the day-to-day events in children's lives in his book, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*:

What rewards and punishments do is induce compliance, and this they do very well indeed. If your objective is to get people to obey an order, to show up on time and do what they're told, then bribing or threatening them may be sensible strategies. But if your objective is to get long-term quality in the workplace, to help students become careful thinkers and self-directed learners, or to support children in developing good values, then rewards, like punishments, are absolutely useless. In fact, as we are beginning to see, they are worse than useless—they are actually counterproductive.⁴

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While you may feel this resonates with your experience in school today, Alfie Kohn wrote that in 1993, over 25 years ago. This problem is not a new one. As far back as 1970, journalist and author Charles Silberman wrote:

Far from helping students to develop into mature, self-reliant, self-motivated individuals, schools seem to do everything they can to keep youngsters in a state of chronic, almost infantile, dependency. The pervasive atmosphere of distrust, together with rules covering the most minute aspects of existence, teach students every day that they are not people of worth, and certainly not individuals capable of regulating their own behavior.⁵

Tragically, it appears that the use of control to restrict young people's self-direction is not an accident, it is *deliberate*.

For example, I learned that the original goal of the U.S. education system was to create laborers to feed an industrial machine. John Rockefeller, America's first billionaire and the richest man who ever lived, organized the General Board of Education to help fund the launch of America's public high schools. Their vision for education is clear from the Board's mission statement in 1906:

In our dreams, people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hands... We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of

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learning or men of science. We hope not to raise up from among them authors, educators, poets, or men of letters. We shall not search for embryo great artists, painters, musicians, nor lawyers, doctors, preachers, politicians, statesmen, of whom we have ample supply. The task we set before ourselves is very simple... we will organize children... and teach them to do in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way.⁶

While this sounds like they aimed to make a nation of robots, which feels pretty evil, that doesn't necessarily mean the founders of our education system were supervillains hatching an evil scheme to control the population. It could just as well mean that they genuinely believed this was the path to American prosperity, and that it would benefit all mankind.

I'm not looking to crucify any historical figures; I'm bringing this quote up to explain how we got to the way things are today. It's easy to look at the way the world is today and feel that it's always been like that. It may feel like school is a staple of American history - it is not. It may feel like school is a staple of human history - it is not. Mass schooling is a recent invention.

My particular concern is with the idea of *compulsory* schooling, where young people are *forced* to attend. Researcher and self-directed learning advocate, Kerry McDonald, writes that:

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Just over two decades after the pilgrims arrival, Massachusetts Bay Colony legislators passed the colonies first compulsory education statute. The General School Law of 1642 required families to “ensure the good education of their children”.... Five years later, in 1647, Massachusetts Bay passed its second compulsory education law... [which] required that towns with more than fifty or more families hire a teacher, and towns with one hundred or more families open and operate a grammar school. These schools were not compulsory in the sense that schooling is today; rather it was the town that was compelled by the state to offer such a school for families who wanted to use it. Towns, not parents [or students], were punished for not complying...⁷

Initially, school was offered in much the same way that a public library is. It was a community service which was offered to the public, which people could choose to use or not to use - it was not forced upon children against their will.

Two hundred years later, the first compulsory education law in the United States that mandated children attend school was ratified in Massachusetts in 1852. By 1918, Mississippi became the final state to adopt compulsory education laws.⁸ In modern times, it is often a fight for parents to get their kids to go to school.

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At the time these laws were passed, many families resisted the idea of the government using force to separate them from their children.

As former teacher turned self-directed learning advocate, John Taylor Gatto, shared with the New York State Senate during his acceptance speech for the award of New York City Teacher of the Year in 1990:

...[compulsory schooling] was resisted — sometimes with guns — by an estimated eighty percent of the Massachusetts population, the last outpost in Barnstable on Cape Cod not surrendering its children until the 1880s, when the area was seized by militia and children marched to school under guard.⁹

Gatto famously quit teaching after receiving his third New York City Teacher of the Year Award and his first New York State Teacher of the Year award, by writing a Wall Street Journal article that closed with the line: “If you hear of a job where I don’t have to hurt kids to make a living, let me know.”¹⁰

While the laws demonstrating the adoption of the compulsory aspect of schooling are clear and easy to trace, the history of how our “factory schooling” model came to be is more difficult to track. The most detailed account of this history comes from Gatto, whose work is featured at JohnTaylorGatto.com.¹¹

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Without rewriting his entire body of work here, the story seems to be that the factory-style school comes from the Prussian model of education that became popular in western civilization in the late 1800's and early 1900's. This model includes familiar features such as separating children by age and grade, changing classes throughout the day with the ringing of a bell, grading and tracking student performance, compulsory attendance, specific training programs for teachers, national testing standards, dress codes and school uniforms, and a prescribed national curriculum for each grade. The ultimate goal is believed to be instilling obedience and uniformity into all students.

This goal was desirable for *employers*, who wanted laborers that would be on time, work long hours, follow directions, not challenge authority, and could read and write; as well as by *politicians and national leaders*, who wanted to indoctrinate youth with patriotism, instill a universal moral code, and be knowledgeable enough to vote wisely in public democratic elections.

If you browse John Taylor Gatto's work or search the web for the "Prussian model of education" or the name "Horace Mann," you will come across these stories that make up our school system's history, which will make you feel uncomfortable and possibly even angry. That's not my purpose here. Instead, I am trying to emphasize that there is that history and inertia explain how we got to where we are today. As evolutionary psychologist and president of the Alliance for Self-Directed Education, Dr. Peter Gray, writes:

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If we want to understand why standard schools are what they are, we have to abandon the idea that they are products of logical necessity or scientific insight. They are, instead, products of history. Schooling, as it exists today, only makes sense if we view it from a historical perspective.¹²

Taking this perspective was really eye-opening for me. I realized that school was not always here... and it's possible that school will one day go away. The only thing in life that is constant, is change.

Going back even further in time, Peter's research has studied how children have learned throughout human history. His research extends over the course of hundreds of thousands of years, going as far back as when humans lived as hunter gatherers. Peter has found that throughout human history, children have learned best through self-directed learning. In his book, *Free to Learn*, he writes:

We have forgotten that children are designed by nature to learn through self-directed play and exploration, and so, more and more, we deprive them of freedom to learn, subjecting them instead to the tedious and painfully slow learning methods devised by those who run the schools.¹³

THE FORK IN MY LIFE'S ROAD

During my senior year of college, all my classmates were beginning to look for jobs after college graduation. It was at this time that I reached a fork in the road. One road was well-paved, had street signs and traffic lights, showed up on everyone's GPS system, and was full of traffic. This was the road all my classmates were on. The second road... was empty and wasn't much of a road at all... it was more of a mysterious path into the forest.

I got my first glimpse at this curious trail into the unknown during the first semester of my senior year when I took a class called "Intellectual Assets." As critical as I may have sounded of my University education earlier, I am genuinely grateful that I took that course, as it changed my life forever.

Oddly enough, this class was the least "engineering-y" class on my schedule. The lectures were more like discussions, we never used equations, and there were no weekly problem sets. Instead, the focus was on creativity, inventing, patent law, and business.

It was during this class, I felt like I'd found my calling.

"That's it, I'm meant to be an inventor," I thought. I quickly learned that, in modern times, being an inventor really means being an entrepreneur. Suddenly I found myself captivated by the world of entrepreneurship and startup companies. At the time (this was the fall of 2007), there was very little information available on how to launch

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a startup. Most business-related educational resources were about how to run and manage a business, not how to start one.

About a month into that class, without having a plan of any kind, I proposed to my classmate and friend, Alec, that we should start a business together. We were both biomedical engineering students, had worked together before on many assignments and projects, had similar work ethics and senses of humor, and Alec had actually taken a handful of business classes as electives. We were a solid fit as partners which is critical when diving into a new business together. I realize now that it was incredibly unusual that we started on this adventure together without having any preconceived notion of what our business would be; we just knew we were going to go for it and swung for the fences.

To find our way through the fog, we tried to follow the example of inventors I learned about in my “Intellectual Assets” class, like Thomas Edison or Alexander Graham Bell. We started by getting together every week for brainstorming sessions where we’d generate a list of possible inventions. It wasn’t important that we actually knew how to create the invention; that was a problem to be solved later. At this stage, it was important not to judge the ideas at all, to keep an open mind as to what was possible, and really stretch our imaginations. Alec liked to refer to this process as “fanta-science”.

One hypothetical invention that stands out in my mind, was the idea of genetically engineering “luxury plants.” This could mean a lot of different things - anything from modifying flowers’ colors to engineering fast-growing

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bonsai trees to developing grass that would stop growing after it reached a certain height.

We didn't only brainstorm ideas when we were together, we also came up with ideas on our own and put them in "Invention Notebooks" that we'd share during our brainstorming sessions. Inspiration could come at any time from any place.

For example, I remember one memorable night where I went online and started Googling different articles about luxury plants and genetic engineering. I came across a blog that focused on linking passages from old science fiction novels to current news articles about real products that actually did what was described in the science fiction novels many years earlier. One such article showed a passage in a book from the early 1900's that talked about plants which would grow into trees overnight. The article was linked to a recent news article about a company that was genetically engineering plants for rapid growth. As I clicked through this blog, I came across a fascinating post which would end up drastically altering the next two years of my life.

The post included a passage from an old science fiction novel that described a weapon that would briefly paralyze people, like a "paralysis grenade." The post was linked to a news story about a U.S. military project called the Active Denial System which worked as a ray gun that would make people *feel* like they were on fire, even though they were not harmed.¹⁴ It worked using electromagnetic waves (in the microwave range) to activate nerves which generate the sensation of pain without actually harming the person's

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body. The idea of using light as a way to activate or deactivate nerves sparked a lot of possible inventions in my head, such as using light as an anesthetic.

This led me to staying up late into the night researching how pain was transmitted through the body, how nerves worked, how they were controlled, how anesthetics worked, what the benefits/downsides of anesthetics were, what other mechanisms researchers tried using to modulate proteins, how light interacts with proteins, how some research was linking specific wavelengths of light to proteins... it went on and on. It was incredibly exciting and fun to be learning in this manner and I was consuming information at a rate I'd never experienced before.

This was the first time I'd gotten exposed to a different approach to learning. Where instead of a teacher presenting a curriculum, conveying information, handing me an assignment, and grading me, it was based on following my own interests and curiosity.

I wondered - why couldn't my whole education have been like this?

You might think this 'call to action' caused me to switch my focus towards education. Nope. I was far too busy having fun playing with technology and doing "fanta-science".

After a month or two of holding weekly brainstorming sessions, Alec and I had a different kind of meeting where we began narrowing down our ideas to find the ones which were both technically possible and practical as a business.

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It was important that the idea not just be “cool” but also be valuable to a potential customer. There are millions of cool ideas out there but it's much harder to find something that will actually be useful enough to justify launching a business.

We decided to focus on different applications for using light to modulate proteins and enzymes. Initially, we focused on using this technology for anesthesia. Since we were biomedical engineering students, creating a medical device got us pretty excited, but we later pivoted away from medical applications toward using the same technology to speed up commercial enzymes. It seemed a lot more reasonable since medical devices are heavily regulated and have incredible technical challenges. Our probability of success was so small as it was, we opted for a path of less resistance. In choosing which commercial enzyme to focus on, we learned that the emerging industry of cellulosic ethanol was in desperate need of more efficient enzymes to make their technology work.

After we narrowed down to a specific business idea, we had a vague idea of the process that would follow to bring this idea to life: raising money, hiring people, performing lab research, building a product, and selling it. This is the process I learned in my class on becoming an inventor and was reinforced in a course on entrepreneurship that Alec and I both signed up for. Despite receiving this high-level overview in these courses, it was still all a mystery how we'd pull it off since we were in the position of actually taking the ideas and putting them into practice. As many people describe entrepreneurship: it was like jumping out of a plane and inventing a parachute on the way down.

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Since there was no instruction manual or curriculum on how to launch a biotechnology startup company, we had to be resourceful. To gain knowledge, we went to online forums, watched YouTube instructional videos, and read books. I also attended any start-up company or technology transfer seminars that our university advertised. I was usually the only undergraduate and often the only student in the room. I asked questions and networked with the “adults”; they seemed to always have the answers. Naively, I considered their opinion even more valuable if they were wearing a suit. I was thankful for any moments of their precious time they were willing to give me.

When selecting our courses for our final semester of college, Alec and I specifically chose classes that aligned with our project. For example, I chose Electromagnetics and Biophotonics as my electives, two classes that were related to light and how it would interact with biology. Alec took classes related to protein sciences. It was not just the classes itself that were valuable, but more so, the access to the professors. Being in the class allowed us to raise our hands and ask questions related to our project and gave us an excuse to visit the professors’ after-hours to ask further questions. In many cases, the class material can be found for free online, but being able to connect directly and build relationships with experts in the field is something much harder to access.

By the end of our senior year of college, we had a research plan which had been evaluated by a couple of our professors, we were negotiating a deal to get laboratory space at the University to do our research, were putting together a grant proposal to obtain funding, and began

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contacting investors. Despite this “full speed ahead” mentality, we really had no idea how we would achieve it. This blend of naivety and over- confidence was a perfect storm to encourage us to keep pushing forward.

By the end of summer, Alec and I had raised over a quarter million dollars from two investors and were beginning the laboratory research to prove the commercial feasibility of our technology.

In some ways, the apparent success we were having so quickly following this alternative path seemed almost too easy. At the same time, it felt incredibly natural.

Why had I waited my whole life to pursue entrepreneurship? I could have done this years ago! If only I had not been sidetracked by my childhood misconception of a 'career' and realized my inner desire to create, I could have broken free from the constrained education system I was a part of all my life and could have gone down this road much sooner.

BREAKTHROUGH OR BREAKDOWN?

Regardless of my newfound joy of entrepreneurship and my appreciation of innovation and creativity, underneath the surface, this venture all still felt pretty self-centered and in alignment with my pursuit of professional satisfaction and wealth. While I was working on a technology that would contribute to positive world change, the motivation behind the work was still aimed towards personal

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amusement and self-satisfaction. I realize now, that our brainstorming sessions were biased because we were engineers: we first focused on generating technology-related ideas that were cool, and our later sessions narrowed these down into what ideas could actually make money. We didn't start by brainstorming about what the biggest problems were in the world and how we could improve global well-being.

This inner conflict began to creep into my conscience as soon as we received funding from our investors. Receiving funding very much locked us into the business and things became very real. The trajectory of my life appeared to be skyrocketing in an unrealistic fashion. Just six months earlier I was a student and now I was co-founder of a tech startup company that was actually funded.

At that time, I wasn't aware of other examples of such young people following paths like this, aside from people like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, or the guys from Google. It was overwhelming and I rapidly had lots of thoughts and realizations about life, which led to a major breakthrough, or -- as the doctors who had me involuntarily committed to a mental hospital called it -- a breakdown.

I became intensely aware that entrepreneurship came with power, and, as Spiderman's Uncle Ben told him, "With great power, comes great responsibility."¹⁵

This realization happened very suddenly. It was like being a cat looking in the mirror and finally seeing a lion. I was no longer a student in preparation, I was now an adult, executing and participating in the world. With this

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newfound perspective, I came to an unexpected conclusion that it was important to do good things in the world. Specifically, I concluded that doing good was the priority over developing cool technology. I realized I had become heavily biased through my youth as so much emphasis was placed on innovative technologies and achievements that it clouded my vision.

I consider this realization to be a breakthrough in my personal development because I had never viewed myself as someone who wanted to do good in the world. I also came to realize that I was one of a small number of people who had the capability, determination, and confidence to actually pursue changing the world in a positive way. I also realized that so many people like me, who had these attributes, were wrapped up in the rat race of trying to attain material wealth instead of improving society. To be clear, that doesn't mean there aren't people who are improving society and getting wealthy, the question is: which is a priority? It's important to have priorities that are aligned with your values, otherwise, you can end up making compromising decisions.

You're probably expecting this story to go in a direction that says, we switched gears, did something amazing for the public good, and got rich in the process. I'm sorry to say, we didn't change gears, didn't change the world, and didn't get rich. Since we'd raised the money and were on a trajectory to carry out the work we said we'd do, we honored our word and stuck with it.

We spent about a year in the lab, spent half the money we raised, and couldn't get the technology to work, so we

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decided to shut the business down and return the remaining money to our investors.

Sometimes it feels like we “quit” or “gave up” and that we should have continued working and trying more ideas until every last penny was spent. I didn’t feel justified in spending our investors’ money when we no longer believed the idea was viable, it didn’t seem right. So we stopped. I prefer the term “stopped” to “quit,” as “quit” carries a lot of negative connotations in our society. “Stopping” can be an intelligent decision, whereas “quitting” is always negative.

Though I was devastated from what I felt was a failure, I grew a lot from the experience. I emerged with a perspective that was thinking more altruistically, but I was still stuck thinking like an engineer. My ambitions were more focused on working on something valuable that would really help people, but I couldn’t get away from the idea that I needed to invent something. I was stuck in the engineer’s mindset of wanting to develop a *technology* that would improve the world. My ego couldn’t seem to detach from this identity.

A SECOND CHANCE

Two years later, I found an opportunity to contribute to the public good in the lighting industry, where new LED technology was being used to reduce our global energy consumption and improve the lighting quality in buildings.

There was an important and subtle shift in my mindset that took place when starting this new business. Previously, the

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engineer in me thought I needed to *invent* a new technology. In the case of LED lighting, the technology was already invented. I found myself in a new role, where my job was to promote the technology, educate people about it, and develop a financial mechanism to make this expensive, new technology accessible to everyone.

To be clear, though my engineering background helped me to understand how the technology worked, the “problem to be solved” in this business was not an engineering problem. The problem was in marketing, education, and finance. This unchained me from the requirement to engineer something and freed me up to realize I had other skills and value to contribute to the world.

My business partners were more savvy about finance than I was, and they found out about an effective financial model being used for other energy-efficient technologies, like solar panels. The way it worked, is that we'd offer commercial buildings zero-out-of-pocket lighting retrofits. This means we would go to buildings that already had old, inefficient light bulbs, and offer to install the new LED lights for free, and when their energy bill went down, we'd get paid back out of the savings over time.

Though this business was more successful than the biotech company I started, it was a serious roller coaster ride that furthered the evolution in my personal development. Specifically, there were two key events which occurred toward the end of my time with the LED lighting company which caused me to finally shift my priorities away from technology and toward education.

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The first key event happened after we replaced the old lights in one of my business partners' house with energy-efficient LEDs. He was the epitome of the stereotypical old, white-skinned, grey-haired businessman who focuses most of his conversations around money. I was really turned off by this obsession with money, but genuinely believed that surrounding myself with people like this would be an asset to the company since my previous business failed and consisted of just me and a classmate who were both inexperienced and engineering-minded. About a month after the LEDs were installed in his house, he enthusiastically shared with me: "The new lights are great! My energy bill went down so much, I just leave the lights on all the time!" A single thought entered my mind: "Fuck you."

I couldn't believe it. I thought of the time and energy put in by the scientists who worked for decades to discover how LEDs could produce light from a microchip using a fraction of the energy required by incandescent, halogen, or fluorescent light bulbs. I thought of the engineers who designed a way to apply these scientific phenomena to create actual LED lamps which could be used in buildings. I thought of the labor that went into mining the precious metals around the world to make LED chips. I thought of the laborers in Asian factories assembling the components to make the finished lamps. I thought of the resources it took to transport the finished products on boats across the Pacific Ocean to the United States. I thought of the time and effort that sales people put into promoting the technology, educating the public, and selling them to property owners. I thought of the contractors who installed the LEDs in buildings.

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We are talking about countless people devoting serious resources to reducing energy consumption, all in the name of “saving the world”. It dismayed me to realize that all this human capital working on new technology was wasted by people using technology carelessly. Even more so, all these resources could have been saved if, instead, we just got everyone to turn off their lights when they're not in the room!

I realized that developing new technology wasn't enough. If people's priorities were money over public good, they would purchase a product to save them money, but not consider the role it played in the public welfare. My intuition told me the underlying issue in creating this distorted value system was related to education. Education started appearing to be a field more worthy of my attention than technology.

The second key event happened a couple months later when our company, American Relight, acquired another company, MSi Lighting. This was a major accomplishment and should have been a time to celebrate. Instead, my business partners decided I was no longer needed and kicked me out of the company.

This happened the day *after* I signed the contracts giving up my ownership in my original company and any decision-making power I had. I was devastated.

I had heard about greed and deceit in business, but this was my first experience witnessing it firsthand. I really believed in this altruistic vision of solving our energy crisis and improving the living conditions inside of buildings using

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LEDs but was surrounded by people who just saw dollar signs. Our interests and values were not aligned at all. While I thought I was making a wise decision of partnering up with a lot of older, experienced entrepreneurs... I now realized how naive I was to think that any of them had interests aside from filling their pockets. It was my fault for getting involved with these kinds of people in the first place, thinking somehow my altruism could balance out their self-interest.

I wondered, “How could people behave like this? Doesn’t anyone give a damn about the rest of the world?”

When I looked for a root cause of this cultural epidemic, I once again looked at our education system’s competitive and achievement-focused culture as the origin of the misalignment of values and pervasive greed in our society.

Around this time, I also started performing stand-up comedy, viewing comedy as an artistic tool for shifting our culture’s perception around mental health. I started seeing this entanglement between education and culture; if one wants to shift our culture, they need to change education. Similarly, if we want to change education, we need to change the culture. The specifics weren’t entirely clear to me, but my inner compass had clearly shifted. My focus moved away from being obsessed with inventing something, or even thinking technology was the answer to our problems. Instead, I wanted to go deeper to the root of our societal issues.

I looked at all the suffering happening in the world from war, discrimination, prejudice, starvation, thirst, poverty,

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greed, violence, etc.... these were the problems of the world worth solving. While there are technology-based solutions to these problems, I saw the root causes of these problems were not technology- based. The problem was a societal and cultural problem. But how does one shift culture? The best solution I could come up with was that improving education was the way to go.

This was the second time I felt a “call to action” to do something meaningful in education. The first time, I was too busy launching my first business. This time, however, I had the good fortune of being newly unemployed with lots of time on my hands.

BEGINNING MY QUEST TO TRANSFORM EDUCATION

It is unusual for me to realize and admit that it was striving to change our culture that got me into education. Something about having an ulterior motive feels impure.

I also felt uneasy as I recognized a conflict within my own values: on the one hand, I value the idea of having a more collaborative, thoughtful, and caring world. On the other hand, I strongly oppose the use of force and coercion, so I don't believe in *forcing* anyone act in a positive way.

I couldn't force my values on students, the best I could do was to liberate them in a way such that they were free to develop their own values rather than to simply adopt that which are imposed on them. This would require actually giving young people the freedom to make decisions, make

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mistakes, take responsibility for their actions, and participate in the world as equals. Ultimately, it requires a lot of trust.

As you can probably tell, I struggle with accepting and admitting that I have this underlying culture- transforming motivation to being involved with education. To be transparent, I don't have a political affiliation and I'm not sure if there is a name for whatever it is that I believe in. My utopian vision for society is such that one day in the future, aliens visit Earth and cannot tell if they are looking at socialism or anarchy. Meaning that they see everyone cooperating and collaborating and sharing and treating one another equally, yet, they are not being *forced* to do it.

This may be an unrealistic future. After all, though aliens are likely to exist, it's unlikely they'll ever make it to Earth. I'm also not sure if this future is one I'd actually want to live in. It would require everyone's values to be aligned and I think a culture with a homogeneous value system could be boring. At the same time, I just cannot accept that the only possibility is to have a world where people only do good if they are forced to.

Even if my fantasy world of a socialist-anarchy never comes to be, and it likely won't, it will always be important for a healthy society that people are educated, critical thinkers. As Thomas Jefferson once said:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control

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with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.¹⁶

But the truth is, if my interest was in solving issues about morality and global consciousness, school seemed like the place where kids should be learning these ideas. If schools really thought these topics were important, kids would be tested on them, right? But in reality, nobody ever gets a grade on morality and consciousness. One might argue that we do train young people to be good by threatening to punish them for bad behavior, but that only imposes someone else's moral code on you, rather than allowing you to develop your own.

Instead, school is training young people to plug into a system as the laborers for the leaders, not to be empowered to change the world themselves. How many young people graduate college with great ambitions to do good in the world, only to shift their focus because they need to make a living to pay off their student loans and the only jobs available don't align with their values? A simple visual representation of this can be seen in how many teens and college students have colored hair as opposed to people in their late 20's. Do they all simply decide it's not cool anymore? Or, are they compromising their individuality because they need to get a job? Sure, a hairstyle is a subtle change, but it's an easily visualized one, whereas the changes in values and priorities are hidden within people's minds.

As I looked closer at education, I wondered where I fit into the picture and how I could make a difference. There are

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only a handful of paths available to people who want to work in education.

I could become a teacher and set a good example for kids. Based on my knowledge of the existing school system, teaching seemed like it would be unreasonably restrictive of my freedom, and I would only be able to reach a small number of students.

I thought of getting a Ph.D. in education and becoming involved with curriculum development, discerning which topics are important for students to learn. That seemed like quite a political and uphill battle, and I'd still be adjusting the curriculum within the existing system... as opposed to changing the system itself. Plus, I had to be realistic. You can't transform culture just by changing the school curriculum. You don't just add "turn off the lights" to the curriculum or add a class called "don't be a selfish prick" - there's something deeper that's needed.

While I certainly admire those who try to "change the system from within", it didn't seem like my path. There still loomed a huge issue which the system seemed uncompromising about: this curriculum was being *forced* on kids against their will. My negative experiences in the mental health system with involuntary commitment and forced drugging exposed me to the consequences of our institutions using force, even when they were well-intended.

I remember having this fantasy where I'd announce to all students in my old hometown of Wethersfield, Connecticut, that instead of going to class, they'd meet out on the soccer

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field next to the school with renegade teachers. Students would meet with them for mentorship based on the students' interests and the teacher's expertise. Teachers could teach actual classes if they wanted, but students would be free to attend or not to attend. To make sure that teachers weren't starving, the students would all sign up underage for credit cards and pay the teachers a small amount for their time.

This sounds impossible, but I've heard of many situations where young people got their hands on credit cards or PayPal credit accounts underage. Part of the schooling would entail mentoring the students on entrepreneurship, so that they could actually earn enough money to pay off the credit card debt. And if the student couldn't actually pay the debt, they'd just contact the credit card company and say, "Oops, you shouldn't have given a minor a credit card, you greedy company!" Of course this was just a fantasy, nothing I acted on, but it seemed so much more ideal than having rooms full of students who never asked to be put in a classroom.

I ran this idea by a few friends who told me that I was crazy and predicted that I would ruin children's lives and get put in jail.

I confess, their comments burrowed into my mind and succeeded in causing me to doubt myself. I became self-conscious and paranoid that I might actually be "crazy." I feared that I would hurt people with my poor, murky judgement. My sensitivity to the judgment of others is a personal issue I'm still making progress on. Consequently, the fear and stigma of being labelled 'crazy' has cost me

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much time and progress.

I couldn't see any place for my approach to learning within the existing school system.

Feeling stuck, I reached out to several people for guidance whom I consider "mentors." It is important to distinguish the difference between a 'mentor' and a 'teacher'.

A teacher in a school is one who is responsible for planning out coursework, setting expectations, delivering information, and evaluating your performance. Their overall goal is to take you from a predefined point A to point B. A mentor, on the other hand, behaves more like a sounding board; providing their wisdom, answering questions you might have, asking you challenging questions you may not have considered, sometimes sharing stories or experiences that worked for them, and making introductions to people who may be helpful along your journey. While you may discuss and set goals, there is no predefined roadmap to follow from point A to point B, there is no clear starting point and no clear finish line.

In meeting with my mentors, we discussed a lot of possible paths that I could take to gain a footing in the education world. One possibility was to submit a grant proposal to get funding for an experimental project that gave youth freedom over their learning. A more grandiose possibility was to move to an undeveloped country and test out my theories with youth who had no access to schools.

The trouble is, at this point, I only had my own personal experiences to guide me in justifying that self-directed learning was a good idea. As one of my mentors told me,

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“You’ve done a lot of ME-search, you need to do some re-search.” The most practical solution to filling this gap in my knowledge was for me to first become a teacher in order to get first-hand experience in the school system.

The idea of becoming a full-time teacher was pretty daunting given the current status of my health, which was not ideal. The month after I was kicked out of my company, I ended up in the hospital twice with cardiac issues. My mental health was also not great. I was stressed. I wasn’t emotionally resilient enough to deal with the possible backlash that might come from shouting from the mountaintops that kids should not be forced to attend school.

I had never been so stir-crazy to get started on something I was really excited about, yet also self-aware of my physical and mental limitations. As it felt like things were crashing down, I felt the urge to start something new quickly before the aftermath could set in from the past failures. I was strongly advised that I take things slow and take care of myself. I needed to understand that the endeavor into changing education would be a marathon, not a sprint.

Yet I couldn’t shake that inner criticism that kept saying, “Taking it slow is the same as quitting... you’re not a quitter are you?” That type of mentality is not helpful at all and is too ego-driven.

A great piece of advice I received in dealing with your ego, is to put your ego in the passenger seat of the car. You don’t want to let it drive; it will get you killed. You also don’t want to put it in the back seat, otherwise you’re

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suppressing it. But you can let your ego be your fun, exciting, co-pilot.

The solution I came to was to move back to the northeast United States where my family lived to get some emotional support, see a good doctor about my heart, and apply for jobs teaching high school physics.

Through teaching physics, I thought I could to expose youth to a view of reality where we are all connected as one beautiful universe and anything is possible. When you cut through all the distractions that more integrative sciences create like chemistry, biology, neuroscience, psychology, sociology, etc., physics is the most fundamental way of looking at the world. Maybe through teaching physics I could manifest a more loving, caring culture. After all, studying physics is the path through which I developed a lot of my own insights about humanity and the value of doing good in the world.

As I applied for positions and went on interviews, an uncomfortable feeling kept creeping in. I simply despised the notion of having thirty kids sitting in a room against their will and forcing knowledge down their throat. It just didn't seem moral. It wasn't compatible with my life philosophy at all.

Why are we *forcing* kids to learn? Is learning so painful that people wouldn't do it on their own? Do they really need to be forced? Do we think so little of our youth? Why do they need a teacher to tell them everything? Why can't they learn outside the system? Is the current method even working? Are people really learning? Was I about to

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become an enforcer of this factory-style schooling system, that treated them like a product to be pieced together on an assembly line, grooming them to fill a position in a mechanized society? How could I teach young people to learn how to think for themselves, make decisions, and create things?

I had far too many unanswered questions and theories that needed validating with actual experience. Fortunately, I was offered a job teaching freshman physics at a high school in Western Massachusetts.

Immediately, I realized that the situation was worse than I expected.

TEACHING HIGH SCHOOL

To summarize my gripes with teaching, it comes down to a handful of main complaints: students are treated as “less than”, the compulsory nature of schooling transforms teachers into authoritarians, standardized testing prohibits authentic teaching, and imposed curricula cripple creativity and exploration.

First and foremost, the most painful aspect of my teaching experience was seeing how poorly young people are treated and condescended to. Of all people, I expected better from teachers. I recall being in the teacher's lunchroom, proposing my ideas about making school optional, and hearing teachers say things like, “If we don't force them in a room and force knowledge into their brain, they'll never learn... without school, they'll become criminals or drug addicts, likely both”. The jabs were never-ending: “They're

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rude,” “they’re monsters,” “they’re lazy,” “they’re misbehaved”, “they have no respect.”

Because I look young, teachers occasionally mistook me for a student and yelled at me. Multiple times, I was scolded for being in the mail room: “You’re not supposed to be in here”. I remember getting interrogated when trying to enter the school on a weekend to retrieve a notebook from my classroom, being told, “you should know students aren’t allowed in the building on the weekend.” When I would point out to these people that I was actually a teacher, they’d response, “Oh, sorry, I thought you were a student,” as if that would make their tone acceptable.

The worst instance was when I was talking to another teacher and one of my students interrupted us to ask me a question. The other teacher scolded him saying, “Wait your turn. Adults are talking.” You might assume this type of coldness would come from the older teachers who are just “phoning it in” before they can retire, but that statement actually came from a 27-year-old teacher, one who I had previously thought was a decent guy.

This is the reality of the system. It can transform even the most well-intentioned teachers into an authoritarian enforcer. I’m criticizing others, but I confess, I fell into the trap as well.

Twice, I have said, “shut up” to a group of kids. It’s not only inappropriate to say this to kids, but it originates from a place of feeling the need to control others. Ever notice that young people are the only ones we say “shut up” to? Or you use the phrase “misbehave” when referring to?

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I even made a girl cry once. While I was teaching a class, she kept making this squeaking sound from the back of the room to purposely distract everyone and get a laugh. I quickly quieted her by telling her directly that she was being “annoying” and she got really upset and yelled at me. Being stubborn, and thinking I was teaching her a “valuable” lesson by being direct, I reaffirmed that she was being annoying. This led to her being more upset, crying and yelling ensued, and eventually the principal had to be brought in.

Even as I write this, I agree, she was definitely being annoying. That’s not really the point. The point is, that in front of a roomful of her peers, I exercised my authority to label her and humiliate her. I shamed her into submission. Shame is an inappropriate control mechanism for any adult to wield on a young person. Or really, any person in power to wield on any individual.

Another memory I have of my own authoritarian nature, is when I gave an assignment where the students had to pretend they worked as physics consultants to a video game company and write a letter to their boss explaining the laws of physics which would be needed to make the game realistic. It was meant to be a fun, practical activity, showing the link between the work we were doing and an actual job someone could have. Given how many of these letters I’d have to grade (and having seen their handwriting), I made it a requirement the assignments be typed on a computer. When students complained about not having access to a computer, I suggested they use the library. When they expressed any life obstacles preventing them from doing this, I playfully but firmly reassured them,

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“Life is tough... if you can’t handle this task, you’re going to be very disappointed for what the future holds. You can do this.” I thought I was teaching them some form of “tough love”.

I’m not saying there’s no value in pushing people to overcome adversity. The problem here is that I am creating artificial adversity to achieve *my* goals, not theirs. They don’t have any intrinsic motivation to complete this assignment, I’m merely creating obstacles in their way to make it easier for me to grade.

A more powerful experience would be if they were working on a project they really believed in, and I could point out to them that it would be more effective to communicate their message to their audience if it was typed on a computer, and they believed in their project so much they personally would have climbed a mountain to get access to a computer. But instead, it was merely an artificial challenge created by me.

So I’m not here to blame teachers, even the ones I’ve heard say inhumane things like, “Don’t let them see you smile before Christmas break.” Teachers don’t mean to turn out this way; however, the system puts pressure on teachers to approach their job in an authoritarian way. The education system is a massive hierarchy, and while students are at the very bottom, teachers are only one notch above them.

It's no surprise given this hierarchy, power imbalance, and overt control, that school is sometimes compared to a prison. In fact, one of my favorite jokes from my comedy album *The Flim Trilogy* is:

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I've been in a lot of high schools, a handful of jails, and a portfolio of mental hospitals – these places shouldn't be so similar... On the plus side, school is the only one where you start out locked up, and if you fuck up, you get to leave.¹⁷

It should be no surprise that prisoners are reported to actually have more freedom than students! The United Nations issued a report saying that “Every prisoner who is not employed in outdoor work shall have at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily if the weather permits.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, a study done by TreeHugger.com found that “1 out of 2 kids worldwide spends less than an hour outside.” One more comparison to prisons: in school, kids have to ask permission to use the bathroom. In prison, you get your own toilet! I actually got reprimanded by our department head because I refused to say “no” to kids asking to use the bathroom.

One of my worst experiences teaching happened the day before the school year started, when I learned they lied to me during my job interview. At my interview, I was told by the department head that I had complete control over the curriculum. Admittedly, I thought this was a lot of freedom to hand over to me given that I had never taught before. But I was excited about all the possibilities.

Then, the day before classes started, the Head of the Science Department handed me a copy of the previous year's state standardized test for physics. He told me that my students would take a similar test at the end of this year;

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they needed to pass in order to graduate. I was shocked. When I was a kid, standardized tests were never linked to our graduation, they were used to evaluate teachers and schools. Now I understood the meaning of the buzz words, “high stakes testing.” It turns out that 13 states in the U.S. linked testing to graduation in 2013. This number used to be as high as 50% of states in 2002.¹⁹

Not only are test scores linked to graduation rates, they are also linked to funding. For example, The Classroom reports:

While schools don't have to administer annual achievement tests, they'll lose funding if they don't. Local school districts determine test content, but with the recent push toward meeting Common Core standards, states' tests are becoming more standardized. A school that consistently fails to meet Adequate Yearly Progress standards may not be able to access some grants and other forms of funding. After five years of failure to meet [Adequate Yearly Progress] standards, a school can be closed altogether.²⁰

It's really important to take notice of this relationship: when test results are linked to both school funding *and* students are being punished for poor performance, we have a severe problem. The reason being, that need for test results to dictate funding requires students to fail. The failure rate is how they know where to allocate funds. If everyone suddenly passed the test, the test would be a

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failure in their eyes. They have to modify the test to ensure that a certain number of students fail, so they can use this data as a means to allocate funding. Therefore, the very nature of the testing system is designed to harm a certain percentage of children. It's by design.

As an example of this problem in action, a former public school teacher in New York shared with me that standardized test graders were actually encouraged to decrease all the writing scores for the standardized test one year, so that they could show evidence of increasing student achievement in future years. This move to artificially decrease test scores to increase future funding ultimately resulted in many students not being allowed to graduate that year.

Suddenly, as a teacher, my responsibility was to teach exactly what would be on the test; otherwise, I'd be risking having these teens not graduate. It was my duty to teach the content of the curriculum, regardless of my own opinions about it; I could not teach what I was passionate about. When people say that school has become "teaching to the test", they are right. Even in my rebellious nature, I realize I was doing the students a disservice not to teach to the test.

My priority as a teacher went from teaching physics to getting kids to graduate. Since there would never be a situation where 100% of students passed the test, this meant my priority was to spend as much time as possible preparing kids for the test, to minimize the number of kids who would flunk out of school. There was no time to teach physics topics I found truly meaningful and inspiring.

WHY?

This was incredibly disappointing, but it made sense now why I never liked physics when I was a student. Despite the fact that I had attended a math and science magnet school and a highly-ranked university engineering program, it was only when I started to engross myself in physics books outside the curriculum, that I truly began to learn about physics topics which I was passionate about (such as quantum mechanics).

The high school physics curriculum doesn't include all the cool conceptual things about physics which, I believe, make physics a meaningful, self-transforming subject. I want to teach how physics relates directly to us as human beings living in an amazing universe, not only how it can be used to create technology. Magnets are amazing because they magically cause forces to happen without any objects touching, not just because of their role in speakers or MRI machines. Light is amazing because it is constantly flying all around us, completely invisible to us, except for the tiny amount passing through the tiny slit in our eyeballs, and even then, just a small range of frequencies in the visible spectrum. It's not only amazing because it can be used to measure how fast a car is moving. And quantum mechanics can be used to describe how the whole universe around us is existing, or not existing, when we're not looking... it's not only useful for quantum computing. And gravity... how we take this magic force for granted that holds us all to the ground, never stopping to appreciate that *magic is happening!*

Instead, high school physics is taught more like pre-engineering: it focuses on learning the principles and equations and how they can be incorporated to solve

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technology problems. Because my goal in education is to “make the world a better place”, creating better engineers is not at the top of my list of priorities. I want to create better human beings.

While I firmly believe a proper physics education could change the world, I quickly realized it's not possible to teach physics in a curious, explorative, conceptual manner in the school system. I wasn't really there to teach physics as I deemed it valuable to people, I was there to teach someone else's curriculum. It was like the curriculum was the law and I was a police officer who was there to enforce it. I couldn't lie to children all day and pretend it was right. I concluded that I don't think it's really possible to teach *anything* properly in the school system.

As my frustrations in the classroom room grew, my health declined.

The stress of being trapped in a helpless situation where I wasn't empowered to give these students the education they deserved, while also seeing them in a helpless situation, really wore on my soul. The heart issues that had caused me trouble the summer before were starting to act up again. It was almost a humorous scene, me teaching physics at 27, with nobody knowing I'm wearing a heart rate monitor under my “uniform” like I'm some kind of mad scientist. The stress and anxiety led to a lot of insomnia, and, for me, lack of sleep causes me to get a bit detached from reality. I am aware of this, and never went to teach in what doctors would call a so-called “psychotic state”, and it caused me to miss a lot of days of school. Missing classes made me feel worse, because I felt like I was letting down all the

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students. It was a downward spiral.

There was one obvious solution to my own helplessness and, I feel, it was the same solution to the students' helpless situation: leave school.

CHANGING THE SYSTEM FROM THE OUTSIDE

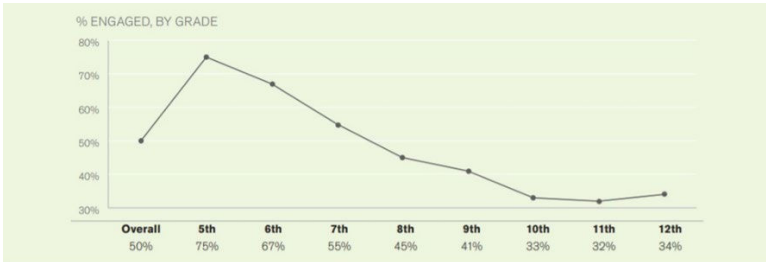
After only a semester of teaching, I left. While my experiences validated my instincts, about the school system, I was once again unemployed and looking to devote my time to changing the system. It was at this time that I first came across the writing of John Taylor Gatto who validated my feelings, when he wrote:

I don't mean to sound inflammatory but it's as if government schooling made people dumber, not brighter; made families weaker, not stronger; ruined formal religion with its hard-sell exclusion of God; set the class structure in stone by dividing children into classes and setting them against one another; and had been midwife to an alarming concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a fraction of the national community.²¹

Remarkably, Gatto's research also discovered that the literacy rate has *dropped* with the institution of compulsory education.²²

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Does this surprise us? How can young people learn if they are not willing participants in the process? You can only motivate students with candy and praise for so long before it wears off. A 2015 Gallup Student Poll found that student engagement peaks in 5th grade, with 75% of students reporting being engaged in the classroom and steadily drops to as low as 34% for high school students.²³



Yet it seems like school reformers never look at the issue of consent in schools when looking to create change. They focus on issues like teacher's pay, curriculum, technology, discipline, security, dress codes, school-day length, school-year length, etc.... without every challenging the compulsory, hierarchical system itself.

The fact that our children spend the first 18 years of their lives being institutionalized has tragic effects, robbing them of their individuality. This impact on the individual then extends to society as a whole. Growing up in an environment where you are told everyday what to do, where to go, what you can and cannot say, what you can and cannot wear, who you can and cannot sit next to, and that your self-worth is based on your academic achievements... is a travesty to mankind.

WHY?

The system is not serving students well in their careers, either. The Associated Press announced that in 2011, 54% of college grads under age 25 were out of work or underemployed.²⁴ A report from McKinsey & Company and Chegg, Inc. analyzed the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2011 and found that 48% were in jobs that require less than a four-year degree.²⁵ While this data was derived more so to blame colleges, it is telling of our education system as a whole.

Amidst all the concerns about whether school is preparing people for the workforce, mental health issues for youth are at their worst. Suicide rates among teens are drastically rising: a recently published study showed that the suicide rate for 15- to 19-year-olds rose from 8 per 100,000 in 2000 to 12 per 100,000 in 2017: that is a 50% increase!²⁶

There has to be a better way for human beings to exist. A way they can learn more effectively and not suffer such emotional torment along the way.

What if we just got rid of all the systemic constraints of school? What if there existed a space where learning was consensual? Creating that opportunity became my mission. Specifically, I decided to commit my efforts to make self-directed learning available, affordable, and accessible to all youth.

It is with that mission in mind, that I started creating this book.

While hearing my personal story here may be boring for people looking to dive in right away to the core of this

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book, I've shared all this personal background with you so that you can understand my motivations and be critical of what I'm going to share with you. I'll do my best in this book to present facts, however, it's important for you to recognize that I am motivated to write this book because I have a certain bias. To try and balance this bias out, I am being as transparent as possible.

I appreciate you taking such an interest in this work. In the words of one of my favorite comedians, Bo Burnham, "I just hope I don't get more from this than you do."²⁷

Maybe you can relate to my story, maybe you don't. Maybe your experience is completely different. That is perfectly OK. In our next chapter, we will start looking at something which everyone can relate to: fear. Not to worry, we'll also be looking at ways of overcoming your fear.

ACTION:

This is your first action to take. You don't have to do it, but if it was worth 1 hour of listening to me, it's got to be worth 5 minutes of your time to get a pen and paper and actually *do* something.

Ask yourself: Why are you reading this book? And now, repeat asking "why" several times to try and get to your underlying motivation.

WHY?

For example:

Question: Why am I reading this book?

Answer: Because school sucks.

Question: Why does school suck?

Answer: Because I'm not interested in the things I'm learning about and I feel trapped in there.

Question: Why I am not interested in what I'm learning and why do I feel trapped?

Answer: I'm not interested because I don't have any choice in what I learn about and so my teachers simply bring up topics and give me assignments based on their curriculum without any connection to my real-life or interests I might have. And I feel trapped because there's really no way out of this system which I'm trapped in year-after-year until I hopefully graduate one day and can go to college (I guess) and then get a job... I'm not even sure what that's like, I honestly haven't had the chance to think about what that future looks like because I'm so focused on the present task at hand which is to "get good grades and get into college."

Question: Why do you feel like you have no choice? Why do you think there is no way

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out of the system?

Answer: Nobody has ever presented me with a different path. I've never seen anything different.

Question: Why haven't you seen a different path?

Answer: Either an alternative path doesn't exist or it doesn't work well enough to be popular. Maybe it's being hidden from me intentionally, or maybe it's just not mainstream so it doesn't reach me via the media or my parents or teachers or peers.

Continue this process of asking “Why” until you feel you've uncovered your true motivation for reading this book. Hold onto what you've written, as it may be valuable for you to keep referring back to this “Why” and re-reading it anytime you encounter a challenging part of this book. That motivation will help fuel you through the difficulties.

If you get to the end of this book and you're underlying motivation has not been fulfilled, please write to me and tell me what I missed. There's a contact form on my website at jim-flannery.com. If I'm missing something, I want to know, as learning about and understanding my blind spots in supporting young self-directed learners is part of my own mission and purpose.

CHAPTER 2

FEAR AND COURAGE

This book can be difficult for a lot of young people. It's not difficult in the way that calculus is difficult or in the way that dunking a basketball is difficult. This book is more difficult in the way that skydiving is difficult. You can read all about skydiving, watch lots of videos, look up statistics on how rare skydiving deaths are, and talk to lots of skydivers... but it's still difficult to jump.²⁸

The challenge at hand is overcoming fear.

As you read this book, you are likely to encounter a lot of fears.

This is normal.

Feeling fearful may make you think that this book is intended for fearless individuals. It is not.

In fact, I'd argue that fearless people do not exist. We tend to think of "fearlessness" as an admirable quality, when it is actually a horrible one. If you were fearless, you'd likely end up dead by carelessly crossing the street in traffic and

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being hit by a car. Fear has a purpose. A better quality than fearlessness, is to be *courageous*, which is to have fears and overcome them when it's important to.

The most powerful speaker and writer about courage is Dr. Brené Brown. She writes:

Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage.²⁹

Vulnerability is not knowing victory or defeat, it's understanding the necessity of both; it's engaging. It's being all in. Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional.³⁰

You can't get to courage without walking through vulnerability, period....³¹

Pursuing the ideas laid out in this book will require a certain amount of courage on your part, so that you can overcome your fears. Don't worry, courage is a skill that can be practiced and you can get better at it.

You're not alone in your fears. All of the other young people reading this book have fears, very similar to yours. And, believe it or not, I have a tremendous number of fears in creating this book.

FEAR AND COURAGE

In our current culture, we're encouraged to hide our fears. We're told that being afraid is a sign of weakness, when it is a completely natural and essential part of being human. I'm going to share with you about my fears in releasing this book so you can see this process in action. Don't give me too much credit for being vulnerable here, obviously I overcame these fears, otherwise you wouldn't be reading this book. And I have to admit, I've also never had the courage to actually go skydiving.

FEAR OF JUDGMENT

The first, and most intense fear I have, is a fear of judgment from people that has plagued me for a long time.

I know that in creating such a controversial book, some people will call me a "bad person". I'll likely be called a "monster" for suggesting that some young people would be better off without school. Critics will say I am "ruining children" and "ruining society". Parents will complain I'm "corrupting their children". I'm sure some teachers will criticize me as being a "bad teacher who couldn't cut it in the system".

I'm still fairly new to public criticism and am not yet comfortable with it. Even with my limited exposure to the world, I've already received physical threats of violence against me and I've been slandered on social media.

Even within the self-directed education movement, I've been criticized for advocating for alternatives to school because 1) I went through a conventional school so I don't

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have personal experience with alternatives and 2) I don't have children of my own who I've put through school. Critics feel I'm unqualified to speak about this subject because I haven't "lived" this.

The worst version of public criticism would be to have my ideas or work dismissed as "crazy" due to my history in the mental health system. This hasn't happened yet, but I expect it to be if I have any level of success with this book. This really bothers me because it's such a cheap and easy way to dismiss someone and it's impossible to defend.

Though my *character* is frequently attacked, rarely are my *ideas* on education ever challenged. Most often, parents give me a mixed response and say, "You've got some great ideas, Jim, and I'm sure that will work for some kids... but that wouldn't work for all of them, and definitely not mine."

Let me be very clear that this book is not for everyone - but - it's important that it be for anybody.

What I mean by that, is that some young people simply won't be interested in the content of this book. It's not for them and that's perfectly ok. But this book is accessible for anyone who is interested in finding an alternative path, regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic level, geographic location, primary language, religion, disability, political affiliation, clothing choice, hair style, who their parents are, how many siblings they have, how many parents they have, how many friends they have, whether they are a straight-A Advanced Placement high honors student or a teen who is flunking every class.

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If you are wondering: “how do I know if this approach to learning is for me?” I have a clear answer. If you listen to this entire book, and *feel* that it’s for you, it probably is. There is no quiz or test you can take to “qualify” as a self-directed learner. You simply choose it because it feels right to you.

I am not creating this book because I want everybody to do what I think is best, I am creating it so anyone can access this information who needs it. I am advocating for informed consent in education, not force and coercion. Let’s be honest, does anyone honestly think that school is working for *all* students? And if we admit it’s not working for all of them, why are we *forcing* it on all of them?

I welcome an alternative perspective. If someone could convince me our modern school system is fine and that I am wasting my efforts trying to change things, then it would save me a lot of time, energy, and stress. I’d be grateful for that... I could redirect my efforts toward solving a different problem. Maybe I’d even put my biomedical engineering degree to use and make some money. My parents would be thrilled. Most likely, I’d shift my efforts toward doing more stand-up comedy and possibly building the greatest miniature golf course ever built.

The reason I am creating this book despite being afraid of the criticism and consequences, is that I believe the positive benefits of helping empower young people to direct their own education outweigh the negative consequences of strangers saying mean things about me.

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I pick and choose my battles, and this is one worth fighting for. To me, transforming education is not just about finding better ways to learn. To me, the battle is much larger than that.

Just a few tragic statistics about the current mental health conditions of teens is an indicator that we have a serious cultural problem on our hands:

- Children today are more depressed than they were during the Great Depression and more anxious than they were at the height of the Cold War.³²
- Between 2009 and 2017, rates of depression rose by more than 60 percent among those ages 14 to 17, and 47 percent among those ages 12 to 13.³³
- Teens report being more stressed than adults and state school as a leading stressor.³⁴
- The number of children and teenagers who were seen in emergency rooms with suicidal thoughts or having attempted suicide doubled between 2007 and 2015.³⁵

Working to solve problems like this motivates me to endure the fear of judgment from others.

Another way I deal with the fear of judgment is to talk with mentors and friends who have dealt with similar challenges themselves. This helps reassure me that my fears are not unreasonable and that they are simply a part of the process of trying to do something great. In truth, I've come to realize that every job has some negative aspects of it, and

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the more influential and important your job, the more severe the risks.

FEAR OF FAILURE

The next fear I want to share with you is that I'm afraid this book will be a failure.

I'm not worried about the information being valuable. I've personally seen the ideas covered in this book in action and they work.

What I'm afraid of is that I won't be able to convey the information well. I worry I'm not qualified enough to write this book. After all, I've never written a book before nor do I have a degree in writing... what makes me think I can do this?

I'm not motivated enough to get a Master's degree in Writing in order to write one book. My goal is not to make a career as a professional writer. My goal is to change education, and creating this book is one piece of that larger puzzle.

I have to accept that, while I would do a better job if I did have more experience as a writer, that doesn't mean this book will be a failure; there is a large space in-between the absolutes of success and failure.

I also worry that the book will fail because the content won't feel relatable. Since most teens have never seen any of the ideas in this book in real-life, how will they ever

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believe this stuff is real and accessible to them if they haven't seen it for themselves?

To address this, I'll include quotes directly from teens already practicing the methods described in this book, in an attempt to make this subject-matter more tangible and real to you. For those who need more convincing, I'll also share with you about how you can contact some of these young people, so you can hear from them directly.

I want to be clear that this is not a book about hypotheticals, or theories, or abstractions - it's about real things being done by real people in the world today. This is not a work of fiction.

While my ego would prefer to suggest that all the ideas contained in this book are my own bright ideas, very little of what I'm sharing here is original thought. People have been writing and speaking about self-directed education for decades. I owe a great deal of appreciation and thanks to these courageous trailblazers who really paved the way for me to speak my mind by being open with their own ideas in the radical alternative education movement. These include but are not limited to: Akilah Richards, Blake Boles, Gina Riley, Grace Llewellyn, John Taylor Gatto, Ken Danford, and Peter Gray. A special statement of gratitude is in order for Grace Llewellyn and Blake Boles, who have courageously focused on writing directly for teens. In the words of Isaac Newton: "If I have seen further than others, it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants."³⁶

FEAR AND COURAGE

While I have taken measures to reduce the chances this book will fail, that is not quite the same as facing my fear of failure. Truly overcoming this fear, means accepting that failure is an inevitable part of taking risks. I've taken a lot of risks, and failed many times before, yet I'm still standing. It sucks to fail. I assure you that it is not a pleasant experience. I've failed with websites that I've launched without getting any users, businesses I've started that failed to earn money, stand-up comedy performances I've performed that nobody laughed at... the list goes on. Repeated, devastating failures have certainly hurt, but they haven't killed me. I've learned a lot, and I go into every new project with the collective wisdom I've gained from all these failures, which increases the probability that my next project will succeed. In that way, my failures are not worthless or a waste, instead, they are an invaluable asset.

FEAR OF SUCCESS

I never hear anyone mention having a fear of success, but it is one that I really struggle with. There seems to be a "sweet spot" of success, where you make a meaningful impact and earn a living, without it disrupting your everyday life. Once you exceed a certain level of success, it appears to have a negative impact on you, with a chance it may even destroy your life. If this book truly has the impact that I dream it to have, and hundreds of thousands or even millions of young people get all the knowledge I've packed into this book, it may make life really uncomfortable for me.

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Our society tends to associate ideas with people, rather than focusing on the ideas themselves. Even though this book has hundreds of quotations from other people, many of whom who have contributed far more to the self-directed learning movement than I have, it'll be associated with me. I'm not very comfortable with that amount of attention. This may sound unusual coming from someone who enjoys performing stand-up comedy, but I actually do not like attention and the spotlight. I only like it during specific times, when it's intentional, not on a day-to-day basis. I have no desire for fame, but feel like it may be entangled with success in my work.

I'm reminded of a quote I heard from comedian Russell Brand in his documentary, *Brand: A Second Coming*, though it is often attributed to other people like Harry Truman: "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."³⁷ This is the approach I'd prefer to take, or at least to attribute as much credit as possible to the people who have done the real work, who I quote throughout this book.

I fear the impact that "fame" can have on the relationships I have with my friends and family, and especially on my ability to build new friendships and connections in the future. I have a good friend of mine who became semi-famous in his early 20's, and I could tell that, from that point forward, he was constantly dealing with people coming after him asking for things and frequently trying to use him. I saw it as an unwelcome challenge to have to navigate this realm of figuring out who your true friends are and who is using you.

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I also fear that idea of being recognized easily in public; I value my anonymity. That's one of my favorite things about traveling, is feeling like I am free of judgment and being self-conscious because I'm anonymous. This book being a tremendous success could make this more difficult for me.

It probably sounds grandiose to suggest that millions of youth would read this book, but I am not aspiring for mediocrity. I know I can reach 10 million teens through SnapChat ads, and my experimentation suggests about 10,000 of them would purchase this book. Assuming it doesn't suck, and they tell their friends about it, this could potentially become a really big deal.

It's completely possible that my marketing experiments are flawed and nobody may be interested in this book. Or that people are interested in this subject, but I am a poor writer or communicator, and the book is a flop. But I'm not really sure how to aim for anything less than a home run. Why are we even playing the game if we're not swinging for the fences? So don't be fooled, my ambitions are what psychiatrists would label as grandiose. Whether or not I am currently experiencing delusions of grandeur, can really only be determined in the future based on whether this book is actually successful. You can see the flaw in the diagnostic logic here: future outcomes can't actually be used to determine a present mental state. But you never really know until the day of release how it's going to go, so the future exists in an uncertain probability cloud that will only manifest once the book is released.

LEAVE SCHOOL: what teachers can't tell you

I've grown more and more comfortable with this fear of success over time. My first ever psychiatric hospitalization, while seemingly being over a fear of failure, I think was really over a fear of success. I've felt the fear of pending success many times because of different businesses and even performing comedy. Over time, I've developed a lot of tools to help ground myself. I make sure to get sleep, eat well, exercise regularly, meditate and do yoga daily, avoid too much caffeine and sugar, spend time in nature, don't isolate myself, and put energy into maintaining meaningful connections with friends and family. These habits help keep my ego in check and help me not get too overwhelmed by the world.

FEAR OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

One last fear I want to share is that I'm afraid of the possible negative, unintended consequences that could come from young people using the information in this book improperly. I don't have any control over you, and that lack of control is frightening.

I worry that you, the reader, may have been so badly harmed by the school system, that you will blindly latch onto anything you read that opposes it. Please do not take anything I say at face value; please check my sources. It's important to be a critical reader. When I include references to published studies and journal articles to support my arguments, read those with a critical mind as well. Even if you agree with me, try to challenge what I say and come up with counter arguments.

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Unfortunately, this medium of writing is not a conversation; it's a one-way broadcast, so I don't have a way to ensure that you're using this information wisely. That's a risk I take but I trust you to do thorough research before making any drastic decisions regarding your life and education. I think the consequences of young people's decisions are often overstated and that the benefit of practicing the skill of decision-making is more valuable (and one which young people don't get an opportunity to practice).

At the same time, I think it's also important to not let doing "too much" research delay taking action. There is a balance. I often feel like I want more information before making a decision, which delays my decision-making. It's important to acknowledge that inaction is also a decision.

For example, if this book suggests that you should quit school, don't jump into that decision lightly. At the same time, don't spend so much time doing research that years of your life are wasted away with indecision.

You could always quit school and go back if things don't work out. Don't let yourself (or others) trap you in "all or none" thinking.

Again, this isn't quite facing my fear of unintended consequences. To do that, I once again turned to my peers and mentors to discuss this issue. For example, just last week I spoke with one of my old college roommates who is now a spinal surgeon. He shared with me about the high stakes of his job, knowing that at some point in his career, he will certainly fail and be sued for malpractice. No matter

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how great a job he will do and how many lives he will save, there will ultimately be some people who he works on who feel they were harmed. It is an uncomfortable reality one must accept in order to do great work.

LET'S GET STARTED

One of the great motivators that has helped me overcome all of these fears, is talking with teens about their experiences in school. I am very appreciative of all the teens who encourage me to speak more publicly about my views on education. You often hear teachers say things like: "I swear I learn more from my students than they learn from me." This is probably the case because school sucks and kids don't learn much there. (Kidding... sort of.)

I genuinely do feel like I learn from young people, especially when they ask for advice, because it holds me accountable to take that same advice myself to avoid being a hypocrite. I tell teens to follow their passion, be true to themselves, be authentic, experiment, trust yourself, go against the grain, and be the change they want to see in the world. In giving that advice, I have to take it myself.

Just as I'm moving forward with creating this book, I ask you to courageously work through your fears and continue this journey.

I am not here to force you to quit school and I don't want you to feel ashamed if you decide to stay in school. If it works for you, then stick with it. I am only here to offer you knowledge of an alternative path which you may never

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have known existed.

Don't expect to like everything I have to say. Don't expect this to be easy. Expect the truth.

Leaders in mainstream education often claim they want to make kids into critical thinkers, yet they rarely give you the opportunity to critically think about why you're forced to spend your days locked in a building for 12 years of your life. It's time to start thinking critically.

You've grown accustomed to having authority figures deciding what subjects you study, handing you assignments every day, telling you when they are due, grading you on your performance, and comparing you to your peers. It's time to find out what subjects interest you, to ask your own questions, to set your own deadlines, and to claim your own self-worth rather than relying on authoritarian voices to judge you.

It's time for you to learn everything that your teacher can't tell you. Let's dive into the next chapter which introduces the amazing alternative approach to learning known as *self-directed learning*.

ACTION:

Ask yourself: What are your greatest fears? Write them down. Don't try to solve them or overcome them. Just acknowledge the specific things that you are afraid of. If you are comfortable doing so, for each fear, write down

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“why” you are afraid of that. If you really want to stretch your comfort zone, do the same “root cause analysis” you did for the Action for Chapter 1, and repeatedly ask “why” to dig deeper and understand your underlying fears. It’s ok if this brings up more fears to add to your list.

After you are done, go back and re-read your “why” from Chapter 1. Is your motivation for your “why” strong enough that you believe it's worth continuing on with this book despite your fears? If so, write out an agreement with yourself, something like: “My motivation is strong enough to persist through my fears to continue this journey through to the end.”

PART II

CHAPTER 3

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

I will talk a lot in this book about “self-directed learning.” To give you a good idea of what that means, I will first give you a formal definition and then share about where these ideas come from. Then, I’ll share with you specific stories of my own self-directed learning experiences. I’ll start with some stories from my youth, to show what self-directed learning can look like at a young age. Then I’ll talk about my experiences with self-directed learning as an adult.

While this book is created for teens, I want to focus a lot on what self-directed learning has looked like as an adult, because I want to emphasize to you that self-directed learning is valuable in the so-called “real world” and not just some training activity for kids. Making the transition to the “real world” as a self-directed learner is a smooth one, while this transition for the unprepared is quite abrupt.

For a great definition of what self-directed learning is, I will quote Blake Boles, the author of *The Art of Self-Directed Learning* and the host of the *Off-Trail Learning* podcast. Blake writes:

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Self-directed learning is an approach that places freedom, choice, and responsibility in the hands of the person doing the learning.

When you do self-directed learning, here's what it looks like:

- choosing to learn, study, or practice something because it's interesting, important, or meaningful to you
- proactively seeking out people, resources, companions, and other help you need along the way
- defining the "success" of your learning as you see fit
- assuming ultimate responsibility for the outcome of your efforts

Self-directed learning is not anti-structure, anti-school, anti-teaching, or anti-testing. Think of it as intentional learning or consensual learning. Self-directed learners can thrive in any learning environment — including a highly structured or traditional one — as long as they intentionally choose it and consent to its policies.³⁸

If you've attended school your whole life, this may feel unfamiliar. There's a good chance you have more experience with what Blake describes as "unexamined learning," which he defines:

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The opposite of self-directed learning is what we might call unexamined learning. Here's what it looks like:

- learning something simply because you're doing what you're told, without any consideration of how it serves (or harms) you
- making little effort to learn something; believing that knowledge or resources will magically appear
- blindly accepting the definition of success that's handed to you (e.g. high test scores, fame, getting rich)
- assuming that someone/something else is fundamentally responsible for what you learn or achieve (e.g. a teacher, institution, or society)³⁹

Most students in school are doing what Blake calls “unexamined learning,” which probably includes yourself. If it does, don't worry. This isn't intended to make you feel bad or ashamed. The odds are, you've probably never been exposed to the idea of self-directed learning.

You might be asking yourself, if self-directed learning is so valuable, why haven't you been exposed to it? And why aren't more children educated using this approach? As it turns out, self-directed learning is exactly how young people have learned throughout history. Only recently has “unexamined learning” become the norm.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING THROUGH HUMAN HISTORY

Dr. Peter Gray's research has uncovered that up until the agricultural revolution about 10,000 years ago, most children were educated through self-directed learning. Peter writes:

For hundreds of thousands of years... we lived as hunter-gatherers... children in hunter-gatherer cultures learned what they needed to know to become effective adults through their own play and exploration. The strong drives in children to play and explore presumably came about, during our evolution as hunter-gatherers, to serve the needs of education. Adults in hunter-gatherer cultures allowed children almost unlimited freedom to play and explore on their own because they recognized that those activities are children's natural ways of learning.⁴⁰

This is not to romanticize the lives of hunter-gatherers; infant mortality rates were high, starvation was common, there were no antibiotics, and life expectancy was short. There were incredible challenges to this lifestyle, however, these challenges meant that there was an enormous amount of knowledge and skills that hunter-gatherer children needed to learn in order to contribute to the survival of their community as adults. With all of these challenges and all this information to learn, it is remarkable that children

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learned everything they needed without any formal instruction. They learned through extensive play and exploration of the world around them. They were also able to observe the adults as they worked and mimic their activities through their play. For example, the children hunted small animals like rabbits as a form of play that mimicked the adults hunting of larger animals.

I'm not claiming that we should educate children exactly as they were in hunter gatherer times. It is not the specific acts, like learning to build weapons, hunt, or identify plants that I want to focus on. Instead, it is the principles on which their learning was based which are valuable and inherent to our biological drive to learn. Peter identified seven key features present in hunter-gather education which continue to be valuable in modern times. He writes:

The ideal environment for such education... is one in which young people (a) have unlimited free time and much space in which to play and explore; (b) can mix freely with other children of all ages; (c) have access to a variety of knowledgeable and caring adults; (d) have access to culturally relevant tools and equipment and are free to play and explore with those items; (e) are free to express and debate any ideas that they wish to express and debate; (f) are free from bullying (which includes freedom from being ordered around arbitrarily by adults); and (g) have a true voice in the group's decision-making process.⁴¹

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If this method of learning is so valuable and was practiced for hundreds of thousands of years, you might be wondering what caused this form of education to be phased out, and for more conventional learning to become widespread. Peter identifies the agricultural revolution that took place about 10,000 years ago, considered to be a major milestone in human development, as the turning point where humans moved away from self-directed learning and toward what resembles a more controlled learning environment. He writes:

With the rise of agriculture, and later of industry, children became forced laborers. Play and exploration were suppressed. Willfulness, which had been a virtue, became a vice that had to be beaten out of children.⁴²

He continues:

Agriculture brought to human beings more than a new way of procuring food. It introduced a new way of thinking about the relationship between humans and nature. Hunter-gatherers considered themselves to be part of the natural world; they lived with nature, not against it. They accepted nature's twists and turns as inevitable and adapted to them as best they could. Agriculture, on the other hand, is a continuous exercise in controlling nature; it involves the taming and controlling of plants and animals, to

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make them servants to humans rather than equal partners in the natural world. With agriculture, I suggest, humans began to extend this idea of control over nature to other aspects of the natural world, including children.⁴³

Children are inherently curious from the day they are born, constantly exploring the world around them, and they learn their most valuable skills like how to talk and walk without the need for formal education. Self-directed learning is sometimes even referred to as “natural learning,” since it is the style we are evolved to utilize naturally.

It is sad to see this love of learning erased from young people’s minds. As former teacher, John Holt, wrote in his groundbreaking book, *Teach Your Own*:

We destroy the disinterested (I do not mean uninterested) love of learning in children, which is so strong when they are small, by encouraging and compelling them to work for petty and contemptible rewards -- gold stars, or papers marked 100 and tacked to the wall, or A's on report cards, or honor rolls, or dean's lists, or Phi Beta Kappa keys - in short, for the ignoble satisfaction of feeling that they are better than someone else. We encourage them to feel that the end and aim of all they do in school is nothing more than to get a good mark on a test, or to impress someone with what they seem to know. We kill, not only their curiosity, but

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their feeling that it is a good and admirable thing to be curious, so that by the age of ten most of them will not ask questions, and will show a good deal of scorn for the few who do.⁴⁴

Now that we've looked at the history of self-directed learning, let's now look at some concrete examples of what self-directed learning looks like in practice.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AS A YOUTH

My youngest experiences with self-directed learning are hard to recall because I was so young but I definitely learned to walk and talk before I attended any form of school.

I remember playing with LEGOs a lot as a young child, starting with building the models as depicted in the instructions and then building my own creations. We had an old suitcase that my brother and I combined all our LEGO pieces together into to create a large collection of parts and pieces that we could create with. This freedom to explore and create things was never with coercion or instruction, we were simply free to play. I later got into Capsella, which was similar to LEGOs but included motors and gears. This wasn't as exciting as LEGO because the parts were expensive, so we didn't have a lot of them, which limited my options on what I could build beyond what was described in the manuals.

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While this would give some indications that I'd later become an engineer, there were also indications I would become a writer. My family owned an old typewriter, and I remember writing short stories on it. When my parents moved a few years ago, I found some of these old stories buried in boxes in their attic. It was strange to read my own childhood writings were mystical stories about magic and warlocks and sorcerers and teleportation and time travel. I never submitted these stories to anyone to read or publish, this was just something I did for fun when I was really young.

I also remember being into baseball when I was young. My brother and I collected tons of baseball cards and even wrote letters to baseball players asking them for autographs. (The trick was to include their baseball card and a self-addressed, stamped envelope in our letter so they could easily sign it and send it back). When my brother, myself, and a couple neighbors would play two-on-two whiffle ball, we'd hold imaginary drafts to create make-believe professional teams. We'd pretend we were the different players at bat, keep track of all the statistics, and then calculate our batting averages and other statistics as we role played each player. The childish, make-believe nature of this game is a little strange and mildly embarrassing, but clearly required some creativity and learning a little bit of math. Again, the point is, these were our self-selected activities and we were learning through play.

Back on the tech side of things, I also enjoyed playing with computers at a young age. My family got our first computer when I was 7 years old and it consumed my attention. My

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interest in computers led me to building my first website at age 11. The website was simple, but all websites were simple back in 1997. I didn't do this because anyone told me to, I just thought it was super cool to have my own place on the web. The first website I made was mostly about video games and, I'll admit, most of the content was copied off other websites.

At the time, nobody ever indicated to me that building websites was potentially a valuable skill. Though I did end up creating one website which earned me some money as a teen, I wasn't doing this professionally and I didn't even know web development was a viable career option. I wasn't able to pursue this interest in elementary, middle, or high school, since there was no class offered on web development or any kind of computer programming. I tried buying a book on programming, titled "C++ for Dummies" and hated it. In my senior year of high school (at the Academy of Math and Science), they did offer a C++ programming class, which wasn't related to websites, and it was miserable. I did like the teacher but taking a formal programming class was painfully dry, boring, and slow.

There are a few lessons from my experiences of building websites that I want you to pay attention to:

- 1) Learning often moves much faster without being part of a class.
- 2) Sometimes it's much better to have a project (like building a website) to work on that allows you to learn skills along the way, rather than to focus solely on the skills (like learning to code).

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- 3) What often looks like play to people, can actually be real learning.

I can't complete talking about building websites as a kid without sharing a conversation I had with my high school guidance counselor during my junior year, when I told her I was interested in going to college to study web development and to try to make a career out of building websites. She advised me against this path, because she thought I wouldn't enjoy being strapped to a desk all day and that she heard most programming jobs were moving overseas.

Little did she know that software development would become one of the most lucrative career paths one could take and that we'd all be walking around with laptops in our backpacks allowing incredible mobility. I won't hold it against her personally that she was wrong, after all, it was 2003 and she had no way of knowing what the future would hold... but it is indicative that our guidance counselors and adults in our lives can't predict the future. It is likely that the reason software became so pervasive in our society, is that so many young people were passionate about the subject and found ways to solve technical problems using software, thus creating a market for it which didn't exist beforehand.

In middle school and my first year of high school, I started to get into music, I learned to play guitar, and joined a band. (Our name was Dark Descent, and we rocked). While I did take some lessons at one point, the idea of learning guitar and taking classes was based on my own interests. To be clear, self-directed learning doesn't mean you can't

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take a class. You absolutely can - as long as you are choosing to take it.

When I was in the band, we reached a point where we'd written a few of our own songs and wanted to expand our audience beyond our lead guitarist's basement; we wanted to get gigs. This involved recording a CD and contacting local clubs. While I was the least-talented musically, I was pretty sharp with computers, and helped us get the album recorded and burnt onto CDs. I then wrote letters to local venues including a copy of our CD and we ended up getting booked for a handful of paying gigs. We didn't become famous rock stars but definitely got our taste of being real performers. One claim to fame was that we were once the opening act for a band called Soil when they came to Hartford, CT in September 2001 and, by the summer of 2002, Soil was the opening act for Ozzy Osbourne. The valuable lesson to get from this is that sometimes an interest in one subject (like guitar) can naturally evolve into learning many other valuable skills that you never intended from the beginning (like how to use recording equipment and software, and business promotion). Of course, I also created a website for our band, and continued developing my programming skills.

Another passion of mine in high school was weight-lifting and nutrition. Since I played basketball and was only 5 feet 8 inches, I felt that the only way for me to compete was to be faster and stronger than anyone else. I remember reading countless articles on the web about the best training techniques, regimens, the biology of how muscle was generated, and what an ideal diet was for athletes. I never fulfilled my dreams of playing in the NBA, but I did

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develop healthy eating and exercise habits at a young age. By the time I took biology class in high school, I was already familiar with a lot of the topics and the classes felt much more practical and relatable. I then used my class time to raise my hand and ask the teacher lots of questions that pertained to my own personal interests in training and nutrition, thus getting a lot of value out of the teacher as a resource.

Another interest I pursued in high school was gambling. I became fascinated with casino games like craps and blackjack, as well as skill-based games like poker. While one could critique the merits of learning about such questionable activities, there is no questioning that these were practical ways of exploring probabilities and statistics. I also can't leave out that I now have three adult friends who have made a living as professional poker players, so there must be some value to this skill.

This leads to a subject that can't be avoided in any discussion about self-directed learning, which is video games. The educational value of video games is an often-debated subject in the self-directed learning world. One perspective is that only games that are designed specifically to be educational can be valuable, while other people believe that all games have some learning component to them.

When my family got our first computer, my parents purchased some education-specific games, though I didn't play them a lot. I think they underestimated the educational value that was inherent to freely exploring a novel technology like a computer, even without any special

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games. Figuring out how to get on the internet, install and remove software, update software, and install hardware were useful skills for a young child. In particular, it was when the computer broke that I learned the most, which happened pretty frequently. Fixing my parents computer often involved navigating DOS, formatting the hard drive, re-installing the operating system, re-loading drivers, and other advanced technical challenges that you couldn't learn from a game.

My favorite games to play tended to be problem-solving games like Chip's Challenge on PC, and games like Mario or Zelda on the NES and Nintendo 64. The greatest pleasure I got from video games was from multiplayer gaming, which has value in learning communication and collaboration skills. With computer gaming specifically, I remember learning about computer networks for LAN play and direct IP gaming because we didn't have online communities like Steam or Xbox Live to connect through. I also experimented a little with graphic design software used in computer games using 3D Studio Max. My interest in gaming waned by the time Nintendo GameCube came out, though I did get pretty heavy into Super Smash Brothers in college with my roommates. There's definitely some interpersonal skills and personal development from playing competitive games in a playful manner with your peers.

When people hear that I briefly taught high school physics, they usually assume I became interested in physics because I studied it in middle or high school. That is definitely not the case. Up until my junior year of college, I really did not like physics at all, despite taking multiple physics classes in high school and even being an engineering major in

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college.

My personal exploration and love for physics started when I was a junior in college. I watched a couple fascinating YouTube videos about physics, became interested in the subject, and purchased a handful of physics books from the book store (like Brian Green's *Elegant Universe* and Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*). Before this, I don't remember ever buying a book purely for my own personal pleasure. I became completely hooked with this mysterious, magical world of understanding the nature of reality - an obsession that still carries to the present day.

My interest in physics brings up an important point, which is that I was consuming information for the joy of learning and understanding, not as part of a particular project. It's important to emphasize that not all self-directed learning has to be project-based learning. The two overlap sometimes, and that can be a lot of fun, but it's not required.

One disappointment in my self-directed learning as a teen involves stand-up comedy. While I generally tell people I started performing comedy around my 27th birthday, I actually gave it a try in high school as well. I had become a huge fan of stand-up and spent a year writing joke ideas in a notepad and then wrote out a 5-minute routine. My dad drove a friend and me to an open mic in Boston where I performed the set. While I did get some laughs, the experience was really disappointing. It felt really unnatural being this young kid performing for adults. I wish I had some kind of mentor or coach to talk it all through with, but, instead, I didn't have anyone who really supported this

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interest and I ended up putting my comedy dreams on the backburner for a decade. It's important to remember that self-directed learning isn't all about doing things completely by yourself - finding the right mentors or people to support you is an important piece of the puzzle.

One last adventure in self-directed learning from my youth was when I started rock climbing during college. Some people wouldn't consider this to be a "learning experience" because we think of athletics as being so far removed from academics. I want to include it for a reason. I played lots of sports as a child, like basketball, baseball, and soccer. These were all sports that I was surrounded by growing up, the rules were well-defined by the professional leagues, there was a local league to join that was organized by adults, there were adult coaches, the games were already organized, and there was lots of support and encouragement (and some pressure) for every kid in town to join these teams.

Rock climbing was different. I got into rock climbing simply out of curiosity when I saw an indoor climbing wall at the gym at my university. It was my curiosity that drove me to rent a pair of climbing shoes and first experiment with climbing on the wall. It was my own self-drive and interest that had me take an intro course to learn how to belay a climbing partner. It was my own self-direction that led me to make friends with people who were into outdoor climbing, so I could tag along on their climbing trips and learn how to do outdoor climbing as well. Rock climbing was a big part of my life in my 20's and I've learned a great deal along the way about maneuvering my body, the technical aspects of setting up anchors, and of how to

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challenge myself emotionally in dire situations.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AS AN ADULT

Let's move on from my youth and look at the value of self-directed learning in my adult life. There's lots of examples I could explore in detail, like learning to play drums, learning about yoga and spirituality, learning about social activism, exploring mental health, learning to skateboard and surf, and learning about new cultures through international travel. Even writing this book, designing the *LEAVE SCHOOL* app, finding the right person to build it, and experimenting with marketing strategies was a self-directed learning experience.

Instead of briefly talking about each of these different subjects I've learned about, I'd like to dive deeply into a single subject I studied so you can see the gritty, day-to-day details of what self-directed learning can look like. Keep in mind that self-directed learning looks different for everybody, it's very personalized to the individual, but seeing my approach will give you one detailed perspective to help expand your perception of what is possible.

I'm going to focus here on the journey I went through after I left teaching in 2014 and made my first efforts to empower young people to learn without school through a project called Open Source High.⁴⁵

There are two things I want you to pay attention to as I share this story: (1) take notice of the large variety of

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resources I tapped into as learning tools and (2) take notice of all the “accidental byproducts” that came out of my learning. When I say, “accidental byproduct”, I mean things which I learned along the way which weren't directly related to my goal, but were necessary for me to pick up to proceed on my path. It is many of these “accidental byproducts” that proved to be the most valuable things I learned. As evidence of that, the mere fact that I am able to sit here and devote the many hours it's taking to write and edit this book is a direct result of a business I started which was an “accidental byproduct” of launching Open Source High.

When I first quit teaching, I really had no clue how I was going to change the school system to allow young people to pursue self-directed learning. I never expected self-directed learning would be allowed within a school, so I felt it was necessary for youth to have the option of leaving school and learning independently. I never thought that school would disappear or “go out of business”, but I imagined if enough young people left to pursue independent learning and were successful, this would force the school system to change.

I needed to examine exactly what opportunities I wanted to create for young people, so I reflected on my own experiences and what worked best for me.

I thought of my senior year of college when I was beginning my first startup company. I remembered the passion and excitement that I pursued learning with. I thought of what exactly was the mechanism I used to learn from. There were many... I attended seminars and

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workshops, I read online forums and blogs, I read books, I read peer-reviewed journal articles, I emailed with professors and business people and lawyers, I reached out to friends and family... I did all of this without being forced or coerced.

I stepped back further from the problem and asked more questions. Where did I find out about the seminars and workshops? Where did I find the forums and blogs? How did I decide what books to read? Where did I find journal articles? How did I find out about these professionals? How did I get in touch with them?

There was no single answer.

Sometimes I'd use Google. Sometimes I'd find links on blogs pointing to other resources. Sometimes I'd get recommendations for books to read from people or websites. Sometimes, I'd hear a website mentioned in a seminar and subsequently visit the website. Sometimes a professor would introduce me to another professor within their network via email. Sometimes I'd see a flyer for an entrepreneurship or technology- related event and attend it.

I also recalled reaching out to my friends who studied a wide range of subjects. From my mechanical engineering friends, I would receive technological aid; from my marketing major friends, I would grasp the understanding of how to promote a business. Oftentimes, they didn't have the answers, but they could refer me to websites, books, YouTube videos, professors, or other students who could better help me.

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This learning process felt very natural and felt like there were infinite resources. I learned far more from this “self-directed” process than any college course. This is not to suggest that taking a class is not a part of self-directed learning. But classes were just one of many pieces in a much bigger learning pathway. My goal when I took a class wasn't just to get a good grade, it was to get knowledge I was looking for, build a relationship with the professors, and be able to ask lots of questions that pertained to my own genuine interests.

In seeing this natural process by which I was finding resources through other people when launching my startup during college, I noticed a parallel to my current involvement in the psychiatric survivors mental health movement; specifically, *peer support* was found to be much more effective at helping people than traditional models that involved an hierarchical structure of a powerful doctor telling you what to do. By getting rid of the authority figure directing and dictating, you empower people to mutually solve their problems together. According to the “helper therapy” principle, described by social psychologist Frank Riessman, “helping others is deemed absolutely essential to helping oneself.”⁴⁶

I started believing that a model that empowered youth to collaborate with one another could really work. I was also reminded of the students in my freshman physics classes, many of whom did not have parental support to guide them effectively. Many kids have separated parents who work multiple jobs and aren't around for most of the time. Some of my students even had the responsibility of raising their siblings.

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In the absence of supportive parents, they would need peers to lean on to for support. I thought that creating a structure that empowered peers to support one another's learning goals could be a tool that made youth less reliant on the top-down school system.

Even though I had a vague vision of what I wanted to see happen, I wasn't ready to take to the streets trying to liberate the children of the world immediately. I needed to start small with something real and tangible that showed that peer learning was effective at least liberating a few students from school.

Around this time, I gained inspiration from four existing companies and decided to incorporate elements of their models into a peer learning project of my own:

1. *Khan Academy* was growing rapidly with their massive database of video lessons covering nearly every subject in a high school curriculum. To some extent, they had "proven" that video-based learning could work. Although it was incredibly powerful, it appeared terribly boring.
2. The Comedy Central show *Tosh.0* which featured comedian Daniel Tosh making jokes about funny YouTube clips that was highly rated. Every episode ended with a feature of a "Viewer Video of the Week," in which viewers would compete to get featured. This showed me that a celebrity could engage with an audience and

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encourage them to submit user-submitted content.

3. *Reddit* had claimed its position as the so-called “Front Page of the Internet.” Its strategy of allowing users to upvote and downvote content demonstrated that an engaged community could effectively curate crowd-sourced content.
4. *YouTube* was becoming an incredibly popular platform for young people to create and post content. There were countless creative youth all competing for attention on the internet through their video content.

I saw a vague path that, while incredibly ambitious, seemed feasible enough to pursue. I thought: If Tosh decided to use his star power for good purposes... he could tell his teenage viewers to submit ‘educational videos’ and they’d bring in entertaining and informative content... a community could upvote/downvote for quality to make sure we filtered out the best videos... and he’d end up creating his own “Tosh Academy” of content made by teens. If teens then started learning from content made by their peers... then it would prove to motivated teens that peer-to-peer learning was a powerful enough force to inspire them to make the leap away from the school system into a collaborative, self-directed learning path.

Naturally, Tosh is busy with his own projects, and I lack his star power, so I needed to start small. To make this happen, I envisioned building a website where kids would

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post creative, entertaining, yet educational videos teaching one another every subject in a high school curriculum. Not every video needed to be some over-the-top crazy video, that was my own personal preference, but the focus would be on young people speaking to one another through their own creative medium. I wanted to create a structure allowing them to use their own styles, I didn't want to dictate (and hinder) their creativity. The overarching goal was for them to engage with one another however they chose, not necessarily the way I envisioned them.

There were two skills I needed to get this project launched: video production and website development.

I felt that I needed a sample set of my own funny/educational videos which would set the tone for what the website would be all about. This would attract the first student-made videos and then I could remove my own content to focus on the ones made by students. Although I had never made a video before, I had some experience with website development and audio-editing software from my childhood.

Then, I'd need the website, which would display all the content submitted by the teens, sort it by subject, and manage the up-voting and down-voting.

At the time, I felt like I was in way over my head with the website. When I first started building websites in the late '90s, it was easy to build a legitimate-looking website, seeing as the majority of websites were very basic. They mainly consisted of a single programming language, HTML, which is easy to learn. Modern websites are

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different - they are dynamic, have databases storing content, use multiple functional programming languages to drive capabilities, and include more detailed stylings of fonts, graphics, and animations. Plus, today's websites have to adapt to different sized screens.

I was really intimidated by the idea of making a modern website, and also realized that to get this project started, I didn't really need the advanced stuff. I could get by with most of the basic skills I had from my childhood and just create a simple landing page with a few videos on it. Once I laid out a vision of where this would go, I believed I could attract other people with more advanced web development skills to build a more sophisticated website. Learning modern web development seemed like it may actually be a distraction from moving forward with the project, so I didn't spend time on it.

LEARNING TO CREATE MY FIRST VIDEOS

Instead, creating my first videos felt like a higher priority, especially since it was a completely foreign skill. I'll admit, it also seemed like it would be a lot of fun. Nothing wrong with prioritizing fun.

At this time, my former college roommate, Adam Zhang, was in the early stages of starting a video production company, Adam Zhang Productions. I reached out to him and volunteered to be an actor in a few of his comedy sketches like the "Nut Box Challenge."⁴⁷

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While watching the “Nut Box Challenge” video gives the impression that I spent all day kicking people in the nuts, this was really a valuable learning experience for me. I treated my day playing the “Amateur Nut Kicker” as an internship or apprenticeship, volunteering my time in exchange for knowledge, experience, and wisdom.

Since my friend Adam was directing the production, I asked him as many questions as I could to make sure I was getting the most of this experience. For example: “Why are you recording the audio separately from the video?” “Why did you switch lenses there on your camera?” “What was the process like of writing the script?” “How much of this was planned vs. improvised?” “Why did you buy that particular camera?” “Where did you buy your gear?” “Why?” “What software do you use for video editing?” “Why did you choose that?”

I walked away from these volunteer days filled with knowledge about how to create a script, plan out shots, film, record audio, deal with lighting, and do basic video editing. I also received some suggestions on other resources I could check out to seek more advanced information on my own, and could reach out to Adam with future questions if I got stuck.

Just from my few days of work with Adam, I learned more than enough to start playing around and experimenting with my own videos. I learned that I could get by with using my iPhone 5 with a special app that allowed me to shoot in HD, but that I’d probably want to buy a cheap wide-angle lens that clips onto the phone to get better quality pictures. I also learned that while the iPhone was good enough for

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video, I would need to purchase a better microphone, and that I may need multiple microphones depending on the type of setting I was filming in. For example, a shotgun microphone made sense for filming outdoors but a clip-on lavalier microphone made sense for indoor filming. If you go and watch them, all my first physics comedy sketches were filmed using the iPhone 5.⁴⁸

Educational resources to learn about filming also came through chance. While browsing a store with my girlfriend one day, I stumbled across a book called *How to Shoot Video that Doesn't Suck* by Steve Stockman. Stockman taught me that contrary to my previous understanding, good film is made up of many short shots that are pieced together. That book also taught me how crucial lighting is in getting a good picture.

Around this time, I also reached out to my cousin, Ciaran, who works professionally in film production. He has a lot more experience than Adam, but he is also a lot busier with a hectic travel schedule and a family to support. Because of this, I waited until I had a knowledge base from my work with Adam and reading Stockman's book, before asking Ciaran for advice. Because of his experience level, my cousin was much more of a mentor than a peer. I asked him for things like, "How do I deal with the ambiguity of what feels like such a big project?" "What are the best channels to distribute content after it's made?" "What should I avoid doing?" "Where should I buy equipment if I'm on a budget?"

Naturally, the internet proved to be an amazing resource for finding material to learn how to make videos. I even found

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myself learning from YouTube videos made by teenagers. Specifically, YouTube is where I learned how to create a green screen video, which is what most of my first videos used. Since my goal was to create a platform for educational content made by teens, it was reassuring to see how useful their content was. The videos made by teens seemed to speak directly to me: a novice looking to make my first video. They didn't assume a lot of background knowledge and met me exactly where I was in my journey.

That summer, I wrote scripts and filmed my first physics comedy sketches. When I was filming, it was hard to get a great gasp as to whether things were coming out well or not. It wasn't until I started editing that I was able to realize the mistakes I'd made during the filming.

The editing process was the most challenging and tedious, partly because my filming and audio recording wasn't excellent. Fortunately, my girlfriend worked as an editor and video journalist at her school newspaper when she was in college. I was lucky she took as much interest in creating these zany videos as I did. She was especially helpful in teaching me about video transitions and how to adjust audio levels.

Her journalism background was incredibly valuable when we edited the "Cat Box" comedy sketch, because there was lots of unscripted, improvised footage from different people that needed to be edited down into an actual story that made sense. A valuable learning experience I received from making this video, was that I needed to be more minimalistic in the amount of footage I filmed; otherwise, the editing process becomes overwhelming.

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While I am partly embarrassed looking back at these physics sketches, I am also quite proud. They are truly unique and fit my style of blending goofy and absurd humor while still conveying physics concepts. I also realize that creating and posting such ridiculous videos was vulnerable and exposing for me, so I feel like it built a lot of character. This was the first time I ever received any kind of criticism over the internet for something I'd put out there, which was character-building in itself. For example, a physics teacher took the time to write to me and say, "Just give it up. It is a terrible teaching tool, adding nothing to the viewer's understanding of gravity."⁴⁹

LEARNING HOW TO LAUNCH

After making my own sample videos, I needed to recruit student filmmakers. I had no idea where to find such students. I reached out to my mentors for advice and they advised me to go directly to students and teachers for suggestions.

I emailed teachers, some of my former teachers and some strangers I found online, and offered to visit their classes to share the physics videos I made and ask the students their opinions on my proposed peer-learning project.

Reddit also proved to be a valuable way to find interested teachers to discuss this project. As an experiment, I ran a contest on Reddit asking stand-up comics to submit videos of themselves making physics jokes about gravity. I got twelve submissions all from one high school physics

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teacher, Joseph, in Pennsylvania. Interestingly, he wasn't even a comedian, just a physics teacher with a great sense of humor. To this day, I'm still good friends with Joseph and I even traveled to Pennsylvania to visit his class once and we filmed him telling gravity jokes that his students wrote.⁵⁰

I also met teachers by attending conferences and events for physics teachers. I shared with them my students-teaching-students idea, and asked for ideas on how to recruit students to participate. I remember that one of my former high school physics teachers invited me to dinner with the Connecticut Association of Physics Teachers and she shared about the success of their school's 'JETS Engineering Design Competition' team. This was a program I participated in when I was a student, but had forgotten about. This conversation gave me the inspiration to use a competition as a way to promote the peer-learning project and attract our first students.

In order to promote our kick off video contest, I needed a way to promote the contest itself. To do this, I launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise prize money for the contest. Naturally, the crowdfunding campaign needed to be promoted as well. As you can see, this was a multi-tiered build-up to launch. I'd promote the crowdfunding campaign, which would promote the video contest, which would promote the peer-learning project.

I'd never run a crowdfunding campaign before, and needed advice. I looked for events in my area where this subject was being discussed. I was excited to find that there was a local organization in Springfield, MA that supported

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entrepreneurs, called Valley Venture Mentors, holding a workshop on crowdfunding. I was able to talk with people who had actually run crowdfunding campaigns successfully to get tips and suggestions. One unfortunate thing I learned, was that people who ran successful crowdfunding campaigns typically spend up to a year promoting campaign before ever launching it. In my case, the campaign was going to be my “kickoff” event.

Through running the crowdfunding campaign, I learned a lot about fundraising. Specifically, I became aware of the inadequacies in my fundraising technique.

First and foremost, I realized how uncomfortable I am at communicating directly with people, especially when I'm asking them for something. Making a video talking about the crowdfunding campaign and blasting it across the interwebs was easy, but actually speaking with people directly and asking them for money was much harder.

Secondly, it was frustrating to be promoting and fundraising for the video contest, instead of fundraising for my larger vision of creating a platform that enabled teens to leave the school system and pursue self-directed and peer-to-peer learning. The truth is, the contest was a tangible, real, immediate thing which I could directly link the fundraising effort to, while my larger vision was more abstract and vague.

The crowdfunding campaign was not as successful as I hoped in terms of actual fundraising and I ended up putting a lot of the money into it myself to ensure it would succeed. It was successful in raising awareness among teens for the

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video contest, which was the ultimate goal of the campaign.

As a result, we received a bunch of awesome physics videos submitted by teens around the United States and our contest was a great success. The most popular video was called “How to Pick Up Girls with Physics.”⁵¹ It was the perfect blend of humor and education - exactly what I had been looking for - and it was loved by many teens who watched it. It was clear that the two teens from Ohio who made the video were much better at video-making than I was, which reinforced the value of student-generated material and validated that students could create great content and that this model could work.

I thought maybe I could draw some media attention from newspapers for the contest. Once again, my girlfriend stepped in to help, wielding her knowledge from being a copy editor at her college newspaper. She advised me to write press releases and send them to the local papers in the towns the winners were from. After some Google searches for “How to write a press release,” I was able to draft a compelling release. I learned the importance of choosing a good headline and sub-headline, including quotes from people, including a great photo (I used one of me handing a giant check to the winners), avoiding biased and loaded words, and trying to tie the story into being relevant to the local community.

It was eye-opening to learn that news was created this way: I was creating the article and submitting it, and the journalists basically just added their name to it. Though we got the contest covered in several local newspapers who were excited to promote the local winners, I wasn't able to

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draw any national attention.

The next step was figuring out how to take this peer-learning idea that I'd demonstrated in a small way through the video contest and scale it up. I had no idea what to do next and realized I was going to require a lot more support.

Fortunately, the Valley Venture Mentors were running a summer mentorship program that was offering this type of guidance.

I received a healthy dose of criticism from the members of this program who felt that this website was solving a nonexistent problem. I felt that they couldn't see the big picture, that the success of this platform would empower students to not rely on the oppressive, coercive school system. The mentors were a good mirror to me, because it made me realize this platform didn't really solve the problem of school not serving students' needs. At best, it solved the problem of young people looking for a creative outlet, and solved a problem for advertisers looking to get their brands in front of young people.

At the time, I was stubborn and insisted that my idea would work if we just had more momentum. I thought we just needed a "critical mass" of users creating content and things would take off in a big way.

I persisted.

To hit this critical mass, I thought we needed a larger, better-funded contest. Keep in mind, our initial contest was only promoted through the crowdfunding campaign and we

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didn't actually have any student videos to show as examples, all I had were my own videos. I thought that I could use these first student-made videos as examples to find sponsors for a much larger competition.

LEARNING ABOUT MY CUSTOMERS

I worked with my mentor, Scott, to generate a list of business types that might have an interest in having their name attached to a larger physics video contest for the spring. I called universities with engineering and physics departments, audio-video equipment companies, tutoring companies, and engineering firms. My tactic in reaching out to them was to sell them on what they would gain from being affiliated with the contest. However, the truth was that we were a pretty small operation and our website had very little traffic. I didn't have much to offer, but I was able to raise a few thousand dollars and some audio/video equipment to give away as prizes. When I ran a much larger series of video contests in the spring, I attracted more students and more videos we submitted; yet, I still wasn't sure how to proceed.

The elders in my mentorship program were insistent that my ambitions with Open Source High were vague and I needed to be more specific and clear in what exactly the problem is I was solving. I spent that summer doing what are called "customer discovery interviews" with teens who had participated in the contests and inquiring about their motivations, interests, and problems. It was becoming very clear that having student-made videos wasn't doing anything to help them escape the school system, nor had

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many of them even considered that escaping school was even a possibility. They simply accepted school as an inevitable part of life... the idea of anything else existing was outside their radar.

Despite these obvious red flags that my project was on the wrong track, I continued. As part of my “customer discovery interviews,” I asked teens about their interests so I could find different ways to motivate them to create videos for the site. Ultimately, I spent most of 2015 running video contests; testing different parameters to see what attracted the most students. Designing these experiments was fun and reminded me of my time spent designing and running experiments in science labs.

For example, I tried adjusting the topics to capture their interest. Initially, Open Source High only covered physics subjects since that was my field of interest and I knew how to reach teachers, but I realized that not many kids are into physics. We ran contests covering a variety of subjects, and ultimately found it is more important to let kids present on whatever subject they want, rather than laying out subjects myself.

I experimented with different judging methods for choosing the contest winners. For some reason, I felt like it was unfair to have me be the person choosing a winner. I wanted to remove myself from that role of evaluator or judge, so I wouldn't be perceived as the “teacher,” I'm just the promoter. In the first contest, I had teachers vote, but the kids felt that the teachers were too focused on the academic content and not enough on creativity, expression, and fun. We tried having the voting open to the public, but

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we had some instances of hacking and kids complained it turned into a popularity contest. After much trial and error, the students repeatedly told me that they most preferred having me do the judging as they believed that was the most fair.

I also experimented with different prizes to see what would appeal most to teens. In addition to giving cash prizes, we tried some non-cash prizes for “category winners,” such as a piece of artwork for the most creative video, or a Bo Burnham comedy DVD for the funniest video. We also gave away audio/video equipment provided by sponsors for the “best production”. Though the prizes did seem to have a direct impact on getting more students, teens unanimously said they preferred cash prizes over anything else. This created a conflict with our sponsors, who felt that cash prizes were a bit crude. You can see there was a clear challenge of aligning the values and goals of sponsors and advertisers with those of the actual youth participants.

LEARNING MODERN WEB DEVELOPMENT

In addition to adjusting the parameters of the video contests, I also thought making a more professional website would attract more students. At this stage, we were still operating with an incredibly primitive website that looked like it was built in the ‘90’s. I also thought a nicer website would help us attract more impressive sponsors, which would give us better prizes, which would attract more students.

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Up to this point, I assumed I would attract collaborators to help build a nicer website. Unfortunately, I didn't have a detailed enough vision for this project yet to attract partners; this experimental, exploratory phase I was in really required autonomy.

Consequently, I immersed myself in learning about modern web development technology. A quick Google search for “how to build a website” led me to an endless supply of free resources to learn to code like YouTube and CodeAcademy. These were good to give me a refresher on HTML (which gives the structure of a webpage) and to start learning about CSS (which gives the styling to the page), but I was overwhelmed at all the different languages and options when it came to making things functional on the site. The scope was too large and I realized that I didn't need to learn *everything*, I needed to learn the specific skills to build a community-based website that operated similar to Reddit, except focused on video content. I narrowed my Google search to terms like “how to build a website like Reddit” and found two options for software platforms that seemed like they could work: WordPress and Telescope.

I had heard of WordPress before but never used it. As I understood it, WordPress was easy to use and incredibly popular. Telescope was a brand-new platform that I'd never heard of and was based on a new programming language called Meteor.

Looking back, for the benefit of moving the Open Source High project forward, I should have gone with WordPress. I would have been up and running faster, with less hassle.

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At the time, the tech geek in me wanted to be sophisticated, so I decided to learn about programming with Meteor and built the site using Telescope. This required me to learn a lot more about modern programming than I really needed for this particular site. The benefit of choosing Meteor and Telescope, is that I learned a lot about web development! The downside was that the website wasn't as attractive as it could have been if I'd gone with WordPress, there were lots of bugs, and it was time-consuming to continue supporting it.

To get help learning about Meteor, I befriended some web developers online in a Slack chatroom (Slack is similar to Discord) that was focused around the Telescope platform. Since Telescope was open-source software, the platform attracted a lot of creative, self-directed people who share ideas openly and collaborate on software development. Some of these developers would help me when I was in a jam, sometimes for free, sometimes I had to pay them. In addition, a GitHub forum existed for the Telescope platform, which was yet another opportunity to ask questions and get support from others users. These open-source communities were amazing examples of the power of peer-learning, which reinforced my belief in this project.

My primary mentor in the Valley Venture Mentors program, Scott, was a retired web developer who directed me to another massive online community of web developers who support one another called StackOverflow. In many cases, whatever question I had was usually already asked by someone else, and the answer was already awaiting me. In the rare cases I couldn't find an answer, I would post my question, and I'd commonly have a few

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responses within a day or two. It is always important to think of your mentors not necessarily as people who have the answers, but as people who can connect you to the people who do have the right answers. When possible, always ask your mentors for introductions to people they know who may be able to help you.

I also went to an in-person MeetUp.com group for Meteor programmers and connected with someone who eventually became who I think of as being my “software mentor”, Dave. He and I had many discussions and debates imagining the ways in which software could be utilized to facilitate self-directed and peer- learning communities, and he also helped me one-on-one with some particularly frustrating programming bugs I couldn't resolve otherwise.

Supportive resources can come in many different places, even from an Airbnb host. Around this time, I stayed at an Airbnb in Boston and mentioned to the host, Emigdio, that I was starting to build websites. He was a graphic designer who was just beginning to learn web design using WordPress so that he could earn a living while attending school to become an accountant. He showed me his projects and pointed me to some free, new tools that made building beautiful websites quite easy using WordPress page builders. It was meeting Emigdio that finally got me exposed to how easy WordPress was to work with and opened my eyes to the possibility that I could actually make money building websites for other people.

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LEARNING ABOUT MARKETING

In addition to changing the parameters of the video contests and building a nicer website, I also experimented with different approaches to recruiting students to create videos. I initially tried posting on Facebook and Twitter, but it always felt like my posts and tweets were falling on deaf ears. I even tried tweeting directly at popular teen YouTubers, but I got little to no reaction.

I tried another approach of contacting high school teachers to try and reach their students. Since we were initially focused on physics, I started by asking my former high school physics teacher for advice on how to reach other physics teachers. She added me to a statewide email discussion list for physics teachers in Connecticut which I could promote to, and I also searched online for similar mailing lists for other states and organizations. Spam is generally frowned upon for these lists, but since we were running physics- specific video contests with prizes, they were receptive to the messages I sent out. As we expanded Open Source High to cover subjects beyond physics, I found new lists which were less specific and included high school teachers of all subjects.

I asked students who participated in our contests how they found out about our website and discovered the best videos were coming from students taking film production classes in their school. From talking with these film production students, I realized that I was better off focusing my efforts on reaching teens interested in video-making and enticing them to make videos about academic subjects, rather than

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reaching out to people with academic interests and trying to get them to make videos. This may seem obvious, but it was a valuable lesson at the time.

I asked the students for introductions to their teachers and learned specific strategies on how I could reach more film production teachers. Though the number of film production teachers is very small, there are some small channels which they could be reached through. I was able to reach more of these teachers by running advertisements in trade magazines for film teachers, posting to their online discussion boards, and writing to their email lists. Some of the film students directed me toward OnlineVideoContests.com, an online database of video contests. Once Open Source High got listed on their website, we attracted even more students. Not only that, but I was able to speak with the webmasters of OnlineVideoContests.com who also gave me free advice on how to adjust our contests and website to appeal to more teens.

A handful of film production teachers in New England and southern California even invited me to come to their classes to speak to their students about our video contests, which allowed me to see what the school environment was like in different parts of the United States. I learned that even at schools in wealthy communities, that could afford better qualified teachers, more computers and up-to-date textbooks, that had polished floors and freshly painted halls, that the underlying issues related to controlling students remained. The problem is systemic.

The teachers and administrators still lock the kids indoors,

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control what they do every day, threaten them with detentions and suspensions for not obeying orders, motivate them with grades, and make them feel ashamed for anything less than perfection as if *the students* are the problem. I found it particularly frustrating when I'd see certain websites blocked online, which seemed to put undue restrictions on young people's access to information. I remember struggling to give my presentation at one school because we realized that my own personal website which was hosting some of the Open Source High files was blocked at one school, claiming it was "inappropriate." Thankfully, I could use my phone's hotspot.

One challenge I encountered with reaching teens through their teachers, was that school cast a certain filter on the project that restricted what we could and could not say. For example, I felt like I could promote our video contests, but couldn't talk as much about the larger vision of creating a way to help kids leave school. I also had to be more careful about my language and personality - and because a lot of students were ultimately creating their videos as part of school projects, they also had to be careful that their videos passed the "acceptability" standards of their school.

QUITTING (AKA STOPPING)

As you can see, I tried a lot of different things to get this project to take off. While the site was improving and the quality of the content was improving, something didn't feel right. Ultimately, I had to face the reality that we were only getting submissions when we'd run contests; kids were not voluntarily submitting videos to us. Running a contest was

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supposed to be an initial marketing tool to get the word out, but it had turned into the actual means by which we sourced content. I hated that kids were only making content when they were motivated by an external reward, whether it was a prize in our contests or a grade in their class. I wanted to work on something that inspired people's intrinsic motivation, to inspire them to create things for the joy of creating.

I also became very frustrated that Open Source High was not developing into a community. While we were getting more and more teens to create videos, they didn't engage with one another. They were making videos for *me* rather than *each other*. This defeated the whole idea of having a peer-to-peer learning community.

Ironically, Open Source High, which began as an effort to liberate youth from school, had evolved into being just like school: I would offer a prize, students would do work for a prize, and I would judge their work and determine the winners (and consequently, the losers).

It was with this frustration that around May of 2016, after almost two years of working on Open Source High, that I decided I needed to take a step break from the project and step back. It wasn't that I didn't believe the project could work anymore. I believed Open Source High could keep growing into a popular platform for student video contests, but it wasn't going to ultimately change anything about education. Running the site was time consuming, and I needed to free up my time to get new perspectives and new ideas.

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One way of looking at this is that I “quit”. I gave up. I could have kept going and pushing and trying new things and maybe this would have grown into something massive. I lacked the perseverance to overcome adversity. You could also say that I “failed”, that I just wasn’t good enough to accomplish something great. Our society seems to hang onto firm labels like “quit” and “failed”.

While it is true that I “failed” in my goal of changing the world, and it’s true that I “quit” working on this particular project, I persistently continue to make changes in education. One cannot say one has “failed” until they are done, and I am far from done. And it’s hard to look back on the time I spent as being a “failure”, because I learned so many valuable skills, met some great people, and had a lot of fun working on it.

REVIEWING THE ORIGINAL OBJECTIVES

When I started describing my story of creating Open Source High, I told you to pay attention to two things: 1) the large variety of resources I used as learning tools and 2) the accidental byproducts of this endeavor.

To quickly refresh the many resources I learned from, here’s a list of the buzzwords: books, mentors (teaching, programming, business, film), YouTube, my friend Adam, my cousin Ciaran, my gut instincts and feelings, lots of Google searches, news articles, journal articles, other physics teachers, Bureau of Labor Statistics, marketing reports, lessons learned from my earlier experiences (like

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starting my first business or being a high school student or college student), blogs, seminars and workshops, professors, fliers on walls at coffee shops or other buildings promoting events, former classmates, observing other businesses (like Khan Academy, Comedy Central, Reddit, or YouTube), childhood experiences (like building websites for fun), my girlfriend, former high school teachers, student feedback from presentations I gave in classrooms, social media networking (specifically Reddit), conferences and events, MeetUp groups, Valley Venture Mentors mentorship program, customer interviews with students, experimenting and observing the data from the outcomes (like how many videos we got for different contests), Code Academy, Slack chat rooms, an Airbnb host, owners of OnlineVideoContests.com, physics teacher discussion lists, and general teacher discussion lists.

My hope is that you will realize that the possibilities outside of the conventional classroom setting are endless.

And what did I learn? Entrepreneurship, video production, film, audio recording, lighting, web design, web development, press release writing, journalism, film production, digital marketing, TV distribution, script writing, video editing in Premiere Pro, graphic design in Photoshop, crowdfunding, fundraising, sales, performing customer discovery interviews, running a contest or competition, running an experiment, CSS / HTML / WordPress / Meteor / Telescope, Twitter and Reddit.

Again, these were all accidental byproducts that I never set out purposely to learn, but are all valuable skills.

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Now it might feel like I am advocating for project-based learning. To be clear, that is not the purpose of my story. Project-based learning is just one aspect of self-directed learning, it just happens to be a sexy one to share because there is something to show for it. I am specifically advocating for self-directed learning. It was my choice to pursue this project because it was meaningful to me. I sought out all the resources that would be needed to bring this project to life. I was the one who ultimately decided whether it was “working” or “failing”. And I am the one who was ultimately responsible for the outcome. This project would not have been the same if someone else has “assigned” it to me as a class project for a grade. That would be project-based learning, but not self-directed learning.

Self-directed learning also includes learning just for the joy of learning new things, without creating a project. Just for evidence of this, here are the books I ordered in 2014 and 2015 during the time I was working on Open Source High. This doesn't mean these are great books, or that I even read them in their entirety, I'm just trying to show that not all learning has to be through building a project:

A Thomas Jefferson Education by Oliver DeMille

The Teenage Liberation Handbook by Grace Llewellyn

Without Their Permission by Alexis Ohanian

Free to Learn by Peter Gray

The 4-Hour Workweek by Tim Ferriss

The Autobiography of Malcolm X by Alex Haley and Malcolm X

Organizing for Social Change by The Mid-West Academy

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One World Schoolhouse by Salman Khan

Punished by Rewards by Alfie Kohn

Refuse to Choose by Barbara Sher

The Renaissance Soul by Margaret Lobenstine

The Founder's Dilemmas by Noam Wasserman

The Teacher Liberation Handbook by Joel Hammon

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley

Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power by Yogi Bhojan

Some might get the impression that I'm saying that taking classes is bad. There's nothing inherently wrong with taking a class if it is valuable and it is your choice. During this time period, I was actually taking a weekly oil painting class that I enjoyed a lot. I gained a lot of value from having direct one-to-one coaching on my art. I also recall taking a free online course about entrepreneurship, the Lean Launch Pad (free on Udacity⁵²), which was incredibly valuable in learning about startup companies. In this class, there was no one-to-one coaching, but I found the content very valuable.

In writing this chapter about my learning in 2014 and 2015, I find it interesting that I don't mention documentaries or podcasts at all, which I find to be valuable resources. I just didn't happen to watch any amazing documentaries about education during this time and I didn't start listening to podcasts until last year. This isn't meant to be an all-encompassing guide to every possible way to learn, just a real-world example of the incredible diversity of avenues one can learn from.

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My favorite part about sharing this story is demonstrating all of the unintended benefits that came from a project that could be considered a “failure”. I set out to create a way for teens to not need school. I failed at that. But along the way, I gained knowledge about the education system, developed valuable technical skills, built a network of mentors and collaborators, and built a lot of interpersonal communication skills.

My web development skills even developed enough during this time that I was able to begin earning a living as a freelance web developer, a job which has been paying my bills ever since. The video production skills I learned also resulted in my being contracted last year to produce a video series for an international mental health activism organization. I cannot emphasize enough that these were *accidental* byproducts of my efforts, yet they are incredibly valuable.

Of course, the story doesn't stop here. Though I took a break from Open Source High, I continued in my fight to liberate teens like you from the school system. Almost immediately upon picking my head up from being so narrowly focused on that project, I noticed I became more receptive to other possibilities. It was at this time that I discovered the mysterious world of “unschooling” and realized that I didn't need to invent a way for teens to be liberated from school, the solution already existed.

“Unschooling” is the answer to the question I imagine you have right now, which is that: Self-directed learning sounds great, but how can I do that when I'm stuck at school?

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We'll explore this more in the next chapter.

ACTION:

What do you think is the greatest problem the world is facing? Write it down. Next to it, write down the reason you are not trying to solve that problem right now. Are there any steps you could take toward solving this problem? Even small ones? What's stopping you from getting started?

I'll give an example:

Problem: I am really upset at seeing homelessness.

Why am I not solving it: Well, what could I possibly do? I don't even make any money, it's not like I can buy anyone a home. I don't have the skills to build someone a home, or money for materials or land. I'm pretty helpless, and even if I could somehow buy or build one person a home, there are half a million homeless people in my country, how could I ever effect that?

Steps I could take: I could read more books about homelessness to try and understand the root causes of this problem. I could watch YouTube videos about the issue. I could go to city hall meetings where they are

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discussing the problem and hear possible solutions. I could research what other organizations are working on to eliminate homelessness. I could volunteer at a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen to help in some way. This would also give me opportunities to talk directly with people who are experiencing homelessness, as well as some of the people who are actively working to help address the issue. I could also start learning more about activism, politics, government, and social change movements, in general, to see how that information from other social change efforts could be applied to help homeless people.

What's stopping me from starting: I suppose what's stopping me is the large scope of the project... but now I see there are some little pieces that I could begin doing. I think what's stopping me is some discomfort with putting myself out there in a new place, like going to a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen. I've never done something like that before. I'm afraid of being the new person and all the anxieties that come from being outside of my comfort zone. I also feel a bit intimidated by starting to learn more about these causes, because the more I read about them and learn, the more impossible it seems to make an impact. People have been working on these problems for years without seeing the situation improve, so I'm afraid

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of devoting all my time and ultimately failing. So the reasons I'm not starting are more about my personal discomfort and anxiety, not so much because there's nothing available for me to do.

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If my ultimate goal was to empower young people to thrive without needing school, I needed to learn from people who were already living and learning outside of the school system: homeschoolers.

Looking back now, this should have been my first step, but I was distracted by my own biases and judgments about what homeschooling was. I had preconceived notions that homeschooling was done by religious fanatics who wanted to control their children, not the kind of people who would subscribe to my idea of liberating young people to explore the world without limitations.

Fortunately, I came to learn I was completely wrong about the homeschooling world. It is true that there are some extreme homeschoolers who keep their kids out of school in an effort to control them who are so sheltered from the world that they never develop social skills. It is also true that some homeschoolers try to replicate “school at home” with the mother playing the role of teacher, preparing lessons and teaching their children all their subjects around the dinner table. To be clear, this is *not* representative of

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the entire homeschooling community. I do not wish that experience upon anyone, and certainly would not have written a book encouraging people to follow that path. If conventional school is painful, doing “school at home” sounds like torture.

I'd like us to set aside any biases we have toward the word “homeschooling” and take a fresh start. Let's use a specific definition of “homeschooling” that allows us some flexibility. Let's call “homeschooling” a *legal term* used for educating children outside of school.”

With this definition, I can now introduce you to a special form of homeschooling I've encountered, called “unschooling,” which opened my eyes to what is truly possible once one steps away from the conventional school.

WHAT THE HECK IS UNSCHOOLING?

I'll admit, the word “unschooling” has almost as much negative baggage as the word “homeschooling”. The first time I heard the term “unschooling” was at a Valley Venture Mentors event in Springfield, MA where I was giving a short presentation about Open Source High. After all the entrepreneurs gave their pitches, we split up into small groups where people attending the event could give us feedback and discuss our ideas. I remember someone who came to my group telling me, “It sounds like what you're describing is *unschooling*.” I reactively dismissed the possibility that my project could ever be affiliated with such a silly word.

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The term “unschooling” continued to pop up on my radar, but diving deeper into researching the subject sat toward the bottom of my never-ending “to do” list. It was only after I stepped away from Open Source High in early 2016 that I finally had the time to explore new ideas and learn about subjects such as “unschooling”.

I first started reading about unschooling on blogs and different websites. It appeared that young “unschoolers” were learning and thriving by simply following their interests, without any curriculum or grades or force or coercion. As unschooling mother, Kerry McDonald, writes in her book, *Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom*:

Curriculum rests on control. It is about deciding what subject matter others should study and master, and when. It may be a gentle curriculum with songs and games and colorful stickers, but it is still a method of controlling another’s learning - sometimes through prodding, bribery and punishment. Unschooling is about challenging that control. Without a curriculum, learning becomes less regimented and more organic, springing from developing interests and passions. There is no need to prod, bribe, or punish a child because learning comes from within. Instead of someone else deciding what a learner should know or do, it is the learner who decides what to know and do. Instead of someone else assessing a learner’s knowledge, it is the learner who decides

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when her learning is complete. Unschooling is far less authoritarian than schooling. Learning happens naturally, and much more meaningfully, when it is driven by the learners' personal motivations.⁵³

If you are looking for a simple definition of what exactly unschooling is, the simplest thing I can say is it is *living life as if school does not exist*. "Unschooling" is essentially a slang word for self-directed learning. If you are looking for a more formal definition, Wikipedia defines "unschooling" as "an educational method and philosophy that advocates learner-chosen activities as a primary means for learning."⁵⁴

The term "unschooling" was first coined in the 1970's by John Holt, who became disillusioned with the school system after teaching elementary school for six years and began writing about self-directed learning and unschooling.⁵⁵ Holt believed that "children who were provided with a rich and stimulating learning environment would learn what they are ready to learn, when they are ready to learn it."⁵⁶ Holt's philosophy was that "children did not need to be coerced into learning; they would do so naturally if given the freedom to follow their own interests and a rich assortment of resources."⁵⁷ His book, *Teach Your Own*, and popular magazine, *Growing Without Schooling*, became the handbook and information source that empowered many parents in the pre-internet days to remove their children from the school system to pursue self-directed learning.

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It's important to acknowledge that this counter-cultural unschooling movement is often affiliated with white, upper-middle class people. To put it directly, as unschooling mother Tiffany Sandoval wrote in a blog post titled "Diversity: Let's begin the conversation," she wrote: "... let's just be real for a minute: the Homeschooling/Unschooling community is lacking cultural & socioeconomic diversity."⁵⁸

Despite this notable problem with the movement at large, the truth is that self-directed learning has been a critical part of the cultures of black, indigenous, and people of color for many years. In her controversial article in *Tipping Points* titled, "Ours First", associate professor of education Dr. Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson writes:

...centering Whiteness and wealth is common practice in the settler-colonial, imperialist context that is the United States... that assumption more accurately reflects the normalized and dominant identities of a Western-dominated global system, rather than the groups that historically practiced Self-Directed Education, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.... Marginalized groups have been learning the world for a long time, and without school. Before and throughout this colonialist era, it is the way we learned to manage our food systems and organize communities. It is the way we learned to predict weather and navigate seas. It is the way we learned transportation routes and

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our stories. It is the way we learned ourselves and others. It is the way we learned who the oppressors really were, despite what they told us about themselves in their schools. It is the way we learned to survive under Western colonialism and imperialism. And it is the way we will thrive beyond it.⁵⁹

In looking at the data from the National Center for Education Statistics, white families choose homeschooling at a rate approximately twice that of black, indigenous, families of color.⁶⁰ The data also supports that homeschooling is not only for upper-middle class families, with homeschooling rates approximately equal for families above and below the poverty line.⁶¹ To be clear, this data is for all homeschoolers, not just unschoolers.

In most cases, the decision for parents to unschool their children does bring with it some financial setbacks, but these parents feel that the educational value of unschooling is worth the cost. Unschooling father, Ben Hewitt, published an article about his family's decision to unschool as a lower-class family:

Everyone we know who unschools, in fact, has chosen autonomy over affluence. Hell, some years we're barely above the poverty line. But the truth is, unschooling isn't merely an educational choice. It's a lifestyle choice.⁶²

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While we're talking about the accessibility of unschooling, it's important to note that unschooling is the choice for children with a wide range of disabilities. Unschooling researcher, Dr. Gina Riley, is currently involved in a study to explore this group and shared with me an update of her findings thus far:

I am currently doing a study on those who unschool students with disabilities/special needs, and from my research, this population is larger than we can imagine.

First of all, disability tends to be a social construct, and most disability is classified/diagnosed within the time that a child is enrolled in school. There are many parents that choose to homeschool/unschool from the beginning, knowing that their child is "different", and knowing that difference may be "labeled/defined" within a traditional school environment.

I'm hearing so many stories of individuals who unschool whose children have a wide range of disabilities (ADHD, LD, ID, Autism, EBD, etc)...

We always hear that students with disabilities need "structure", but you can unschool and still provide a structured environment for your child.⁶³

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According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, approximately 5% of parents stated that the most important reason they chose homeschooling was because their “child has a physical or mental health problem”.⁶⁴

The unschooling movement has continuously grown since the 1970's, with current estimates stating that approximately 10% of the 2 million homeschoolers in the United States would be classified as unschoolers.⁶⁵

Learning that people were unschooling since the 1970's and that there was a whole movement behind this learning approach was a huge awakening for me. I realized that I didn't need to invent the solution that allowed young people to thrive without school, it already existed. My focus quickly shifted away from creating a solution and toward learning about what already existed and finding a way to make it affordable and accessible to everyone.

This put me in a similar situation as when starting my LED company, American Relight; we didn't need to invent anything, we needed to make the technology accessible and affordable to everyone by using marketing and education to spread the word and a financial mechanism to make it affordable. I realized something similar was needed for the unschooling movement.

In the same way that I needed to learn a lot about LED technology before I could promote it, I had a lot to learn from existing unschoolers who had been using this approach to learning for decades.

To understand this way of life, reading blogs and books

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wasn't enough, I needed to meet some actual unschoolers in-person. In September 2016, I attended my first of many unschooling conferences, called the "Life Without Instructions Conference" in Staten Island, New York.

While I tend to feel like a bit of an outsider anywhere I go, I never felt more welcome around a group of people than I did at Life Without Instructions. Being at an event surrounded by self-directed learners finally made this lifestyle feel normal, whereas previously it always felt so foreign and unusual.

The families of unschoolers at the conference were an interesting paradox. On the one hand, I could describe them as a group of "like-minded" people because of their choices related to pursuing self-directed education. On the other hand, the very thing they all had in common was an open-mindedness and a different way of living their lives than the mainstream world did.

I couldn't really put anyone in a box and say "this is what an unschooler" looks like. True, there were more people with colored hair, tattoos, and casual clothing than you'd see at a more conventional education conference. But there were just as many people with conventional appearances. Appearances were not a unifying characteristic of unschoolers. What connected them was their curiosity and interest in learning, and they all carried out discussions and participated in workshops collaboratively.

The families came in all shapes, sizes, colors, and economics: black, white, brown, single parents and married parents, large families and small families, rich families and

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poor families. Not every family was a 100% unschooling family, some families with multiple children had kids in conventional school and some who were unschooled. It was a blend, without any specific rules.

The interests of the unschoolers were also across the board, but the one thing they had in common was that they were interested in learning. One teen I met was into military history, another into health and nutrition, while another was very into music, played multiple instruments and was in several bands. One was a competitive figure skater who simply couldn't attend school and pursue their interest at the same time. Another was an active dungeons and dragons player who was interested in creating his own board games. A surprising number of teens attending the event were world travelers who learned by traveling the world and referred to themselves not as unschoolers, but as 'worldschoolers'.

Having met many more unschoolers since this conference, I find that the ones you typically hear about or read about are the exceptions: the geniuses who are amazing at a musical instrument or who know how to play 30 different musical instruments, or the pro athletes, or pop music stars, or actresses. Sure, these people do exist, but most unschoolers are more like run of the mill people. They are human, just like you.

You may be wondering what their social skills were like. Contrary to the negative stereotypes about homeschoolers, the young unschoolers at the conference had great social skills. In fact, on average, I would say their social skills were above the level of their peers. The idea that

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homeschooling will lead to poor social skills appears to be a myth. Homeschooling father, Michael Rennie, has even written that: “I would go so far as to say that we homeschool because it’s so good at socialization.”⁶⁶

Unschoolers’ excellent social skills are a result of age-mixing; unschoolers are not separated out by age like in schools, they are free to spend time with people of any age. As Peter Gray wrote in an article for Education Week:

If we want to capitalize on childrens’ and adolescents’ natural, playful ways of learning, we must find ways to break down the barriers we have erected to keep young people of different ages apart. Age segregation deprives them not only of fun, but also of the opportunity to use fully their most powerful natural tools for learning.⁶⁷

The unschoolers’ social skills also seemed above average because the youth were entirely comfortable speaking to adults. This makes sense because all the adults that schooled students are around, namely parents and teachers, tend to play the role of authority figures. In the case of unschoolers, it was more common that they would build friendships with adults without a power hierarchy.

Speaking of the adults, another remarkable observation was the strong relationships that existed between the teens and their parents. I was surprised to see such openness, honesty, trust and respect both from the parents toward their teens as well as the teens toward their parents. I remember attending a group session specifically for parents of teen unschoolers,

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where one parent remarked: “Everyone warned us that when our kids became teens, they’d turn into rebellious monsters. But it never happened. They have nothing to rebel against.”

It wasn’t just the youth who were curious, interested, motivated learners - the parents subscribed to the same philosophy on life. I came to learn that while unschooling is usually thought of specifically as an approach to education, in practice, many parents extend non-authoritarian unschooling philosophies to their entire parenting style. Teresa Graham Brett writes about how school interferes with the parent-child relationship and the impact it has on their learning:

Schools use their control over children to drive performance. As babies and children grow up within our paradigm that embraces power and control over others, we learn that we must please our parents in order to maintain their love and acceptance. Teachers soon take over the role of authority of parents, and the majority of students - who are not motivated by an intrinsic desire to learn whatever material the curriculum requires of them at the time - learn to perform to please their teachers and parents in order to get some emotional needs met.⁶⁸

I highly recommend attending a conference for unschoolers to meet teen unschoolers and learn directly from them what this lifestyle is like. There are annual conferences that take place all over the United States, and some internationally.

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Sue Patterson's website (UnschoolingMom2Mom.com) has a page dedicated to finding unschooling conferences in your area.⁶⁹ You can also connect online with some unschooling teens on the Peer Unschooling Network⁷⁰ and to unschooling parents in a variety of Facebook groups⁷¹.

Other opportunities to meet in-person with other unschoolers include programs like Not Back to School Camp, which is a summer camp specifically for teen unschoolers. I worked at Not Back to School Camp for one ten-day summer session and cannot recommend it enough. If traveling is an interest of yours, there are two programs which both offer international travel experiences with other unschoolers and worldschoolers, called Unschool Adventures and Project World School. Project World School also offers two family summits per year that your entire family can attend, which function similarly to an unschooling conference. I've been the emcee at two of these events in Mexico and had a great time connecting with such interesting families from around the world.

When approaching unschoolers as a curious outsider, be aware that while unschoolers are often the most open-minded and accepting people I've ever met, occasionally, they can be a little suspicious of outsiders probing them with lots of questions. You have to keep in mind that unschoolers are sometimes judged for living life differently. Parents expressed to me that they were often criticized by their friends and family for choosing to unschool their children. It's unfortunate that most of society has been socialized into believing that education can only happen within a school, despite the fact that public opinion is that our education system is failing our kids.⁷²

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The day-to-day lives of unschoolers are hard to describe because it will vary depending on the individuals' interests. That is the nature of personalized learning: there is no one-size fits all box. Ideas and interests flow naturally throughout a day, week, year, or decade; it's completely natural.

For example, creating art can be a fun gateway to developing a variety of skills and interests. An unschooler learning to paint may become curious about how the paints are created, which can lead to an interest in chemistry. This can lead to an unschooler creating their own home science lab where they experiment with creating and mixing their own pigments and paints.

The bridge between art and engineering was made elegantly by Renaissance artists like Leonardo da Vinci, but also applies to modern times as well. For example, when my friend Brianna was a teen, she started a creative project to build a custom bookshelf for her brother's bedroom. This evolved into her designing and manufacturing a unique, spiral-shaped bookshelf out of sheet metal. Through this project, she ultimately learned a lot about sheet metal fabrication and even started a business selling her bookshelves online. Today she works in industry as a structural engineer.

One clever tactic that unschoolers use for learning new skills is to gain on-the-job work experience by getting apprenticeships, internships, and volunteering. Many think this is something that only college students do, but these opportunities are actually available to people of all ages: all

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you have to do is *ask*.

I actually had an unschooler approach me a couple years ago to see if she could be an apprentice in web development as a means of improving her coding skills. I told her I didn't have the time to coach her, but I could give her some small tasks, and see how she did, and if it went well, I would pay her. It turns out, she was far more talented than she suggested during our conversation, and she has been working for me for the last two years. She went from offering to work for free as an apprentice, to having a job - just by asking. I've heard many stories of young unschoolers who got their first jobs by starting as a volunteer and slowly making themselves invaluable to a company and ultimately asking for a paying job.

Play is another under-rated way unschoolers learn, whether it is board games, card games, role playing games, or video games. Parents often overlook this fact and often try to organize games themselves and “force” learning into the games. It's important that the activities actually be directed by young people. As Peter Gray shared in an interview with the *American Journal of Play*: “...I think activities structured for kids by adults are not fully play...”⁷³

While the term “unschooling” might suggest a rejection of every learning method found in schools, that is not the case. For example, many unschoolers take classes to learn certain unique subjects that require more direct coaching like karate or calligraphy. It's very common for unschoolers to begin taking classes at their local community colleges as teenagers, because they are allowed to take individual classes they are interested in without needing to enroll as

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full-time students. Taking community college classes is also a cost effective way to start accumulating college credits. Some unschoolers even find themselves transferring to private universities as sophomores at age 18 when their schooled peers are graduating high school and applying to college to be freshman.

Unschooling also doesn't mean you can't use textbooks. Some unschoolers read textbooks when they want a really comprehensive view of an entire subject. The key is that unschoolers are not limited only to classrooms and textbooks. The goal is to pursue learning in whatever manner you wish. Unschooling is not a mechanism to reduce your opportunities, but rather to expand them.

If you are looking for a subject-by-subject breakdown of how every subject can be learned without school, I highly recommend Grace Llewellyn's book *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*.⁷⁴ Grace's book has become the ultimate handbook for teens interested in unschooling and will go much more in-depth than this overview. What's most fascinating about her book, is that it was published before the internet became ubiquitous, so there are countless "real world" approaches to learning, you're not only to the digital realm.

While the internet is an amazing tool, you should also aim to have real-life interactive experiences which you can learn from. While this can mean doing hands-on projects, internships, and volunteering, I'd also like to mention the role that travel has played in a lot of unschoolers' lives. In fact, travel has become the focal point of some families learning, who refer to themselves as 'worldschoolers.'

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Worldschooling is a small but growing lifestyle of traveling the world and learning through cultural immersion in different countries. Some would imagine this to only be the lifestyles of the rich and famous, but it's quite the contrary, many worldschoolers are not wealthy: they've merely prioritized travel and learning above material possessions and have found creative ways to make things work. For example, some use the website [TrustedHouseSitters.com](https://www.TrustedHouseSitters.com) to get basically free housing in different countries.

I'm a big advocate for the benefits that are gained from travel and highly recommend it. As I shared with you earlier, my goal in being involved in education is to transform our culture to be more loving, accepting, creative, and collaborative. Travel is an excellent gateway for embracing these values. As Mark Twain said:

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.⁷⁵

As you can tell, unschooling looks different to different people. If you're trying to imagine what your life would be like without school, I suggest that you take a look at your life when school isn't in session. What do your weekends, summers, and school vacations look like? What would you do if summer vacation ran all year round?

It's possible that this may all feel either too good to be true,

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or like something that “other” families do. Or maybe your mind is overwhelmed with all the possibilities of having that much freedom. You may be thinking, “This just isn’t what *my* life could be.” I think that all these feelings are a natural reaction to learning about a lifestyle that seems so foreign to your own, especially once you realize that unschooling isn’t some strange cultural practice happening in a faraway land - people are unschooling right in your state. This life has been accessible to you your whole life, you just didn’t know it existed.

There’s a possibility that you may even feel a bit of anger, born out of frustration that some teens have so much freedom compared to you. That is a natural feeling as well. It does seem unfair, doesn’t it?

LET’S HEAR DIRECTLY FROM SOME UNSCHOOLING TEENS

I remember when I first learned about unschooling, I wondered how all the students in school would react if they suddenly became aware of this secret culture of people thriving outside of school. It made me think of countries ruled by dictators, where when people finally got internet access and started discovering that the rest of the world had democracy, they were outraged and began protesting. I wondered if students in school would react the same way.

But how could kids in school “see” that teens around the world are unschooling? How could I make this feel “real” and not just some abstract idea they read about in a blog? One way that I hoped to expose teens in school to

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unschooling, was through co-producing the podcast *Youth on Subjects of the World*. While it is not necessarily a podcast about unschooling, most of the teens featured on it are unschoolers. Here are a few quotes directly from a couple teen unschoolers who appeared on Episode #6, where we specifically discussed education.⁷⁶

Right now, at least in the United States, education for a lot of people is being ruled through fear. If you don't do this, you're not going to get a job.... Parents fear their child won't succeed.... And children fear, if I get this grade, I get a reward, but if I don't get this grade, I get a punishment. Education should be an interesting beneficial experience for children, they should learn to associate education as having fun and learning things, not as a fear of punishment.

- Neil

I think education is very important... but education and school are not necessarily the same thing. You can learn all the things you've ever needed to learn in life without setting foot in a school.... The forcefulness of having your entire life dictated by someone else under you're 18 creates something where you don't want to learn.... It's not healthy to be told your entire life what to do, because then you're expecting to be told what to do by the time everyone expects you to make your own decisions.

- Martin

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In addition to helping co-produce the podcast, I created the Peer Unschooling Network, also known as “PUN”, which is a digital community that connects unschoolers and other self-directed learners from around the world.⁷⁷ You are certainly free to go speak with the youth that are on that website, but I will share with you some of what some of them have shared with me.

When the site first launched, I asked the teens on PUN what their favorite thing about being an unschooler was. The unschoolers who responded are from many different countries and backgrounds, with ages ranging from 13-20, some of them are new to unschooling and some have been doing it their whole lives.

Here's what they said:⁷⁸

my favorite things are the flexibility of my schedule being able to choose who I hang out with and not being stressed about when assignments are due etc.

- age 14

I have just been homeschooled/unschooled, since I was 11 because school was treating me pretty badly. So a few of my favorite things about being an unschooler are 1) There aren't any bullies here or anywhere else. 2) I get to spend more time doing the things I love like editing pictures or writing short stories and 3) I don't get compared/compare myself to other people's

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work. I get to decide if I'm not working hard enough for this particular subject. I get to change my schedule or curriculum if it doesn't fit me so in a way, I'm like my own teacher to myself

- age 13

Honestly, to me everything comes down to time. I get to spend more time on subjects that I am interested in. I also get to work at my own pace. I've had a few experiences trying to work in a more contemporary classroom setting and it just frustrated me having to wait for other students when I already had a concept down, or vice versa. It also lets me travel during off seasons when flights are cheaper. The actual education itself was never a big challenge. I'm nineteen and I'm employed, I have my college fully paid for, and I've traveled more than most of my friends. I did what they did but with more free time and adventure.

- age 19

Being able to be around people that are kind and helpful. Being free, and traveling to new places. Choosing my own abilities and what I want to learn.

Plus, being accepted for who I am, instead of being around people who don't generally like differences...going to a mainstream school (especially public) there aren't many people who are mature, honest or conscious.

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And then you feel oppressed and totally out of place.

- age 15

learning things at my own pace, having more time for friends, and having freedom I have a lot of friends, some across the country. I know a lot of friends in my area, a few go to public school so it's really hard to see them because how busy they are with school! But I love having so much free time to do what I want and choose what I put my time into. I wouldn't want to live any other way!

- age 15

Pretty much that I can choose what I want to learn, and then go as indepth as I want into that area.

- age 18

I'd have to say, having the freedom to learn what is most meaningful to you would be the best overall. Being able to spend more time with family and friends is pretty great too, and so is getting to take my time on things. If you want to sum it up probably just the no-holds- barred approach to doing what is meaningful in my life.

- age 20

I will admit, these teens do make unschooling sound pretty amazing. I don't mean to oversell it; please keep in mind I

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did ask all of them what their *favorite* part about being unschooled was.

I can relate to a lot of what they describe because I do a lot of self-directed learning as an adult. One aspect of this lifestyle which I could not relate to, however, was the unique social challenges of living this lifestyle as a teen. I wondered how teen unschoolers made friends without school or how they dealt with the stigma of being “different” than other people because of their lifestyle choices.

I’ll admit, social challenges are issues I still deal with in my adult life. Being a traveler and entrepreneur, I struggle with making friends and building close connections. And my unfortunate run-ins with the stigmatizing mental health system has made me feel quite “different” than other people. Although I definitely feel isolated at times, I can combat that by traveling to events or communities where I can find like-minded people. I’m not sure I would have had access to these same opportunities when I was a teen, but it’s impossible for me to go back in time now.

I wanted to get beneath the surface of all the positive things that unschooling seemed to offer and learn about the downsides as well. I wanted to know about their problems and challenges too, not just the benefits. A mentor of mine at Valley Venture Mentors, Thom Fox, gave me great advice to learn about people’s problems:

Ask them questions like “What is your greatest challenge?” or “If you could wave a magic wand and change anything, what

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would you change?" or "What's the most frustrating part of your day?". People love talking about their problems much more than their successes, so don't be surprised if they go on for a while.⁷⁹

I went and asked the same teens on PUN about their challenges and frustrations as unschoolers. This is how they responded:⁸⁰

The social aspects can sometimes be difficult, but really other than that the challenges are the same as any other high schooler. Though it kinda is a stereotype there is some truth in it, that homeschoolers have no friends which is not true of most people, but it is harder to make friends because you're not around other kids 12 hours a day so it's easier to make friends but coming back to my earlier point you make friends you actually like.

- age 14

...People keep mistaking me for anti-social and introverted just for the reason that I'm homeschooled. I like talking to people, and I'm pretty much the exact opposite of introvert. It's a terrible stereotype that homeschooler = anti-social

- age 13

Mostly trying to explain to people that i am still learning and i didn't drop out of school.

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to avoid conversations like that i just tell people i Home school, instead of Unschool which is what i am actually doing.

- age 16

Participating in certain team sports can be more challenging without the same programs schools provide, also some places require schools to allow home schoolers to join certain extracurricular activities....

- age 19

...the feeling that I'm not doing enough. It feels like if I have the ability to do anything in the world I should be this rich famous prodigy.

- age 13

Ah the downsides are probably having to create your own program rather than having it all set out in a curriculum, and having no one to set deadlines and motivate you
Rather you have to do it yourself and create your own community to support and motivate you

- age 18

Actually there is nothing that I dislike, the only thing that has cost me work is to take responsibility for my time and take advantage of it, you know, in a school they always tell you what time you should do

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things, but now it is my responsibility, it is great but not easy

- age 13

...It's probably just me. But I'm doubting myself too much. I feel this need to be this super awesome unschooler, and I feel that I'm not awesome enough. It's like, when you are an unschooler you have to be really good at everything, and if you are not, then you are a failure...at least that's the impression I get from other people. Maybe I'm wrong. I don't know.

- age 18

As you can see, life isn't magically perfect for unschoolers. I'm here to give you a balanced truth, without rose-tinted glasses. I did my best to get quotes directly from teens living this life so you could hear directly from them. As you noticed, most of their challenges are not related to their learning, they are related to social challenges.

Keep in mind, the three main places I've met unschoolers have been unschooling conferences, summer camps for unschoolers, and the Peer Unschooling Network. Because these three places are specific gathering points for unschoolers who are seeking community and connection, it may be that my research has self-selected for teens who are having trouble finding friends. I can't claim that these interviews speak for the entire population of unschoolers, which is quite diverse.

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Not to be alarmed, in the three years that the Peer Unschooling Network has been running, I've noticed a promising trend. PUN tends to attract teens when they first transition to unschooling and are trying to navigate their new social landscape and make friends. They tend to make a few friends on the site and quickly move on with their life. This creates a challenge for me of maintaining a sustainable community, but it also means that teen unschoolers are generally overcoming these social challenges pretty quickly.

Specifically, unschoolers have expressed to me that after leaving the school system, they find their social opportunities expand dramatically, because they now feel free to make friends with people of any age from any town, not just same-age students from their own town that happen to be placed in their school classes.

Most notable is that you'll notice from their responses that not a single person mentioned that their greatest challenge is related to learning. This is not to say that unschooling solves all of life's problems, but learning is not their biggest problem.

DOES UNSCHOOLING WORK?

With all this commotion about advantages and disadvantages, you probably have one big question: does unschooling actually work? In response, I challenge you to tell me how you would measure whether its "working" or not?

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Most people would suggest that comparing standardized test scores between unschoolers and schooled children would allow us to see which method works “better”, but it’s impossible to know all the hidden variables contributing to differences in test results. Specifically, a correlation does not equal causation. Unschoolers doing better or worse than average on a test does not specifically mean that their unschooling life is the cause for the difference in their performance. For example, maybe unschoolers tend to have more intelligent parents who give them a genetic and/or cultural advantage that doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the specific method of learning they used. Maybe the same group of unschoolers would be destined for success regardless of their educational choices.

If you really insist on comparing standardized test scores, we get the best perspective by looking at SAT scores. While these aren’t mandated anywhere, they are taken by many students and the same test is given nationwide, not state-by-state. The Homeschooling Legal Defense Association reports that homeschoolers, on average, perform better on every single SAT subject. Specifically, they write:

In 2014, homeschoolers scored an average of 567 in critical reading, 521 in mathematics, and 535 in writing. In comparison, the average SAT scores for all 2014 high school seniors were 497 in critical reading, 513 in mathematics, and 487 in writing.⁸¹

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Please note that unschoolers are only 10% of the homeschooling population, and we don't have data specifically on unschoolers. Also keep in mind that SATs are not a very useful way to determine someone's intelligence. Many colleges are moving away from asking for SAT scores on applications. The latest data from FairTest.org lists over 1,000 colleges and universities that don't use SATs as part of their admissions process.⁸²

If you were to base everything on statistical averages, this would indicate that every student should become a homeschooler, however, there is a severe problem with using statistical averages to make decisions about how individuals should behave. You, as an individual, are a data point of one.

I recently read a pair of articles by holistic psychiatrist Dr. Kelly Brogan where she describes that doctors are using this approach to develop personalized medicine, in what she calls "N of 1 medicine." She writes:

We are bringing medicine back into the realm of the "N of 1" or the "study of You". You are not a randomized clinical trial. You are a specific symphony of information.⁸³

This is N of 1 medicine, where randomized trials, piles of curated medical papers and statistics are rendered secondary to your personal, individualized experience.⁸⁴

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You do not get to live your life a million times and take an average of all your outcomes - you get one life. To make matters more complicated, to compare your own individual performance to statistical averages, is also problematic, because the average is a calculation that doesn't actually represent a real individual person. Todd Rose, author of *The End of Average*, explains part of the issue:

You cannot understand individuals by focusing on group averages. In every field that studies individuals, we found the same thing. There's no such thing as an average cell, there's no such thing as an average genome, there's no such thing as an average cancer, and - in what may be the single most important lesson for education - there's no such thing as an average student.... And our education system is built on the assumption that there is an average student. Think about it... Most textbooks, are designed to be "age-appropriate", which sounds great, but it really just means they're designed for the average student of that age. Most standardized assessments, like the SAT or IQ test, are explicitly designed based on comparison to a hypothetical average student. Most of our curricular materials, prescribed not only as a standardized sequence, but as a standardized time for learning. And we set those sequences and we fix those times based on what we know about learning, on average.⁸⁵

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Comparing standardized test scores also runs into the problem that standardized tests themselves may not be the greatest tool for determining whether someone is receiving a good education. There is far more to one's learning experience than just whether they can solve math problems, recall the definitions of advanced vocabulary words, or remember the dates and locations of famous Civil War battles. We are still yet to develop standardized tests for creativity, self-direction, problem solving, emotional resilience, kindness, leadership, responsibility, passion, work ethic, physical health, mental health, organization, common sense, money management, culinary skills, tech savviness, decision-making, time management, grit, patience, empathy, honesty, integrity, generosity... or, most importantly, happiness.

I'm not trying to dismiss your valid concern about whether unschooling is an effective form of education. I simply want to emphasize the challenge in determining what it means to be effective.

Not only is it difficult to determine a definition of "effective", it's also difficult to do an authentic research study. In a perfect world, you would perform a study involving a large group of students from around the world who live in a variety of geographic locations, with different cultural backgrounds, and a range of socioeconomic levels. You would then randomly assign students to different groups: one group would receive a conventional education and one would pursue self-directed learning. Performing a study like this is difficult due to ethical considerations. Can you imagine any parent allowing their child's education to be decided through a randomized study?

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That's not to say that we don't have *any* research on unschooling, I just want to prepare you for why we the conditions are challenging to perform a "perfect" study.

One approach to studying the outcomes of unschoolers comes from a pivotal research study by Peter Gray and Gina Riley, who published their findings in the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*.⁸⁶ (A summary of the results was also published on Peter Gray's "Freedom to Learn" blog on PsychologyToday.com.⁸⁷)

The study involved interviewing 75 "grown unschoolers", which are adults who had been unschooled as youth. The researchers asked a variety of questions to determine how the grown unschoolers were faring as adults, such as whether they ever went to college, whether their career matches their passions, whether they are financially independent, and whether they would choose to unschool their own children.

It is important to note that since this survey was voluntary, all the responses came from people who were willing participants. This could potentially introduce a bias into the survey results. For example, it's possible that someone who had a horrible unschooling experience may have been more likely to respond to the survey because they felt very strongly and wanted their opinions to be heard. On the other hand, there may be a tendency for people with bad unschooling experiences to not want to disclose the poor self-reported outcomes of their life experiences; thus, there may be a tendency to actually withhold negative opinions. This is not my effort to dismiss all of the data gathered in the study, it's merely me doing my best to present an

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honest case to you.

To address the problem of potential bias, Peter and Gina write:

A major limitation of this study, of course, is that the participants are a self-selected sample, not a random sample, of grown unschoolers.... What the study does unambiguously show, however, is that it is possible to take the unschooling route and then go on to a highly satisfying adult life. For the group who responded to our survey, unschooling appears to have been far more advantageous than disadvantageous in their pursuits of higher education, desired careers, and other meaningful life experiences.⁸⁸

The two researchers first broke the unschoolers up into three groups. One group had never attended school, another group had no schooling past 6th grade, and the last group had some schooling past 6th grade. To clarify, they define “schooling” as either conventional “school-at-home”-style homeschooling or attendance at an actual school.

The summary of their data is included in this table.⁸⁹

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DATA SUMMARY (Based on preliminary analysis)	I. No Schooling. N = 24	II. No Schooling past 6th grade. N = 27	III. Some schooling past 6th grade. N = 24
1. Age: Mdn (range)	24 (18-35)	25 (19-37)	24.5 (18-49)
2. Yrs of schooling+hrs schng: Mdn (range)	0 (0-0)	5 (1-7)	8 (1-11)
3. Gender: % Female	19/24 = 79%	20/27 = 74%	19/24 = 79%
4. Some formal higher education	18/24 = 75%	23/27 = 85%	21/24 = 88%
5. Has or working on BA or higher	14/24 = 58%	12/27 = 44%	7/24 = 29%
6. Work matches childhood interests	21/24 = 88%	19/27 = 70%	18/24 = 75%
7. Financially independent	11/15 = 73%	18/21 = 86%	14/19 = 74%
*8. Job/career in arts/film/theatre/writing	19/24 = 79%	9/27 = 33%	8/24 = 33%
9. Evidence of entrepreneurship	15/24 = 63%	14/27 = 52%	11/24 = 46%
10. Clear "yes" to unschool own child	18/23 = 78%	16/27 = 59%	16/24 = 67%
11. Clear "no" to unschool own child	1/23 = 4%	2/27 = 7%	2/24 = 8%

*Statistically significant difference across groups.

You'll notice another potential bias of this study is found in Row #3, "Gender", which says that far more women completed the survey than men. This does not mean that more women are unschoolers than men.

The authors suggest the high number of responses from women could possibly be due to the fact that more women read Peter's blog, which is where the questionnaire was posted, or the fact that women are typically more likely to complete online surveys of this kind.

You'll also notice that there is no "control" group in this study, which means we don't get to compare these responses the unschoolers gave to your "average" public school student. This presents a challenge if one wants to make an argument that "all students should be unschooled instead of going to school." However, that is not the purpose of the study. As I mentioned, the conclusion that the researchers came to was that "it is possible to take the unschooling route and then go on to have a highly satisfying adult life."⁹⁰

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Let's dive into some of the details of the study. First, let's address the common question of whether unschoolers attend college or not. There was plenty of data in rows #4 and #5 to support that those who wanted to go to college or another form of higher education were able to. (Note that in Row #5, a "BA" refers to a Bachelor of Arts degree from a college). The researchers write:

Overall, 33 (44%) of the 75 participants had completed a bachelor's degree or were fulltime students in a bachelor's program at the time of the survey. Although we did not ask for the names of the colleges attended, some volunteered that information. The named colleges included several state universities (e.g. UCLA, University of South Carolina, University of New Mexico), an Ivy League college (Cornell), and a number of small private liberal arts colleges (e.g. Bennington, Earlham, Marlboro, Mt. Holyoke, Prescott). Of those who had completed a bachelor's degree, 13 were enrolled in or had completed a post-graduate degree program.

Of those who had not enrolled in a bachelor's program, 29 had pursued some other form of higher education, either for vocational training (in such realms as the culinary arts, business administration, massage, EMT, practical nursing, and sign language interpretation) or to gain specific other useful or desired skills. Thus, in all, 62

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(83%) of the respondents had pursued some sort of higher education.⁹¹

Clearly, unschoolers do choose to pursue higher education. Again, the key here is that they are choosing to do so, they are not being forced. The research study also asked about the grown unschoolers' experiences as college students, to learn whether they felt like they were prepared for their college education. Peter and Gina wrote:

The participants reported remarkably little difficulty academically in college. Students who had never previously been in a classroom or read a textbook found themselves getting straight A's and earning honors, both in community college courses and in bachelor's programs. Apparently, the lack of an imposed curriculum had not deprived them of information or skills needed for college success. Most reported themselves to be at an academic advantage compared with their classmates, because they were not burned out by previous schooling, had learned as unschoolers to be self-directed and self-responsible, perceived it as their own choice to go to college, and were intent on making the most of what the college had to offer.⁹²

Their research dug deeper into the grown unschoolers' college experiences, finding that:

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The themes that emerged from the sample as a whole are these: (1) Getting into college was generally not particularly difficult for these unschoolers; (2) The academic adjustment to college was generally quite smooth for them; (3) Most felt advantaged because of their high self-motivation and capacity for self-direction; and (4) The most frequent complaints were about the lack of motivation and intellectual curiosity among their college classmates, the constricted social life of college, and, in a few cases, constraints imposed by the curriculum or grading system.⁹³

Going to college or not going to college is a personal choice, typically based on whether it will help someone in their career. It is not meant for everybody. With the cost of college tuition increasing and many college graduates finding themselves overwhelmed with debt and unable to find jobs, alternatives to college are being created that offer more cost-effective career preparation.

One type of alternative is an alternative financial model to attend a conventional university, such as an Income Share Agreement model (ISA). Under an ISA, instead of taking out a student loan with fixed payments and interest rates, you agree to have a certain percentage of your income go directly to the university for a specified time period. This creates an incentive for the university to make sure their graduates are finding jobs. Some examples of colleges offering ISAs are Purdue University, Norwich University, Messiah College, University of Utah, and Clarkson

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University.⁹⁴ You can find a curated list of universities offering Income Share Agreements at incomeshareagreements.app.⁹⁵

Another type of alternative is a complete alternative to college, with both an alternative learning and financial model. One example of this kind of program is Praxis, which offers a 12-month program that is zero net tuition. The first six months is a “boot camp” that gives you the tools that you would need to go work at a startup company. The second six months is a paid internship at a startup, where you are guaranteed to earn enough money to pay off the tuition you spent in the first six months. This is a great option for many young people and they’ve graduated hundreds of students since launching in 2013.⁹⁶

While the individual decision of whether or not you should attend college is beyond the scope of this book, I want to point you to an incredible interview on Blake Boles’ *Off-Trail Learning* podcast about this subject.

T.K. Coleman, the Education Director of Praxis, presents the best arguments against going to college. The consensus that the debate comes to is that the greatest asset that college offers, which is difficult to find outside of college, is the social opportunities. College essentially has a monopoly on the social lives of 18- to 22-year-olds.

That being said, T.K points out that if someone puts the same effort into creating a social life for themselves that they are putting into attending college, they can create a rich, meaningful social life without attending college. As T.K. states:

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I don't think that all forms of not going to college provide you with a social life.... Nothing is easy from the default position of being in a place where it's not easy to make friends. So what you have to do is you have to make some changes, it might be to go to college, or it might be to move to a new city. But either way, you're going to have to get off your butt and get out there and put yourself in an environment where you can meet friends.⁹⁷

Regardless of whether one attends college or choose an alternative path, a more important question is whether they ultimately find employment. Peter Gray and Gina Riley's survey of grown unschoolers found that the majority of the grown unschoolers who responded to the survey were financially independent as adults (Row #7 in the table). Keep in mind the age range here varies, with a median age of 24 years old and a range of 18 to 49. Peter and Gina note, interestingly, that:

...a number of these added that their income was modest and they were financially independent in part because of their frugal lifestyle. Several of them described frugality as a value and said they would far rather do work they enjoyed and found meaningful than other work that would be more lucrative.⁹⁸

Also notice that a large number of the respondent's pursued careers that matched their childhood interests (Row #6). A

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fascinating finding was that such a large number were pursuing careers in the arts (Row #8). One might think that that being an unschooler would be an advantage if you wanted to make a career in the arts because you'd have more time to work on developing your skills. This may be true, but it's important to remember that being a professional artist isn't just about being skilled at art, it also requires one to figure out how to get people to pay you for your craft. There is, no doubt, an entrepreneurial aspect to being an artist which is often forgotten. It may be that unschoolers are able to make a career in the arts not just because of their artistic skillset, but because of the self-directed, entrepreneurial attitude they take to creating their desired lives.

There is some evidence in Peter Gray and Gina Riley's survey of grown unschoolers that this is the case, with an incredibly high number of unschoolers reporting being self-employed entrepreneurs. Given that my own leap into self-directed learning came when I launched my first business, this made a lot of sense, but I was still blown away by how high the number was. As a comparison, *Inc. Magazine* reports that approximately 14% of adults run their own businesses⁹⁹; however, 40-60% of unschoolers are reported to run their own businesses! (Row #9 in the table)

Unschoolers that follow unconventional, self-directed career paths are also common. Their study mentions an exemplary individual who describes himself as a 39-year-old "self-employed polymath":

He had experienced a mix of schooling and unschooling through tenth grade and then

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left high school for good. He went on to a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and a life that he refers to as that of "a self-employed polymath." He wrote, "As a polymath, what I do now is very much what I have always done (I mostly ignored traditional schooling, even when I was forced to go); I do anything and everything that catches my attention. Life is about learning, growing, and sharing your discoveries with others who want to learn and grow too."

His list of jobs held over the years includes, but is not limited to, the following: research & development consultant for a medical manufacturing company; clinical hypnotherapist; master practitioner of neuro-linguistic programming; director of tutoring services for a community college; wilderness survival, first aid, and bushcraft expert; PADI divemaster (scuba diving) instructor; martial arts instructor (Kung Fu, Judo, and Jeet Kun Do); and author of two published children's books (and currently working on a new series of bedtime stories).¹⁰⁰

The study also included some feedback on what grown unschoolers considered the advantages that their unschooling experiences brought to their careers:

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Almost all of the respondents, in various ways, wrote about the freedom and independence that unschooling gave them and the time it gave them to discover and pursue their own interests. Seventy percent of them also said, in one way or another, that the experience enabled them to develop as highly self-motivated, self-directed individuals. Many also wrote about the learning opportunities that would not have been available if they had been in school, about their relatively seamless transition to adult life, and about the healthier (age-mixed) social life they experienced out of school contrasted with what they would have experienced in school.

Thanks to Peter Gray and Gina Riley's research, we now have some published evidence that unschoolers can grow into successful adult lives.

Self-directed learning advocate Blake Boles also recently launched a website, GrownUnschoolers.com, which features narrative profiles of adults who grew up unschooling and have careers in arts, science, technology, trades, music, and more.¹⁰¹ You can even filter to read the stories of those who attended college and those who did not, to compare their outcomes. It's a great resource to put a face to the mysterious lives of unschoolers.

At this stage, you may be sold on the idea of unschooling as a viable path for yourself, but you may be wondering: how do I start?

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BECOMING AN UNSCHOOLER

First, there is the logistical question – how do you legally quit school? It turns out that this isn't too difficult from a legal perspective. Legally, you will be considering yourself a “homeschooler.” Homeschooling is the legal mechanism for unplugging oneself from the school system.

Every state and country has different laws on what the requirements are to legally classify oneself as a homeschooler. You can get more state-by-state details at ResponsibleHomeschooling.org¹⁰², or on the Home School Legal Defense Association¹⁰³ website. Be sure to check with these groups, as asking your public school administrators can often lead to false information. This doesn't mean they intend to lie to you, but many are told incorrect information in an effort to retain more students.

If you want to quit school but still participate in extracurricular activities, like your school play or join a school sports team, you'll want to contact your school to ask about what restrictions there are on you participating in extracurricular activities at school if you were to disenroll. Different states and different towns have different policies on whether this is allowed, so you will have to check out the local laws. But remember, all rules and laws can always be changed. If this is something you are passionate about, fight for change! Homeschoolers in many states have come together to advocate for the right to play on school sports teams. For example, the state of Tennessee changed its policy to allow homeschoolers on sports teams in 2012, and Ohio followed suit in 2013.¹⁰⁴ Ask your school

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administrators what their policy is and who decided on that policy. Reach out to these people and ask where these issues are discussed, and show up to advocate for yourself. This is part of the process of being self-directed, this is not a school assignment, it's not in the curriculum, this is real life.

Depending on the state, the specific steps of unenrolling from school will be different. Some states have very little oversight and simply require your parents to write a letter saying they are pulling you out of the school system. Others are more strict and require you to write a detailed annual plan and submit it for their review. Among the unschoolers that I've spoken to, this can be frustrating, but is not insurmountable.

Always verify that the source of the information you are receiving about your local and state policies is up to date, because the laws frequently change. For example, Connecticut laws have recently been proposed to raise the age at which a student can un-enroll themselves without their parents' permission from 17 to 18¹⁰⁵, while the current top result in a Google search says students can un-enroll at 16.

Speaking of parents, your biggest obstacle in becoming an unschooler will most likely be convincing your parents to let you leave school. Each person's relationship with their parents differs so I cannot speak to your situation directly. That being said, the three most common objections from parents are:

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- 1) Will my kid get into college?
- 2) Are they going to miss something?
- 3) How will I know they are learning?

The first concern is the most practical one. Though you should really have a discussion about whether college is your goal in the first place, it is reasonable to not want to close yourself out to any future opportunities. The best way to address the question of college is to show your parents concrete evidence that it is possible to go to college without attending high school.

First, I would recommend showing your parents the data from Peter Gray and Gina Riley's survey of grown unschoolers. This is a quick way to show them what is possible. Then, I would show them a more detailed resource, like Blake Bole's book *College Without High School: a Teenagers Guide to Skipping High School and Going to College*. Blake writes:

Emerie Snyder entered New York University's revered Tisch School of Arts without a day of high school on her transcript. Andy Pearson never went to any school but began part-time college courses at the University of Michigan at age 16 (and soon became a full-time student). Charlotte Wagoner studies International Business at Rockhurst, and Shannon Lee Clair writes plays at Princeton — each without four years of high school to their names. Unschoolers have gained admission to virtually every competitive college in the US. These unschoolers aren't Einstein-like

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geniuses. They're normal teens who, unsatisfied with school's plan for their future, chose to get an education on their own terms. You can make this choice, too.¹⁰⁶

I mentioned this earlier, but it's important to be aware, of one secret that unschoolers frequently tap into is attending community college at an early age and transferring into a regular college later. Another trick is to take dual enrollment courses, that earn you college credits and high school credits. You can think of this as taking AP courses in high school, where you are getting a high school credit but also a college credit.

While these are offered at community colleges, there are also online options you can utilize no matter where you are. For example, TEL Library offers online dual-enrollment courses, for about \$100 for each course. Better yet, through a partnership they have with Colorado Christian University, you could pay \$300 for a year membership and take unlimited online courses to earn high school credits, which can also be counted toward a full year of general college credits. You can then transfer these college credits to the University of your choosing.¹⁰⁷

A related concern to getting into college, is whether you can get a diploma. As you can imagine, if you don't go to school, there is no institution to grant you a diploma. Many unschooling families create their own diplomas, which don't really carry much weight. You can get a GED, which is a General Equivalency Diploma, by taking a test. The GED covers the subjects one would normally encounter in

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high school, like math, science, language arts, and social studies, and passing the test is equivalent to earning a high school diploma.

There is also the HiSET exam, which is a newer alternative to the GED exam. The HiSET is not available in every state, so be sure to check what is available locally on the HiSET website.¹⁰⁸

The main differences between the HiSET and GED, is that the HiSET has five subject tests instead of four (they have separate reading and writing tests rather than a single language arts test), and the GED is only available as a computer-based test, while the HiSET is available in a computer-based and a paper-and- pencil format.¹⁰⁹

Though you will often see statements that the HiSET and GED are only available to people over 18 years old, you can take the tests in most states if your parent verifies that you are not enrolled in a high school.

You can also earn an actual diploma through some unconventional approaches. For example, you can earn a diploma from Beach High School, which is a one-man high school run by former schoolteacher Wes Beach. Wes Beach works with young self-directed learners to create transcripts and navigate the college admissions process, and also issues diplomas. Though Beach High School is physically located in California, anyone can enroll in Beach High School, regardless of their location. One caveat: the diplomas offered by Beach High School are technically not accredited. Their website issues a statement:

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Beach High School, while very non-traditional, provides diplomas that are just as legal and legitimate as any other diploma from any other school. You should know, however, that BHS is not accredited. There is a small risk that an institution, organization, or business will not respect the fact that your diploma comes from a non-traditional school and will not accept your diploma. This has happened in a handful of cases that I know of, and I've graduated more than 900 people.¹¹⁰

If you are looking for a diploma from an *accredited* institution, there is another option. The North Atlantic Regional High School in Maine issues accredited diplomas to teens in all 50 U.S. states. There are more requirements than Beach High School, but the accreditation brings a little more weight to your diploma. You will have to show evidence of credit hours in each subject, such that you would meet the requirements of a high school in Maine.¹¹¹ They consider a credit hour to be equal to 80 hours of work, and to earn a diploma you'll need to show evidence of an equivalent of earning the following 17.5 credits:

- 4 English
- 2 Math
- 2 Science, one lab
- 1 Social Studies, in addition to US History
- 1 US History
- 1 Phys. Ed.
- 1 Fine Arts
- 1/2 Computer Skills 1/2 Health

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4 1/2 Electives, your choice¹¹²

This may sound like a lot. But if you do the math of multiplying the 17.5 credits by 80 hours per credit, and then dividing that by 4 years, and 52 weeks in a year, it comes out to roughly 7 hours per week of documented work.

Following along with such requirements can earn you a diploma, but naturally will be more limiting in how self-directed your learning experience really becomes. As you can see, the more you try to earn credentials from a third-party, the more your freedom is restricted.

That being said, satisfying such prescribed credit hours, may help address the second biggest concern parents bring up: “How will I know we aren’t missing anything?” To address this concern, I suggest two main points.

First, it’s important to accept that nobody is retaining 100% of the information that is taught in school. It’s not fair to dismiss unschooling for falling short of a goal that school is also not meeting. I understand that is a bit of a cop-out on the concern, which brings me to my second point. If your parent’s main concern is about you learning the same material that you would cover in school, you could negotiate with them to obtain copies of the curriculum and pursue learning this material outside of school. Be careful not to give in too easily to your parents’ fear, as this could quickly devolve into a homeschooling situation that looks like “doing school at home” as opposed to a genuine self-directed learning experience.

The third concern parents typically have, “How will I know

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my child is learning?" can be addressed in a variety of ways. The cynic in me wants to say: you'll be able to tell your child is learning by actually having a conversation with them about the things that interest them. That should make learning self-evident.

However, cynicism is rarely a satisfying answer for a parent concerned about their child's future. There are a variety of ways that one can document students' learning, and some states will actually require this to satisfy their homeschooling laws. In the absence of classes with grades given by a teacher, you can create your own portfolio that documents your learning. Online curriculum offered by websites like Khan Academy usually include tests which demonstrate mastery of each subject along the path. You could also take some community college classes that will include assignments, tests, and grades which provide the "evidence" that you are as accomplished as anyone else. Many unschoolers even build websites to showcase their projects and passions through photos, videos, and writing. I have some tutorial videos on my website, jim-flannery.com, that can give you some guidance on how to build your first website.¹¹³

It's important to acknowledge, that underneath this question of "How will I know my child is learning?" is a more deeply-rooted and unspoken question: "How will I make my child learn?"

This, unfortunately, is the most challenging aspect and requires a combination of trust from the parent in the individual child, but also seems to involve a certain amount of trust from the parent in the world as a whole. It tends to

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be the most anxious and nervous parents, who want as much control over all aspects of their own life as possible, who apply this pressure and fear-based mindset to their children as well.

The best resource I've found to help teens discuss unschooling with their parents, is found in Chapter 10 of Grace Llewellyn's book, *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*, titled "The Perhaps Delicate Parental Issue."

Fortunately, with a little care and planning, you will be able to help them see the light. Ideally, it will go well enough that your parents support and encourage you without too much entangling themselves in your hair, and become so inspired by you that their own lives become richer and braver....¹¹⁴

In part, it feels like a cop out that I'm telling you to go read someone else's book for the answers. As you've noticed, my whole mantra in self-directed learning is to tap into as many resources as possible, and Grace's book is the best resource to go to for guidance on convincing your parents to let you unschool.

Grace encourages young people who want to leave school to write a letter to their parents stating their position. Writing a letter is a good option when people feel intimidated by conversation because it allows you to speak fully without interruption. It also allows your parents to read it on their own without feeling pressured to give you an immediate answer in the moment.

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You may feel afraid to put your feelings into writing, but Grace offers some encouraging words:

I have some comfort to offer you. Unschooling generally seems to make parents into allies and friends rather than disciplinarians and authority figures... Many unschoolers told me that once they left school, all kinds of family arguments and hostilities just disappeared. It makes sense; no more quarrels about grades and homework, no more need to take revenge on parents for what happens at school.¹¹⁵

As an adult, I've asked my own parents how they would have felt about me leaving school as a teen. Interestingly, they felt their own academic shortcomings would have prohibited me from doing this. They felt that *they* were unequipped to be my teachers. It's important for your parents to realize that unschooling does *not* mean your parent becomes your teacher. As unschooling mother and host of the *Fare of the Free Child* podcast, Akilah Richards, clarified in her talk at the Rooted.Us Conference in New York this year: "We don't educate our children. We allow our children to be educated from a variety of resources."¹¹⁶

For more support on dealing with parents, Blake Boles has an episode of his *Off Trail Learning* podcast that covers this specific subject of talking to parents, titled: "Caitlyn Scheel on Convincing Your Parents to Homeschool."¹¹⁷

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The best advice I can offer is that you must articulate to your parents what it is you are specifically pursuing through pursuing self-directed learning. Rather than focusing on what you are leaving behind, focus on what you are going toward. For example, one could say, “I am going to begin passionately pursuing self-directed learning so that I can take ownership of my life and control my own destiny... [state your personal goals]... and by the way, leaving school is a necessary piece to make this happen.”

I would recommend not using the term “unschooling” with your parents, instead, use the term “self-directed learning.” Point them to the website for the Alliance for Self-Directed Education, which is a collaboration of credible professionals and academics that are promoting self-directed learning. Their website is at self-directed.org.

Honestly, I would advise against pointing your parents to my book or any of my work. My reputation is not the most credible because I’m outspoken on a variety of sensitive issues, perform stand-up comedy, and am open about my extreme experiences with the mental health system. I don’t blame parents for wanting to hear parenting advice from other parents, instead of from a psychotic entrepreneur with delusions of transforming our culture into a loving, collaborative world of enthusiastic learners.

That being said, in my personal interviews with unschooling parents, I asked “If you could wave a magic wand and change anything about your experience unschooling your child, what would it be?” and the answer I got was incredibly promising. The most common response from parents was that they wished they had

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started sooner. Another common answer I hear from parents after allowing their teen to leave school is: “I finally got my real kid back.”

Dr. Peter Gray and Dr. Gina Riley also published a research paper in the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* that surveyed *parents* of unschoolers, titled “The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route”. They concluded:

The biggest challenge expressed was that of overcoming feelings of criticism, or social pressure, that came from others who disapproved and from their own culturally-ingrained, habitual ways of thinking about education. The reported benefits of unschooling were numerous; they included improved learning, better attitudes about learning, and improved psychological and social wellbeing for the children; and increased closeness, harmony, and freedom for the whole family.¹¹⁸

One of the most powerful messages I've heard offered to parents nervous about allowing their children to leave school, comes from Ken Danford. Ken is the co-founder of North Star, a self-directed learning center for teens in Western Massachusetts that has been running for over 20 years. Ken was asked during an interview in 2015, “What can you say to comfort parents who are afraid of ruining their child's life?” and Ken replied:

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The one thing I'm sure of was when I was teaching 8th grade middle school, I was making some teenagers' lives worse. No matter how much I tried. They didn't understand the assignment, school made them stressed, there were some people's lives who were just made worse by going to school. And if there's one thing I'm sure of, in the 19 years of coaching teenagers to stop going to school and experiment with this approach, I have made nobody's life worse. Not one.

We don't help everybody. The model doesn't click for everybody. But we've made nobody's life worse. You cannot mess up your life by opting out of high school. It will not be worse. And the odds of it being better, instead of simply muddling along until graduating, are really high. Getting out of school and experimenting with life is going to be more interesting and more enriching and more productive than muddling along and getting your traditional high school diploma with whatever grades you choose to get. It's just an open and shut case. There is no risk. There really is not a risk.

The risk is, conversely, watching your teenagers shut down. Watching your teenagers withdraw. Watching teenagers in what could be the prime of their lives, just

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putting in time and waiting for it to be over.
That's the risk.¹¹⁹

No matter how many articles or books your parents read about unschooling, they will ultimately receive the most reassurance from speaking directly to other parents. They can dive into a conversation with other unschooling parents on countless Facebook groups. They can join groups such as UnschoolingMom2Mom, Unschooling Connection, Unschooling Q&A, and Homeschooling/Unschooling/Uncollege/etc. These are global communities of unschoolers, including unschoolers with many years under their belt or those who are brand new to it. Your parents can also find local groups in your area to meet unschooling parents face-to-face through UnschoolingMom2Mom.com's "Find Local Groups" section.¹²⁰ More recently, the Alliance for Self-Directed Education also started building a listing for local groups and conferences that are worth checking.¹²¹

Try not to get discouraged if your parents don't accept your decision right away. For many self-directed learners, getting your parents to agree to let you leave school is one of the most challenging parts of the process. That being said, it is also an important one. You will want your parents to support your decision, because being surrounded by nay-sayers and people criticizing you will bring you down in the long run. That's not to say it can't be done, but please, work hard to support your parents, because the value of having supportive parents cannot be overstated. Also, because you're officially a self-directed learner now, your job is to find ways to accomplish tasks to fulfill your goals and dreams. You should consider persuading your parents

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to be one of your first big projects.

When speaking to them, talk with them about your goals and what goals they have in mind for you. Are you aiming for college, the military, to start a business, go into the arts, or something else? This will give you an idea as to where their hang ups are, and what specific objections and concerns they have. If you are able to find common ground, and see that you ultimately have the same goal of creating a life that is happy and fulfilling, and for you to be able to financially support yourself one day, you'll make a lot more progress than focusing on your differences. It's also important to be clear that you are not leaving school so that you can "create school at home" but so that you can do something truly meaningful with your education.

You may also want to negotiate with them a period of "deschooling", whereby you all agree they won't bother you with school-related ideas for a certain period of time. This will ensure that you won't leave school and then have your parents breathing down your neck, constantly monitoring you, asking you every day what you learned and did, and ultimately have them turn into your new principal and prison guard.

I've heard some unschooling parents say that it takes one month of deschooling for every year of school that your child attends. My personal perspective is that deschooling is an ongoing journey that we must constantly revisit, because society tends to reinforce many of the ideas that school perpetuates. One can never completely escape "schooly" concepts.

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One teen, Dylan Marcus, who attended public school before becoming an unschooler, shared in an interview I did with him last year, that his experience with deschooling took over a year:

It had been a year since I was out of public school, and I was still getting used to not being at school. Still having a mindset of, “I have to do something now. I have to be on Khan Academy every single day. Not because I wanted to, but because I thought I had to...”¹²²

The deschooling process is not just a process for the teen, it's also a process for the parent to shed themselves of school-related misconceptions about learning and life. For example, Kerry McDonald, in her article, “How to Deschool Yourself for Success and Satisfaction,” highlights six common myths that we are taught in school which must be unlearned:

- #1: Color Inside the Lines
- #2: Ask for Permission
- #3: Be Quiet and Stay Still
- #4: Don't Read Ahead
- #5: Winners Never Quit
- #6: Failure Is Unacceptable¹²³

Talking to your parents about this subject will not necessarily be easy, but there is a lot to be gained from doing difficult things. As entrepreneur Tim Ferriss, wrote in his book, *The 4-Hour Workweek*: “A person's success in life can usually be measured by the number of

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uncomfortable conversations he or she is willing to have.”¹²⁴

Accomplishing the task of persuading your parents will prepare you for future tasks where you may need to persuade people. In the near future, you may be persuading someone to mentor you, a college to accept you, or an employer to hire you. Don't back down from the challenge, lean into it. Learning to persuade others is a valuable skill, not just for salespeople, but for any career path you choose. In author Daniel Pink's book, *To Sell is Human*, he explains:

Physicians sell patients on a remedy. Lawyers sell juries on a verdict. Teachers sell students on the value of paying attention in class. Entrepreneurs woo funders, writers sweet-talk producers, coaches cajole players. Whatever our profession, we deliver presentations to fellow employees and make pitches to new clients. We try to convince the boss to loosen up a few dollars from the budget or the human resources department to add more vacation days.¹²⁵

If you are struggling to convince your parents about allowing you to become an unschooler or if you don't feel fully prepared to embark on self-directed learning on your own, don't fret. Our next chapter is going to talk about innovative learning centers where self-directed learners come together under one roof to explore their interests together. Since these places can sometimes “feel” like school, attending a self-directed learning center may be a

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more digestible approach for both you and your parents to allow you to get started on your self-directed learning journey.

ACTION:

Write a letter to yourself describing what your dream education would look like. Identify what the risks are. What could go wrong? What can you do to protect yourself against those risks?

Example:

Dear Jim,

You've been working hard and getting good grades in school for the last decade. You are achieving high standards in comparison to your classmates, and it appears that you'll be able to get into competitive colleges. Everything seems to be aligned with what the adults around you are encouraging you to do in order to have a successful life.

But are you happy? Are you excited about what you are learning? Do you look forward to your classes and homework? Would you do any of this if it were not required of you?

You spend a lot of your time playing on the computer, building websites, and learning

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about software. What if you could devote more time to that and even try taking a community college class or an online class about programming? What if you could find a company to work as a junior intern and get more experience with computers? Would you learn anything useful doing that?

You used to write more as a kid - what happened to your passion for writing short stories? And even for performing comedy? What if you did some comedy writing and made a website of short, funny stories? Or to write spoofs of some of the 'classic' books kids are reading in school? Would that satisfy learning the same things as kids are doing in school, yet also develop a genuine passion for writing?

What about science? Could you not find a lab to work at locally one day a week to get some experience? Or reach out to people to offer 1-hour a week of mentorship for your own self-directed studies? Have you checked in to learn about the local homeschooling groups to see what they are offering for science?

Honestly, I'm not trying to claim that you aren't learning anything in school. Your grades are an indication that some kind of learning is happening. My main concern is whether you are actually getting fulfillment

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from the work you are doing in itself, or if the main fulfillment you are getting is from the positive grades you receive.

It seems like you're not getting any support for your interests in comedy or in building websites, and that skill could be really valuable. The same goes with your interest in music. While you may not become a famous musician, you've already learned how to record and produce a music album - is there no place for you to develop that skill and even find paid work in that field?

Try and envision a world where you wake up each day and work on things you enjoy in themselves, not because of a grade you'll receive. What is it you think school is offering you that you can't get elsewhere? Possibly the higher-level math classes you are taking. But can't you get that from Khan Academy online? It seems like the one subject that you wouldn't be able to learn effectively from your own hands-on experiences in self-directed learning.

What do you have to lose from trying? Even if you take a year off from high school to pursue this, you can always go back. You may be a year behind your friends. And that will feel uncomfortable because you've built your identity around your grade level, your graduation year, and your friends. But

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maybe your leadership could even persuade others to follow in your footsteps. Or maybe you'll end up meeting some other teens along the way who will share this pursuit with you.

If the main risks you have are social, maybe you can purposely incorporate staying connecting with your friends into your plan. Check with your school to see if you can continue playing basketball, so you can connect with your team. And keep playing in the band so you have a good group of close friends. Maybe your schedule will even accommodate you joining in some other extracurricular activities that you couldn't pursue before because you had so much homework, where you could meet new friends. Better yet, why not look into some programs that are running in other towns, and really expand your network beyond your current town. It seems somewhat silly that 100% of your friends live in the same town as you, when you could walk 5 minutes from your front door and be in the next town over.

I'm not saying this is the perfect answer, but what's holding you back from taking a risk? It seems like there is so much to potentially gain, and really very little to lose.

After you are done writing the letter, ask yourself: what's

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stopping you from addressing this letter to your parents? If you're feeling brave, go for it. Adjust the letter so it's addressed to your parents and give it to them so you can start the discussion. Again, don't pressure them to read it and respond to you on the spot, tell them they can read the letter and then you can talk about it later, after they've had time to digest the ideas.

CHAPTER 5

FINDING YOUR TRIBE

Through my research and interactions with teen unschoolers, the main challenges they expressed were social. They didn't lack in social skills; they could carry on a conversation better than most of their peers. The main issue was that they wanted to find more opportunities to connect with other young people. Since so many teens are in school all day, it creates a natural challenge. The teen unschoolers I spoke to also confessed to feeling hurt by how people perceived them upon hearing they were unschoolers.

A specific story comes to mind that an unschooling teen named "Amy" shared with me. Amy told me that when her friend who attended school was introducing her to her group of friends, she introduced her by saying, "This is my friend, Amy, she's homeschooled." It really bothered Amy that she felt that her first introduction to a new group of people came with this unexpected asterisk next to her name.

This stigma associated with homeschooling and unschooling generally stems from it being misunderstood.

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The unschooling philosophy is quite radical in comparison to the mainstream approach to raising children, and people are not always open to new ideas, especially when they challenge their own. After all, to accept unschooling for what it is - an empowering and liberating method of learning that is proven to work for some people - would require one to accept that their own methods of learning may be substandard.

I admit, before taking the time to learn about the world of unschooling and homeschooling, I thought it was weird as well. Even when I was actively working to find ways to help young people learn without needing school, I still associated negative baggage with the words 'homeschooling' and 'unschooling'.

I also surveyed teens who attend school, asking them how they felt about attending school. Interestingly, most teens replied by telling me how they felt about the environment socially, most not even mentioning the learning aspect of school at all. With regard to the social environment, teens tended to express being in one of two extremes, sharing statements that ranged from: "The one thing I like about school is that all my friends are there" to "I hate going to school because I get bullied, don't have any friends, and have developed severe anxiety and depression."

School clearly has a monopoly on finding teenagers since the law essentially requires them all to show up. They even send busses to everyone's neighborhood to pick kids up and bring them to school. Many young people's lives outside of school are also occupied, either by after-school activities, homework, or an endless combination of both.

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Despite so many teens attending school, for many of them, the school setting doesn't seem to be conducive to building meaningful friendships. The social dynamics that take place inside a school are really unusual, though we seem to accept how unusual the environment is because of the fact that schooling is so widespread and common.

For example, starting in kindergarten, students are separated throughout the day by age. By the time they are teens, the school system also starts separating them out by academic achievement. Rarely are students encouraged to talk with one another inside of a school, aside from a short lunch break and even shorter transition time between classes. Teachers frequently even control where students can sit in class, prohibiting conversation and meaningful connection. Plus, schools often adopt dress codes and prohibit certain kinds of language, further preventing young people from expressing themselves in ways they feel are genuine to them. In addition, students are constantly pitted against one another in the form of competition for praise, attention, and grades from teachers. All of these factors combine to create an unusual way to make social connections and friends. Yet, the school continues to be the only game in town if you are looking to meet other teens.

I wondered if there were places where unschoolers come together to make friends and create community. The unschooling conferences and camps I visited were a perfect environment for teen unschoolers to connect intensely for a week, but they were annual events which limited the potential for long-term connections and friendships. I also found the local unschooling groups were often focused more on supporting younger unschoolers, but seemed less

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inviting to teenagers. There seemed to be a need for spaces that allowed self-directed teens to come together on a regular basis.

That's not to say that everyone wishes to travel each day to a building and be surrounded by people five days a week. I imagined a place where individuals could choose whether or not they wanted to attend each day, but if they chose to show up, there would be a building filled with kids who shared a desire to simply learn. Maybe something like an "unschooling school" if that was such a thing.

In my travels and research, I discovered there were many such places across the United States (and around the world). You may wonder how it is that you've never heard of them. The truth is, that when compared to how many schools there are, the numbers are pretty small. The best estimates for the United States report that there are around 50,000 teen unschoolers^{126 127}, 15 million teens in high school¹²⁸, and only a few thousand attending these mysterious self-directed learning centers.

It turns out there is not just one model for a self-directed learning center, which can be thought of as an "unschooling school". I'd like to share with you some information about the variety of options that are out there, so you can get a feel for yourself about what these places have in common and what makes them distinct. The three models I'd like to discuss are democratic free schools, Agile Learning Centers, and Liberated Learners centers.

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DEMOCRATIC FREE SCHOOLS

Democratic schools are schools where the rules are proposed and voted on by students. A specific type of democratic school, which emphasizes self-directed learning, is typically called a “free school” or sometimes a “democratic free school.” The naming can be a little confusing and it is not uncommon for learning centers to misuse a term in their name. Often times you have to visit a learning center in-person to truly understand their structure, rules, and culture.

Typically, democratic free schools encompass grade levels K-12. This encourages “age-mixing,” which is completely absent from conventional schools. When I interviewed Dylan Marcus last year, who now attends a democratic free school, he shared with me:

Right now, we have 16 enrolled... our youngest student is 4 and our oldest student is 18... I think [age mixing] is significantly better. When I was in public school, I was afraid of the kids who were just a year older than me. Now, at Sudbury School, none of my friends are exactly my age... we have all these older kids with so much knowledge and so many younger kids who we can pass that onto... I think it's pretty awesome.¹²⁹

The democratic free schools I’ve visited have ranged from having as many as 100 students to as few as seven students. The defining characteristic of democratic free schools is

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that the school is run based on the rules that are proposed and voted on by the members of the school, namely the students. Every member gets a single vote, including the staff members, and no one's vote carries more weight than any other person's. Democratic free schools tend to be free of fixed schedules and offerings, allowing every student to be free to create their own personalized learning experience.

The first democratic free school was a boarding school in England called Summerhill School (est. 1921), which still exists today.¹³⁰ In the late 1960's and early 1970's, a surge in interest in democratic free schools in the United States led to The Free School Movement, resulting in over 600 democratic free schools existing in the U.S. by 1972.¹³¹ While many of the democratic free schools from the 1960's and 1970's are now closed, the democratic free school model continues to live on. At present, there are about 120 democratic free schools in the United States listed on the Alternative Education Resource Organization website.¹³²

The most famous of the democratic free schools in the U.S. is the Sudbury Valley School, which opened as a day school in Framingham, Massachusetts in 1968 and continues to operate today. Of the 120 democratic free schools in the United States, 21 of them follow the more radically self-directed Sudbury School model. The main characteristic that distinguishes Sudbury Schools from other democratic free schools, is the role of adults. It is part of the Sudbury School culture, and often written directly into their rules, that adults do not intervene at all in the lives of young people unless the young person specifically asks for support. This policy applies to both parents and

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staff members.

Dylan Marcus reported that:

At a lot of the [Sudbury Schools], the parents tried to take it over and turn it into something like a regular public school. At the Brooklyn Free School, they successfully changed it, and now the Brooklyn Free School is like a regular private school, they even have uniforms.¹³³

To be clear, not every Sudbury School follows this rule, but it is a strong component of what makes Sudbury Schools different. As a result, you will find Sudbury Schools most fully embrace the philosophies of self-directed learning, while some democratic schools and free schools can still feel very much like a conventional school. For example, The New School in Kennebunk, Maine is a democratic school that has classes and grades and the Brooklyn Free School in Brooklyn, NY is a free school that seems to separate the students by age (into older and younger) and I witnessed a lot of pressure from the adults to tell the young people what they should be working on. For that reason, I tend to focus more of my visits and research on Sudbury Schools, but as I mentioned earlier, you should definitely visit any school in your area that claims to be a democratic free school or Sudbury School to see for yourself if their culture resonates with you. You may be surprised at what you discover, for example, the Philly Free School in Philadelphia, PA uses the term “free school” in their name, but actually follows the Sudbury School model.

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Democratic free schools are organized through regularly scheduled School Meetings which takes place once or twice a week, depending on the specific school. At School Meeting, all the members gather to share any school-wide announcements and bring up issues they may want to have a vote on. Issues can be related to creating a rule or they can be about making decisions for upcoming events. For example, when I've reached out to different Sudbury Schools to ask if I could visit as a guest, several of them had rules in place requiring the students to vote on whether outside visitors could visit or not. School Meetings typically last between 20 minutes and an hour, depending on who is present and what issues are being discussed.

I expected Sudbury students to be against rules, but the opposite was true. The students actually take a great interest in the organization and structure of their environment. As Dylan shared with me:

It's definitely not anarchist. We definitely have a lot of rules. But I like that, people tend to break the rules a lot less, because we vote on it. And if people think the rule is unfair, they can change it....¹³⁴

I asked Dylan to go into detail about how School Meetings work, so I could better understand the process:

School Meeting is on Monday and Thursday, where we vote on the Speaker.... We always have a Speaker. The Speaker is voted on each week and they do it for a week. The Clerk is a volunteer, nobody

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wants to be Clerk, ever. The Clerk writes down all the motions that are made throughout School Meeting, what points they've made, what the votes for the motion were, like if it failed or passed. The Clerk is also responsible for updating the rule book from the notes at School Meeting. People can write up issues they have on the School Meeting board, which is a white board, they can have issues they want to talk about and they can make it into a motion, then you have Announcements, which you don't make motions on, like "Hey, I'm thinking of going on a field trip."... We have a talking stick, only the person with the talking stick can talk. The Speaker can take away the talking stick if they think someone is talking too long... so you can't filibuster. The longest School Meeting we ever had was two hours... normally they're 10 minutes to half an hour.¹³⁵

At most democratic free schools, daily attendance is required, though many are flexible on what time people arrive.

At most democratic free schools, diplomas are granted to graduating students. How diplomas are earned depends on the rules created at each school and students can usually choose not to pursue a diploma if they don't want one. For example, at The Sudbury Valley School, students who have been enrolled for at least three years are eligible to petition to earn a diploma. To earn the diploma, the individual must

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present their case to a Diploma Committee, and defend the statement: “My experiences during my stay at school have enabled me to develop the problem-solving skills, the adaptability, and the abilities needed to function independently in the world that I am about to enter.”¹³⁶

The Diploma Committee makes a determination of whether the student is awarded with a diploma. The Diploma Committee consists of three individuals, chosen by the School Records Clerk, who must be staff members or former staff members, or alumni who graduated at least 10 years ago.¹³⁷

Evaluation can often lead to power imbalances, such as we see in a conventional classroom where the teachers evaluate the students. To avoid this, some Sudbury Schools bring in community members from outside the school to evaluate the students' graduation projects, thus ensuring the staff members are never in a position to judge or evaluate the students.

There are many great benefits to attending a democratic free school, which include age-mixing, community, collective resources (such as computers, books, and musical instruments), a physical location to meet up, freedom to pursue your interests, and a small staff to help students find resources. The staff can be as small as a single person and hiring/firing decisions are voted on by the students. The staff truly work for the students and their role can vary depending on the particular school. For example, at South Jersey Sudbury School there is a single staff member carrying many responsibilities, while at the larger Sudbury Valley School, there are multiple staff members,

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including one whose whole job is to maintain the computers and instruments and facilities related to technology.

As Brian Foglia, the staff member at South Jersey Sudbury School says:

Staff at Sudbury schools are passive resources for the kids. We do not interfere in students' activities unless there is a safety issue or school rules are being broken. We do not even propose or recommend specific activities unless one or more students solicits that recommendation. We are available to help in any way if the students desire our help. Aside from that we do all the administrative tasks necessary to run a school/business.¹³⁸

One particularly interesting aspect of the Sudbury Schools, is their Judicial Committee. This is the committee which handles situations when a rule is broken. The committee consists of four students, ranging in age from 7 to 18, who handle rule infractions and deal out punishments. The Judicial Committee typically meets at the same time every day to go through any reported infractions, but will meet immediately if there is a case involving violence.

At first, I found it hard to imagine a school experience where my peers, rather than adults, were the ones with the authority to discipline me. In my youth, I often got in trouble with teachers for repeatedly interrupting class with my humorous commentary. The conventional school

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system often pitted students against the authorities; therefore, I assumed I had the support of my classmates in rallying against the teachers. In truth, I presumed from their laughter that my classmates all preferred my commentary, but it is unlikely that all of them actually supported me. It's likely that some actually found me incredibly annoying. But ultimately, in school, it was me versus the teachers and my peers did not play a role in telling me how to behave in school.

Under a democratic model, it is your *peers* that write you up for violating rules. Where I come from, that is called "tattling," and it is frowned upon. In democratic schools, however, I came to realize that it is one of the secrets to their empowering culture. I realized that if my peers were the ones writing me up, the experience would have taught me to listen to and respect their opinion! It was easy for me to be dismissive of my teachers when they wielded unchecked authority, but I don't think I would have been as dismissive of my peers.

Dylan Marcus explained the actual culture around being written up for the Judicial Committee:

It's not like a tattle-tale culture at all... You would think it is, but it's nothing like that. Because we made the rules.... We all agree on a rule and said that's unfair and it infringes on our right to remain peacefully, so why would you do that?... It's more interesting when it's your peers telling you, because no one is an authority. At School Meeting, everyone is the authority.... It's a

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lot better when you hear from a peer that they didn't like what you did.¹³⁹

Dylan also shared what the actual experience is like being written up by your peers and having to come before the Judicial Committee:

It is quite fascinating when we get someone in JC who is new to the school and has never been written up before. They are totally expecting a principal's office-type scenario and are intensely terrified of it. Normally, though, they figure out quickly that it really is nothing to be afraid of. Normally what they did was something very minor yet still important to bring up. Examples such as 'you didn't clean up like everyone else', 'you didn't stop when someone asked you to stop doing something', or simply 'you are being an asshole, stop it', etc. Then JC will give them a punishment (normally an extra clean-up job, or something we come up with specialized for what they did) and they are on their way.¹⁴⁰

It was rare for actual "classes" to occur at the Sudbury schools, although students would occasionally request for the staff to find people to come and tutor/teach a particular subject. A typical day's activity would include hanging out/socializing, playing computer and board games, role playing, or reading. It's what you'd expect to see when a group of young people are allowed to hang out together, and does not resemble the *Lord of the Flies* stereotype that

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many adults fear would break out.

The physical spaces the democratic schools occupy are varied depending on the number of students, the local culture, and the availability of spaces in the community. For example, the Sudbury Valley School has over 100 students and a huge property with one large building which housed gathering rooms with different activities taking place. None of the rooms resembled a classroom, but most of the rooms were lined ceiling to floor with bookcases filled with books. The content of the rooms depended on their function - they may have tables and chairs, or couches, or art supplies - nothing was uniform. They also have a separate building with musical instruments and a performance space, as well as a dedicated computer space. Plus, they had a basketball court and a pond and plenty of space outside to play games.

On the other end of the spectrum, the South Jersey Sudbury School only has a couple dozen students and rent their space from a YMCA camp ground. The camp runs in the summer and the school rents the space during the school year. They have acres of woodland to run around and play, in addition to more conventional space indoors. I remember walking in and being so amazed to see they had a basketball court inside their school. I quickly remembered that all the schools I attended also had basketball courts. The difference is that my classmates and I we were never allowed to use the basketball court unless it was part of a class (which basically never happened), whereas students here could play basketball all day long if they wanted, though they all seemed busy with other activities.

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Other democratic schools I've visited resembled more conventional school buildings with classrooms, though, you'll rarely find rooms with rows of chairs and desks all facing a chalkboard. More likely would be to see smaller rooms with tables with chairs all around them, and lots of community space including couches and places where youth can comfortably hang out with one another and socialize.

When I was asking Peer Unschooling Network members about their experiences with unschooling, one of them who attended a Sudbury School shared what he thought were the advantages and disadvantages of attending a democratic school:¹⁴¹

ADVANTAGES

1: the freedom to do whatever you want and learn whatever you want. 2: Everyone has an equal vote in all the rules.

3: Your aloud to have your own opinion.

I don't think the rules impose on my freedom because they're rules you voted on and if you don't like a rule you can go to school meeting and try to change it.

DISADVANTAGES

Well i like to make movies so sometimes there aren't enough people to help make the videos but that's because were a small school. otherwise there aren't any other flaws that i can think of. To be honest nothing. I really like my unschooling life. Sudbury has actually make me hate

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weekends. You're always waiting for school to start.

Similarly to when I introduced the idea of unschooling, you may be wondering what happens to students who attend schools where young people are allowed to make the rules and be self-directed. Fortunately, Dr. Peter Gray and David Chanoff published a study of the outcomes of Sudbury School students in the *American Journal of Education* in an article titled “Democratic Schooling: What Happens to Young People Who Have Charge of Their Own Education?” They concluded:

Although these individuals educated themselves in ways that are enormously different from what occurs at traditional schools, they have had no apparent difficulty being admitted to or adjusting to the demands of traditional higher education and have been successful in a wide variety of careers. Graduates reported that for higher education and careers, the school benefited them by allowing them to develop their own interests and by fostering such traits as personal responsibility, initiative, curiosity, ability to communicate well with people regardless of status, and continued appreciation and practice of democratic values.¹⁴²

With specific regard to concerns about how a Sudbury Valley student could adapt to the college environment after being so free to choose-their-own-adventure, the

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researchers found:

More surprising than the observation that [Sudbury Valley School] graduates have done well in jobs and careers is the observation that they have also done well in college. Not having taken the usual high school courses, many if not most of these individuals must have been behind most of their college classmates in knowledge of the materials taught in such courses, yet they seem to have had little trouble catching up. As we have seen, the graduates themselves explain this in terms of their positive attitude about learning, their feeling of responsibility for their own learning, their ability to find things out on their own, and their lack of inhibitions about communicating with professors and asking for help when needed - characteristics that they regard as having been fostered by their [Sudbury Valley School] experience.¹⁴³

Peter Gray and David Chanoff also looked at their experiences in gaining employment and their performance in the workplace:

An analysis of the characteristics that lead to high employability would probably include such traits as a strong sense of responsibility, an ability to take initiative and solve problems, a desire and ability to learn on the job, an ability to communicate

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effectively, and, perhaps most of all, a high interest in and commitment to the field in which employment is sought. These are precisely the kinds of characteristics that the graduates see as having been most fostered by their experiences at [Sudbury Valley School]. Rarely would an employer be concerned about a prospective employee's knowledge of ninth-grade algebra, tenth-grade biology, or eleventh-grade history. However, if the person had developed special skills and knowledge by direct involvement in the field in which employment is sought, as was the case for many of the [Sudbury Valley School] graduates, that would be of great interest to an employer. Thus, it does not seem surprising to us that [Sudbury Valley School] graduates have done well in jobs and careers. It does not seem to be the kind of observation that requires explanation in terms of unique qualities that may have resided in them prior to enrolling at [Sudbury Valley School].¹⁴⁴

There are some that think the lack of top-down structure in a Sudbury School would inherently lead to some kind of *Lord of the Flies*-style self-destruction. Peter and David were clear to correct this misconception:

[Sudbury Valley School] is not defined simply by lack of curriculum. It is a community of people that centers around

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democratic values that involve notions of individual integrity and respect. The membership of this community includes a group of adults (particularly part-time staff members) from various walks of life, all of whom serve as potential role models, guides, and bridges between the developing child and the larger world.¹⁴⁵

If you are looking to find a democratic school, there are a variety of resources you should check. Unfortunately, no single resource has a perfect record of everything worldwide, so check multiple lists to be sure what is in your area. Here's the best lists I've found so far:

- Wikipedia page for "List of Sudbury Schools"¹⁴⁶
- Wikipedia page for "List of Democratic Schools"¹⁴⁷
- Hudson Valley Sudbury School's Directory of Sudbury Schools (note that there's a separate page for international locations)¹⁴⁸
- Alternative Education Resource Organization's World Map of Democratic Schools¹⁴⁹

If you are interested in attending a democratic free school or Sudbury School, many have a sliding scale for tuition, with some students attending at no cost at all. Don't let price be a reason to keep you from attending, always take the step to reach out and ask about financial aid before assuming it will be too expensive.

AGILE LEARNING CENTERS

Agile Learning Centers (ALC) are a recently developed model for democratic self-directed learning centers which are similar to Sudbury Schools because they are also inclusive of students in grades K-12 and because they have a weekly meeting which guides decision-making by way of student voting.

The first ALC was started in New York City in 2013 and, since then, the model has been growing worldwide.¹⁵⁰

ALCs are unique in that they utilize a set of tools and techniques they've adopted from the agile software development world to steer their communities, which results in a breadth of diversity among the learning centers. I've heard ALCs described as being so unique from one another that "once you've seen one ALC, you've seen one ALC." Even the website for Agile Learning Centers struggles to define itself because each Agile Learning Center is so different.

Some of the fundamentals of the ALC toolkit ingrained in ALC culture include daily intention-setting and reflection, as well as a weekly "Change Up" meeting. For example, every member starts the day by sharing their intentions for the day with the group. At the end of the day, they do a written reflection about how their day went. Their weekly meeting, called "Change Up", is also different from a Sudbury School, because ALCs emphasize consensus in their voting as opposed to a majority. This means that in order for rules to pass at an ALC, there must be no major

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opposition, things aren't simply approved just because of a majority.

The consensus-based component of their decision-making process is exemplary of the ALC's emphasis on creating equity in their space and promoting social justice. While Sudbury Schools tend to emphasize creating as much freedom for the individual as possible, ALCs tend to emphasize taking care of one another. Alexander Khost, editor of *Tipping Points* and founder of the former Teddy McArdle Free School in New Jersey, compared the models along their political positions:

I've always said free schools, for the most part, reflect the Socialist Self-Directed Education movement, whereas Sudbury generally means Libertarian, and ALC means anarchistic. That is meant to be a *very* loose definition.¹⁵¹

ALC's weekly "Change Up" meeting also focuses on testing out new ideas to see how they work before creating concrete rules. This is in an effort to make quicker decisions so that issues won't be dragged out too long. All students attending the ALC are required to participate in the daily intention-setting and reflection as well as the weekly change up meeting.

In sticking with the ALC's emphasis on equity and social justice, ALCs offer sliding scale tuition for all members. Always be sure to contact them with questions about financial assistance before assuming that it is too expensive to attend.

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The ALCs offer more structure and guidance from adults than Sudbury Schools tend to, albeit that structure is purposely designed to be flexible and easily changed. In comparison to my visits at ALCs in New York and Atlanta, I felt like the students at Sudbury Schools were more actively engaged in the process of creating and running their schools. At the ALC's, the students were certainly self-directed in that they were never forced to work on anything they didn't want to, but the adults played more of a hands-on role in facilitating the logistics of the day. I'm not making a judgment as to whether one approach is better than the other, just an observation of the different cultures.

The ALC staff, or as they are called at ALCs, the "Agile Learning Facilitators" or "ALFs", are very much involved in the lives of the young people that attend and can feel free to run classes, workshops, activities, and learn right alongside the young people. I remember visiting the Manhattan ALC and seeing the facilitators engaged in a game of Minecraft alongside the other youth. In this way, the facilitators demonstrate their own love of learning and model self-direction as opposed to imposing learning on students.

As Abby Oulton, a facilitator at Manhattan ALC, states:

The facilitator's role is to accompany young people and make their journeys self-directing in our current world easier where we can. What that looks like varies widely depending on the people and place. There are basic expectations that facilitators work to keep the physical spaces of their ALCs

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and the interpersonal spaces of their relationships safe, respectful, and honest enough that they nurture growth. Kids bring some of our facilitators' interests, trusting that this adult is someone who they can share, collaborate, and explore with... or at least who will gladly travel with them where they want to go so they don't get hassled for being a young person alone on the subway in the middle of the day.

Some facilitators offer mentoring or skill shares. Some donate books or invite interested kids to join their mission to learn some new thing they're personally curious and excited about. Some share photos and stories with parents. Some update websites. And some of us facilitate by tending the accessibility of the space -- I manage the paperwork and budgeting that keep the ALC open, one of our ALFs regularly stays late to support working parents with late pick-ups, and most of our staff are actively involved in anti-oppression work that extends outside of our ALC community (as our lives and young people's lives do) guided by that "no one is free until we're all free" spirit.¹⁵²

ALCs tend to have a more specific schedule of events and classes than Sudbury Schools, or as they call them, "offerings," that take place throughout the week. Everything was always optional to students; they could accept or reject the offering as they chose.

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Walking through the building at an ALC, you could encounter a larger variety of activities taking place; you may see a group in one room building forts out of furniture, another group playing computer games together, some in a room creating art, some playing music, some reading books, and others creating projects in a maker space. The interactions between the young people at ALCs seemed similar to those at democratic free schools, the main difference was how involved the adults were - with the adults being much more involved at ALCs.

The ALC spaces I visited resembled small schoolhouses, though they functioned more like community centers. There were no rooms resembling classrooms with rows of desks and chairs facing the front of the room with a whiteboard. You were much more likely to see kids sitting around on couches rather than at desks.

While I've only visited a couple ALC centers (ALC Manhattan and Heartwood ALC in Atlanta), Blake Boles has more experience and shared this analysis in his article for *Tipping Points*:

While the longest-running Agile Learning Centers are legally formed as private schools and subject to attendance requirements similar to a Sudbury school, an ALC doesn't have to be a school. There are parent co-ops, preschool groups, after-school groups, and homeschooling collectives that operate with ALC tools and principles. These groups may only operate a few days a week and have very flexible hours... Don't think of ALCs

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as schools — think of them more like intentional communities with shared values and practices. ALCs come in all shapes, sizes, and flavors.

The largest Agile Learning Centers serve the full spectrum ([ages] 5-18), and sometimes preschool ages as well. Some ALCs serve only teenagers, some serve only young children, and some are even experimenting with serving adults with ALC coworking centers.¹⁵³

Much like the other learning centers, ALCs offer community, mentorship, facilities, and a designated place to learn. Graduates of ALCs can receive high school diplomas.

Attendance requirements are intentionally vague. While students at ALCs are technically required to attend every day, the youth can opt to do “off-site learning” any day they choose, without needing to state what the learning can be. In other words, a member could choose to stay home and read a book and call it an “off-site learning experience”, they just need to inform the ALC that they will be off-site that day. This corresponds very strongly to one of the ALC’s core principles, that states that “learning is always happening”.

In recent years, the ALC has been working to replicate their model in many places. As of the publishing of this book, there are eight official ALCs around the world and many more places, like libraries and homeschool groups, that

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have incorporated ALC tools into their communities. For the searchable map, visit the ALC website.¹⁵⁴

The ALC model is growing quickly since the Agile Learning Center community published the beta version of an open-source document titled the Agile Learning Center Startup Kit to help new groups get started.¹⁵⁵

Since Agile Learning Centers are very new, there is no data or studies yet on outcomes of their students. That being said, their approach is catching on quickly, and ALCs are the fastest-growing model for self-directed learning centers.

LIBERATED LEARNERS CENTERS

Liberated Learners Centers are another type of self-directed learning center that are specifically designed for teens. The first Liberated Learner Center was opened in 1996 in Amherst, Massachusetts by former teachers Ken Danford and Joshua Hornick. It was originally called Pathfinders, and has since relocated to Sunderland, Massachusetts and changed their name to North Star.

Typically, Liberated Learners Centers play a large role in coaching families on how to leave the school system. Liberated Learners Centers specifically state they are not schools, and all attendees must legally register themselves as homeschoolers. They provide weekly one-on-one mentorship, tutoring, community, facilities like study rooms and computers and music rooms, and also a variety

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of classes and workshops for youth to attend.

While they do offer classes, students are not required to attend them, and the classes do not offer grades. When asked why they would offer classes at an unschooly-centric place, Ken Danford, who is now the executive director of North Star, says: “I think it’s important to have classes, some parents want to see some level of structure, and it gives the teens something to say ‘no’ to, which is very empowering.”¹⁵⁶

When I reached out to Ken to ask him for more details about why they chose to offer classes, Ken added:

- teens also want to see some level of structure, and have things offered to them
- adults like sharing things they love with a willing group of students
- just like a senior center or an after school program, people may want a reason to go somewhere other than just to see who else is there and what they are up to - having a specific class to look forward to and attend helps people organize their days and weeks.
- allowing people to say ‘No’ can be quite revealing to themselves, and yes, it feels empowering

I’m all for having a system that lets people offer regularly scheduled and planned activities with one another. Assuming

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everyone can say 'no', including the teacher if they feel their offer is not being honored, seems to be a great situation.¹⁵⁷

I visited four different Liberated Learners Centers in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey. I remember sitting in on a particularly interesting biology class at Beacon Self-Directed Learning in New Haven, CT. The teacher was a venture capitalist in the medical device space, who volunteered once a week at Beacon. The class he ran was very informal; about twenty students gathered in a room (others opted out) and the teacher turned on a PowerPoint presentation with some slides. He told everyone that if they wanted, he could go through some slides, or they could just ask questions and have a discussion.

While one could imagine a conventional school where students are afraid to raise their hand, the teacher could easily end up flipping through their PowerPoint slides and essentially reading a script to the classroom. In a Liberated Learning Center, however, every student that shows up to a class has chosen to be there, which creates a culture where engaged learning is the norm. In this particular class, some hands went up immediately from students with questions and the conversation began. I don't know if I would describe it as a question-and-answer session or simply a discussion, but it was really interesting. For two hours we talked about everything from the history of medicine, to modern disease prevention, to different career paths in the medical field. It was really exciting to see such curiosity from the students and such flexibility from the instructor who felt entirely comfortable following the students'

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interests rather than feeling obligated to stick to a pre-planned presentation he arranged.

In keeping with their stance that they are *not* a school, but are an alternative *to* school, most Liberated Learners Centers are only open four days a week, to encourage young people to find things to do outside of the learning center. For example, instead of attending North Star on Wednesdays, young people are encouraged to get internships, volunteer, take up a hobby, or partake in other community-related activities. As Ken Danford shared at a book signing for his new book, *Learning is Natural, School is Optional*:

We originally closed on Wednesdays because I needed a day off. I was exhausted from running this place. We quickly discovered it was important to close one day a week and tell kids to “get a life, you don’t need us every day, there’s a whole world out there waiting for you, go after it.”¹⁵⁸

For youth enrolled at Liberated Learner’s Centers, daily attendance is not mandatory. Students are free to come and go whenever they want, there is no attendance, and young people do not need to sign in and out of the building whenever they leave. Though there is a weekly community meeting, it is not required. In fact, nothing at North Star is required.

As you might imagine, having no attendance policy and only being open four days a week, North Star does not offer diplomas. I would say that these qualities make the

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Liberated Learners model the most radical example of a self-directed learning center.

I remember sitting down with Ken at the Life Without Instructions Conference and him repeatedly bringing me back to the point that a diploma doesn't add any value to someone's life. "Jim, you're not paying attention, so I'll say it slowly... the diploma opens zero doors that aren't already open."¹⁵⁹ He shared with me about alternative paths teens at North Star took, teens as young as 15 or 16 were taking the GED or HiSet exams to earn equivalency diplomas, were taking community college classes, getting internships and real work experience, and sometimes even transferring into colleges as sophomores while their peers were still finishing their final year of high school.

The problem with diplomas is that they all have the same weight, even though everyone receiving one is getting a different educational experience when you take into account the different level courses people take and the different grades they receive. The diploma itself only demonstrates that you've completed a series of courses; it has no bearing on how much you've actually learned.

The model of awarding diplomas for completing credits may have made sense in the early days of conventional schooling when students in each grade were learning the exact same content at the exact same time, but its merit disappears under any modern attempt to *personalize* education. The diploma is like a vestigial organ; the purpose it was originally designed for is no longer needed.

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In reflecting on my conversation with Ken, I realized the significant implications of making diplomas irrelevant: if society accepted that the diploma offered no value in demonstrating a student's intelligence or capability, then the conveyor belt in our manufacturing plant-style assembly line of a school system would stop working. In other words, if we remove the figurative "finish line", then all of the preceding steps in the assembly line can be relaxed.

One consequence of removing the diploma would be a reduction in our dependence on high stakes standardized testing. Since testing acts as a quality control system to make sure children are moving through the educational assembly line without missing any components so they will be a completed human product at graduation time, removing the finish line makes the standardized testing mostly irrelevant.

Removing the diploma from the education system could be the first step in a substantial systemic change that focuses on learning rather than schooling. It's no surprise then, that the motto of the Liberated Learners is: "Learning is natural. School is optional."

Ken Danford wrote about his views on graduation after attending his own children's public high school graduation ceremonies:

I found my children's graduation ceremonies to be happy community events, but they left me with one primary critique. The graduation speakers presented school as

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if it were a long journey with only one acceptable outcome: graduation. They congratulated students for making it to that point, as if school were a divided highway with one exit tollbooth, through which the students were now passing.¹⁶⁰

At North Star, there is no official “congratulations, you’ve completed the program” to give to anyone. You simply leave and move on with your life when you are ready. The natural question to ask is: what do North Star teens “move on” to do with their lives after North Star?

At the end of 2017, Ken released two reports on the outcomes of 473 alumni who attended North Star in its first 25 years of operation. The reports compare the outcomes for teens who used North Star as a kind of “short break” from their education and those who utilized North Star for their entire teenage education. A summary was published on the Alliance for Self-Directed Education website.¹⁶¹

When looking at what both groups of teens did with their lives after leaving North Star, Ken made an interesting observation:

North Star coaches teens to leave school and embark on a self-directed path. It turns out that for 82% of our members, the first activity after North Star is: school. This includes young teens that return to high school and older teens that go on to community college, four-year college, or formal certificate or training programs. In

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the long-term, at least 69% of North Star alumni enroll in a college or formal training program.¹⁶²

The follow-up question people tend to ask is: “What colleges did North Star alumni get into?” The full-report has a list of every college any alumni attended, but I’ll give you some highlights not only to show you the prestigious names, but to show you the variety of certificate programs, community colleges, and Universities: American Musical and Dramatic Academy, Maine School of Masonry, Sage Mountain Herbal, Peace Corps, Hampshire College, Brown College, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Reed College, Yale Law School, and many others.¹⁶³

Since most view the purpose of attending college is to help one get a job, I think its most important to observe the career paths that North Star teens ultimately pursued. In looking at the group of teens who specifically spent the majority of their teen years at North Star, Ken reports:

North Star alumni are in every field, from midwifery to mortuary services. They are doctors, lawyers, bankers, realtors, teachers, psychologists, and school administrators. There are many involved in the healing arts. We have musicians, artists, and comedians. There are labor activists. Many are involved in technology. The list is long.

The simple conclusion is that choosing self-directed learning during the high school years has had no limiting role on our alumni,

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collectively. Further, we propose that having 27% of alumni involved in Self-Employment or Unusual Work demonstrates that self-directed learning may encourage independence and a commitment to following one's passions for a career.¹⁶⁴

To clarify, Ken defines "Unusual Work" to be careers such as glassblowing, fashion design, professional rock climbing, a horse trainer, or a Buddhist monk.

As of the publishing of this book, there are now 13 Liberated Learners Centers throughout the world. You can find a center near you using the searchable map on the Liberated Learners website.¹⁶⁵

The Liberated Learners Network also offers coaching to people who are interested in opening their own centers. Joel Hammon, who co-founded a Liberated Learner's Center in Princeton, NJ called the Princeton Learning Coop, also published a guide on how to open your own Liberated Learners Center, called *The Teacher Liberation Handbook*.¹⁶⁶

Like the ALCs and Sudbury Schools, Liberated Learners Centers offer a sliding scale for tuition to their members. In fact, North Star states that since their inception, they have not turned down a single teen due to financial reasons.

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OTHER NOTABLE LEARNING CENTERS FOR TEENS

While I emphasized the Liberated Learners, Agile Learning Centers, and democratic free schools, I want to point out that there are many other self-directed learning centers that exist in the world. An entire book could be written specifically about this subject. The reason I focused on the ALCs, Liberated Learners, and democratic free schools is that they are the most common models of self-directed learning centers, so you are most likely to be able to find one of them in your area.

I'd like to touch on a few other notable opportunities worth mentioning that are either stand-alone learning centers that haven't been replicated or are places where self-directed learning is possible but isn't necessarily an inherent part of the center.

For example, homeschooling coops can create lots of opportunities for young self-directed learners, though they are not necessarily all focused on self-directed learning.

In a coop setting, parents all contribute to the benefit of the collective. Some parents may volunteer to teach a class each week in a subject they are familiar with. Some parents may donate materials and supplies. Others might offer physical space the coop can use to hold classes or group meetings. The idea is that if everyone contributes what they can, the group benefits as a whole.

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I first heard about homeschooling co-ops when I was a guest on the webshow “For the Love of Learning” (episode #118)¹⁶⁷. One of the other guests, Kandy Tucker, described a co-op she and her son, Jesse, created in central Florida called the Freeschoolers Organization, where both teens and adults taught classes. They also started a group called Table Top Teens for unschooling teens to play board games as well as Aquanauts, an all-ages group focusing on “hands on” work for scientists. As the number of groups they were starting grew, they consolidated them all into a larger organization called the Majestically Awkward Funschoolers, which has over 350 members. In Kandy’s words:

For a long time we did a lot of things on our own... but it's a lot nicer when you have community support behind you. We decided together to create a lot of different groups and clubs and its really blossomed in this area... It was something here in central Florida that we needed because we have a lot of homeschooling groups but not any unschooling groups, so we just go around and try and plan as many things as we can, focusing on things my son enjoys, and his friends come in and we plan things they enjoy, and we encourage other parents and members of our community to step in and do the same, and we've grown really fast.¹⁶⁸

If you want to find out if there is a homeschooling co-op in your area, I don't have a master directory for you to search through. Your best bet is to Google search “homeschooling

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co-op” in your city.”

Another model is that of a “co-learning community”, such as Workspace Education in Bethel, CT, which is catching attention on a national level. What makes Workspace really unique, is that they have blended a co-working space for adults with a self-directed learning space for youth - all under one roof. There is a specific space where the adults work remotely all day and another space allowing young people to explore their interests and ideas. At present, there are about 100 families with 150 children who are members at WorkSpace. Naturally, this approach only works in an area where there are lots of parents working remotely, but it is a truly innovative approach to what the future of working and learning and living can look like.

Students are required to have their parent on the property while they are in the building, though exceptions are made for teens age 16 and up. Many parents offer to teach courses and workshops, some for free, some require an additional fee.

Workspace is well-funded and built out a facility that most of these other locations can only dream of, spending millions of dollars purchasing and renovating their large space, which features multiple classrooms and study spaces, an entrepreneur space, a woodshop, an animation lab, a history and humanities space, a performing arts space, an art space, a makerspace, an audio recording studio, a creative movement studio, an industrial kitchen, and a science lab. Students have access to resources like sewing machines, 3D printers, laser cutters, virtual reality headsets, lab equipment, microphones, video cameras, and

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a DJ booth. In addition, Workspace has relationships with local businesses who regularly donate things like materials to make costumes or robotic arms.

Given how much is happening within the Workspace building at any time, a Google Calendar is used to allow people to easily find when and where activities they are interested in are taking place. To build community amongst its members, Workspace runs events like open mic nights, karaoke night, and a twice-a-year MarketPlace where youth can sell items.

Workspace operates with only three full-time staff members who manage the operations and facilities, plus a recently hired teacher to run the science lab. According to the Founder of Workspace, Cath Fraise, approximately 10% of the members at Workspace have a high buy-in and get incredibly involved in running classes and workshops. Workspace also invites retired professionals and community members to volunteer to teach classes. During one of my visits to Workspace, there was an archaeologist visiting who created an archaeological dig on the side of the building where he'd buried real artifacts donated from a museum.

An online version of a self-directed learning center recently launched called Sora School. Sora describes itself as “an online, project-based high school where students explore their interests, learn how they want, and gain valuable exposure to future careers.”¹⁶⁹ Sora connects teens virtually to work on projects together and also provides mentorship from their network of CEOs, entrepreneurs, journalists, engineers, computer scientists, designers,

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artists, and scientists.

Mentioning online self-directed learning opportunities wouldn't make sense without including Khan Academy, a completely free learning resource. Khan Academy has a massive database of video lessons matching every subject in a middle and high school curriculum. They also have tests and quizzes you can take, and they track and monitor your progress. Spending 100% of your time on Khan Academy would not really be a self-directed learning experience, but it is an invaluable resource for content and structure if you are looking for that on specific subjects, especially math.

Along the lines of free resources, I want to mention what are called “homeschooling charter schools”, which I learned about when I lived in San Diego, CA. These charter schools do not actually have a physical location that the students attend each day. Instead, the students enrolled in the homeschooling charter school receive monthly credits which they can use to pay for classes like art, karate, music, or math tutoring from businesses in their community. These homeschool charter programs also offer government-funded resources like Education Specialists who help students design personalized learning plans and find resources.¹⁷⁰ This unique model allows for government funding to be able to support their self-directed education. From what I've seen, these exist throughout California¹⁷¹, but it is possible they exist in more locations. You should research to see if similar opportunities exist in your local community.

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Having government funding to support self-directed education is very difficult to pull off, because government funding typically comes with strings attached to it. Governments typically want accountability in the form of evaluations attached to their funding, which is difficult to formalize in a self-directed setting where learning is personalized. Personalized learning is not compatible with standardized testing.

That being said, there are some instances where this appears to have occurred, such as Meraki High School in Fair Oaks, California. Meraki, which was originally called “UnSchool”, was started by Gabe Cooper who shared his journey in an episode of Blake Bole’s *Off-Trail Learning* podcast. Gabe says:

... for 18 months I spent interviewing kids, checking out schools, and asking kids - ‘What do you like about school?’ ‘What do you like about learning?’ Then I’d say ‘school is this organized system that tells you how to behave and operate and learn in some linear fashion. Now talk to me about your learning. If you have a free Saturday, what do you want to do with that time? What’s your learning then?’ And kids would tell me what their learning looks like. So I thought, ‘why can’t I create that environment at something called a “school”’. Why can’t that be school?’ They all told me they don’t really like classes, they like what I came to define as “chill time” with an adult that could mentor them. It’s nothing

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profound to me, it's just 'Can I hang with an adult who knows something or is willing to try something with me?'" I have kids trying to weld, to make a movie, whatever it is, let's try it and educate ourselves about it.... And now we have about 80 students, they've come in and our principle was that they would design the entire program.¹⁷²

One example of a partially publicly-funded self-directed learning center is LightHouse, in Holyoke, Massachusetts. LightHouse started off as a true self-directed learning center that was a Liberated Learner's Center. After Holyoke's public schools were taken over by the state due to high dropout rates, the city offered to pay full tuition to send teens at risk of dropping out to Lighthouse. Part of this arrangement required Lighthouse to start taking attendance records and providing written descriptions of all the classes the teens were taking. Naturally, this began to deviate from the self-directed nature of Liberated Learners centers, and LightHouse ultimately left the Liberated Learners network. At present, LightHouse is not entirely funded publicly, but operates as a hybrid of a public/private learning center.

When I first started writing this book, I thought I'd be reporting about the launch of the Powderhouse Studio in Somerville, MA. Powderhouse was an ambitious project to create a publicly-funded self-directed learning center that would serve 160 teens, and was in the works for about seven years. Powderhouse even won a competition that awarded Powderhouse a \$10 million grant from the XQ Institute to build the facilities. Though the project was approved by the Somerville Teachers Association, it was

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rejected in March of 2019 by the Somerville School Committee, who felt that it would detract from the resources being committed to the rest of the community.¹⁷³

As you can see, finding sources of funding to support self-directed learning centers continues to be a challenge. This is one of the main reasons why we don't have learning centers in every town and city. We're going to look at this problem in the next chapter.

ACTION:

Now that you've heard about a variety of learning centers, write down what elements of each one resonate with you. What would an ideal learning center look like for you? Write it down and visualize it as much as possible. Of course, you won't necessarily find *exactly* what you are looking for, but it's important to write down what it is that you *want*.

Now, search online for local self-directed learning centers, Sudbury Schools, Liberated Learners Centers, Agile Learning Centers, democratic free schools, the Alliance for Self-Directed Education's resource list¹⁷⁴, and local Facebook groups and coops. If you find one nearby, reach out to them and introduce yourself. If possible, schedule a tour. You can also tell your parents about this learning center, and tell them you are curious to visit it. For some parents, this may be the ideal way to introduce them to the ideas of self-directed learning so that they can see it in action.

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Make sure that before you attend a center that you write down what you hope to see and any questions you have. Be sure to ask these questions during your tour. After your visit, write down how your expectations were either met or not met by your visit. If you couldn't find a learning center near you or you were disappointed in what you saw, do not worry. The rest of this book will address this issue of there not being enough self-directed learning centers in the world.

PART III

CHAPTER 6

THE BIG PROBLEM

We started by looking at unschooling, which is the most popular path for self-directed learning. This approach has some challenges which some people are unable to overcome: it generally requires a large amount of parental support and can be isolating depending on your geographic location and access to transportation.

Self-directed learning centers have filled this gap by providing a physical space for young people to come together and learn, alleviating the dependency on the parents. Yet, as you may have noticed when trying to locate a self-directed learning center near you, there are really not a lot of them out there.

So if you don't have parents who can support your unschooling and you don't live near a self-directed learning center, what do you do? In setting out to find ways to make self-directed learning available, affordable, and accessible to all youth, we come to a road block.

Oftentimes, when the subject of making self-directed learning available to the masses comes up, the focus

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quickly shifts to debating what the best model is. Is it unschooling? A Sudbury school? An Agile Learning Center? A Liberated Learners center? As if we need to first decide what model is best, and then make an effort to promote these models.

Within the self-directed learning world, these debates often seem endless and divide us more than they unite us. Even pioneering leaders like Daniel Greenberg, who co-founded the Sudbury Valley School, wrote an article titled “Let’s Be Clear: Sudbury Valley School and ‘Un-schooling’ Have NOTHING in Common.”¹⁷⁵ This article is representative of the kind of in-fighting that takes place and, while the article makes some valid points about unschooling focusing on family relationships and Sudbury School focusing on community relationships, seems to do nothing but divide this movement. Many leaders within the unschooling movement are also quick to criticize one another for their different approaches to unschooling, often shaming parents who don’t adhere to the purist philosophies, with Facebook groups commonly spreading messages like, “That’s not unschooling. You’re not really an unschooler. This is a group for discussing unschooling.”

I’m not even a parent and I’ve been criticized and publicly attacked for my approach of sharing this knowledge with teens rather than sharing it directly with parents, because I may cause a rift within a family if a teen learns about unschooling and their parents are not supportive of it.

As you can tell from my enthusiasm in the previous chapters, I am a fan of all of these different models of learning centers, and I’m also a fan of unschooling. There

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is no “best” model and there is no “perfect” way that learning should happen everywhere. The effectiveness of these different approaches to self-directed learning depends on the specific community that the learning centers are created in and the specific needs and personalities of the individuals who participate.

Rather than comparing the different learning centers to choose a favorite or decide what is best, I prefer to examine what qualities all these learning centers have in common. This helps to see what pieces are critical to a successful self-directed learning center and how this is distinct from what you see in conventional schools. Blake Boles did an excellent job of summarizing this comparison in his keynote address at the 2019 AERO Conference:

When I zoom really far out and define conventional education, I see: mandatory curriculum, standardized testing, homework, narrow age-grouping, grades, a traditional power hierarchy, little freedom of physical movement, little autonomy for the teachers and other adults, little privacy for anyone, a closed campus, specific hours for arrival and departure, and the requirement to show up all five days of the week.

Conversely, a self-directed approach looks like something without mandatory curriculum, standardized testing, grades, or homework. Where there’s full age mixing, real decision- making power for young people, real freedom of physical movement,

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high autonomy for the adults, high personal privacy, an open campus, and flexible arrival and departure hours including flexible weekly schedules.¹⁷⁶

In a perfect world, we wouldn't just have one self-directed learning center in every community; *all* these different styles of learning centers would be available in *every* community and teens around the world would get to choose between multiple options and could be free to switch anytime they wanted. This is a bit of a fantasy since most communities don't have any of these learning centers available. I think this is a dream worth pursuing, because all of these learning centers are amazing places that can help young people pursue self-directed learning.

There is an underlying problem which needs to be addressed if we are ever going to see a rapid growth in the number of self-directed learning centers that exist in the world. The problem is not an educational problem; it is an entrepreneurial problem. Specifically, there are two aspects of the *entrepreneurial* problem we need to address: *people* and *money*.

Let's start with the people problem. To open a learning center requires an individual (or a pair of individuals), to take the lead to open the learning center and there just aren't that many people out there looking to open learning centers.

I remember going to the 2018 AERO Conference where AERO Director, Jerry Mintz, held a "School Starter's Workshop" for people interested in opening learning

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centers. There were maybe 25 people in the room. I realized that even if every single person in that room succeeded in opening a learning center, and each center had 100 students, we're only talking about helping 2,500 kids... yet there are over 10 million youth who could benefit from a self-directed learning center. We simply don't have enough adults willing and able to open learning centers at this time.

The "people problem" isn't just a lack of leaders, it's also a problem that the leaders can quickly get burnt out. It takes an incredible amount of time and energy to keep these learning centers afloat financially, and there is very little monetary reward. Many founders quit within a year or two of starting. With such small organizations, losing a founding member can be devastating, often resulting in closure of the learning center. It's disheartening to think of how many teens have had an opportunity to leave the school system to join a self-directed learning center, have taken that leap, and then were forced to return to school after their learning center was closed.

In addition to founders quitting because of burnout, many quit after they lose the motivation. For example, many learning centers are opened by parents who are motivated to create the learning center because it serves their own child, and once the youth ages out of the program, the parent feels less-inclined to continue the program.

Many learning centers are also started by former teachers, which presents a different problem. While their heart is in the right place, their motivation for opening the learning center is usually to have more freedom in their teaching...

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not to run a business. Yet the hard reality is: a self-directed learning center is a business. This is a big disappointment for many teachers, many of whom end up quitting and shutting down their learning center.

There is some hope for solving the “people problem.” Just last year, Princeton Learning Cooperative co-founder, Joel Hammon, published *The Teacher Liberation Handbook*, which offers instructions and best practices for teachers on how to quit their teaching jobs and open self-directed learning centers. Joel’s book is very honest and direct, and should provide a realistic perspective for teachers looking to make the leap, so that they will be prepared when they do. It’s too soon to measure the impact of this incredible book, but I hope it finds its way into the hands of every existing teacher and college student studying to become a teacher.

In addition to the “people problem”, there is also a “money problem”. All of the aforementioned models of learning centers all struggle for monetary reasons. It takes money to open up a learning center; the greatest expenses being rent, staff, and insurance. For example, Joel Hammon shares that Princeton Learning Cooperative in Princeton, NJ spent \$40,000 dollars in their first year.¹⁷⁷ Unless the founder of the learning center has a lot of savings or an inherited fortune, tuition money is needed to pay all the bills. Attracting tuition-paying members to a brand-new learning center is really challenging, after all, who wants to enroll in a learning center that doesn’t exist or have any students yet? You can imagine how challenging it is to open the doors to your learning center on Day One, while having enough students paying tuition to cover your costs. To make matters worse, once the founders open the doors of

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the learning center, they become so busy running the learning center that they don't have extra time available to promote the center and attract new tuition-paying members.

In *The Teacher Liberation Handbook*, Joel describes what he calls the “year of pain”, where anyone starting a learning center basically has to go with little to no pay for their first year to get things up and running. The “year of pain” then applies to any new staff members who join. During the “year of pain”, each new staff member works to attract new students to join the learning center to help bring tuition numbers up, so that the following year, there will be enough money in the budget to pay that staff member a salary.

Another aspect of the “money problem” applies especially to learning centers that focus on serving teens, like Liberated Learners Centers. Since there is a much smaller window during which a member can attend a teen-only center, at most 5-6 years for someone who joins at age 13, they are constantly losing members. This is not as big of a problem for a Sudbury School or Agile Learning Center which are open to K-12 and retain students for much longer.

I recently asked Ken Danford at his book signing for *Learning is Natural, School is Optional*, “Did you always have the policy at North Star that you wouldn't turn anyone away for financial reasons or did you add the policy after things stabilized?” He replied, “We always had that policy, but let me be very honest, we've been open for over 20 years and it's never been stable. The way we stay open is that we don't pay people as much as we'd like to.”

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As I mentioned earlier, there is little to no public funding available for these alternative learning centers. Occasionally, grant money is available, but it is sparse. Some programs are supported by generous donations, but these are also limited. Ken has told me that, at most, about 40% of the annual revenue of Liberated Learners centers come from donations.¹⁷⁸

As you can tell, financial instability is a huge problem for starting and running a learning center. When combined with the “people problem”, I paint a pretty dreary picture. It’s not all negative, though. After all, people are making it happen; there are over a dozen Liberated Learners centers, over a dozen Agile Learning Centers, and many more Sudbury Schools and democratic free schools currently operating.

But it’s not enough. Countless teens are without these opportunities. So let’s do something about it.

The whole next chapter is devoted to teaching you how you can overcome both the “people problem” and the “money problem” to create your own zero-tuition, student-run learning center in your community.

ACTION:

Go back and re-read what you wrote during the activity at the end of the Fear and Courage chapter. Have any of these fears gotten better or worse having read the first half of this

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book? Is anything new popping up? This next chapter is going to be the most intimidating, so feel free to go back and add in some new fears if you want to make sure they are being clearly stated. This will make them easier to overcome.

Then, I want you to write down your own ideas for how the “Big Problem” could be solved. Before you become biased by hearing my ideas, what solutions can you come up with?

CHAPTER 7

START YOUR OWN

While self-directed learning centers are amazing places, they don't exist in most communities. While this is disappointing, don't worry - this whole chapter is dedicated to teaching you how to create your own learning center.

I must confess, my main purpose in writing this book was to teach teens how they can create their own zero-tuition learning centers. All the information I've shared about self-directed learning, unschooling, and self-directed learning centers can be found in a variety of other sources. Those ideas have been tried and tested over the last few decades by unschoolers around the world. While these ideas are likely new to you, they are not really new.

The ideas I will present in this chapter are newer and untested. While I ask you to keep an open mind, also be critical. My enthusiasm does not guarantee that an idea is a good one. That being said, I will provide compelling supporting evidence and instruction to increase your probability of success. This means success is not guaranteed, there is some risk involved. I don't say that to scare you, I say it to remind you that this is how the real

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world works: nothing is certain. However, I also wouldn't have written this book if I didn't believe in this idea and believe in you.

I want you to take the ideas presented here as a set of guidelines and adapt them to your specific situation. Your personal needs and those of your peers will all be unique, as will be the community that you live in. Take what you find valuable and try it out. If it doesn't work, make adjustments or throw it away. Don't feel obligated to follow everything presented exactly, use your discretion. The act of decision-making is not necessarily easy, especially when you don't have a lot of practice. Now is the time to exercise that muscle.

If I could summarize my vision in a single tweet, it would be this:

Start your own zero-tuition self-directed learning center for teens using your local library as the headquarters. Free staff, free building, free computers, free books, freedom. Start now – you'll figure it out.

If this sounds intimidating, fear not. Your ability to succeed as a self-directed learner is *not* dependent on opening your own learning center. Remember that the largest number of youth doing self-directed learning are unschoolers, who don't attend a learning center at all. You could stop reading this book right now and still thrive just using the information I've already shared.

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However, if you've made it this far into the book, I invite you to explore your curiosity of what is possible by continuing to read.

One challenge we run into whenever we want to create something new is that language can trigger ideas that are unintended. For example, when I say, "you should create your own learning center," certain limiting ideas likely pop into your head because of the associations you will have with these words. The word "create" implies you may have to build something physically... the term "learning center" carries with it a vision of trying to start one of the existing learning centers that we've discussed... and even though I didn't use the word "school" at all, there is still this underlying association we cannot escape that we are basically starting a "school". These associations all bring in some potentially negative images that make this feel either impossible or undesirable. For example, you may be envisioning high costs to construct or rent a new building, endless paperwork to keep track of all the students, or the overwhelming task of persuading everyone in your town to join.

Let's try to make a conscious effort to remove all of these restrictions and biases that we can. Starting from scratch, we'll walk together as we assemble the necessary components of our learning center piece by piece. This will include overcoming all the challenges we discussed in the last chapter related to the "people problem" and the "money problem", as well as challenges which are unique to you as a young person doing this on your own.

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To ensure the success of our learning center, we want it to have a special characteristic that risk analyst and author Nassim Nicholas Taleb coined, called “antifragile”. When you think of things that are fragile, you imagine those which break very easily when they are disturbed. When you think of the opposite of fragile, you may think of words like “resilient” or “robust,” properties describing an object or system that doesn’t change form when it is disturbed. We want the true opposite of fragile, something that gets stronger when it is disturbed, we want “antifragile.” As Taleb writes:

Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty. Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of this phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it antifragile. Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better. This property is behind everything that has changed with time: evolution, culture, ideas, revolutions, political systems, technological innovation, cultural and economic success, corporate survival, good recipes..., the rise of cities, cultures, legal systems, equatorial forests, bacterial resistance... even our own existence as a species on this planet.¹⁷⁹

For a concrete analogy of what it means to be antifragile, I am reminded of an environmental project in Arizona called

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‘Biosphere 2’. Biosphere is a 3.13 acre closed system; the largest closed system ever created. It was created as an experiment to learn what it would be like to create such a system on another planet, like Mars. Within this space, there is a rainforest, ocean, wetlands, grasslands, desert... it’s a remarkable representation of creating an “Earth” on another planet.

Scientists discovered something strange happening within the biome. Though the trees were growing faster than normal, which could be explained by the near-perfect soil and climate inside the biome, the trees were falling over at an unexpectedly high rate. They couldn’t figure out why the trees were so weak when they were giving them all the resources they needed like soil, sunlight, and water. What they found, was that the trees are anti-fragile -- they require the impact of regular wind to help build their strength, and there was no wind in this closed off biome system. When wind blows, it generates subtle bending and cracking, and a special kind of wood grows to heal the cracks which is called “reaction wood.” The reaction wood is stronger and more pliable, but only grows in the presence of windy conditions. You can think of this like a human being working out to build muscle - the muscle only grows as you expose your body to challenging conditions which cause microtears in your muscles, and, as they heal, you become stronger. Without any wind, the trees in ‘Biosphere 2’ lacked reaction wood, and were so weak that they would break under their own weight.

Our learning center will be antifragile: it will not break, and when it is challenged, it will increase in strength through experience and learned wisdom. Better yet, since the

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learning center will be created by and run by teens, when it is challenged, you will also get stronger.

Let's now explore how we can use antifragility to solve the "People Problem" and the "Money Problem" that other self-directed learning centers deal with.

SOLVING THE "MONEY PROBLEM"

The biggest concern you probably have at this stage is: what about money? If you recall, the "Money Problem" that learning centers encounter is that they have to charge tuition in order to cover all of their costs, and this is especially problematic in the early days of the learning center when they have very few students paying tuition to cover their costs. We must develop a unique solution so that our learning center can overcome this problem.

The initial impulse of adults looking for a solution to the money problem is usually to find ways to raise money. This results in people looking for grant opportunities or thinking of ways to do charitable fundraising. These are definitely viable options, but let's dig a little deeper into understanding the money problem before impulsively seeking solutions. As Einstein is claimed to have said, "Given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes understanding the problem and one minute solving it."¹⁸⁰

Fortunately, to aid our understanding of the "money problem," we can look at the financial statements from the

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first year of operations at Princeton Learning Cooperative in Princeton, New Jersey. They are published in Joel Hammon's *The Teacher Liberation Handbook*. When we review these statements, keep in mind that during their first year, they had a single staff member, seven students, and rented a single room in Princeton, NJ.¹⁸¹

You've probably never seen an Income Statement before. It's basically a chart that categorizes all of the money an organization takes in (the Income) and all of the money they spend (the Expenses). The key take home: if your expenses are more than your income, you are losing money.

An Income Statement shows the total dollar amounts across each category for the entire year. This can be a little misleading, because most of the money coming in and out of the business is not all done in one lump sum. For example, income from tuition payments from parents could be paid monthly or by semester. Expenses like rent payments for the space or insurance are typically paid monthly. Payroll expenses for the staff could be weekly or bi-weekly. Despite this limitation, the Income Statement is a helpful way of looking at the overall picture of how much money is being devoted to different parts of the business.

In reviewing the Income Statement, let's start with income. For the Princeton Learning Cooperative, income came entirely from two categories: tuition and donations.

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	Jul '10 - Jun 11
Ordinary Income/Expense	
Income	
43000 · Donations	
43200 · Restricted Donations	3,993.98
43400 · Unrestricted Donations	8,865.68
Total 43000 · Donations	12,859.66
47200 · Program Income	
47230 · Net Tuition	
47231 · Gross Tuition	30,400.00
Total 47230 · Net Tuition	30,400.00
Total 47200 · Program Income	30,400.00
Total Income	43,259.66

Donations of about \$13,000 accounted for about 25% of the total income. Even at a successful center like PLC, the strategy of fundraising through charitable donations was only a partial solution. Tuition accounted for the remaining 75% of their Income, with PLC receiving about \$30,000 in tuition from their seven students which is roughly \$4,000 per student. If you recall, PLC and most other self-directed learning centers offer “sliding scales” for tuition. This means that they have a listed price and people pay what they can. For example, if the average amount someone is paying is \$4,000, and the full tuition is \$10,000, then that means that some members are paying a lot more than average and some are paying much less.

Though many learning centers succeed using this sliding scale tuition model, it is also incredibly fragile. If there are not enough families who can afford to pay a higher amount,

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there is not enough money available to support those families who cannot afford as much. This severely limits the number of communities which can financially support a learning center.

As I mentioned earlier, it is my goal to create a solution that is accessible to anyone, even in communities which don't have a handful of richer families able to offset the costs for the poorer ones. To achieve this goal, our learning center will have zero tuition, which means that anyone can attend without risking the closure of our learning center.

Having a zero-tuition model probably sounds like an impossible feat, but it can be done. As one example, Dr. Sundiata Soon-Jahta, an independent educator and a social sustainability activist, co-founded and co-facilitated a zero-tuition self-directed learning center called GROW in Atlanta, GA. By combining forces with other parents who all contributed resources like space, time, and expertise, GROW was able to offer zero-tuition self-directed learning opportunities from 2015 to 2019.¹⁸²

Of course, our approach will focus on being a teen-organized group rather than a parent-organized group. You'll see that this brings both benefits and challenges.

Let's start by taking a look at how the money at a typical learning center gets spent, which is shown in the Expense section of the Income Statement. To simplify things, let's start with the big-ticket items that add up to over \$1,000 for the year, which accounts for 93% of the annual expenses:

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Expense	
60800 · Fundraising Expenses	375.00
60900 · Business Expenses	
60920 · Business Registration Fees	<u>920.00</u>
Total 60900 · Business Expenses	920.00
62100 · Contract Services	
62140 · Legal Fees	<u>1,867.92</u>
Total 62100 · Contract Services	1,867.92
62800 · Facilities and Equipment	
62890 · Rent, Parking, Utilities	<u>9,465.00</u>
Total 62800 · Facilities and Equipment	9,465.00
65000 · Operations	
65004 · Advertising	429.02
65008 · Website	326.91
65010 · Books, Subscriptions, Reference	159.53
65020 · Postage, Mailing Service	159.27
65030 · Printing and Copying	<u>2,296.31</u>
65040 · Supplies	<u>946.26</u>
Total 65000 · Operations	4,317.30
65100 · Other Types of Expenses	
65120 · Insurance - Liability, D and O	<u>3,290.00</u>
Total 65100 · Other Types of Expenses	3,290.00
66000 · Payroll Expenses	
66100 · Health Insurance Reimbursements	9,539.36
66200 · Payroll Services	1,101.95
66300 · Salary	8,059.11
66000 · Payroll Expenses - Other	<u>594.86</u>
Total 66000 · Payroll Expenses	19,295.28
68300 · Travel and Meetings	
68310 · Conference, Convention, Meeting	473.13
68320 · Travel	<u>88.03</u>
Total 68300 · Travel and Meetings	561.16
Total Expense	<u>40,091.66</u>
Net Ordinary Income	<u>3,168.00</u>
Net Income	<u>3,168.00</u>

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Let's address these categories one-by-one and generate solutions on how to eliminate the cost. Keep in mind that there are likely many different solutions to these problems, I'm just going to present those which I came up with.

Business registration fees: \$920

Legal fees: \$1,867

The business registration fees and legal fees are related, so let's cover them both at once.

The business registration fee is a cost the government charges you to legally operate an organization, which could be a business or non-profit. There is usually an initial fee to open the organization and then annual fees to keep it open. You can eliminate this fee completely by never forming a legal organization for your learning center. In this sense, the members of your learning center will not be a part of an organization, they'll simply be a group of teens eager and interested in learning.

The legal fees in the Income Statement are from hiring a lawyer to register their business as a legal entity. Similar to the registration fees, you can eliminate this cost from your learning center by not legally organizing. Again, there's no need to hire a lawyer if you are just a group of young people getting together with a common interest in learning.

Not only will you save money on registration fees and legal fees, you'll also save a lot of time because you won't have to file taxes, an annual business report, or have formal board meetings.

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This may not sound valuable now, but it is a great benefit. I recently heard of a self-directed learning center who was being investigated for violating labor laws who got audited and, in order to avoid being shut down, the founders had to provide detailed evidence of their payroll, taxes, overtime, tax exemptions, vaccinations, and a receipt for every purchase they made in the last 18 months. You can imagine the cost of all this work was outrageous.

You are probably wondering: what do we lose by not forming a legal organization? Surely there must be a benefit if all of the established learning centers are legal entities, right?

Generally speaking, forming a legal organization means that the property of your organization is legally protected; an organization can own property and equipment, have bank accounts, take out loans, etc. A legal organization also protects the individuals involved in that organization from legal liability. So if something goes wrong, the organization can be sued, not the individuals.

While it may sound like a loss to give up these rights, there are tradeoffs that make it worth it. For example, by not becoming a legal entity, you have no leader or person who is in charge of you. There is a major benefit to your freedom, because many areas have laws that dictate where you can be in public as a legally organized group. In New York state, organizing an after-school program with more than five members or a summer program with more than ten members requires special licensing.^{183 184} If you don't form a legal organization, you are simply a group of people coming together, and no licensing is needed.

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Rent, parking, utilities: \$9,465

The second largest expense for a learning center is paying rent for the space you are residing in. Many learning centers try to reduce this cost as much as possible by negotiating deals with non-profit organizations like churches that aren't using their space during the week. The South Jersey Sudbury School used a similar tactic; they rent space from a YMCA summer camp during the school year since they only use their space in the summer. I've even heard of learning centers that initially operate out of the founder's home to reduce costs until they had enough students paying tuition to pay for rent in a private space.

One frustrating challenge to finding space is that the number of students attending a new learning center is often highly variable in the first few years, and many centers have to quickly relocate to a new space that can accommodate their growing students. Worse yet, some founders overestimate how many students they'll have and accidentally rent a space too large and expensive for their small community. One learning center I visited, the Dida Academy in Brooklyn, NY, solved this problem by renting shared office space from a co-working facility which charged them on a per-student basis to help them adjust incrementally as their student enrollment grew.

Just as we found a way around business registration fees and legal fees, there is a way around paying rent as well. We can eliminate this expense entirely by using space that is freely available. The library is a perfect option. All of the space in the library is open to the public for free and

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includes freely accessible books, computers, and even a staff! Most libraries even offer smaller meeting rooms for any private gatherings you want to organize.

This is one of the great advantages to not registering our learning center as legal organization: you can access public resources more freely. If you were a legal business, you would be far more limited in how you could use the library, because businesses cannot co-opt the library for their own purposes. However, as an unaffiliated group of teens, you're simply patrons of the library using it for its intended purposes.

John Taylor Gatto offers some strong support in favor of youth tapping into the public library as a resource for self-directed learning. He writes:

To begin with, libraries are usually comfortable, clean, and quiet. They are orderly places where you can actually read instead of just pretending to read.

For some reason, libraries are never age-segregated, nor do they presume to segregate readers by questionable tests of ability any more than farms or forests or oceans do. The librarian doesn't tell me what to read, doesn't tell me what sequence of reading I have to follow, doesn't grade my reading. The librarian trusts me to have a worthwhile purpose of my own. I appreciate that and trust the library in return.

Some other significant differences between

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libraries and schools: the librarian lets me ask my own questions and helps me when I want help, not when she decides I need it. If I feel like reading all day long, that's okay with the librarian, who doesn't compel me to stop at intervals by ringing a bell in my ear. The library keeps its nose out of my home. It doesn't send letters to my family, nor does it issue orders on how I should use my reading time at home.

The library doesn't play favorites; it's a democratic place as seems proper in a democracy. If the books I want are available, I get them, even if that decision deprives someone more gifted and talented than I am. The library never humiliates me by posting a ranked list of good readers. It presumes good reading is its own reward and doesn't need to be held up as an object lesson to bad readers. One of the strangest differences between a library and a school is that you almost never see a kid behaving badly in a library.

The library never makes predictions about my future based on past reading habits. It tolerates reading because it realizes most men and women are often very eccentric. Finally, the library has real books, not schoolbooks. I know the Moby Dick I find in the library won't have questions at the end of the chapter or be scientifically

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bowdlerized. Library books are not written by collective pens. At least not yet.¹⁸⁵

While libraries offer a wealth of resources, don't think of them as your only option, you can treat the library like your headquarters. Some towns also have community centers which are publicly available. Not to mention the parks and other outdoor spaces when weather permits. Get creative! You could even try to reach out to coffee shops or other local organizations who would allow you to use space for specific events or group meetups.

When I've shared this idea in workshops and talks I've given, one criticism I repeatedly hear is that libraries are too quiet and teens will want space they can be loud and run and play in. That's fine – because, guess what, you can go outside anytime you want! At school, students are only given the opportunity to play outside for about half an hour during recess; at our learning center, you can go outside and play all day if you choose. There are also private study rooms and group rooms at libraries that can be utilized for louder conversations. Lately, many libraries are even opening up “teen rooms” to specifically accommodate teens' needs.

Another criticism I've heard about libraries is that there are no music practice rooms available. Most libraries do have rooms available for people to use privately, however, many instruments are too loud for this setting (such as a drum set or trumpet). In these cases, you must get resourceful. You could offer to improve the library facility by soundproofing one of the private study rooms. If money is an issue to pay for soundproofing materials, throw a small benefit concert

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in the community to raise the money.

You can also look at spaces beyond the library to play music or make louder noise. Maybe the local community center has a space allowing for more noise, or you could play outside at the park, or find another space in your community to be loud. Some grocery stores have community meeting space, as do many bookstores and coffee shops. You could even check with the local churches, even if you don't have a religious affiliation, many of them offer space freely to teens when they ask. The key is: keep an open mind and reach out to potential resources and ask. You will be surprised what doors are opened to you once you ask.

One recent story in the news provides a window into what is possible. Kerry McDonald recently wrote an article about the Chicago Teachers Strike, and found that the teachers strike has shown that communities can become open centers for learning in the absence of schools. She writes:

As the Chicago strike shows, when government schooling is not the centerpiece of a child's life, community organizations step up to provide support and care. Museums, churches, libraries, and a multitude of civic nonprofits are opening their doors to children displaced by the teachers' strike, and public parks and playgrounds abound.¹⁸⁶

In her article, titled "Chicago Teachers' Strike Shows Why We Don't Need Public Schools," she reports the YMCA is

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running classes at 11 locations throughout the city, the Boys & Girls Club is open all day to support youth, the aquarium is offering programming, and local libraries are too. It is amazing how the potential for community involvement can be revealed during an apparent crisis.

The Alliance for Self-Directed Education is also rallying behind libraries. Last year, they started an initiative called “Libraries as Centers for SDE” and they’ve finally received a grant to perform a research study in this space.

In Dr. Peter Gray’s announcement about the initiative he declared:

An overriding goal of ASDE is to make [self-directed education] available to everyone seeking it. Achieving that goal would seem to require a means of obtaining public financial support for [self-directed education] learning centers. The direct approach would be to try to make at least some public money in town or state school budgets available to [self-directed education] centers. However, that approach is likely to create great resistance. One form of that resistance would be school-like requirements regarding such centers, which would run counter to principles of [self-directed education]. I am suggesting here an indirect approach, an end run around the school system.

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Libraries are already centers for [self-directed education]. Libraries everywhere are already interested in expanding their services. Some are becoming toy and tool lenders as well as book lenders. Most of them offer community educational services such as book discussion clubs and programs of films and speakers. Most librarians are also quite familiar with and supportive of homeschoolers, because homeschoolers, on average, make much more use of libraries than do other people. Librarians also, largely, tend to be people who support [self-directed education] (whether they know it or not). They are trained to help people learn what they want to learn, not tell people what to learn. They also have a long history of defending freedom of thought and expression.¹⁸⁷

In response to Peter's announcement, parents around the world responded to share how the libraries in their communities are already evolving to accommodate the teens in their community. A few highlights:¹⁸⁸

Our library is THE hub for activity in our community. I would say it is a pretty broad self-directed education center already with our City Arts and Cultural Center operating out of the building, spaces for all kinds of workshops, many classes and indoor recreational activities, Repair Cafes, etc.... Meeting rooms that normally require a fee

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have had the fee waived for us with a smile even though we don't meet their non-profit waiver status....

- Cassandra

As a military family, we've moved a bit and been involved with different libraries in different parts of the US. Some have had beautiful open-ended spaces. One, in particular, had a space in the basement full of technology from robot-building to 3D printers to quilting machines, and even Minecraft clubs for kids

- Kelley

In our library system in Mesa, AZ we are fortunate that they have recently developed a ThinkSpot where certain equipment (3D printers, sewing machines, green room with cameras, etc.) is made available for the public's use – sort of like a Maker Space...

- Michelle

Many libraries have developed or are developing spaces specifically for teens and more recently tweens. Often these are tied to makerspaces/hackerspaces etc.... Our teen/tween area is owned by the kids. Adults are restricted and must be accompanied by a teen/tween. Noise and chaos are expected and welcomed.... Of course libraries also come with built in facilitators – librarians — who are trained and passionate about

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helping people – kids to adults – to navigate the system.

- Mare

The libraries in Canada are amazing. They have anywhere from 3-30 modern meeting rooms available for free booking and they are often empty during the day as most programming for adults and school kids occur at night and programming for babies and toddlers (and their parents) are in the morning. That leaves afternoons as the sweet spot for homeschoolers. Our unschooling teens have a student-led book/movie/video game discussion group that meets once a week at one of these meeting rooms in the library and they have access to a screen, media player, computer, and even a small kitchen.

The libraries have many computers equipped with specialty software like Adobe InDesign that the kids can use for free.... The libraries run a weekly teen video game sessions at 3 pm and also offer snacks and board games for the kids to play as others are on the video games. Libraries are not worried about noise or running children here – they really are quite progressive as they realize that they are no longer just hubs for book lending.

- Judy

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I am beyond thrilled about the Northeast Regional Library that opened last month in Louisville, KY. It is a magnificent 40,000 square foot building on 13.5 acres, it includes a spacious Maker Pavilion – an audio/video studio; maker space; maker kitchen and a yoga space; as well as a walking trail and outdoor learning space to come. I've met with the Children & Teen Program Manager for a tour and she was opened to everything I asked about utilizing the library for [self-directed] teens.

- Rene

One legitimate obstacle to accessing the libraries, is that some have age restrictions on whether youth can be at the library without a parent and/or whether youth can reserve a private meeting room without an adult either signing off on the reservation or being physically present in the room with the youth. This type of restriction is incredibly frustrating, even infuriating.

For example, the West Nyack Free Library in West Nyack, New York states in their policies for meeting room reservations, that:

Youth groups using the meeting room(s) must have at least one adult (21 or over) present at all times.¹⁸⁹

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Yet just seven lines below this rule, is another rule saying:

No program or organization using the meeting room will discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, or handicapped status in the provision of services.¹⁸⁹

To overcome this obstacle, this type of rule needs to be changed. Getting a rule that discriminates against youth changed is very difficult, especially when young people cannot vote. If you can get a group of students together to protest outside the library, the embarrassment of the library being seen as a place preventing youth from learning could be enough pressure to get them to change their rules. You may find they will pay more attention to you if you also have parents and other adults supporting your cause. Getting a petition going in your town, or even within library patrons and staff, showing public support of changing the age restrictions on youth can also help. It may sound daunting, but people will show lots of support for a group of teens who are trying to learn but are being prevented by weak library policies.

Another option, which I hope can become a reality, is to rally together with other members of the broader self-directed education movement, who will write letters and make phone calls to the library, calling them out on their discrimination against youth. By connecting with other youth in a similar situation, possibly through the Peer Unschooling Network, you can get more people calling and writing letters to get these types of policies changed. Of course, it may seem like forcing your way in the door will

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create an environment where you don't feel comfortable in the space which previously restricted you. Keep in mind that just because a policy is discriminatory against youth, doesn't mean that 100% of the staff at the library support said rules. This rule may simply be one that the library director supports, or even may be a leftover rule from a previous library director. Don't assume everyone is against you, you're likely to have more support than you realize.

Whenever you face an obstacle in life, there are multiple options. You can find a way to overcome this obstacle by yourself, get some support, or find a completely different avenue. So it may make the library an unusable space, which is an absolute shame, but don't let that discourage you from seeking access to other spaces in your community.

Printing and Copying: \$3,290

Princeton Learning Coop spent over \$3,000 on printing and copying in their first year. When I looked at their 2nd year financial statements, this dollar amount went down to \$500. After checking with Joel, he shared with me that they spent a lot of money on information packets that they would hand out at their promotional events. Because of the high cost for printing these packets, they switched to printing simple business cards with a link pointing to a page on their website that contained more detailed information.

To reduce the cost of printing and copying to as close to zero as possible, do your best to use digital materials instead of printing on paper. You can use shared Google Docs, Google Drives, and social media for sharing

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information. If necessary, the library has printing services that you can pay for on an as-needed basis.

I travelled nomadically for four years without bringing a printer and was able to use very little paper. On those rare instances I needed to print, I just visited a library, or Kinko's, or FedEx.

Payroll Expenses: \$19,295

The final expense we'll address is also the biggest expense for every learning center: the staff. As I mentioned before, new staff members at PLC were required to endure the "year of pain," where they would earn very little money in their first year until additional students would join who were paying tuition.

As you may guess from my suggestions in the previous budget items, I suggest you cut this cost entirely by not hiring a staff at all. Instead, use freely existing resources!

This may sound a bit crazy and it's important not to minimize the value that staff members bring to learning centers. They provide mentorship, help youth find resources, provide guidance to families who are learning about unschooling for the first time, handle the logistics of running the business, ensure the facilities are maintained, deal with bookkeeping and paying bills, promote the learning center through marketing and advertising, and some even shovel the sidewalks in the winter.

We can eliminate the need for paid staff by taking each task normally managed by a staff member and handling it with

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three options: (1) eliminate the need for this task to be completed entirely (like bookkeeping and business filings), (2) take on the responsibility of the task ourselves (such as promoting the learning center), or (3) find adult volunteers to contribute their time for free (like providing mentorship).

By far, the biggest untapped resource to consider are librarians. Libraries already are already paying librarians so you don't have to! Most librarians have a master's degree in library science and are trained to help people (like you) to find whatever information or resources they are looking for. Use them!

You can also reach out to people in your community to come teach a class for an hour or two a week as volunteers. In school, you are accustomed to seeing each teacher everyday where they have to convey information to 15 to 30 students all at once. In self-directed learning, you don't need someone to spoon-feed you information every day. What you need is someone to guide you through particular challenges, offer advice, answer questions - this can be done with much less frequency and formality through mentors.

Be resourceful and cut out the need for a full-time staff to babysit you. This doesn't mean you're doing everything on your own, but it means you are in charge of being your own administrator.

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SOLVING THE “PEOPLE PROBLEM”

This is a good time to dive much deeper into the second problem that learning centers face, which I call the “people problem.”

As I mentioned, the “people problem” is two-fold: there are not enough leaders to open self-directed learning centers and the leaders that start them quickly get burnt out. Without a leader, the learning center never opens. When a leader gets burnt out and quits, the center shuts down, leaving a lot of teens in a precarious position. Relying so much on a single individual creates an incredibly fragile system.

We can address these two problems by moving away from a solo adult being the leader of our learning center, and instead, empower the youth themselves be the leaders.

Since the number of teens far out-number the number of adults in any educational setting, this solves the problem of there not being enough leaders. We also avoid potential burnout by distributing the responsibilities of operating the learning center across all the teens, so that all the weight doesn’t fall on one person’s shoulders.

At first, taking on all the responsibilities of the staff may sound like a very intimidating undertaking. However, please be reminded of what roles and responsibilities the staff members of a place like a Sudbury School actually take on. As Brian Foglia, the staff member who started the South Jersey Sudbury School shared previously:

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Staff at Sudbury schools are passive resources for the kids. We do not interfere in students' activities unless there is a safety issue or school rules are being broken. We do not even propose or recommend specific activities unless one or more students solicits that recommendation. We are available to help in any way if the students desire our help. Aside from that we do all the administrative tasks necessary to run a school/business.¹⁹⁰

We are mainly talking here about administrative tasks, some of which can be eliminated entirely by not becoming a legal business, some which become the responsibility of the facility you're using (like the library staff), and some which teens must take on themselves. To be clear, being a learning center instead of a school removes most of the administrative work. There is no need for attendance and grade reporting and all of the IEP's and 504's that teachers have to put together because you are not a school, you are a learning center.

The greatest value that adults bring to the table is their non-administrative role in providing mentorship and guidance. I do agree with the Sudbury Schools that sometimes adults can impose their interests on young people who simply aren't interested or feel like they must do what the adults want out of obligation. However, I don't agree that the solution is to mostly exclude adults from being involved in the learning center. Much like Ken Danford at North Star says, I think it's important that young people be empowered to say "no" to things they don't want to do. It's

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up to your group to decide how much involvement you want adults to have in your learning center as a whole, and up to each individual member of your learning center to decide how involved adults are in their lives.

While it's obvious that people like librarians are already available to support you, you may be wondering how you can get other adults to volunteer their time to support your learning center. Fortunately, there is a roadmap available for this process.

During my visit to Beacon Learning Center, which is a Liberated Learners Center in New Haven, CT, I learned that a venture capitalist was teaching their biology class as a volunteer. It seemed unusual to have such an accomplished volunteer teach a class and I was curious to learn more about where guest speakers like this man came from.

Fortunately, I heard Joel Hammon explain why people love volunteering their time at learning centers when he appeared as a guest on Blake Boles' podcast:

Volunteers tell us, 'coming in here for an hour a week and working with a handful of kids who are really interested in what I have to offer is the best hour of my week.' They love it, it's meaningful to them and there's not a lot of opportunities for people to do that.¹⁹¹

Joel went on to describe how Princeton Learning Cooperative currently has 3 full-time staff but there are

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about 35 part-time people involved in supporting the 30 teens who attend. Some of the part-timers are work-study college students who get paid through their university, but most are volunteers.

Joel shared their clever recruitment process:

We started a class last year, it's called 'Career Explorations.' It's basically just an excuse for us to write to people. We just write to anybody. We have a handful of kids who are committed to having lunch on one day a week. We write to any interesting people we find out about in the community. We write to them and say, "Hey - would you be interested in coming in for an hour to have lunch with a group of kids and talk about your career, what you're interested in, and how you got there?" And we have about a 100% success rate, it doesn't matter who we write to.¹⁹²

I emailed Joel asking for details and he said the teens email interesting people in their community that they know about or see profiled in the local newspaper or that they have researched because they have a particular expertise a teen is interested in, like a veterinarian. They invite the person in to visit for an hour during lunch where the teens interview them about their career and life. If there's an interest from the teens, they'll then ask the volunteer to come in on a regular basis. If there's no interest, they don't follow up with the guest anymore.¹⁹³

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This brings up another reason why you should think of the library as your headquarters rather than your entire learning center. It may be easy to get a volunteer to come to your location for a one-hour event, but if you want repeated involvement, you may need to be willing to travel to where they are. Or, you may have a volunteer with a job like a mechanic, who can share a lot in an hour at a library about their work, but it really makes sense to be on-site at their location for future meetings and more detailed instruction. Regular meetings with a mechanic could easily lead into something like a regular apprenticeship or internship.

I personally used a similar approach to reaching out to volunteers while organizing the Peer Unschooling Network's Create+Connect summer program. The program involved matching up teens with mentors in their respective field of interest for a three-month period. In most cases, I asked for a full three-month commitment from the mentors, which is a lot to ask for. Fortunately, I had a network of friends and colleagues I was able to reach out to who were willing to help.

There were, however, two teens who were both interested in careers as writers, and I didn't have anyone in mind that I knew well enough to ask to volunteer as mentors for a full three months. I did, however, have a handful of people who I knew well enough to ask for an hour of their time, so I essentially proposed to run a "virtual" version of the "Career Exploration" class that Joel ran at Princeton Learning Cooperative.

To give you something concrete, here is an example of an email I sent to Peter Gray to invite him to participate as a

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mentor in the Create+Connect program:

Subject: Mentoring a couple young writers

Hi, Peter.

As you may be aware, PUN is running an online program this summer called Create+Connect that matches young people up with mentors to help them create a project. We have two young people in the program who are avid writers that want to learn more about how to get their word out into the world.

Would you be willing to have 1 or 2 hour-long group video calls with them to share your experiences as a writer and answer any questions they have?

The program runs from June 23 to September 13. We'd work within your flexibility, so if you can only meet once, that would work too!

Please let me know if you are interested.

Jim Flannery

Notice that I very clearly state why I am emailing him specifically with this request - because he is a writer. I also

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make it very clear exactly what I am asking him for - to participate in one or two hour-long video calls. These two pieces are critical: it makes sure that the email is relevant to who you are writing to and makes it very clear what the request is. I try to avoid too much extra information unless the person asks for it, because their time is valuable. If you're having trouble drafting your email, you can always ask the librarians for help.

Just like Joel Hammon reported, when I sent out emails to potential volunteers, I had a 100% success rate of getting people to spend an hour meeting with a group of teens. I'll admit, I had two advantages over Joel. First, I was emailing people that I already knew, which increases the likelihood they'll reply. And second, since I was requesting video chat meetings, the volunteers didn't even have to leave their office to have the meeting. It made it quite difficult for them to say "no."

In your case, there is a good chance you will be reaching out to people you've never met. This will likely reduce your success rate, but that is perfectly normal. Always look to see where there may be a way to find something connecting you and the person you are writing to, to increase your chances of getting a reply and a meeting. If you write to people who live in or near your community, they will likely feel a connection to you and your learning center, so be sure to emphasize your location. It will also help build connection when they know you are specifically interested in their field of work. It also never hurts to mention if you have a friend or relative in common. Mentioning you are a teenager is also important as people tend to like helping out young people. If you can put these

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terms in your subject-line, that also helps. As an example, something like “Wethersfield teens interested in web development” would have been a great subject line when I was a teen if I was trying to contact a complete stranger who was a web developer in my hometown of Wethersfield, CT to get some advice about computer programming.

It's unlikely that every single teen at your learning center will find the perfect mentor already living in your neighborhood. It will happen sometimes, but not 100% of the time. You should plan to reach outside of your immediate community for volunteers as well, just expect to have a lower success rate. It takes some vulnerability and courage to put yourself out there in the world and to keep pushing forward after hearing people tell you “no” or, worse yet, having people never reply to you at all. Don't be too discouraged, it's a normal part of the process.

One possible tactic to increase your success rate in recruiting volunteers is to use snail mail to contact potential mentors and teachers. Most of the mail I receive is junk mail, but I always open any mail which has an envelope that is hand-written, which indicates to me that it is not junk. Just be sure that your handwriting is legible!

Much like we discussed in the unschooling section, it is a good idea to ask volunteers for introductions to other potential volunteers. For example, if you have one person volunteer to talk about their experience as a professional musician, they likely know other musicians who would also be willing to come in and talk about their experiences. Asking them to introduce you to others is a great way to

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make a future connection.

While we're talking about volunteers, let me make one more important point: they don't necessarily need to be professionals. I have been mentioning volunteers as being "professionals" or people who make a career out of their work, but there are also other people who are hobbyists who could provide value. For example, I myself am not a professional physicist, but I love physics, am knowledgeable about it, and would love to meet with teens to discuss this subject. Same goes with public speaking, painting, stand-up comedy, rock climbing, hiking, and other interests of mine. Be resourceful and keep an open mind to who may be able to offer you some guidance and support.

Retired professionals are also great resources to. Just last month, I took a 3D printing class at a local library that was taught by a retired engineer. He spent about four hours with me, one-on-one, teaching me how to use their new 3D printer. Because he was a retired professional, he was able to share with me all of the interesting applications for 3D printing in a real, professional setting, as opposed to just theory. Sometimes retired professionals can be far better than a trained teacher because of all their practical work experience.

One last concrete idea to share with you about volunteers. The Hive, a self-directed learning center in Eugene, OR started by Grace Llewellyn, just recently posted on their Facebook page looking for volunteers to teach classes. I thought this would be a useful example since it was directly from the real-world as well:¹⁹⁴

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The Hive: Self-Directed Learning for Teens 27 mins · 🌐

We're starting to build out our fall calendar, and seeking volunteer teachers for weekly one hour classes, 4 weeks or longer (so a 4-hour commitment) - YOU? Our latest blog post muses on the fact that awesome adults tend to show up in Self-Directed Education spaces.



THEHIVEFORTEENS.ORG

Labors and Love

Grace Llewellyn Extraordinarily fun, brilliant, warm, creative, generous adu...

👍 2

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

A quick warning about involving adults, especially if they are former teachers or parents. It's good to include adults as advisors, allies, coaches, mentors, consultants, supporters, and even invite them in to teach a class - but do not give them decision-making power over your group. This can become a very slippery slope as they can sometimes take over a group, believing (as most adults do) that they know better than you.

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People have often asked me why I am putting this book out before I've "tested" the idea of launching a teen-led zero-tuition learning center. The simple fact is that my leading the project would inherently reduce the decision-making power of the teens. I'm happy to offer guidance and suggestions, but it needs to be *your* learning center, not *mine*.

This issue of allowing well-intentioned adults to participate without giving them decision-making power reminds me of a similar issue which the psychiatric ex-patient / survivor movement faced starting in the 1970's that still continues to this day. That movement deals with lots of oppression, coercion, and force; doctors deem the so-called "mental patients" incapable of taking care of themselves and making their own decisions, which is incredibly disempowering. To counteract this oppression, activists started creating their own non-clinical alternatives to the mental health system, which they ran themselves. Almost immediately, clinical professionals tried to take over their spaces.

Human rights activist Judi Chamberlin wrote in detail about this problem in her pioneering book *On Our Own: Patient-Controlled Alternatives to the Mental Health System*. You can simply substitute the word "adult" or "teacher" everywhere she mentions "professionals" and substitute "teens" or "students" anywhere she mentions "patients" or "members":

Although some professionals may be involved... their participation is deliberately limited by the members.... Most mental

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health professionals, conditioned by their belief that patients are incapable of self-directed activity, cannot go along with the limited role allotted to them under the supportive model. Sometimes, professionals in this situation attempt more direction of the group than is needed or desired by the members... Many professionals deeply resent being excluded from meetings and activities of the group. In fact, this is one of the organizational problems with which any group attempting to set up as an alternative service will probably have to deal with early in its existence... the setting up of alternatives will frequently attract a number of well-meaning professionals... and an immediate number of relatives [like parents]... As we have seen, ex-patient consciousness raising cannot take place in such mixed groups... it must be up to the ex-patient members of the group to determine the degree that non-patients may participate ... those professionals and other non-patients who fight attempts by ex-patients to exclude them from some meetings are precisely the same people who will probably attempt to control and direct the group. Those non-patients who recognize the need for consciousness-raising meetings and don't object to being excluded from them are the only non-patients who can participate successfully...¹⁹⁵ [underlining added for emphasis]

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To be clear, I'm perfectly aware that I risk being perceived as hypocritical in presenting that you shouldn't let adults make decisions for you, while simultaneously presenting you with this guide for creating a learning center. Consider me a supportive ally, not a decision-maker. Take this information and use it to serve your needs and your priorities, not mine.

OTHER NECESSITIES

On our first pass through the Princeton Learning Cooperative Income Statements, I skipped over all the Expenses that were less than \$1,000 for the year. Though they are individually small amounts, they add up to a total of 7% of the annual budget, which is not insignificant. Let's take a look at what these expenses are, just to make sure we're not missing anything financially. These budget categories include: Advertising, Website, Books, Subscriptions, Reference, Postage, Mail, and Supplies.

Advertising is important since it will enable other teens to find out about your learning center. That being said, you can advertise without spending money using free resources. The most popular and common approach to this is social media. If you can reach teens in your community and neighboring communities through social media, I highly recommend it.

It may seem scary at first reaching out to communities outside of your own. When I grew up, my parents' house was a block away from the next town over. Because of this 'invisible line', I pretty much never got to know anyone in

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that town; it was like a foreign territory not to be explored. As an adult, I realize these 'invisible lines' were an unnecessary barrier to meeting and connecting with others. Stretch your comfort zone and expand your reach to neighboring communities to find the right people to join your learning center.

If you do want to spend some money on advertising, I've had a lot of success with SnapChat. In fact, there's a good chance that's how you found out about this book! SnapChat allows you to cost effectively target a specific town and age range with your message. For as little as \$20, I've been able to get the word out about comedy shows to an entire community of teens. The key is to make sure it is very clear that your ad is directed at teens living in that community. When someone sees the ad and they know it was intended specifically for them, they are far more likely to click on it. When I promoted my comedy shows, I dressed in a wacky costume and used a green screen to put the local high school behind me in my ads. This made it very clear that my ad was intended for young people in that specific city. The fact I was dressed so ridiculous conveyed that there was something funny involved. Once they swipe up on my ad, then they would see a regular video of me talking to them to promote my upcoming show. So I got their attention first and then shared my specific message.

Aside from social media, you can try posting fliers around your school or in community areas where teens like to hang out. You will know better than I do where teens hang out in your area, maybe the movie theater, coffee shop, miniature golf course, arcade, or skate park. Be sure to post something at the library too, even though it's not a teen-

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specific space, any teen already visiting the library is likely to be highly interested in your self-directed learning center.

When doing marketing or advertising, always be careful about the words you use to communicate to your intended audience. If you have read this entire book, you may have learned some new vocabulary words that your average teen may not understand.

Lastly, I hope to make the Peer Unschooling Network website a place where people who read this book can find each other to organize their local groups. I am doing my best to get the word out about this book, but don't rely on me. Though PUN has members from around the world, I cannot guarantee it is the best place to find peers in your immediate location.

The next expense on the Income Statement is Websites. If you want to create a website, you can get a simple, free website on Weebly.com, Wix.com, or WordPress.com. As a small warning, having a website could potentially give people the impression you are an "organization." Tread carefully with that decision. If needed, you can get your own domain name for about \$15 a year from Godaddy. If the idea of building websites excites you, I have some tutorial videos on my personal site at Jim-Flannery.com that can help you build more elaborate sites.

The category on the Income statement for Books, Subscriptions, and Reference is completely covered by the library. You don't have to worry about this expense at all. In case you are not aware, libraries have subscriptions to many journals, magazines, and news sources - including

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online versions of the content. Libraries also do inter-library loans, so if your library does not have a book you want, they can often contact other libraries and have it loaned to your library at no charge. This is an unbelievable resource that very few people are even aware of. Many libraries also have subscriptions to software, like the Adobe software suite. I have to pay a \$39/month fee for all my Adobe software, but many libraries get this completely free. Always check with them to see what they have available, and let the librarians know if there is something you want them to get which they don't have. It is their job to serve the community's needs, which include yours - don't be shy to express your needs.

For the Postage and Mail expense, you can probably get by in 99% of cases with digital communications, like email. While this isn't exactly postage or mail, it makes sense to mention here that when I have to send faxes, which is rare, I use FaxZero.com to send them for free.

The last expense mentioned in the Income Statement is Supplies, which is pretty vague and non-specific. Supplies could include art materials, computer accessories, music instruments, paper and pens, power tools and building materials, or any other material or item you might need to aid your self-directed learning.

Obviously, these can be bought with money, but let's explore the methods of getting your hands on free supplies without spending money.

North Star developed a great tactic for obtaining free resources for their teens by putting out a quarterly printed

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newsletter. The newsletter contains articles written by staff, teens, and alumni with updates about what’s happening at North Star. Every issue of the newsletter also includes a “Wish List,” where they ask for specific things the teens are trying to get their hands on. Here is an example of their most recent “Wish List”:¹⁹⁶

WISH LIST

ITEMS

Outdoor furniture

Bowls for eating
Quality kitchen knives
Cutting boards
Baking pans and sheets
Stand or hand-held mixer

Computers and tablets in good condition
3-D printer
Graduated cylinders
B&W 35 mm film
USB-C to USB dongle
Hand-held dry erase boards
Room-darkening shades

House plants
Perennial garden plants
Landscaping materials
Quality basketball hoop

Guitar strings

Drum skins
Amp
Ukelele

White noise machine

VOLUNTEER SKILLS

Paving of our parking lot
Handyman/woman
Snowplowing services
Solar power
Teachers in a variety of topics (contact loran@northstarteens.org)

ALSO...

Renters for our building (evenings, weekends, summer)
An endowment

Contact:
info@northstarteens.org

You could always produce and ship out your own newsletter, like North Star does, but that may be a bit of a stretch for a new group because of the time and cost to produce the newsletter. Instead, you could create a newsletter and publish it online. The Brooklyn Apple Academy puts out a monthly newsletter called the Apple Gazette featuring comics and photos and interviews, which they sell at their learning center in a printed format but also distribute for free online.¹⁹⁷ Though they do not have a “Wish List”, they could very easily use this newsletter to

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request support.

You could always post a “Wish List” on your website, if you make one, however not many people are likely to visit your website on a regular basis. It's more important to get this list of needs directly in front of people, so be sure to create an email list that you can send out information through. Even posting your “Wish List” as a flier on the walls of the library, community center, local coffee shops, post office, or other venues could get your words in front of people.

To be clear, you don't necessarily need to create a whole newsletter to ask for support. A direct request for donated supplies and materials can be just as effective. You could also use social media to reach out to other teens in your network to ask for supplies.

You may also find support by reaching out to adults in your community. One useful tool for doing so is NextDoor.com, which is a free social networking app that allows you to post messages to reach adults in your neighborhood.

Another option is to call local businesses directly who may have specific items you are looking for and ask for donations. For example, if you are looking for tools, maybe a local construction company has extra ones they no longer use that they'd be willing to donate. Even if you think they'll say 'no', reaching out and asking isn't a horrible way of letting them know your group exists, which could make it easier to reach out in the future to ask them to be volunteers.

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I know it sounds difficult to reach out and ask for help. In our modern society, we so often avoid being vulnerable and asking for help. However, it truly is a great way to reach people and make connections. I remember hitchhiking last year in Ireland and I actually built great connections with the people who offered me rides; far more meaningful than I would have developed by riding the bus.

Lastly, and certainly not least, you can also find supplies at the local dump! This may sound like garbage picking, because it is, but lots of communities have a section of their local dump called the “drop and pick” where people leave useful items they no longer want and allow other people to take them for free. You never know what you’ll find. My brother in-law is a master of the “drop and pick”, and has found brand new skis and tons of tools he uses at his heating and air conditioning company. One time when I watched his five kids while he and my sister were away for a week, we all went to the dump for an adventure and came back with all sorts of fun supplies and created a holiday scene on their front lawn with trash. When searching Google for the local dump, you may want to use the term “transfer station,” which is the more technical term for these places.

TRANSPORTATION

At this stage, I hope that I’ve convinced you that it is possible to get a great education without school and that it is feasible to organize a zero-tuition, student-led learning center in your community. The antifragile model I’ve described will work because the two primary failure

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mechanisms of self-directed learning centers are solved: the Money Problem and the People Problem. However, just because your learning center won't fail, doesn't mean it is going to thrive.

There are still a handful of obstacles to overcome.

Transportation is, in my opinion, the biggest hurdle to making this idea take off. The public schools have this problem solved quite effectively: a free bus shows up in front of every kid's home every morning to pick them up and drop them off at school. Without such a system already in place, you'll have to get creative on how you'll get to your learning center.

Transportation is not a problem that is unique to your learning center. Transportation is also a problem for the Liberated Learners Centers, Agile Learning Centers, and Sudbury Schools. All of them require the youth to find a way to get to the learning center on their own. Some walk, some ride bikes or skateboards, some take the city bus, and many get rides from parents.

Where your learning center is located will make a big impact on how people are able to get there. Neil Karkhanis attends a Sudbury School in New Jersey during half the school year and one in Florida during the other half of the school year. When I interviewed him, he emphasized the impact location and setting had on transportation:

It's different for everyone. For cities and places that have easy public transport, it's easier to get to school. [In Jersey], we have a

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huge campus, like a YMCA, where we can walk around for hours. That's a benefit to us. I remember Dylan rode an Uber back from school for a while, because obviously not every parent can get their kids to school if they have to work or things like that. [The school] does adapt differently if its a suburban area, a rural area, or a big city. The biggest differences are how you get there and what you can do off campus.¹⁹⁸

Several founders of learning centers have expressed that when choosing a location to open their center, being located along a bus line or near a train station was a critical feature. At WorkSpace Education in Bethel, CT, the executive director even contacted the town and requested that they reroute the local bus lines to ensure the bus would pass directly by their location. In many towns and cities, the library will be on the bus line, which again, makes it a great place to set as your headquarters.

When the local bus line is not a valid option, you've got to be innovative and collaborative. Maybe you can organize a carpool where older kids with driver's licenses can offer to pick up younger kids. Maybe some parents are willing to collaborate to offer rides to other kids on certain days. Maybe you can use Uber or Lyft.

You could even go to town meetings to get rules changed to allow you to take the regular school bus and simply get off at a stop near the library. In the town I grew up in, the middle school, high school and the local library were all within a few blocks of each other. During my teen years, I

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could hypothetically have taken the bus to school and walked to the library everyday – if they allowed me to. In truth, I would likely have had to fight an uphill battle with the administration for that right, since homeschoolers are typically excluded from using the school bus.¹⁹⁹

While it seems fair to request that you be able to ride the bus since it's already going by your house and you are saving the town a lot of money by not attending school, there tend to be strict policies and rules against deviating from the norm. In some cases, exceptions will be made if you are an individual and you keep fairly quiet. In other cases, there is a lot of value in having strength in numbers, and having a large group of teens show up to a town council meeting demanding the right to ride the bus could be more effective.

If you're not allowed to ride the school bus, similar tactics could be used to demand free access to the local bus. I contacted Margie Sanderson, a grown unschooler who is a Board Member for the National Youth Rights Association, and she told me that she is actively involved in a campaign like this right now in British Columbia, Canada. The "All on Board" campaign is advocating for free transit on public transportation for youth ages 0-18 and a sliding scale based on income for monthly passes for all adults.²⁰⁰

Programs like this already exist in cities like Philadelphia, where they've completely done away with school busses in favor of giving youth free access to public busses. As Margie describes:

In Philadelphia, young people can get free transit passes as an alternative to the district

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offering school bussing. It's a great system!

This is sort of an intersection of disregard for young people and immense auto-orientation. The North American obsession with the private car has left our transit and bike infrastructure lagging far behind, but now with the growing climate crisis there are some cities starting to pay attention and trying to catch up. There is some cool work being done with UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities initiative, Tim Gill's Rethinking Childhood, and projects like Growing Up Boulder that are pushing to address the need for young people to be taken into account in urban planning, including of course transportation.

IMO, it'd be awesome to see more cities adopt a similar model to Philadelphia's Transpass system because it a) does away with the school bus and utilizes an already present and more efficient resource (public transit), b) builds the habit of transit ridership as opposed to private vehicle ridership, and c) is accessible to everyone, whether in school or unschooled. In my true ideal future we'd have free public transit for all.²⁰¹

Allowing youth free access to public transportation would solve a lot of problems related to youth liberation. Ken Danford at North Star shared with me that, in Western

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Massachusetts, the college students are allowed to ride the local bus for free, yet teens still have to pay.²⁰² Margie Sanderson shared a similar story about the city of Vancouver in British Columbia:

Vancouver also has the situation of offering free transit to college students but not high school students, through a program called the U Pass. At least here though, the U Pass is subsidized by the colleges, so it's not the public system that's paying for the college students free access but their own tuition money.²⁰³

I'm sure it sounds challenging to get rules and policies changed in your community, but it is possible. For example, through effective organizing in Raleigh, North Carolina, teens can ride the bus free as of August 2018.²⁰⁴

If the public transportation option is not available to you, there are private options, though they do cost money. A startup company called Hop, Skip, Drive launched in 2015 and offers rides for youth age 6 to 17 to and from school. It's like Uber for kids, except the drivers all have at least five years of experience in childcare. They are currently operating in California, central Colorado, Washington DC, Virginia, Arizona, southern Texas, and around Seattle, Washington.²⁰⁵

Getting to and from your learning center is important. Also important, is being able to leave in the middle of the day to go to other places. Whether you are looking to go to another location because of a class or academic activity is

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taking place somewhere else in the community, or because you want to take a break from learning and grab lunch or play in the park, it's helpful to be able to get around. For this reason, many learning centers find it helpful to be located in areas within walking distance to resources like shopping centers, community centers, restaurants, and public parks.

DECISION-MAKING AND RULES

Let me begin by saying: I don't like rules. I've never been one for following them, and being the one making them makes me uncomfortable. I've never felt like it was fair to impose restrictions on other people. I think part of my resistance to rules comes from growing up in an authoritarian setting at school. I also grew up in a community which was incredibly judgmental, which adds another layer of control. People were very critical of how you talked, how you looked, how you acted, what grades you were getting, what clothes you were wearing, what kind of car you were driving, and where you were going to school. In addition to all these social rules, I went to a public school with an endless array of rules that are designed to maintain order by controlling youth.

If you are utilizing public spaces like libraries, you will likely have to adhere to the rules of those spaces. As a group of teens using these spaces, you can advocate together to have rules and policies changed, but you may not have a lot of voice unless your group is large. You may find you simply cannot change the rules.

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What's more important for the success of your learning center, is the rules by which you organize and make decisions within your group. In the previous chapter, I described the weekly School Meeting that takes place at Sudbury Schools and the weekly 'Change Up' meeting that occurs at Agile Learning Centers. Adopting one of these democratic models may be useful to assist your group in decision-making and setting the rules of your learning center. Instead of feeling like you have to attach to one specific model, I suggest you adopt the features that resonate with you and your peers.

Don't feel too intimidated by the idea of there being rules. When I first visited a Sudbury School, I was somewhat expecting to meet kids who also felt the same way about rules as I do. I was incredibly surprised to find the opposite – they actually promoted the establishment of rules and structure. As they explained it to me, because the youth were the ones that were in control of the rule-making, they appreciated and valued the rules. They felt having a system they all agreed upon led to greater accountability, personal responsibility, and ultimately to more freedom. Anytime students feel there is a rule that isn't fair, they can actually take action to change it.

When students at a Sudbury School are written up for breaking a rule, the judicial committee of the Sudbury School handles the situation.

I asked South Jersey Sudbury School student, Dylan Marcus, to share his perspective on being written up by his peers in comparison to his experiences when he used to attend public school:

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It's so interesting when you are being punished by your friends and peers in a Sudbury environment rather than in a normal public school environment, where it is the teachers' or principal's responsibility to discipline the students. It is much easier as the student to say "f you why should I care what you have to say" to someone who you don't really care about, however, when it is your friends [telling you that you messed up], it definitely means a lot more to see the disappointment in their eyes.²⁰⁶

If this feels too formal, setting up a specific conflict resolution process to handle differences between students could be a useful tool. Agile Learning Centers, for example, describe a four-step process for handling conflicts:

Our process starts with breathing and deciding what/how to communicate with the involved people, attempting to communicate with them directly to address the issue, getting support communicating with them if the problem persists, and finally filing [a] form to gather the Culture Committee for conflict resolution help in cases where the previous steps prove insufficient.²⁰⁷

North Star, while they don't rely on a democratic process, does have a conflict resolution process they use. Ken Danford recently wrote about this in *Tipping Points*:

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North Star has a staff-moderated process for conflict resolution. We aim for immediate and mutually satisfactory reflection, explanation, and resolution. No staff member possesses “dictatorial” powers and any staff member initiating a complaint about a teen’s behavior must include another staff member and other interested parties to the discussion. Any serious conflict must also involve at least one parent in the process....

The first step is to have a private meeting with a staff member and any other relevant or desired witnesses.... When a conflict resolution meeting is called, both parties must stop what they are doing to discuss the situation. A person who refuses a meeting will be asked to leave the premises, and will not be welcome back until they are ready to have this conversation.... A second adult can ensure that any bias by the first adult might be recognized and called out, and also help the teen feel that they are not stuck alone with a person with whom they are already in conflict.²⁰⁸

As always, you will need to adapt your system to meet the specific needs of the individuals in your learning center. I find the democratic models are particularly valuable because they can evolve to meet the needs of your unique community.

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ON ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Throughout this chapter, I've emphasized the idea that your learning center should be tuition-free. While this is a great goal, it's also true that having money can give you access to more resources. What if your learning center needs additional computers? Or you decide you want to add a music room to the library? Or, most importantly, you want to create some process or system for transportation to bring people to your new learning center? Some of your goals may not be achievable simply by using free, public resources.

There are multiple methods of accessing funds to support your learning center, like getting involved in local politics to advocate for increased funding for community facilities (like the library) or holding fundraisers to bring in funding for the facilities you are using (like the library).

While these approaches are worthwhile and can potentially be successful, be aware that they will involve some amount of collaboration with other individuals and groups that are likely made up of adults. If the adults in your community are open to collaborating with you to help fundraise, that is great. Unfortunately, that is not always the case, and there are risks you should be aware of.

When you are in the role of an under-represented group, like teenagers are, collaborating with people in power, like adults, can sometimes be problematic. The power imbalance can lead to those in power having leverage over you. You can imagine a situation where you are

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collaborating with the library for a fundraiser where you and other teens put in all the effort to promote and run the fundraiser, and the library ends up controlling how the money you've raised gets spent. This shouldn't completely discourage you from collaborating, but it's important to be aware of these details and to always have other options. You can't depend on those in power to empower you.

Fortunately, there are countless options for earning money through entrepreneurship, which Wikipedia defines as “the process of designing, launching and running a new business.”²⁰⁹ This may sound overwhelming, just as the idea of opening your own learning center sounds overwhelming at first, but if you break it down into what this definition really means, it's quite simple. Starting a business just means selling a product or service to earn money.

I would argue that, even though it's not a business, starting your own learning center is already an entrepreneurial act. While some people argue that entrepreneurship must be a profit-driven business, I like to define entrepreneurship as “taking a risk to solve a problem that nobody told you to solve.” This may be in the form of starting a family-owned restaurant, going door-to-door shoveling driveways in the winter, beginning a political movement in your local region, or even being an artist looking to earn a living while sharing their work with the world. In my opinion, making money is not always the end-goal, but it is a byproduct which can help amplify your impact.

For example, I want this book to reach as many teens as possible. Since not all teens have access to money, making

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the book free seems like the best way to reach a large audience. However, by charging money, I then have revenue coming in from selling the book, which allows me to spend money on advertising. Being able to advertise the book can allow me to reach far more teens than if I simply posted it for free in the app store without any promotion.

To fulfill my mission of making self-directed learning affordable and accessible to everyone, I will still need to find a way to make this content accessible to those who cannot afford it. Accessibility is a massive challenge. Even if this book were free, it still wouldn't be accessible to people who cannot afford to have it shipped to them. Even creating a free YouTube channel with all of this content, which would require a lot more time and energy than a book, would still exclude teens who don't have reliable high-speed internet access. As you can see, this is a marathon, not a sprint, and financial resources are just one of the sources of fuel that's needed to endure this long journey.

Entrepreneurship requires you to find ways of accomplishing your goals with limited resources. Many times, the two resources you are managing are time and money. Depending on how much time and money you have will dictate your decision-making. In the case of the *LEAVE SCHOOL* app, I spent a lot of time writing the book and I paid someone a small amount of money to code the app. This made sense for me because I needed to do the work which I couldn't hire anyone else to do whereas there are many web developers who could build this basic app at a reasonable price. Since I run a web development business, I also have access to web developers that can do

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good work at a discounted price than most would be paying.

You can also find innovative ways to leverage your time and limited funds to accomplish your goals. For example, if you want to build a music room at the library, maybe you can get local businesses to donate the materials and loan you some tools, but you and your peers can put in the hours of labor to do the work. Or maybe none of the businesses are willing to donate materials, but you can find a local sponsor to pay for the materials in exchange for you naming the room after them, (“ie. Dave’s Guitar Store Music Room”).

The director of the co-working space I worked out of in Northampton, MA, Mary Yun, used this tactic to help fund the construction of one of their meeting rooms. In exchange for giving the co-working space a discount on a massive glass sliding door for the meeting room, A.W. Hastings & Company got to put their logo on the main doorway entering the room (which is called the ‘Hastings Room’). Hastings employees also get to use the meeting room for a few hours each week for the next three years. Now Hastings has their brand in front of countless businesses that enter the space, and even ended up with a shoutout in this book.

One similar suggestion which comes from Margaret Lobenstine’s book, *The Renaissance Soul*²¹⁰ (which I highly recommend), is to get a part-time job that gives you access to free resources. For example, let’s say you find yourself printing a lot of flier or documents, and the library is charging you more than you can afford. Maybe you

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could get a job one day a week in an office environment doing administrative work like filing papers, and they might let you have access to their printer for your own purposes. This may not match up with your specific needs, but can be adapted to whatever your needs are. Remember, being a self-directed entrepreneur is all about being resourceful and creative to accomplish your goals.

Negotiating deals to avoid having to pay for things is a great tactic, but there will ultimately be situations where you need money and you should know how to earn it. If your experience in public school is anything like mine, at no point in your entire education did anyone teach you how to make money. Even if you go to college, you'll likely never have anyone teach you how to make money. At best, you learn how to signal to an employer that you are suited to be hired for a job, but you never learn how to actually sell a product or a service. This is a serious gap in our education system and one which must be filled through more self-directed activity. Entrepreneurship can only be taught effectively if someone has an actual business, nonprofit, or project they are actively working on.

Fortunately, through becoming a self-directed learner, you are developing the kind of “take action” skills that all entrepreneurs need to be successful. In contrast, employees at companies are much like students; they need someone to tell them what to do and give them their next assignment. Entrepreneurs are self-directed; they have the challenge of steering the ship and making the decisions that make businesses money.

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To inspire some action, I will provide a few ways for you to earn money, though you should be as innovative and as creative as possible in coming up with your own ideas. You should also keep in mind that ideas are only as good as their execution. For example: when I was a teen, going door-to-door shoveling snow off driveways was one way for me to earn some extra money in the winter. This may not work in a southern state where it doesn't snow or in a city where everyone lives in apartments. Even in Connecticut, (my home state), shoveling snow was not always a reliable source of income: we would have some winters with several heavy snowfalls and some winters we would only have one snowstorm.

Ideas really are a dime a dozen, it is the details of the execution that determined whether an idea gets results. After all, there were many portable MP3 players on the market years before the iPod became a massive success.

Let's use shoveling driveways as a more accessible example. If you wake up the day after a snowstorm, grab a shovel, and go door-to-door offering to shovel people's driveways for money, you will probably spend a lot more time walking the streets and ringing doorbells than actually shoveling snow. You will be limited in how much you can earn in one day based on this slow sales process. You have a narrow window of time after the storm ends where you can earn money and you are stuck splitting your time between doing the two jobs of selling the job and providing the service.

If, instead, you planned your snow shoveling service in advance by putting out flyers in public locations such as on

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your neighbors' mailboxes, the library, laundromat, post office, or coffee shop, you could line up a ton of clients in advance, before the snow ever falls. Then, when a snowstorm did arrive, you'd know exactly how many people's driveways you had to shovel and you'd know exactly how much money you were going to earn for completing the work. With this knowledge, you could probably afford to hire other people to do the actual shoveling. The exact same idea of "shoveling snow for money" could make far more money when executed differently.

To take this one step further, once you have customers who are paying you to shovel their driveway, you could then offer to provide related services in other seasons. You could mow their lawn in the summer and rake leaves in the fall. Maybe they even have a pool you can clean or a car you can wash and wax for them. Now you'd have an all-year round business and you've already done a lot of the hard work of gaining customers for the snow shoveling.

Building relationships is a huge part of business as these relationships can lead to unexpected opportunities. I found when I started building websites for a living, that it took a lot of time and effort to go after my first clients. Once I built a handful of websites for people, then they started coming to me asking if I could help market and promote their websites. Even though I never pitched myself as a marketer, because I had relationships with these clients that I built through doing excellent work, they hired me for this related work. Suddenly I was making a lot more money because I wasn't spending a lot of unpaid time trying to hunt down new clients.

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I mentioned washing and waxing cars as a possible business. Washing cars is a fundraising tactic I've seen many youth groups make money at. Just like if you are operating a lemonade stand, you should find a high-traffic location near a busy street to setup your car wash. Maybe there is a local business who would partner with you to allow you to use their parking lot for that day. Be sure to put up large signs so people know that you are running a car wash fundraiser. It's your job to make sure that everyone who drives by understands what you are doing; you can't expect them to read your mind.

Again, execution and careful planning is the key to success. Letting people know you are raising money for an educational purpose will make them more willing to help. To be perfectly honest, I get less enthusiastic about contributing to fundraisers when I don't feel like the purpose is meaningful. I don't get as excited about donating money to get new uniforms for the baseball team or paying for the cheerleading squad to go to a competition somewhere across the country. While these are certainly fun activities that I hope people pursue, they feel like a luxury, and I don't feel nearly as inspired to help out as when someone tells me they're raising money to build a music room or buy musical instruments. To me, I feel better supporting a cause that empowers someone to do something they couldn't previously do at all, as opposed to enhancing a previously existing experience.

There are many more ideas for business opportunities for teens. When I was running Open Source High, I surveyed the teens who participated and asked how they made money and heard some creative stories.

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One memorable story was of a teen named Jacob who started a small carpet cleaning company. On one ordinary day, Jacob's dad rented a carpet cleaner from the local supermarket in order to clean the carpets in their apartment. His father suggested Jacob could earn money cleaning carpets, and explained that since high-powered carpet cleaners are expensive to purchase, people typically hire professional carpet cleaners or they rent the equipment for 24-hours and clean the carpets themselves. Jacob took this idea and ran with it. He printed off business cards advertising his own carpet cleaning service and posted them all over his local laundromat and on the door of every unit in his apartment building. His phone started ringing with potential customers. He would schedule 4-5 customers in his area to clean their carpets every Saturday, allowing him to rent a carpet cleaner for just one day per week to do all the work. This is a perfect example of limiting costs, while maximizing profit.

Jacob also earned some money for his videography work. Not only did he earn several hundred dollars in the contests we ran on Open Source High, but I also hired him to create some animations for the Voices for Choices video series I produced for MindFreedom International.^{211 212}

Another great story I heard came from a pair of teens with a passion for film, who made money by filming house tours for real estate agents. They offered to make one free video for their clients as an example, and the realtors would use it to promote the home they were selling. This proved the value of their work to their clients. Then, the teens charged for all future videos. The money they earned creating videos for the realtors enabled the teens to purchase more

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film equipment to advance their passion for film. As you might expect, having better equipment also meant the quality of their work for the real estate agents also improved, which allowed them to charge more money.

I know many teens who make money by babysitting. Two of my nieces did this throughout college, and I learned they were able to charge more money just by calling themselves a “nanny” instead of a “babysitter.” Additionally, if you can present yourself as a specialist in some way, you can charge more money. For example, I met a teen at Not Back to School Camp who was fluent in American Sign Language. By offering to be a nanny who specialized in working with hearing impaired youth, she could charge a lot more money than a regular nanny. If you have a unique skill, such as horseback riding, golf, painting, playing piano or some other interest, you could also present yourself as a nanny who focuses on this skill. Though she’s not a teen, my friend Beth calls herself the “Dive Nanny” and gets paid to go on vacations with families and take the kids scuba diving.²¹³

You can also offer to teach lessons without being a nanny at all. For example, when I was in high school, I used to tutor a few younger students in math. To find students to tutor, I contacted the schools in town and asked to be added to their list of available math tutors. In hindsight, I probably could have found more students to tutor if I put up fliers around town, since then I wouldn’t have to compete with all the other people on the school tutor lists.

Don’t limit yourself to only tutoring or teaching younger people. If you know how to play the piano, you don’t only have the capacity to teach a young child, why can’t you

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teach a 75-year-old to do the same?

Once you've got an idea for how to make money, your biggest challenge is probably going to be getting customers. I mentioned earlier that after developing my web development skills creating the Open Source High website, I started earning a living building websites, but I never shared the secret to how I found my first clients. Justin Wilcox, who runs CustomerDevLabs.com, suggests your first customers will be people that fit three criteria:

- 1) They have a problem
- 2) They know they have a problem
- 3) They are actively looking for a solution to their problem

This may seem silly or obvious, but it's important. For example, there are many people who have bad websites, but they don't know it. That's not a good customer. There are also a lot of people who know they have a bad website, but have too many other priorities, so they're not actively looking for a new website. That's also not a good customer. The best customer for me is someone who has a bad website, knows it's bad, and is looking right this second to find someone to build a new one.

To find these people, I went to the Craigslist "Gigs" section and searched under "Computer Services" for people looking for help with their websites. I was able to search any city in the whole country to see who had recently posted a request looking for a web designer or web developer.

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I knew that there would be tons of other programmers like me replying to these ads, many of whom send automated, copy-paste emails replying to every single ad. I differentiated myself by writing short and simple emails that made it clear to people that I was a human being. Here is a sample of one of my first emails:

Subject: Still need a web developer? Hi!

I have been building websites since I was 12 years old and would be happy to help with your site. You can see links to a lot of the projects I've worked on at flantascience.com.

The current project I am devoting my time to is Open Source High, a peer-to-peer learning community for high school students. So if you know any high school students or teachers, please spread the word :)

Feel free to email me back or call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX. I look forward to speaking with you.

Jim

As I've mentioned, if building websites interests you, I have tutorials on my personal website (jim-flannery.com) that teach people how to build websites.

There are lots of opportunities to make money online that extend beyond just building websites. Nowadays, many

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companies also need help with managing their social media accounts. One of the teens who was a part of Open Source High currently runs social media accounts for some of my clients.

Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, is another great space young people can explore to earn money. SEO involves helping a business to get their website to rank higher in search engines like Google. Many people mistakenly think SEO is a fancy programming technique that only computer scientists know how to do. In reality, Search Engine Optimization is more related to writing than programming. If you enjoy writing, I highly recommend you search the web for some tutorial videos on Search Engine Optimization and see if it appeals to you.

Another way to make money online is to sell products you've made through your own website, eBay, Etsy, or Amazon. One of my best friends who I mentioned earlier, Brianna, started selling custom-made bookshelves through Etsy as a teenager and has become quite successful at it. If you are an artist, you could also sell branded products featuring your artwork through a site like FineArtAmerica.com, where they will take your artwork and put it on t-shirts, coffee mugs, blankets, etc. which you can sell.

There are a couple of large online marketplaces for finding work. TaskRabbit²¹⁴ is one such marketplace, which involves finding work locally. For example, a friend of mine regularly gets paid gigs in his city for assembling furniture for people. There are also global marketplaces for digital services, like Fiverr²¹⁵ and UpWork²¹⁶. I've hired

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lots of people off these platforms to do logo design, basic coding, graphic design, audio file mastering, business card design, content writing... even the developer of the *LEAVE SCHOOL* mobile app came from UpWork.

Another couple of ideas come from famous entrepreneur, Mark Cuban, who wrote an article titled, “Making money as a student” and suggests selling shoelaces. As Cuban writes:

I guarantee you that if you go to the parking lot of any high school or college football game with a bunch of shoelaces in team colors that you bought for two bucks a pop, and put up a sign and two chairs, you can make money.²¹⁷

In closing this topic of entrepreneurship, I will share with you one endless resource for inspirational ideas. If you do a Google search for “reddit black market school” or “reddit make money as a teen”, you’ll find lots of posts with teens asking how to make money. There are endless replies, many of them are specifically related to making money in school rather than outside of it, but there are so many creative ideas presented, you’ll find something that resonates with you. I’ll share just a handful of the more interesting ideas here:

Haircuts. For a catholic school run by nuns, hygiene was super strict so if your hair or nails were long they would cut it half way so that you would be embarrassed and have to get a haircut asap. So a couple of the

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highschool kids made a super secret barbershop inside the school behind the dump for broken cars, you have to know the right people and schedule an appointment to get in.²¹⁸

I asked my rich friend from school to have his mom advertise me as a babysitter to their uber rich neighborhood's Facebook group. I got ~\$25 an hour from that on average and mostly I just played video games with 8 year olds. One person paid me \$35 an hour (but only needed babysitting for a few hours on the weekends). It was the greatest hustle of all time.²¹⁹

I noticed a friend of mine was making lots of money by selling chips when our school stopped selling them in vending machines. Selling them was banned and could lead to suspension but the payout was huge due to demand. I decided to sell myself and would earn \$30 every 2-3 days. A box of chips would cost \$12 and contain 30 bags so I'd sell them for a buck each. My friend later got busted for selling and so my supply and demand skyrocketed shortly. That's actually how I ended up understanding how stocks work!²²⁰

My brother sold fidget spinner during the craze. Shipped in about 500 from China for .50c each and sold them for like 5 dollars a

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piece.²²¹

I went to a private high school with a strict dress code, ties, belt, etc. So I bought a bunch of ties and belts from a thrift store and ran a lucrative rental business out of my locker.²²²

me and my brother would take money to beat all the challenges in Goldeneye 007 for N64, so people got all the cheats. The invincibility challenge was the toughest.²²³

The only guy in the school who's family had proper TV channels used to tape wrestling events and rent them out.²²⁴

I'm a dishwasher at a Thai restaurant a couple nights a week. Bosses are pretty understanding, so my days are pretty flexible.²²⁵

WINDOW CLEANING. I cannot stress enough how much people hate cleaning their windows. From age 16-19 i made around \$250 a week by cleaning windows. Once I found a proper neighborhood of people unwilling to clean their shit, I had a consistent clientele of about 15 people wanting windows cleaned every couple months.²²⁶

Photos of groups of friends. I'd take pics at

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lunch (and sell yesterday's photos for \$5 to \$8) of all the little crews and cliques, develop the film in the darkroom during a free period in the afternoon, print the negatives during 1st or 2nd period photo class... sell the black and white 5 x 7's or 8 x 10's during lunch and take more images. Wash, rinse, repeat. I made hundreds of dollars, if not more (I was a spendthrift). Some adults thought it was drug related, but no one who actually knew me. My school had 2 to 3 thousand students, some kids bought multiple pics. I took pics of couples, but the best were groups of 10 to 15 ppl... could make \$100 on 1 image.²²⁷

A kid at my previous school sold those little salt and pepper packets to kids at lunch everyday. 50 cents for both. The cafeteria (due to state/fed regulations) didn't season anything so the food was blander than bland. He made a few hundred dollars over the course of the month he did this before admin shut him down.²²⁸

I bought those big candy bags at Costco with money I earned mowing lawns. Then I made mix n' match bags and sold those. Then I bought those mixed pop flats from Costco and started selling the pops for a little less than you could get from the canteen. Eventually, demand got so big that I had to expand. So I "hired" a friend of mine to

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work with me at 10% of her profits for working for me. Rest was hers. We ran that operation until I left. Made good money with it.²²⁹

CREATING COMMUNITY: CULTURE AND BONDING

While we dove into creating our learning center with the intention of creating a great learning environment, its equally, and maybe even more important, for you to have a good social environment. For this to happen, it's important for you to be intentional about creating a positive culture. By culture, I'm not referring to your personal heritage or your upbringing or your family traditions. I'm referring to the expectations, attitudes, habits, and behaviors that teens at your learning center generally follow when expressing themselves and interacting with one another. Even if your attitude is that "we have no rules or expectations about how people express themselves," that is still an intentional aspect of your culture.

Another example of your culture, may be how bullying is handled, or if there is any bullying to begin with. As Dylan Marcus shares about his experience at South Jersey Sudbury School, instances of bullying can be regulated through community culture without necessarily needing formal procedures for handling conflicts:

...the school is small enough that if someone is being a bully... we'll just be like, alright we're not going to hang out with you. And

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then they see that nobody's hanging out with them because they're mean, and they stop... that's happened, people were mean and they stopped. If you're bullying people, it's almost laughed at, like, "Are you kidding me? Why would you do that?" It's just mean and cruel.²³⁰

Some of the culture development will happen naturally, but it is also valuable to find ways to purposely create community. For example, when I worked at Not Back to School Camp, they had events specifically for building a culture of openness and acceptance while also creating a bonding experience between the teens.

One such event was a ceremony called "Bonding Night," where teens would first hold hands and sing in a circle, then they were paired up and shared their deepest beliefs with one another, and finally they closed with lots of hugs. As a youth, I probably would have resisted such intense emotional connection. As an adult, I see that there is a tremendous lack of emotional expression in our society and have a deep appreciation for the fact that their camp culture emphasized connecting in such a way.

Another event they held was called "Seeing and Seen," where teens had a chance to share things about themselves that were not obvious, such as their religious beliefs, family struggles, sexual orientation, childhood abuse, medical diagnosis, or other personal struggles. This event purposely created a means for individuals to share things about themselves with the group in a supportive way which they didn't know how to do otherwise.

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Regardless of whether your approach is to include methods of developing intense emotional bonding, there should be ways to create a culture that reflects what your learning community wants.

Holding events like open mic nights where people can share music, poetry, dance, comedy, or other creative works are a fun way to connect. Even something as simple as having a weekly pot-luck lunch where everyone brings something to share with the group as part of a larger meal is a great way to connect. This is something they practice at an intentional community I've stayed at in Asheville, NC and it really is a great, simple way to make people feel a part of a group and to build friendships.

Not all culture creation requires planning of an event. An interesting example of spontaneous culture creation happened when naming the Peer Unschooling Network. I chose that name so it would be very clear what the website is about. After the site launched, I quickly started to dislike the name because it was long. I proposed to the teens on the site that we change the name to something like "PeerSchool".

The teens disagreed and explained that they don't even call it the "Peer Unschooling Network", they refer to it as "PUN." Interestingly enough, the term "PUN" doesn't have much meaning to it at all as far as a learning community goes, but the teens became really attached to it and identified with it, so we changed the logo to say "PUN" instead of "Peer Unschooling Network."

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For a while, we implemented an idea on PUN which originated from some teens at Not Back to School Camp who joined the site. At camp, the teens do a daily “check in” with their small advisory groups where they simply share how they are doing each morning. I remember them discussing how social media platforms like Facebook were a weird place to share emotions and experiences because they felt out of place, like people were begging for attention; however, they valued the ability to be able to share what was going on in their lives with their peers in a group setting where this type of sharing was accepted and encouraged. So we created a specific channel in the PUN chat specifically devoted to giving updates on how people were doing each day and it helped improve the connections between people.

The examples I’ve provided here are very specific to the communities I’ve interacted with. It’s important not to get too caught up in the specifics of what others have done, but to simply see that there is value in creating ways of connecting with all the members of your learning center in social, non-academic ways. Schools tend to try and build culture through pep rallies, school dances, and sporting events - so you should feel free to adopt similar ideas or create your own.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

As your learning center starts growing in numbers, you will likely find yourself becoming more and more involved in the community beyond your headquarters. You might be reaching out to lots of local people and having them come

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in to offer to teach a class or mentor you. Others may be involved in a fundraiser you are promoting. You will find that more people are coming to you, and that you are going out to visit more people.

I want to make sure you don't get the impression that everything is going to happen in a vacuum inside your local library. The library serves as a central location, but you should be utilizing as many resources as possible and be engaged with the world around you as much as possible in order to achieve your goals.

As Matt Hern, who co-founded a self-directed learning center in Vancouver, Canada, says:

... it has to be a social project, it has to be a project that is not isolated from, is not dis-embedded, but is part of the neighborhood, is part of the community, and is part of a larger set of ideas around self-determination... the idea is just simply a bunch of people in the neighborhood trying to figure out how to live well together.²³¹

If your learning center is thriving, you will find that you've completely evolved beyond the idea of a "school" or a "learning center," and are now involved in something called "community-based learning." It's likely that the term "learning network" may be more appropriate than a "learning center." Perhaps the phrase "peer unschooling network" has found its true meaning after all and the acronym "PUN" will become the shorthand. I can really only speculate on what the long-term future of these

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student-made learning centers will look like and they're likely to be different in every community.

GETTING STARTED

I don't want to leave you without a starting point, but I also want you to be flexible and realize that there is no recipe or formula for making this work. The specific path you take is dependent on a lot of factors related to your own individual interests and your particular community. Things will look far different in a rural environment vs. a city environment vs. a suburb. The best you can do is learn from and be inspired by what others have done and adapt this information to your own situation.

I also realize that one of your toughest challenges will be to get the first few other members to join your learning center. One approach might be to recruit the existing homeschoolers or unschoolers in your local area. While this sounds like a great approach, I should share a warning that Joel Hammon offers from his experiences with Liberated Learners Centers:

First, it seems like existing homeschoolers are a great fit. They are already out of school, they get the whole idea of homeschooling, and they may have already gone through the detox period of becoming self-directed learners. All of these things are true. Existing homeschoolers have been some of the best members we've had at PLC and North Star has had the same experience.

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But there is a potential problem with having a high number of existing homeschoolers as your members. Homeschooling families have often already built a life for themselves and don't look to you for the level of support that people leaving school need. Therefore, they most often want to be part-time members, attending a day or two a week. The part-time nature of their membership can make it hard to build community.²³²

This doesn't mean the same will apply to your learning center, but I felt it was important to share. In the case of Liberated Learner Centers, they are trying to build a business and need to find people who really need their support service and their community. That is where they are delivering their most value, so having lots of part-timers isn't sustainable for their business.

This may be the complete opposite for your learning center. Maybe you would benefit greatly from having lots of part-time people coming through. Maybe you yourself only want to be involved part-time because you are off doing amazing things independently and don't want to be a full-time member of the community. These are all decisions that are up for you to decide, I'm only here to offer you the insights and resources I've gathered to try and equip you as best as I can.

I recently attended a training by the International Association of Co-Learning Communities held at WorkSpace Education, where I learned a couple good ideas

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for recruiting your first members. One was to run small events in the community that give people a small taste of the type of things that you are doing in your space. This is sort of a “show and tell”. For example, the co-founders shared stories of setting up information tables at community farmer’s markets where they showed off projects the teens created or had attractive science demonstrations like creating giant bubbles. Describing “creating giant bubbles” is tough to explain in words, but if you search YouTube for “How to make giant bubbles,” you will see how this is a good attention-grabber.²³³

While WorkSpace was mainly targeting parents, another insight they gained can be adapted to your specific circumstance. They noticed a lot of their members were bringing groceries into the Workspace kitchen in Whole Foods bags. This implied that the type of people attending their learning center were also the type of person that shopped at Whole Foods. This meant Whole Foods was a good place for them to post fliers to reach their target audience. This is not to say your target audience is also shopping at Whole Foods, but this is a good example of making an observation about their existing members and using that information to try and find more, similar people.

You will probably have to deal with criticism for (in the older generation’s eyes) “rebellious” against the system. I want you to be prepared for this. You are doing something different, and people like to judge others for being different. When it comes to teens being different, adults seem to have no reason to hold back in expressing their condescending opinions, often shaming young people for their chosen paths. This can be tough to deal with if you are

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going it alone, and it'll be important to find support systems like family, mentors, fellow members of your learning center, the library staff, teens on the Peer Unschooling Network, and other unschooling parents. This will make you feel much less alone in this journey. At the same time, keep in mind there are also a lot of adults who think self-directed learning is awesome. Don't let the fear of the naysayers keep you from getting out there and promoting what you are doing so you can attract the right supporters.

If things feel uncomfortable, that is part of the growing process of trying something new. Dylan Marcus described his first weeks at a new Sudbury School:

The first few weeks were kind of awkward, because no one had ever had these experiences before. Even Brian, and the other staff member, Page, they didn't have much experience with starting a school like that.... They didn't know what to do... for us, the kids that were there, it was a very odd experience, because we'd never been anywhere like that. Most of us weren't even unschooled.... There was only like 5 of us, it was really like everyone being at their first day of school... After a while, we started to talk more and open up and become pretty good friends, we're all really good friends now...²³⁴

Always remember, there are many paths to self-directed learning that you can pursue which don't require you to

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start your own learning center. While I think this grass roots method will help transform our culture and make self-directed learning accessible to the masses, there are already tens of thousands of unschoolers around the U.S. that are thriving through their own means.

I suggest the approach of starting your own zero-tuition learning center because I think this model could overcome the barriers that prevent more people from pursuing self-directed learning. Don't feel that just because you are struggling to create your own learning center that the only alternative is to run back to the school system! Be creative and resourceful and persist.

Some closing thoughts on getting started from Neil Karkhanis and Dylan Marcus, two teens who helped organize the South Jersey Sudbury School:

Neil: If you're a kid who legitimately wants to start [a learning center] in your area, the first thing you need to do is change your attitude from needing someone else to start this. If you think you really need an adult to start it... think about it... you're saying, 'I really need an adult to start a school that kids govern.' That's a weird mix.... People like to sit around and wait for someone to take this action. There is no specific person that says "This is the type of person that starts a Sudbury School." You just have to go out there and try and do it, and start talking to people.

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Dylan: I would say, get on the internet, and be proactive. Read everything you can about free schools and other experiences. Go to your local library and see if you can give talks and have meetings, a lot of libraries have free meeting spaces. Just spread the word.... You really can start your own school and it's really awesome. If you can free just one person from a public school mindset, it's such a great accomplishment.... It's like being in a cult and then you're free, it's awesome.... If this just inspires one person to start a Sudbury School, it'd be great.²³⁵

If this still sounds crazy to you, don't worry. The next chapter will share some stories of teens who have already succeeded in creating their own learning centers. And you can too!

ACTION:

Tell your friends about this book and the *LEAVE SCHOOL* mobile app and see what they think. Start having discussions with others about what self-directed education is and what it could look like for your specific group of peers. Start reaching out beyond your immediate friend circles to some people who you don't normally connect with by posting some fliers around your school or town or posting on social media in spaces that will reach people nearby. Connect in-person if possible, but utilize online

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spaces if in-person is not possible. Locate the local spaces that are available, like the library and community center. Plan a day and time to visit them and talk to the people who run them and discuss your ideas. Be sure to let them know you are just a “group of teens eager to do self-directed learning” and not any kind of formal organization.

CHAPTER 8

PSEUDO-SUCCESS STORIES

Most books like this have a chapter dedicated to success stories from people who have implemented the ideas discussed in the book. Since the ideas in the previous chapter about teens starting their own zero-tuition learning centers are all new ideas that haven't been implemented before, I thought I wouldn't have any "success stories" to share here. I thought I'd have to publish a book presenting these ideas, wait five years for teens to have some time to create their own learning centers, and then I could come out with the second edition of the book to share all the amazing things teens did after reading the book.

It turns out, I was wrong. In order to find success stories of student-initiated self-directed learning centers, I needed to move beyond my own ego, and realize that some teens have already created their own centers without ever needing the assistance of my magical book.

These stories I'm going to share with you don't follow the exact methods I've described, but they are similar, and offer concrete evidence that the idea of a student-initiated, zero-tuition self-directed learning center is possible.

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I'm grateful to have found these stories, because they emphasize that you don't need to follow the suggestions in this book exactly as they are written; you need to adapt these ideas to meet the specific needs of the individuals in your community. I don't know you personally, I don't know your interests, I don't know your friends and peers, I don't know your family, I don't know your neighborhood, I don't even know your name. There is a significant communication gap we must acknowledge between me presenting these ideas through a book to thousands (or millions) of teens around the world and what will actually work for each of you.

I hope hearing these stories will show you what is possible, but also won't limit your vision only to these examples. Build off these ideas and create something new that suits you.

A SCHOOL WITHIN A SCHOOL

The first story I learned about took place in 2010 in the town of Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Sam Levin, a student at Monument Mountain High School, started the Independent Project, which he describes as a "student-run school-within-a-school".

Sam had some experience in leading self-directed projects from a previous project he started as a freshman, called Project Sprout, where he and his peers created a student-run garden at their school to provide food to the cafeterias in the school district.²³⁷ By the time Sam graduated, there were fifty teens working to grow a half-acre of vegetables

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that provided food to three cafeterias in his district, three days a week.

Sam described in a TEDx Talk how his student-run garden inspired him to start his student-run school:

I saw kids waking up at 6 in the morning to harvest potatoes. I saw kids getting in the garden at 8 am on a Saturday even if they'd been out partying the night before. Even if they weren't getting any payment, any credit in school, nothing. Yet at the same time, I saw the exact opposite in school. I saw people being unhappy, not engaged, not learning. I couldn't reconcile the commitment and passion I saw in the garden with the lack of engagement and enthusiasm I saw in classrooms. I began to ask: why can't kids wake up at 8 in the morning to read Kofka or do a science experiment? The difference came down to the fact that, in the garden, the kids were in charge....

One day I came home from school pretty exhausted, sat down at the dinner table with my mom and say "I'm sick of it. I can't do it anymore. I can't watch my friends not learning anything because there's nothing to engage them. I can't watch people be unhappy 6 hours a day, 180 days a year." My mom, a little sick of my whining, said kind of offhandedly, "Why don't you start your own school?" So I said, "OK, I

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will.”²³⁸

Creating a student-run program inside an actual public school is not an easy task, and Sam had to make several compromises in order to get it approved. That being said, Sam did pull it off, and it didn't cost the students any money and they earned credits toward their diplomas. Sam found a supportive staff member to be their group's "faculty advisor," who give them more credibility and helped them navigate the politics of the situation. Sam wrote about the challenging objections:

While I was trying to make my case, one of the teachers in the “absolutely not” camp was getting more and more frustrated. He was actually visibly red in the face. Finally, he blurted out, “It’s ridiculous to think that kids can be trusted to learn on their own!”²³⁹

But Sam persevered and the Curriculum Steering Committee approved a semester-long pilot program in a 6 to 3 vote. Then they got the School Committee, the principal, and the superintendent to approve it.

Compromising with people in power can result in stripping away the more radical aspects of a proposal, but Sam persisted, even having to deal with a teacher's union representative who said that if they awarded credits to teens for classes that teachers didn't teach, he'd have the whole union come after them to shut down their program. The compromise was that:

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...students would get a semester's worth of credits. But they would be general credits, and they'd have to make up half an English credit and whatever other subjects they needed to graduate.²⁴⁰

You can see that even though the program was approved, there was some frustrating inflexibility that hindered this from being a completely independent program. This resulted in a very unique, self-directed semester learning experience, but not a full alternative to school. Another restriction because of subject-matter credits was that the program only made sense for juniors and seniors to participate, since freshman and sophomores had more fixed credit requirements. The sophomores also had to take statewide standardized tests which this program would interfere with.

Sam's school-within-a-school was allowed to have a maximum of ten students. They created a 3-question application, and accepted all eight students who applied, including both A-students and students at risk of flunking out of school.

Finding a physical space for their school was challenging, even with support from their advisor. As Sam writes in his book, *A School of Our Own*:

We went through all this bureaucracy to get the school approved, they finally said 'yes', and then they had nowhere to put us. Throughout the summer Mr. Huron and I would call each other with ideas. "I've got

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it,” I’d say. “The auditorium!” “Already asked,” Mr. H would say. “Spring musical gets priority.” It became a joke between us. “We’ll go to school in the garden! And build fires in the winter! We’ll construct a tepee in the hallway.”

I thought Mr. Huron was making another joke when he finally told me where we could put the school. He called one day in August. “Well I’ve got good news and bad news,” he said. “The good news is that the school has offered us a space for the school that can be our own, and we can use it all day long without interruption.” “Awesome!” I said. What could be the bad news? “Well,” he said. “You’re not gonna like where it is.”

It was the coach’s office in the girls’ locker room.²⁴¹

You can actually see inside their classroom in the video they created titled, “The Independent Project” on the Piers Pope YouTube channel.²⁴²

The first half of the school day was spent doing more traditional academic work in science, humanities, math, and English. The students would choose their own questions at the start of the week that they were interested in finding the answer to, then present to the group each week what they found in their research.

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The second half of their school day was spent doing independent projects, they called “Individual Endeavors,” that would last all semester and result in a finished project. For example, one student aimed to write a novel, another to write a play, another to write a compilation of short stories, one did a research study into women’s trauma and recovery, one made a short film, one worked in the culinary arts, etc. I was really inspired by the way these teens appeared to work as a team, collaborating with one another, giving each other feedback; working toward their individual goals as a collective unit.

The school-within-a-school was student-run in a sense, that there were no teachers. But they did still have to answer to the school board and principal and superintendent.

While a part of my wants to criticize this program and say it wasn’t radical enough because they still ultimately had authority figures ruling over them, it was an amazing accomplishment that actually worked. This was a real thing, not just an idea. The school-within-a-school fulfilled the vision and goals that Sam set forth:

I made three assumptions when building my new school. The first assumption was that the school I wanted to build would be a reality....

My second assumption was that it was going to happen within the walls of my public high school. I’ve since talked to people who want to create an Independent Project, and they have asked me about starting charter schools

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or creating a homeschooling program, an after-school movement, or an online school. That never occurred to me. I wanted things to be better for my friends and classmates. So, in my mind, it was always going to be a part of my public school, and it was going to be available to everyone.

And finally, though I knew my school's curriculum would look unlike anything in traditional school, I assumed that, physically, my school would look like any other. When I daydreamed about my senior year, I pictured a classroom with a chalkboard and a whiteboard and desks and posters on the wall.²⁴³

A natural benefit of having a school-within-a-school is that they didn't have any issues with transportation. They also were able to still eat lunch with their friends, participate in sports teams, and get diplomas.

I contacted Sam Levin who is now getting his PhD in zoology from Oxford to ask about the current status of the Independent Project. Since he has not been a student there for years, he suggested I contact the faculty member who championed the project, Michael Powell, who is a guidance counselor at Monument Mountain High School. Michael told me the Independent Project has not run for the last two years, which means it lasted for about seven years. Michael stated the reason it did not run:

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We didn't have a group of students who came forward wanting to do it and it is a program that needs to be student initiated.²⁴⁴

ENDOR ALC

One example of an intentional learning community of self-directed teenagers is an Agile Learning Center in Asheville, North Carolina, that was started by teenage unschooler, Liam Nilsen. Their website describes Endor as:

...an intentional learning community as a self-sustaining organism, run by the participants, for the participants ... “by the participants, for the participants” means that Endor cannot be something that someone does “to” you, or that you can “just” attend and experience. Endor ALC participants should be highly motivated and interested in creating this environment together.²⁴⁵

This idea of participants co-creating the space together sounds exactly like what I had in mind with my vision of a zero-tuition, student-initiated learning center. Endor operates as a cooperative by having the participants themselves manage the administrative duties related to finance, enrollment, and marketing. They use the Agile tools like a weekly “Change Up” meeting to make decisions and steer the direction of their community.

In an interview with Blake Boles on the *Off-Trail Learning* podcast, Liam describes what goes on at Endor:

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It is not a school, it's a learning center. It's part workplace, part learning space, for high school aged self-directed learners... We make a schedule together each day and have different time slots and times and places for working on different things, and all participants direct their own time and choose their own projects... its more project-based and less class- based. Whereas school is kind of a marketplace for content, there's classes and you can take those classes. Endor is more of a support place for self-directed learners who want to create things in their lives. The facilitators are not there to teach, but they're there to help identify steps to take, remind people of deadline they've set for themselves, and help people find resources.²⁴⁶

At Endor, the participants are ages 14 to 20 and anyone under 16 must be legally registered as a homeschooler to comply with local laws. Endor ALC is legally registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, and considers itself to be similar to the YMCA in that it is a community-based program that doesn't offer any formal diplomas or certifications. Instead, Endor is simply a place for people to come together and work on things where there happen to be classes being offered, meeting rooms, copy machines, and other resources. Liam describes it as being like a "co-working space for teenagers."²⁴⁷

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Endor had various physical locations around Asheville, NC:

...in the fall of 2013 the project evolved into a daily popup program finding its home in various locations around downtown Asheville, including Mojo Co-working... In the fall of 2014, Endor opened a permanent location in a dance studio, expanded to take on more facilitators... In 2015, Endor moved across town to be a part of Open Space AVL, a community/project space.²⁴⁸

Endor is open three days a week from 10:00 - 2:00pm, and daily attendance is not required. Participants are free to come and go as they please, but they must sign in and out.

Endor charges \$20/month to be a member, which means Endor technically doesn't count as being zero- tuition.²⁴⁹ The \$20/month membership fee is cheap enough, however, that participants could easily earn money through working to pay for their membership, which would provide a valuable learning experience.

Liam describes a really novel way that Endor participants earned money, through a social media game they created on Instagram called "Guess Asheville." They would post photos of different businesses in the local area on their Instagram account without giving the location and the first one of their social media followers to guess correctly would win \$1. The featured businesses would pay a small amount to be showcased in their Instagram feed.

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At the time of the podcast interview four years ago (April 23, 2015), foreign-language learning was popular amongst the Endor participants. Many of the participants were actively working on learning Spanish using the free-software Duolingo and they would have a weekly “Spanish-only lunch” to practice their skills.

Though it's worth adding that Liam said they never scheduled programs or classes during lunch, to ensure the community connections would build during that time. I thought this was a great example of an intentional effort at culture creation to facilitate bonding and connection.

At the end of each week, all the Endor participants write a weekly blog post about their experiences as a tool for self-reflection and also to pass on knowledge gained to future participants in the ALC. This weekly blog writing also helps teens to later on create a portfolio that documents what they've worked on when they apply to colleges or jobs.

Like all spaces, Endor wasn't without conflict and challenges. For example, Liam mentioned that there were issues related to having guest presenters visit Endor to present their work. The conflict that arose is that teen Endor participants were expecting Liam, who was the lead facilitator, to be fully responsible for bringing in guest presenters, while Liam wanted the other teens to initiate this process with his support.

Another conflict Liam mentioned arose around video games. Some people felt distracted by the commotion of people enthusiastically playing video games in the space

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and they came to a consensus about how to include video gaming without it being a large distraction. The resolution may surprise you: the teens actually voted to ban playing computer games at Endor unless there was a specific community event like a tournament going on. Liam shares:

One of the big things that came up during that discussion was, “Do you play computer games at home?” The answer was “yes”. So they asked, “Well, why are you doing that here, when this is your workplace to bring projects to fruition, when you can do that on your own at home?”²⁵⁰

Since rules are not set in stone, at the following week’s “Change Up” meeting, the rule was overturned. The discussion opened up about the larger issue that it seemed unfair to ban video games, while still having other equally addictive things be available like “going down the YouTube hole” or spending all day on Facebook. Ultimately, the teens reversed the ban on video games, and instead they agreed on making a general community effort, not a rule, to try and “not do things at Endor that they could easily do at home.”

You may be wondering how such a program got started. The origin story for Endor ALC actually arises from Not Back to School Camp. Liam explains:

In 2009, 2010, and 2011, there were two separate sessions of Not Back to School Camp in Vermont, and there were four days in between those two sessions, where the

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campers were left to their own devices. Many people would go home to visit family for those days, but a lot of people traveled far and didn't have a place to stay. I saw that as an opportunity to put together an event that ended up being the first Endor Unschooling Festival. I rented out this old Bed and Breakfast and held the first Endor Unschooling Festival in 2010. I got my mom and a friend of mine to help, I had just turned 16....

It went super well, we had about 45 campers that first year. The second year we did it again and we had about 55 participants... I met with Grace Llewellyn about what Endor would look like in the future because she was planning on merging the two camp sessions into one long session, and so there wouldn't be a need for this unschooling festival in between them....

All the while, it had kind of been my dream since I was 14, to start a kind of self-directed learning center. Now that I'd had Endor setup and had this Facebook Page and a mailing list, it turned into a traveling event network.... For example, we had an Unschooling Day at Occupy Wall Street... a couple years later in the summer of 2013 I moved to Asheville and restarted Endor.... The first thing we did was hang out and figure out how to put unschoolers on the

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Moon... that's why it's called Endor.²⁵¹

I contacted Liam who told me that he moved away from Asheville two years ago, and the other participants continued running Endor for a while, however, they ultimately disbanded, which means it lasted about 4-5 years.²⁵²

PURPLE THISTLE CENTRE

While Endor ALC was started by an existing unschooler, a project called the Purple Thistle Centre was initiated by a group of six teens aged 15-17 who were either in the public school system or attended an alternative school called Windsor House School.²⁵³

Officially launched in 2001, the Purple Thistle Centre operated out of Vancouver, Canada as a full “alternative to school community.”²⁵⁴

One of the co-founders, Keith Lennig, recalls:

When we first began planning Thistle, it was six really excited teenagers throwing ideas out, just kind of brainstorming, around the kitchen table at night. Everything that we talked about seemed very, very possible, on one hand, because there was an adult listening saying “I’m pretty sure I know how this shit works, I’m pretty sure I can do it, I’d like to show you guys how to do it so that you can do it.”... Thistle can be thought

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of somewhat like a library except instead of books, we stock people and opportunities and resources.²⁵⁵

The brave adult that Keith mentions is a neighborhood parent named Matt Hern. Matt had experience as a community organizer and supported their goals. When I connected Carla Bergman, the most recent director of Purple Thistle, to ask her what the visioning and startup process looked like, she described it:

The story goes something like this: Matt had [the teens] all write a letter stating what they'd like to do with their time, thinking about thriving, learning new skills and working with others.... The letters more or less were about learning art skills and writing (photography, painting, zine making, etc). Then Matt asked a few friends who had those skills if they would come in and mentor. They got a small grant from a local Foundation and rented a two bedroom kinda funky space and they started with photography, painting and writing/zine making,... and then it grew.²⁵⁶

In the documentary about Purple Thistle directed and produced by Carla Bergman and Corin Browne, called Common Notion, Matt Hern shares how his organizing process for a collective differs from that of a school:

What schools do a lot, and many institutions do, is they start with an idea about what the

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institution should behave like, and then they ask for participants to adapt to the institutional needs. And so I thought about the other way - what if we were to create an institution that would be flexible and would adapt to the participants needs and interests.²⁵⁷

There are very few rules governing the Thistle, as Matt describes:

We have three rules at Thistle: no drinking, no drugs, and don't be an ass hole. We call it "no ass-holism" which is no sexism, no racism, no homophobia, clean up after yourself, and be nice to people. Essentially the whole thing is just be nice. People understand that instinctively.²⁵⁸

Thistle member Astra Taylor described what made Thistle special:

This concept of asking youth what they want, having freedom and self-determination, and then having this opportunity for rigor. Because if you asked me when I was 15 what I want, I'd have said: to hang out and to learn, and not be babysat.²⁵⁹

Astra Taylor continues:

So many alternative schools and free schools start with a pedagogy, or a philosophy of

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learning. So I liked this idea that the Thistle never had a blueprint or an idea of utopia, it's always been this exercise that the people who are part of it getting to contribute, and make it what they want it to be. And that seems like the antithesis of schools' worst aspects, where school is this rigid thing and you have to fit yourself into it.²⁶⁰

Located in the heart of the industrial area of Vancouver, the Thistle space was designed to accommodate all of their interests like “painting, writing, making films, building websites, sculpting, publishing zines, performing their poetry and spoken word, making comics.”²⁶¹ Their space was part of a large warehouse called the Mergatroid that was converted into a multi-use facility filled with artists and other cooperatives and collectives. As their website describes, the Purple Thistle was a:

2500 sq/ft resource centre that has a ton of supplies, tools, materials, classes and workshops, and it's all free. There's a library, bike fixing shop, computer lab, silkscreening room, animation facility and lots else. And maybe best of all, the whole thing is run by a youth collective that controls all the day to day operations and really runs the place.²⁶²

They describe Purple Thistle as a “youth run community centre for arts and activism.”²⁶³ The collective consisted of a group of 12 - 20 youth, who all were given a key to the space, and had a responsibility to keep the space open for

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one 3-hour shift each week. As Carla Bergman confirms, “[the youth] sincerely ran the day-to-day operations of the space.”²⁶⁴

They hold a weekly meeting on Mondays that is open to anyone. They make decisions about rules, rule enforcement, budgeting, programs, and allocation of resources, about how the space feels and runs.

Their decision-making process was based on consensus, which is different than democracy. As the Purple Thistle website describes it:

The collective meets every Monday night at 7:00, and together we make all the decisions regarding the space, build the schedule, create projects and listen to what one another is up to. The Monday meetings are open to all and everyone who comes participates as an equal. We make decisions consensually and everything is open for discussion.... We eschew the tyranny of the majority in favor of compromise (we don't vote, we decide together).²⁶⁵

The nature of collaboration as a group, was a common thread throughout the Thistle. As Carla Burgman says:

The DIY, do it yourself, ethos that's been around for a long time was definitely something that's attached to the Thistle and we definitely do that as well; we're low to the ground, DIY, all the way. But it got me

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thinking about, one of the things we've been trying to do at the Thistle, is to think about collectivism, to think about working together.²⁶⁶

This community culture of Thistle is bound with friendship. As Thistle member, Sylvia McMadden, says:

I like to think the core of friendship is kindness and love, and those are the terms I would use to describe how we strive to be at the Thistle: kind and coming at things with love.²⁶⁷

While adults are involved in Thistle, they provide support where it's needed and wanted, without getting in the way. Some adults are around as allies to sign permits on leases, get community support, work with the landlords, and navigate the world of grants. The adults also provide allyship and mentorship to youth.

Anyone is allowed to run a class if they want to, no special credential is required. Nobody has to attend any classes; it is completely voluntary. The word "class" is used loosely, as Carla Bergman describes them:

...they weren't classes in the traditional sense. They were more like workshops, sign up and drop in. Often the youth themselves ran them. Depending on skill level, interest and budgets. Some were weekly, some were monthly, some were one offs. They were based off the interests of the youth involved.²⁶⁸

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Everything at Thistle was made available for free, including classes, equipment, and supplies. Thistle operated legally as a non-profit under the umbrella of a larger non-profit organization called “Arts in Action”. This allowed them to apply for grants as a legal entity.²⁶⁹ They also state that most of their funding comes from the government. Carla provided some details about their funding strategies:

Early on Matt and others started a day time Skill Links program, which is a federally funded project. At first it was in publishing and then later in life skills and called Dream Seeds, for young women. This was very well funded (and the youth were paid as well as the mentors). This paid for the rent etc. Otherwise, we relied on a few core funders to keep it going. The city, foundations, and lots of donations and free time on the part of me and Matt and other adults, and of course the youth. The project did good work, was open and free to anyone to use it and so it built up a good reputation (lots of activist groups used it to make signs and banners for protests/marches, etc, as well as for meetings and gatherings). We also had a few community gardens and much else. Having a diversity of projects made it possible to leverage funding from a variety of funders. The key was to find core funding to cover the basic costs like rent. Project grants are good but they don't cover infrastructure and the space wasn't free to rent.²⁷⁰

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The Purple Thistle Centre closed in January of 2015, after 15 years of operation. In a letter to the public, they assured everyone that there was no reason to despair about the closing, but rather a call to celebrate everything that was accomplished at the Thistle:

The Thistle was never meant to be an institution, but rather a space where folks could come together, meet and dream about doing something collaboratively and then do it! And overall, that's what has happened.²⁷¹

Specifically, they saw the closing of the Thistle as a success. Their work in youth liberation was largely successful and they made themselves irrelevant:

...we have witnessed a wellspring of youth projects starting up: from youth-run collectives, to cooperatives and art projects, and it's been inspiring to see. At the same time, and partly as a result of this, we have seen the general involvement at the Thistle really lessen, which really makes a lot of sense to us... In other words, there's lots going on, and a bunch of it isn't happening at the Thistle.²⁷²

This is a great reminder that the ultimate goal of most social change movements is to be so successful that they make themselves irrelevant.

Founder Matt Hern offers advice to those looking to replicate their model:

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It's not a model that can be replicated.... It's just one example. I love it when people come and see us and say, "I'm gonna start something of my own." But what its gonna look like wherever you come from is tremendously different.²⁷³

ONE STONE LAB SCHOOL

One Stone is a non-profit organization in Boise, Idaho that promotes student voice and student leadership through creating meaningful, transformational opportunities for youth in their community. While One Stone was founded in 2008 by two parents, Joel and Teresa Poppen, its written into their bylaws that $\frac{2}{3}$ of the board members are always students themselves.

One Stone began with a few youth-led after-school programs, like Two Birds, a creative digital marketing agency run by students that serves real clients in the real world and earns real money. They also run Project Good, which is a community service organization and the Solution Lab, which is a business incubator for businesses started by students.

In 2015, a 24-hour "think challenge" was organized by One Stone to generate unique ideas to solving a variety of problems in their community. One of the topics discussed was education. Inspired by this event, some of the youth began discussing the idea of creating their own school that extended the type of work they did in the after-school programs into an actual school.

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To generate ideas, the One Stone youth group organized a second 24-hour “think challenge” that was focused entirely on education, attracting 150-200 people from the community to be part of the process of envisioning new models of schools. The executive director of the J.A. Kathryn Albertson Foundation was in attendance at this event and took a real interest in one of the models created by the “think challenge”.

Within four months of the “think challenge”, One Stone had received a 2 million dollar grant from the Foundation to open the One Stone Lab School: a student-led, tuition-free high school in Boise, Idaho.²⁷⁴ As Wikipedia describes their high school:

The program is different from traditional school, as it has no grades, opting for a portfolio and narrative transcript evaluation instead. Another difference is that rather than teachers, they have coaches, which support student-driven learning. Currently, One Stone has 17 coaches, with 7 master's degrees and 4 doctoral degrees.²⁷⁵

The coaches work with teens on project-based learning, and they use online instruction for traditional subject-matter like math.²⁷⁶ One Stone operates 5 days a week, and students participate in internships over the summer.²⁷⁷ As a private school, One Stone does not receive state money and is not be required to administer state achievement tests.²⁷⁸ There are no grades at One Stone, to demonstrate their work, they use a “growth-transcript” portfolio. I spoke with Dr. Caitlyn Scales, who is in charge of Strategy and

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Development at One Stone, for details about the portfolios, and she described them:

The Growth Transcript measures a student's ability to apply their ever-growing competencies and dispositions in a range of contexts, beginning with familiar contexts that require significant coach and mentor support to complex, real-world contexts, where students demonstrate their ability to use their skills in a professional or community setting to lead and effect change. Assessment is rigorous and includes data taken from performance-based evaluations, coach observations and written feedback, peer-to-peer reviews, and self-evaluations. Growth levels are determined in collaboration with the coach, learner, and advisor using rubrics to assess student skills and dispositions.²⁷⁹

The students are issued a One Stone Diploma when they graduate, and there are no constraints imposed on their graduation requirements by the state.

I spoke with Caitlyn and she says that they've just expanded their school to include 9th graders and have over 120 students attending. The format of the classes and schedule changes constantly. As she says, "they are always in beta".

For example, before the school year started, the teens all had a week-long session to discuss what they wanted to get

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from the current school year and brainstorm what that could look like. They decided to kick off the school year with a 3-week tech-free “deep dive” where they are all able to explore subjects intensively that interest them, rather than trying to juggle a schedule of seven different classes all at once. After the three weeks are over, they’ll shift gears to a new structure.

One Stone truly values youth empowerment and including youth in the real world as much as possible. They have many opportunities for teens to be engaged in their community, like the Design Lab, which they describe as:

...a project-based learning framework where students use design thinking to develop solutions to problems found in Boise and beyond. Students build a deep understanding of complex, interdisciplinary, real-world issues, while working with a partner organization or individual on relevant, long-term projects. The process requires primary and secondary research, extensive field work and community engagement, writing, professional communication, and other skills.²⁸⁰

One Stone students also have an opportunity to engage in a summer program, called the Summer Experience, where “students engage in a real-world internship, job shadow, or other professional or academic learning experience in a field of passion or personal interest.”²⁸¹

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One Stone isn't just preparing youth for the real world, it is allowing them to engage directly with it. As one graduate of One Stone, Kate Simonds, recalls in her TEDx Talk with over 3 million views, titled "I am 17":

Most teenagers depart their senior years with a diploma and an unfortunate sense of irrelevancy to the outside world. Any One Stone student has a different story. My three years with this fantastic organization saved me from the confusing mediocrity that was high school, and instead, exhibited the power and responsibility I have as a human being to make the world a better place. The empathy, leadership, and community service my teammates and I experienced granted us with both a lifetime of extraordinary memories and pertinent 21st century skills, not only preparing us for college but for the rest of our lives.²⁸²

Kate has an inspiring message for all teens:

Students, we've been respectfully asking for student voice for years. We've sat on representative seats at board meetings, we've protested standardized testing, but it hasn't been enough, look where we are. We need to stop asking and we need to start demanding. More than student councils and board meetings and clubs and representative seats -- we need to be trusted with more than setting up our parents iPads. Our ideas

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matter.²⁸³

Unlike the other success stories we've discussed, One Stone is still operating today. Their school is the focus of an upcoming documentary by Jon Long titled *Rise: A New Generation*, which documents their second year of operations.²⁸⁴

SEED

I saved the most promising and inspiring story for last. In my search for examples of youth-initiated self-directed learning centers, I reached out to Jerry Mintz, director of the Alternative Education Resource Organization.²⁸⁵ Jerry is one of the elders of this movement, especially around democratic schools, and is the author of the book *School's Over: How to Have Freedom and Democracy in Education*. I asked Jerry if he knew any examples throughout history of learning centers started by teens.

Jerry informed me that in the 1960's, a group of students in Toronto, Canada initiated what became known as the SEED School, which still exists today, and was used as a template for designing 25 other publicly-funded alternative schools in Toronto. It almost seemed too good to be true.

I tried searching for information about SEED but all I could find was a Wikipedia article describing it:

The acronym 'SEED' originally stood for 'Summer of Experience Exploration and Discovery', and when it became a year-round school it was changed to 'Shared

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Experience Exploration and Discovery'. Students interested in a particular subject, would gather other students, and together they would find a knowledgeable person to act as a teacher or catalyst, and meet regularly to learn. The groups met at various locations and times, including sometimes evenings and weekends. It was entirely up to the students how many and which subjects they studied, and when and where the groups would meet. A group studying Mass Media, for example, would meet in the evening in the Lowther Avenue home of CBC Radio Broadcasters Betty Tomlinson and Allan Anderson. The Vegan Lifestyles cooking course met and cooked in student homes with parents joining to eat the meals prepared by the students. A Japanese Studies group met at the University of Toronto. A few groups met at SEED's own facilities.²⁸⁶

This very much sounded like what I envisioned and I wanted to know more about the origin story. How did such a program get started? Who were these teens? And what led them to create what became such a successful project?

The Wikipedia article left with more questions than answers and I had nowhere to go to answer them. Jerry Mintz introduced me to an educator and writer in Toronto, Debra O'Rourke, who was familiar with SEED. She told me a book was written about the founding of SEED, titled *You can't take a bathtub on the subway: A Personal History of SEED*, but that it was out of print and hard to

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find.

In my mind, this book held the secrets to the Universe. It reminded me of when my college classmate, Alec, and I launched our first startup company. Back then, we learned about an obscure book titled *The Resonant Recognition Model* that described a unique way in which light could be used to increase the activity of biomolecules. The book was out of print and only available in foreign countries. I remembered us tracking down a library in Boston, MA that had a copy and going to the library and photocopying every single page in that book so we could have a copy for ourselves. This type of research always makes me feel like some sort of Indiana Jones-type character who is actively digging to uncover the secrets of humanity.

Fortunately, Debra offered to photocopy me a copy of the book. A few days later, she emailed me to tell me that when she went to make the copy, she could not find her own copy of the book.

Almost a year later, I got an email from her telling me she found her copy, offered to make me a copy, and also offered to arrange for me to visit the modern-day SEED School in Toronto.

The adventure continued!

Almost another year passed before I was finally able to make it up to Toronto for a visit. I was able to speak further with Debra about the origins of SEED and also meet with their current Principal, Liam Rodrigues.

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As I came to learn, there is an interesting debate between who actually “started” the SEED program. Basically, the adults claim they started it, while the youth claim they started it. It seems like, in a way, both are correct.

Here’s how I interpret the story, please forgive my nerdy enthusiasm for history.

Since SEED started in 1968, it’s important to first look at the context of what was happening in the 1960’s. At the time, there was tremendous political unrest with a great deal of activism, such as protests of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights and Feminist movements. Assassinations of President John Kennedy in 1963 and activist Malcolm X in 1965 were representative of the political times, and young people were becoming especially politically active and taking to the streets. The involvement of youth became particularly concerning to the public in 1967, during the famous “Summer of Love” in which young people descended on San Francisco and brought the hippie movement to the forefront of pop culture.

The summer of 1968 was looking like it may follow suit, as many political activities were going on at the start of the year, such as: a women’s march in Washington, DC against the Vietnam War; the North Vietnamese launching the Tet Offensive; a labor protest starting after two sanitation workers were killed by a malfunctioning garbage truck; police officers at South Carolina State University opening fire and killing students protesting Vietnam; the American media becoming openly critical of the Vietnam War; the Kerner Commission concluding that American society was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white --

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separate and unequal"; a group of 15,000 Latino students marching out of school in Los Angeles in demand of a better education; 500 New York University students protesting an event at their school where Dow Chemical (who produced the napalm chemical used in military weapons) was recruiting; hundreds of students taking over an administrative building in Howard University in Washington, DC in demand of a greater voice in student discipline and curriculum; a nationwide movement beginning for men to send back their draft cards; Martin Luther King Jr. being assassinated, resulting in riots in over 100 cities nationwide, leaving 39 people dead, more than 2,600 injured and 21,000 arrested; college students taking over five buildings at Columbia University and holding the dean hostage while demanding the university cut ties to military research resulting in 700 arrests; the play "Hair" debuting on Broadway and bringing to the mainstream the ideas about sex, drugs, rock & roll, and war draft resistance; riots breaking out amongst 5,000 college students in Paris, France; nine antiwar activists raiding a government office in Maryland and burning files and draft cards in the parking lot using homemade napalm; Robert Kennedy being assassinated while campaigning to be the next president; and the Poor People's Campaign rallying in Washington which attracted 50,000 participants calling for Jobs, Peace, and Freedom --- all of this just in the first half of 1968.²⁸⁷

As the summer of 1968 approached, the politicians in the city of Toronto, Canada were concerned about what could happen if idle teens were roaming the city unsupervised all summer. It was with this political climate in mind, that the adults on the Board of Education created a summer

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program to engage high school age students during the summer of 1968.

The SEED program, though technically initiated by adults, was brought to life, molded, and operated by the teens who took complete ownership of the program, resembling the model of the famous Summerhill School in England that has inspired so many self-directed learning centers in the world.

The students reached out to a large network of facilitators to teach classes, who they called “catalysts”, which included university students, professors, community members, and well-known experts throughout the city. As one of the adult organizers of SEED, Murray Shukyn, writes in *You can't take a bathtub on the subway*:

The kids were involved in all aspects of the program from public relations and recruiting students and catalysts to policy-making and timetabling, and they quickly developed their own rules and limitations on behavior to ensure that no criticism could be levelled against their program.... SEED belonged to the kids.²⁸⁸

It was important for SEED to be centrally located, to allow for easy access to classes and also to streamline communication. They started off in an empty space on the sixth floor of the Educational Centre, an administrative building of the Toronto Board of Education. Rather than confine the students to this space, it acted mainly as a central hub that functioned as a physical bulletin board for

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organizing people. They called this space, “SEED Central”.

Having a central headquarters with a bulletin board displaying all the day-to-day information about SEED operations was especially important given that SEED started in 1968 when there was no internet. It also helped to have a centrally-located headquarters to shorten the trip for SEED students and catalysts to meet up. As one SEED student, Alvin Snider, explained in an interview:

How far do you have to walk to get food, to get cigarettes, to acquire coffee in some fashion, to walk to the nearest hospital where your friend has just come out of the biology course held there? How far did he have to walk to get there? How far does the journalist have to travel, who is holding the journalism course? How far does the person have to come to you, or you to him, who is teaching French, Spanish, Lithuanian, or what have you? What about the kid who's taking apart the automobile engine? How far does he have to go for that, and from there back to the bulletin board to see what's happening the next day? There is no other way that he can find out but from the bulletin board.²⁸⁹

Anecdotes fill the pages of the “bathtub book” with stories of groups meeting with various catalysts throughout the city of Toronto.

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Some examples: a group of eight youth interested in astronomy met at the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada in the evenings; fifty youth met for a group discussing politics, breaking up into various smaller groups that met three times per week; another catalyst hosted youth in the garden of her home and arranged trips to political institutions throughout the city including having the youth attend Toronto Board of Education meetings where the youth gave a public critique of their process; some youth attended group meetings at the lounge of Innis College; and some met at the International Student Centre of the University of Toronto.²⁹⁰

Some youth had more hands-on experiences: like visiting auto mechanics throughout Toronto; another group of youth visited a recording studio to learn about radio interviewing; a handful of catalysts met with students at the National Film Board to access a large library of films and get insights into how they were made; another catalyst worked with artistic youth interested in sculpture who met at a warehouse where they'd work on Styrofoam, wood, and plaster sculptures; youth interested in theater met with a catalyst at various rehearsal spaces throughout the city; a dozen youth interested in music collaborated with a pair of catalysts to host gatherings where they all played folk music and people danced; some youth interested in social change met with a couple catalysts throughout the city to discuss ways of alleviating poverty in the city; some youth interested in nature traveled with a catalyst to parts of the city like the zoo and Toronto Island; and many youth met in the homes of the catalysts teaching more conventional subjects like math, language, or computers. Some classes even began including adults as learners, such as the

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computer programming class. Similarly, as some teachers became students, some of the students also taught classes.²⁹¹

While it may sound chaotic and scattered, things were organized quite seamlessly on the bulletin board at SEED Central, with simple group descriptions and guidelines such as these:

COMMUNAL LIVING IN TORONTO

Meets every Thursday at 7:00pm with Greg Sass. We visited Yorkville, Rochdale, and Superschool. Thursday, July 24 we're going to visit Digger House. See the bulletin board each week to see where to meet. Discussion on each experience.

COMPUTER SKILLS

Interested in learning the language of the computer and feeding your own problems into a computer? Meet daily at 10:00am in the computer services classroom at the Education Centre with [catalysts] Kin Lee and Peter Chong.²⁹²

The presence of the students throughout the city all summer also acted as a way of promoting SEED. Students utilized all the resources of the city, people, buildings, equipment, and supplies, ultimately evolving into a learning network. Murray Shukyn writes:

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We were developing a community based not on geographical boundaries but on common interest. Each group became autonomous in decisions about content, direction, and timetabling; and contact with SEED Central provided information about other groups' timetables so that conflicts could be avoided. In this way, SEED Central became a facilitator - collecting, organizing, and issuing information, and arranging for supplies and equipment as they were needed.²⁹³

It's interesting to read the role of SEED Central, which seemed to operate almost like a modern-day internet forum, or Google Calendar. The authors of the book use the term "switchboard" and "clearing house"²⁹⁴ which are terms not so frequently used today. Essentially, it means there were people constantly on the phone organizing groups and planning sessions and coordinating locations and times and adult catalysts and teen learners. While a great deal of this could be operated via a digital platform, it can't be understated that there is also a great value in the physical connections that youth made by having a central place to coordinate, meet, connect, and share experiences face-to-face.

SEED teens did not have trouble finding volunteers. They actively made phone calls reaching out to community members but also had an influx of phone calls from people who heard about SEED and offered to volunteer and help out. Remarkably, many of the volunteer catalysts enjoyed their experience so much that they continued to volunteer

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on an ongoing basis.

The culture of SEED was built on mutual respect between adults and youth. As Murray Shukyn writes:

Everyone was on a first-name basis. More significantly, both kids and volunteers shared in the privileges and responsibilities for their groups in SEED. Respect amongst individuals grew in response to the recognition of ability, knowledge, and experience. Respect developed rather than being imposed.²⁹⁵

SEED was a huge success in its first summer. In their second summer, SEED's reputation had grown a lot, and there were issues as changes were made. As Alvin, one of the SEED students, explains:

When I left, [SEED] was following its original promise, but it had some very awkward difficulties to overcome. It was no longer in a central place. It had been given too much, too much room, and too much divided room, when all it needed was one central large room, somewhere in downtown Toronto, and three telephones. When I came back, there were small sets of people in each office. The only people I could actually speak to, who would speak back to me, were those people I had known before. In other words, I was stuck in a small social group and couldn't get out of it no matter what I did.²⁹⁶

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It seems like many of the problems arising in the second summer were, in part, because of the immense success they experienced in the first summer. As two teens discussed in the “bathtub book”:

S: One of the things which I feel destroyed SEED was the media. The media came in. Did you see any of the programs on SEED, on television?

A: They were oriented toward people who were far different from people who were in the program.

S: Not only that, the thing which strikes me is that the people in the program were socialite people, eh? SEED started attracting people who could get on television. People who could have their name in a newspaper. I think that’s something which made it fall apart.²⁹⁷

The influx of new members who were not invested in the creation and success of SEED led to problems, as Diana Smith shares:

The people who came into SEED, afterwards, didn’t have any energy to really work on SEED. It was there for them. They somehow had this idea that it was there for them and it was going to keep going. What happened was that Murray kept it going, in the office. He was the only one doing it, and he was the only one who knew all the information. Eventually, it got to the point

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where he just took over, the way any administrator would. He found it too inefficient to consult other people. It just took more time, so he did it himself.²⁹⁸

Despite the challenges during the second summer, it was during the second summer when the teens expressed that they wanted SEED to continue throughout the school year as an alternative to school. As Murray writes:

The last few days of the summer program were most unusual. Rather than the usual joy at the end of term, depression was apparent in most of the groups. The kids did not want the program to stop, and felt it unfair that an artificial limitation should be imposed on this type of learning.²⁹⁹

The story continues on Wikipedia:

That fall the students obtained recognition from the University of Toronto, and requested the Board establish it as a high school to obtain core funding (for staff and space) and so that students could obtain high school diplomas. During that fall and winter, students ran SEED without any coordinators, using an office made available free by St. Thomas Anglican Church on Huron Street.³⁰⁰

As SEED formalized into an official school which would grant teens a diploma, bureaucracy crept in and guidelines,

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budgets, boundaries, and oversight became more formalized:

Official enrolment was capped at 100 students... Additional students could also attend but not earn high school credits/diplomas. Grades 9 to 13 were included... A budget of about \$200,000 was approved. Murray Shukyn was the first coordinator. To meet the technical requirement of having a principal, and yet minimize costs, the Superintendent of Secondary Schools, A. L. Milloy, was appointed Principal, but he was not involved at the school. A small core group of four or five teachers were hired, most of whom were certified to teach in more than one high school subject, so that students, if they wished, could still take traditional subjects taught by certified teachers that would qualify for a high school diploma.³⁰¹

Whether or not the school continued to be ‘student-run’ is debatable. Thought its stated that “The students ran the school, often dealing directly with the Board of Education...” it implies that they had to answer to authorities. Just as describing a principal as “running a school,” the principal is in charge and responsible for that school, but still has to answer to a superintendent (who in turn has to answer to a school board, who has to answer to voters in the community).

So it could be argued that the adults started the SEED

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summer program, which was run by teens, and that it was the teens that started the actual SEED School. Regardless of how you want to view the early dynamics of its formation, what's more important is to see that it worked and it worked well: SEED has continued to exist to this present day.

When I traveled to Toronto to take a tour of SEED, I have to confess, I was a bit disappointed. I'm not sure exactly what I expected to see, but when I compared it to my other experiences in visiting learning centers, it didn't feel nearly as student-run as I envisioned.

I wasn't trying to be confrontational with the current principal, Liam, or Debra who arranged the meeting, but I did piece together an explanation for the changes. I came to learn that, over time, a lot of the autonomy and self-directed aspects of SEED had slowly been stripped away from it. Keep in mind, that SEED started over 50 years ago and is a publicly funded school. It should not come as a large surprise that between becoming a formalized school and the evolution of time, it adapted. Instead of being an alternative to school, it developed into an alternative school.

CONCLUSION

I apologize for leaving you with what feels like an unhappy ending for most of these "success" stories. Of the examples given, only One Stone and SEED are still operating, and SEED seems to have slowly drifted from its truly student-driven origins.

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The important message that I'm trying to convey to you is that this seemingly crazy idea of creating your own learning center is completely possible. As you've now heard in the stories of the school-within-a-school in Massachusetts, One Stone in Idaho, Endor ALC in Asheville, the Purple Thistle Centre in Vancouver, and SEED in Toronto, tuition-free, student-initiated self-directed learning centers have been created multiple times in multiple parts of the world in a variety of formats.

These stories are examples of what is possible. Author and community-builder Peter Block writes about the benefits and consequences of using examples of great communities throughout the world as our inspiration:

They give us hope and possibility. When seen as benchmarks, they make for good journalism, but benchmarking has an element of illusion built in. It implies that if I can see it there, I can create it here. The hard part of community building is that it is always a custom job. It is born of local people, with unique gifts, deciding what to create together in this place.³⁰²

I had no idea these examples of zero-tuition, student-initiated learning centers existed when I first began writing this book several years ago. Keep in mind that there are probably more examples which I did not come across in my research. Learning about their existence brings me incredible joy, and a slight sadness.

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I feel joy because it provides evidence that this crazy idea can work! I feel some sadness because I must now come to accept the harsh reality that even the ideas presented in this book around creating your own student-initiated, zero-tuition self-directed learning center are not truly original. I haven't really invented anything or come up with any new ideas. I'm much more of a cheerleader than an inventor. I accept that my job here is to take the incredible stories of other teens' accomplishments and shout them from a mountaintop so they can be heard far and wide. And in writing this book, I hope to achieve just that.

ACTION:

As we wrap up, I want to help you zero in on what kind of fun self-directed projects you could work on. I don't want you to feel restricted by this activity, so if you have your own ideas, run with them. This is more to help you brainstorm to come up with new ideas.

You're going to do a "word association" activity, where you write down whatever comes to mind when I present a few prompts. Set a timer for 2.5 minutes for each prompt, and write down as many things as you can during that 2.5 minutes. It's ok if you only come up with one idea, and equally ok if you have 20 ideas. Also, it's perfectly ok if you repeat ideas for multiple prompts. Here are the prompts:

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- 1) Skills you HAVE
- 2) Skills you WANT to have
- 3) Interests you HAVE

Note: recognize the difference between an interest and a skill. If you can say “I know how to...”, it is a skill. If you can only say “I know about...” it is an interest.

- 4) Interests you WANT to have.
- 5) Problems to solve: GLOBAL
- 6) Problems to solve: NATIONAL
- 7) Problems to solve: LOCAL
- 8) Problems to solve: PERSONAL
- 9) Bucket list of things you want to do before you die
- 10) Things I do for fun ALONE
- 11) Things I do for fun with OTHERS
- 12) Big questions you have

Next, I want you to take these different sections and start combining different items to create a new project. The most straightforward way to do this is to combine an interest and a skill. For example, I have a skill for stand-up comedy and am interested in mental health and education, so a lot of my stand-up comedy is about mental health and education. Since I have a skill for doing comedy and have some skills in making videos and have an interest in physics, I am working on making a physics sketch comedy show. Since I had a skill for video and computers, and I am interested in mental health activism, a few years ago I offered to livestream a protest to the internet. Since I am interested in becoming a better oil painter and I am interested in physics,

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I paint a lot of physics experiments.

This will lead to all sorts of fun projects which you can work on. If you want to take it a step further, you can combine your skills and interests with solving a real problem. For example, since I see that there is a huge problem with our education system, and I have skills with computers and performing, I created this book. Since I think teens reading this book will need support to actual create their own learning centers and I have a skill with building websites, I created the Peer Unschooling Network.

You can also look at your bucket list as a project in itself. If you dream of skydiving one day, why not set that as an immediate goal? There's so much to learn from a technical perspective about skydiving, plus the personal development of overcoming your fears. Don't under-value the educational value of these personal pursuits.

In the end, you really only need 1 or 2 ideas that you are super excited about to start moving forward. But it helps to first start with a huge list of ideas, and *then* start narrowing it down to which ones you will actually pursue. Keep in mind, that it's perfectly fine to look at organizing a zero-tuition, self-directed learning center as a big project all in itself.

If you want some more examples of projects I've brainstormed up, you can check out a blog post I wrote with all my bucket list dream projects.³⁰⁵

CLOSING THOUGHTS

At last, we've reached the end of the road together. I only have a few more things I'd like to share with you and then you'll be on your way.

IT'S ALL GOOD

I told you that my main motivation for writing this book was to spread the idea that creating your own teen-initiated, zero-tuition, self-directed learning center could be the magic formula to make self-directed learning accessible to the masses. I very much believe in this idea and hope you end up creating one of these amazing centers -- but -- please know that it's not your burden to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. You should choose whatever path to pursuing self-directed learning is going to bring the most benefit to your life, regardless of how this fits into the larger movement.

If unschooling resonates with you and you have no need for being a part of a learning center, that's awesome, go for it.

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If you feel like going to a Liberated Learner Center, a Sudbury School, an Agile Learning Center, or a different learning center in your area, that's awesome too, I bet it will be amazing. If you want to follow the suggestions in this book and create your own zero-tuition learning center, that's also awesome. Or if this book has inspired you to do something completely different - that's great too. There is no right or wrong path.

The most important thing is that you know your options and that you get to *choose*. As author and poet, Dr. Maya Angelou once said: "I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better."³⁰⁶

Even choosing to stay in your conventional school may be a great choice for you after reviewing all the options. My hope is that knowing that school is an option, and not a requirement, may actually make the experience more powerful for you. I'm an advocate for voice, choice, and self-determination... I'm not here to proselytize about a specific path. Think of all this knowledge I've shared with you as a set of tools that are on your tool belt which you can use as you see fit. The decision-making power is in your hands.

My hope is that whatever choice you make, you'll find the same satisfaction as Dylan and Neil, the two teens who I interviewed last spring who go to the South Jersey Sudbury School. When I interviewed them, they told me they enjoyed their learning center so much, they wished they could go there in the summer.³⁰⁷ That is the kind of learning experience I think every young person deserves.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

If you are worried about whether you are “smart enough” or “good enough” to pursue the ideas in this book, let me reassure you: if you are smart enough to understand what I’ve talked about in this book, you are smart enough to implement it. The challenge here is not intelligence, especially not the kind which you’ve been tested on at school. The challenge is to be courageous enough to do something different and blaze your own trail. This is a good excuse to include one of my favorite quotes from Dr. Angelou, which is: “If you're always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.”³⁰⁸

SPLASH STORY

I want to share one last story which I find exemplary of how a lifestyle pursuing self-directed learning can be standing right in front of you, but you might miss it if someone doesn’t point it out.

There is an event called “Splash” that is held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology every fall.³⁰⁹ Teenagers from around the world travel to MIT for this weekend event to experience their campus and take classes. The classes are taught by MIT students and faculty, as well as volunteers. From the fall of 2015 to the spring of 2019, I volunteered to teach classes there. (Sadly, I am no longer allowed to teach there because I broke their ‘3-strike’ rule.) What makes this event special is that the volunteer teachers get to teach anything they want. They simply fill out a form saying what they are interested in teaching and they are given space on campus to teach it. The students who attend the event, get to sign up for any classes that seem

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interesting to them, it's their choice. This event is a great example of self-directed learning in action because both the teachers and students get to choose what they want.

I've taught many different classes at Splash, ranging from creating a green screen video to public speaking to entrepreneurship to how to create your own zero-tuition self-directed learning center. A couple years ago, during one of my public speaking classes, one of the students mentioned that she was an unschooler. The other students weren't sure what to do with this information.

The girl sitting next to the unschooler, exclaimed: "Wow, I've been hanging out with you all day and I had no idea. That's so crazy... I don't even get it. How do you learn anything without school?"

The unschooler replied, "Well... I'm here at Splash right now, aren't I? We're literally in a class learning about public speaking right now." The first girl realized how silly her question was, yet she had just one more silly question to ask: "But if you don't go to school, how do you meet people and make friends?" The unschooler, very patiently replied, "You and I just met this morning and we've been hanging out all day. You literally met me today... without school."

I love this story because it shows how the answers can sometimes be right in front of your eyes, yet still go unnoticed.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

THE FUTURE: TAKING OVER YOUR SCHOOL

Just as most books often have a chapter devoted to sharing their ‘success stories’, the authors usually close by offering their projection of what the future may look like if their ideas take off. Speculating about the future is fun, but also quite impossible. I have no way of knowing whether this book will be successful at all. Right now, its impact exists only in a quantum probability cloud.³¹⁰

But let’s have some fun and speculate: What if this book is a success? What if thousands of teens, or tens of thousands of teens, or, dare I say, millions of teens listen to this book and begin creating their own self- directed learning centers in their communities? What would that world look like? What are the consequences of such a world?

With so many youths shifting their time toward freely available, community-based resources, it’s possible that many of them will outgrow the library or whatever space they’ve set up their headquarters in. If they are able to grow a vibrant learning community, I imagine they’d be able to think creatively to find other spaces to adapt to the growth of their community.

One possibility is the growth of unique housing environments near the libraries, where young people live and work together. When people ask what I would have done differently if I could re-do my college education, I share that I would have just rented a big house with a bunch of other like-minded college-aged students and worked on

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our own projects instead of spending so much money on tuition and room and board.

I've stayed in so-called "hacker hostels" in Silicon Valley which take a similar approach to providing living and working space under one roof. Co-living spaces that blend work spaces and living space like these are popping up in more places where digital nomads are living, like the one I stayed at in Costa Rica last winter. I have also stayed at a couple intentional communities in Asheville, NC and San Diego, CA as well as a co-housing community in Northampton, MA. They all had different approaches to organizing, making decisions, how space was used, and what type of people they attracted, but they all functioned fairly well.

That's not to say that there would be younger teens living in these communities, but these communities could be places that house older teens and accommodate younger folks being there during the day working on projects. It would look differently in different communities, but I did hear of a couple of adult unschoolers in the Pacific Northwest purchasing a house and renting rooms to older teen unschoolers, so this isn't too unrealistic.

If this movement does grow substantially, which I think it will, the library is going to run out of space for all these teens. Human nature seems to say that if a group is growing and running out of resources and needs to expand, they may consume the resources of their natural competitor... so maybe teens can take over their local public school!

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I imagine that there is a “tipping point” in any community, after which there are so many teens pursuing self-directed learning at the library and so few teens continuing to attend regular school, that a drastic change takes place. Either the administration will be forced to accommodate their dwindling numbers by evolving their policies toward a more self-directed approach or the students will revolt and take over the school.

While the idea of teens taking over their school seems like a reason to celebrate, there is one realistic downside: what happens if not all the students in the school are in favor of self-directed learning? For example, imagine a scenario where a school has 1,000 teens, and 600 of them protest and demand the school be run by teens. Now imagine that they succeed and their school transforms into being student-run. What about those 400 students who did not choose to participate in the protest? What happens to them?

For a long time, I resisted suggesting that youth should overthrow their school administration because I’ve been concerned about this subset of students. I’ve felt bad that a teen could wake up one day to find their school suddenly tipped upside down and they could be forced to adapt to a new structure they didn’t sign up for. Having self-directed learning forced on someone, doesn’t feel very self-directed.

At the same time that I hold discomfort with that idea, I also don’t think that we should hold onto old, obsolete ideas simply because it would disturb the status quo to transition to a new idea.

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I've come to accept now, that this transition would be a good thing, and wouldn't leave those hesitant students in a wake of destruction. After all, in a system where teens are running the school, it is still possible to have teachers and classes which accommodate those teens that are less interested in self-direction. The whole idea here is that they get to choose; they could opt-in to being told what to do. I think this fear I hold is misplaced, but only time will tell.

In speculating about the future, we must accept that there are countless possibilities and we'll never know until the future arrives.

Maybe, instead of students taking over their school, school will just evolve to become an extension of the library. Peter Gray's research says that the government currently spends about 60 times as much money on schools than they do on libraries.³¹¹ Imagine if that money were spread out more evenly, or even reversed. Imagine a world where a space with the library's self-directed philosophy had a school's budget, space, resources, and teachers.

Or, maybe instead of teens reading this to guide the creation of zero-tuition, student-initiated learning centers, they will be inspired to rally and take over their schools immediately. I imagine this could happen in a few locations... and those takeovers could inspire more takeovers across the country.

I've been finding it ironic that youth have been so active in organizing around gun control and climate change, yet we still haven't seen protests related to students' rights. My guess is that it's because many parents and adults (and the media) support gun control and climate change marches,

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but would not all be on board for protests related to overthrowing the authoritarian educational structure itself. We've already seen students be punished just for walking out of the school briefly during gun control and climate protests.³¹² Imagine what would happen if the students were to actually strike and refuse to return to class until their demands were met.

I have thought about focusing my efforts on these sorts of actions and decided this book was a better approach. Maybe it is a cop out. Protests are a way to demand those in power make changes. My approach, instead, is to take that power away from authority figures by creating something where those in power cannot dictate the rules to you. I prefer an approach that doesn't require asking those in power for permission. That's not to say my approach is correct, and I'd certainly support any youth organizing a protest in favor of self-directed learning. I just feel that creating your own learning centers is a more strategic approach and one which also doesn't require you to convince the majority of your peers that self-directed learning is for them. You can simply choose self-directed learning for yourself and go after it.

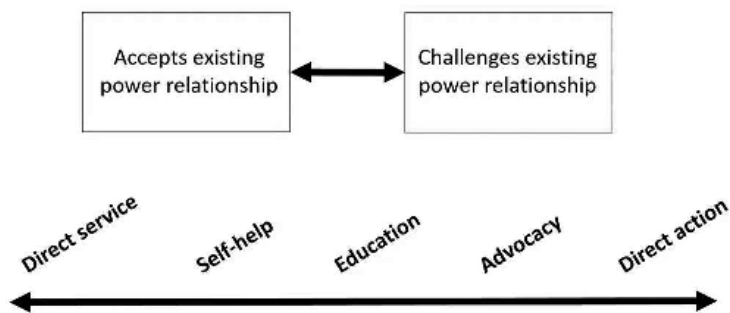
I definitely encourage you to link up with others on the Peer Unschooling Network to get involved in activism. The National Youth Rights Association may be a good organization to reach out to as well, though their focus seems to be more about reforming school policy rather than abolishing compulsory education.³¹³ I see some hope in the youth activism happening at One Stone, where they recently ran their first "Hands Down. Voices Up" summit to empower youth.³¹⁴ Another group, going by the name

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Academia Revolution, also appears to be sprouting some activism efforts. They are planning an online campaign to promote self-directed learning among young people, and even to open their own learning center based on the ideas outlined in their “Academia Manifesto.”³¹⁵ I also see possible activism growing out of the School Survival community, which was started in 1999 by an 11th grader who goes by the name “SoulRiser.”³¹⁶ I do hope at some point these different youth activism groups join forces to create a larger movement that is as strong as the climate change and gun control movements that have been so prevalent in the news.

One piece of information I’d like to include here, for the aspiring activists, is a chart I first saw in the book *Organizing for Social Change*.³¹⁷

The Forms of Community Organizing



adapted from "Organizing for Social Change"

This graphic displays an axis along which the different kinds of community organizing are listed. As you move down the axis, from direct service to self-help to education to advocacy and finally to direct action, you move away

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from organizing that accepts existing power relationships and toward organizing that challenges existing power relationships.

The main message from this graphic, is to look at what kind of activism will help you get to the root of the problem, which is often caused by power imbalances. As human rights activist, David Oaks, described to me:

Imagine seeing a flow of drowning babies coming down a river. Your instinct is to jump in and save them. But you quickly get tired and overwhelmed because you can't save them all. So you may start a program and get others to join you to help rescue the babies, maybe even a training to teach the babies to swim so you don't have to manually rescue them all. This helps, but ultimately, you really need to go up the river and find out who's throwing these fucking babies in the water and stop them.³¹⁸

This book is focused on creating a self-help program and education, and the Peer Unschooling Network can be thought of as a direct service. This allows you to escape the school system and thrive, without ever changing the school system. If you want change to happen, it's going to arise from advocacy and, especially, from direct action. Direct action involves the use of strikes, demonstrations, civil disobedience, marches, and other public forms of protest to demand those in power make changes.

Of course, the youth rights resistance won't occur without a fight from those in power. In a more pessimistic projection

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of the future, maybe the government will respond to the popularization of self-directed learning, and laws will be passed outlawing homeschooling or unschooling. It's really impossible to predict the future, but one thing is certain: change always happens.

Rather than fearing change, my greater fear is that conditions will continue as they are today, or get worse. Just this week, I read a new article in *The Guardian*, titled 'Under digital surveillance: how American schools spy on millions of kids', which detailed the efforts schools are making to monitor and control teens' behavior.³¹⁹ I remember when I was working on Open Source High that I got to meet some of the individuals involved in these security companies disguised as education technology companies, and it's disheartening to see their products now on the market. It seems like the focus of investment in innovation in education is becoming more and more about controlling students than it is on actual learning.

Not to worry: things change. And you can be the one who changes things.

I'm reminded of a quote by a hero of mine named Aaron Swartz (1986 - 2013) who was a computer programmer, entrepreneur and internet activist. Aaron was a great example of a young person in modern times who fought for what he believed in, one of the few examples of modern leadership that I truly respect. Tragically, Aaron is also an example of a citizen standing up to our authoritarian system and paying the price with his life.

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Aaron spoke in a documentary about his feelings of things being static and unchangeable:

Growing up, I slowly had this process of realizing that all the things around me that people had told me were just the natural way things were, the way things always would be, they weren't natural at all. They were things that could be changed, and they were things that, more importantly, were wrong and should change, and once I realized that, there was really no going back.³²⁰

I relate a lot to Aaron's words, since he was in his early 20's when he said this, which is around the same time I started becoming more interested in social change.

Activists often talk about real change needing to come from the "bottom up." Many people feel like this is already happening with the unschooling movement, Liberated Learners Centers, Agile Learning Centers, and Sudbury Schools. This is because these organizations are formed by individuals rather than large, bureaucratic institutions.

My opinion is that these movements are not quite "bottom up" because they are not being created by the teens themselves. They still end up with an adult who is in charge; either the parent or the manager/owner of the learning center. In my view, a true bottom-up system will be completely student-driven. It is for this reason that I am trying to stand back and help facilitate the formation of student-initiated learning centers rather than put myself in charge. Although I run the Peer Unschooling Network, I

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also try to serve the youth there as much as possible, and solicit and implement their ideas. Ideally, youth would take over operation of the website altogether. Even in writing this book, I am informing you of my perspectives on self-directed learning, but not forcing anything on you. It's up to you to do all the work. I even invite you to devise a better approach than I have laid out in this book. If you do, please share it with the other teens on the Peer Unschooling Network so they can use your ideas.

WARNINGS

Self-directed learning is a bit like the Force; it is a great power, but, if used unwisely, can also be somewhat self-destructive. I want to share a warning that is particularly relevant to those who consider themselves “over-achievers”, but really applies to anyone doing self-directed learning.

In stepping away from the school system, you are leaving a world where other people are setting the expectations for you. You're leaving a world where other people are judging and evaluating you. You are entering a world where you are your own self-evaluator.

If you have been raised in the school system to base your self-worth on accomplishments and honors and grades, then suddenly you will find yourself like an addict who can't find a fix. Since there are no longer people to hand you gold stars and A+'s, you'll find yourself in withdrawals from that praise. It certainly is some kind of an addiction to have people praising you, right? After all, isn't that why they use praise in school? To try and “encourage” (aka:

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manipulate) you to work harder? If suddenly you don't have grades and quizzes to prove to yourself that you are succeeding, you may feel a bit lost.

Without being too corny - just remember: you are always doing your best and you are worthy of love and acceptance. You are more than the sum of your accomplishments and creations. You are a human being with intrinsic value and beauty.

As the great quote from the movie *Fight Club* goes:

You are not your job, you're not how much money you have in the bank. You are not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You are not your fucking khakis.³²¹

School creates a competitive environment where you are constantly taught to be your best and do your best and to rise up and be successful and not be a failure. Suddenly you're stepping away from that into an area where there is no judgment, no imposed structure, and no easy way to compare yourself to the world. You're leaving the hyper-competitiveness of schooling into a much more ambiguous zone. This will take time to get used to.

I've somewhat pitched unschooling and self-directed learning as being "better" than school. But "better" at what? Better at achieving the same goals that school had set out for you? Of the endless pursuit of accomplishment and praise? That doesn't feel like an appropriate goal. I think you'll find that once you've stepped outside that system, your goals will shift as well. The danger is in stepping

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outside of the school system and using self-directed learning to continue on an endless pursuit of unfulfilling achievement.

If you become an unschooler and you have all the time to pursue your interests, you can accomplish some pretty incredible things. Really... you have the power to be anything and do anything you want. Sure there are limits, like most of you won't ever be able to dunk a basketball. But any of you could be an artist, entrepreneur, doctor, lawyer, sailor, farmer, engineer, mechanic, athlete, comedian, musician, etc...

Also, don't feel like you have to choose one thing and become the "genius" at it. It's perfectly fine to be a jack of all trades. I remember when I was applying to colleges, the man who founded the Academy of Math and Science magnet school I attended, Dr. Jeffrey Osborn, gave me some great advice. He was a medical doctor who did research and taught at Trinity College and started this magnet school, a truly accomplished guy. He said to me: "Don't worry so much about figuring out what you want to do for the rest of your life. Focus on what you want to do now, or over the next year or two. I'm 52 and still don't know what I want to be when I grow up."

So, in your pursuit of becoming "something" or "someone", do not forget, above all else, to simply be a good human being. Try to not let your ego get carried away with this newfound freedom and power. Try to find balance between yourself and your community. Don't use this tool of unschooling to delve into a world of selfishness, self-advancement, and self-accomplishment. Use this as a tool

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for collaboration and community. Figure out for yourself exactly what you think it is to be a human. Don't let the world define you based on your career or your title - come up with your own definitions. Be happy, enjoy the ride, and don't forget to turn the lights off when you're not using them.

LET'S BE REAL

I would be blind to believe that this book, in itself, could provide you with everything you need to pursue your journey into self-directed learning. I think it's pretty damn comprehensive, but there are always going to be challenges that are unique to your situation to overcome. I would like to do my best to help with these challenges, but I also know that I am limited in my capacity to help everyone. As such, the best place to get started seeking resources and people to solve your problems will be the Peer Unschooling Network. I aim for this to be a youth-run meeting place on the web to organize, troubleshoot, and support one another in your mutual pursuits of self-direction. It's free to use and it's waiting for you. Join at PeerUnschooling.Net.³²²

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“If I have seen further than others, it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

– Sir Isaac Newton³⁶

HELLO, UNIVERSE

None

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CHAPTER 6

THE BIG PROBLEM

CHAPTER 7

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CLOSING THOUGHTS

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