

PIONEER FREE SCHOOL NO. 1:

1. Founding Proposal.

## I. Introduction: the educational task.

Without its young, any society is doomed to a lingering death. Yet a society's young do not spring from the womb full-fledged citizens, ready-made. Human social relations are not transmitted biologically. They are acquired characteristics, not inherited; and they are acquired by education. Education is that process whereby a culture transmits itself; it is that process whereby a society gradually incorporates its young into itself.

With us, this process is utterly intentional and self-conscious. We think it self-evident that an education which does not prepare an individual to enter into his culture creatively, which does not enable him to enhance its transmission through his own individuality, is education in name only. We believe education must enable the individual to participate actively and wholesomely in his society - else it is mere noise.

Very well then, education is supposed to get us into our society. But that is a rather abstract notion; the aculturation process does not take place in a vacuum. There are background conditions which constitute the milieu in which teaching and learning take place, and which determine whether or not that teaching and learning is genuine education. If these conditions are ignored, the education can be positively detrimental. Not only does it fail to socialize the young. It may also destroy them. It leaves them unequipped to cope with their own futures. In some cases, it may even make them into its own enemies.

Perhaps the most prominent, and, paradoxically, the most permanent condition of our world today is just its impermanence. Change seems to be one thing which is changeless. We do not speak here of superficial change. The changes are deep; they go to the very roots of our being as a nation and as a culture. Nor do we speak of gradual change, developing in a single line, and at an arithmetic rate. Rather, the rate of change is so rapid, so multi-dimensional as to be geometrical. Each specific newness gives birth to hundreds of others. And it is not merely that technical innovations build upon the technical past. More importantly, it is that those innovations have unforeseen social consequences as well.

American education, then, must equip young Americans to function creatively, contributively, responsibly, and happily in a world whose central characteristic is radical, exponential change. That is a very tall order. And, there are signs that our educational structures are failing in this task.

But we are not out to point accusing fingers. Such exercises are sterile excuses for remaining uncommitted. It is too easy, and too unproductive, to lay our own stagnation at the feet of those harried persons who are working at that task. We do not want to condemn. Rather, we want to join in the search for genuinely successful educational forms by creating our own educational alternative.

## II. Proposal: Pioneer Free School No. 1

A. Generally: We propose the formation of a "free school" within Pioneer High School. I.e., a free school which is staffed and attended by teachers and students who teach or attend Pioneer High School. The school will be voluntary; its curriculum created by its participants, open-ended, non-compartmentalized, non-graded.



In our view, the paid teacher should really be an educational consultant. He suggests alternative areas of investigation, directions of exploration, and so on. He helps provide an environment conducive to learning.

If we think of the teaching-learning process as one involving direction, there are at least 3 directions it may take: (a) from teacher to learner, (b) from learner to teacher, and (c) from learner to learner. Our school will be a space in which all three directions may take place, where all participants are free to work together in the learning process, both at its inception as well as in its direction.

4. The educational process will be based upon "the individual's strong, inherent desire to learn and to make sense of his environment."

Whether the educational process turns out to be of genuine benefit to the learner or not depends upon how one answers the question, "Is learning something natural, inherent to the human being simply as such, or must we artificially stimulate the process by a system of rewards and punishments?"

We believe that such systems of rewards and punishments actually hinder real learning. We know that there are studies which show that students perform better on tests when threatened by failing grades than they do when they are not so threatened. But we also know that such learning evaporates quickly, until even the highest scorer remembers little of what he had learned. Is it that these students are stupid? We do not believe so. We believe rather that these students have not had the correct incentive for learning. That incentive, we believe, can never be supplied by any system of externally conceived and administered rewards and punishments. It must come from within the individual himself.

But we also believe that every human being has this incentive "built-in," so to speak. Human beings, simply per se, tend to explore, experiment with, and intellectually order their environment, with one proviso: IF they are permitted to do so. The stupidity most of us exhibit in the ordinary classroom indicates that our natural drive to learn is, somehow, being thwarted.

We therefore want a community where we will have time to think, and explore on our own; a space where our natural desire to learn, understand, and create will be released. We need a space where our own individual interests can be the launching pad to continuous learning relevant to our own situations.

Such a space must be physically and psychologically relaxing. Participants must be able to feel, as one student put it, "free to make a mistake without being punished for it." Moreover, the range of possible activities must be determined by the interests of the participants, rather than by interests which are external to the group. This does not mean our curriculum will be irrelevant to the manpower needs of our society. Indeed, part of our education will be to have a hand in determining, for ourselves, the ways in which we may be of service to our society. We think individual learners, when allowed to do so, can respond more quickly to the evident needs of society than can even the most well-intentioned bureaucracy.

5. Our school will be oriented toward periodic and meaningful success for every participant.

John Holt has catalogued the ways in which our present structures encourage failure. "Most children in school fail," he says. And his arguments are persuasive. Up to 40% of those beginning high school drop out before they graduate. Others finish, but only because they have been pushed through the grades independent of any actual learning which may, or may not, have taken place. Again, the great majority of students fail to develop more than a "tiny part of the tremendous capacity for learning, understanding, and creating with which they were born . . . "

But how does this happen? Holt says our children fail because "they are afraid, bored, and confused." They are afraid, first of all, of academic failure. But the solution is not to make our curriculum one in which failure is impossible. We believe there is only boredom in this way. We do not need continual, guaranteed success. Rather we need an atmosphere in which success and failure are not irrevocably tied to an evaluation system which ultimately determines the student's future. The occasion of failure must not simultaneously be one in which we are condemned and punished according to an evaluation scheme which is not intrinsic to the discipline itself. For we have found that then we become over-anxious lest we be continually found wanting, . . . and then it is the system of evaluation which becomes supremely important to us, and not what we would have learned. And we begin to fail more miserably than ever.

Our goal is success and failure which are important and meaningful to ourselves.

6. Our school will be "a school without walls," where the "environment within which students are encouraged to learn" is greatly expanded.

You can't have learning-centered education if all the learning is second hand, from books, from school-teachers, and inside school rooms. We learn best when our learning is part of our lives, and incidental to our activities, not when our lives are narrowly circumscribed by buildings, rules, and prerequisites.

Put another way, we think the resources of Ann Arbor are going to waste. There are so many things we could learn from so many different people, and in so many different places. We want to be able to take advantage of these resources. We know that it will help make us better human beings. We think our involvement might just work to the good of the community as well.

7. Learning centered education implies individualization of the entire learning process.

a. Such a process preserves the individuality and originality of the learner.

None of us have a corner on the truth. We see the world only from our own egocentric perspectives. But far from being a deficiency, this is our greatest asset. For we need every point of view. Thus, an education which seems to prepare the young for a society which is radically and rapidly changing must seek to preserve and enhance the learner's uniqueness.

We envision a curriculum initially determined by our contemporary interests; flexible enough to accommodate the daily fluctuation of those interests. We envision a curriculum which is really a process initiated by, and whose moment-by-moment direction is determined by, the members of the learning community. Such a process begins with our needs and interests, and proceeds to generate in us new needs and interests. We have all had the experience of crossing inviting trails in our educational wanderings. We have all been tempted to stop the forward march and initiate lateral explorations. We believe that such "temptations" should be indulged. We are confident that such indulgence will allow a natural learning sequence to develop in each of us, suited to our own tastes and inclinations.

b. Such a process allows the individual to work according to his own abilities.

In the words of the "Vermont Goals," "We must seek to individualize our expectations of a person's progress as we strive to individualize the learning experience for each person."

But this does not imply that the student should never be encouraged to reach beyond his grasp. Without such reaching there is no growth. Rather, the reaching must be tailored to the individual's abilities. If the chasm is too wide, failure will be assured, and the learner will be inhibited from attempting.

c. Such a process emphasized the individual's own way of learning, through discovery and exploration.

Tailoring a curriculum to the participant means more than suiting particular interests. It means tailoring the learning process itself to those participants. Some of us, for instance, have an analytical bent. Others thrive on the more synthetic activities of the mind. We not only have different interests. We have different learning procedures we feel natural with. Our curriculum will be fashioned not only to individual needs, aspirations, and interests, but also to individual styles of conception, understanding, and creation.

Thus, we envision a curriculum in which actions and ideas are intimately interwoven. For instance, a course in ecology must not only combine a thorough theoretical understanding of the natural functioning of the ecosystem, but must also spill over into the more practical concerns of consumer legislation, legal action against polluters, recycling programs, and the like. Real learning comes from and returns to the individual's concrete experience. What we learn from books must be continually applied in our daily lives so that we verify those ideas at first hand. Again, our daily experiences must be referred to those of others, through books, so that we may be able to discern hallucination from veritable perception.

d. Individualized education places primary emphasis upon the development of the individual's thought process.

If exponential change means anything, it is this: the list of accepted facts is not only superhumanly large, it is continually changing. It is therefore impossible to prepare a person for the future by supplying him with a set of givens. In these troubled times we are learning that there are no givens, no Archimedean points from which we may lift the entire universe. What we need then, is not a comprehensive list of important facts which may be committed to memory, for there is no such list. Rather, we need an education which will enable us to distinguish the important from the trivial, and which will teach us the difference between fact and falsehood, so that we might be better able to discover our own facts to fit our own situations.

e. Individualized education helps the individual evolve a personal philosophy, with a view toward developing a strong sense of responsibility, cooperation, and respect for others.

So many have stated present social problems in crisis terms, that the words seem to have lost their meanings. Yet no others seem to fit. Our society is changing. Many think a naive faith in progress unwarranted. Things which once were pretty well nailed down are now adrift, and no one seems to know which way to turn. Nor is the horizon bright with any promise of returning to former times when things weren't so "up for grabs." The fact is: values are questioned, and each of us experiences those questionings because they are part and parcel of our lives.

What we need is a place where this kind of questioning can proceed freely, and protectedly. We need a chance to work it all out for ourselves. We need to be led out of the quagmires of confusion we fall into. In a word, we need to work out a "philosophy of life" that fits our own experience, one that will enable us to survive as full and healthy human beings. We need a philosophy which will enable us not only to accept change, but also to direct it, so that all may profit from it. We need a philosophy which will thus make us sensitive and responsive to the needs of men everywhere.