

Starting a School

By Carlo Ricci and Kristin Simpson

Abstract:

As Holt suggests, we need to create gates so that those who want to escape the walled garden can more easily do so. To this end, creating an alternative school is one such gate. Not surprisingly, many believe that doing so entails a lot more obstacles than it actually does. Some believe that you would need many credentials, for example a PhD, or a Masters in education, or you would need to be or have been a principal in a public school or at the very least a certified teacher. The truth is that none of this is a prerequisite for starting your own school and that anyone with the will to do it can. Of course there are challenges, yet these are not insurmountable. We hope that those who are thinking about starting a school will use this piece as a resource and as an inspiration to start their own school and to continue to put up gates for those willing to escape.

Introduction: Carlo Ricci

What I want to do is put a gate, or gates, into the wall of the garden, so that those who find it no longer protective or helpful, but instead confining and humiliating, can move out of it and for a while try living in a larger space. (Holt, 1995, p. 9)

When I thought of the idea of starting a journal, one of the things that I hoped the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* (JUAL) would do is to make it easier for those who want to

create gates in the walled garden to do so. As well, I hoped that JUAL would make it easier for those who wanted to escape the walled garden to do so. This piece is an attempt to continue to empower.

At a public meeting held for the Beach School where I was asked to speak about alternative schooling I pulled Kristin aside and asked her if she was willing to work together with me in writing a piece about starting an alternative school. Having done so, I thought she would be a perfect collaborator. Thankfully she agreed and in what follows you will read our combined efforts.

As Holt's quote above suggests, we need to create gates so that those who want to escape the walled garden can more easily do so. To this end, creating an alternative school is one such gate. Since considering writing this piece I have engaged many people in conversation about what they believe is required to start a school in my home province of Ontario, Canada. Not surprisingly, many believe that doing so entails a lot more obstacles than it actually does. Some believe that you would need many credentials, for example a PhD, or a Masters in education, or you would need to be or have been a principal in a public school or at the very least a certified teacher. The truth is that none of this is a prerequisite for starting your own school and that anyone with the will to do it can. Of course, as Kristin brilliantly points out through her experience, there are challenges, yet these are not insurmountable.

We hope that those who are thinking about starting a school will use this piece as a resource and as an inspiration to start their own school and to continue to put up gates for those willing to escape. There are other useful resources available. For example, Greenberg and Sadofsky (1998) have a book titled *Starting a Sudbury School: A Summary of the experiences of fifteen start-up groups*. In addition, the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) offers a school starters course. The course is titled "Start a School 101" and it is taught by Jerry Mintz. It is an online course that accepts students on a rolling basis. The course description reads as follows:

The goal of this course is to help educators assess the feasibility and resources required for

starting a school. It will prepare students to undertake planning and opening a democratically run school. The course is designed to address practical as well as methodological and philosophical issues pertinent to the process. This includes clarifying the educational vision, building a suitable educational model and mastering the governance techniques necessary to successfully start and run a school. (AERO)

The topics covered are divided under the following categories:

Class 1

Different types of democratic schools and governance

Class 2

Clarifying educational vision

Class 3

Different kinds of governance

Class 4

Building a community around the idea of starting a school

Class 5

Legal requirements of a school

Class 6

Finding or building a school environment

Class 7

Financial basis of the school, including fundraising, budgeting and insurance issues

Class 8

Recruiting teachers and students

Class 9

The first days of school

Class 10

Recapitulation and evaluation

On their website they have some comments made by people who have taken and evaluated the course. I believe that their evaluations are worth repeating here:

"What an amazing, diverse group of people! I told my husband last night that I feel that I've found my tribe, in a way. It's really the first time in my life that I've been surrounded by people who are thinking about all of the things that I am, who are concerned about the same things that I am, who are passionate about the same things that I am, who are dedicated to putting their thoughts into action like I am. It is truly wonderful!" --Mary

"This class has helped me spell out my ideas and put them out there in a safe place that is supportive and helps me see what potential they have. This class has also inspired me to discuss my vision more with others (in person) and let people know not only what I feel is necessary in education, but WHY I feel it is so necessary. I have developed more confidence in articulating my vision and by doing so, have gotten lots of valuable feedback and support in surprising areas. It is quite an exciting time for me seeing all of the ideas I have been playing around with in my head for so long finally come out and take shape into something that seems a little more realistically feasible each day!" --Katie

"I do feel the course has assisted in getting closer to my goal of opening my school. I have learned a great deal from the topics and the questions/comments posted by the collective group. I have a new sense of confidence and peace about this process. I do not see it as such a big thing now. I am already open for school everyday for my children and now I am just including

some others with a little different twist." --Marianne

*"This course has been spectacular-- it really has opened many doors for me and made a *major* step in the right direction for me opening my school-- both in what it has taught as well as in the people I have met." --Alex*

"This course has been immensely helpful. Among other things, I've discovered that there is a considerable body of literature on the subject of alternative education, but the literature is NOT readily available. You won't encounter it as required reading in teacher preparation courses. You won't find it in most public libraries. One thing I could do, I suppose, and it would be tax-deductible, would be to purchase the available materials from The Education Revolution website and DONATE them to the library." – Robert (AERO)

Clearly, those who want to create these gates can benefit and take advantage of the experience and resources of others. For example, Jerry Mintz established and for eighteen years ran Shaker Mountain School (VT). This was a free school based on the principles of Iroquois democracy. Greenberg and Sadofsky founded Sudbury Valley, and Kristin co-founded The Beach School. I believe that we are blessed with people who are willing to take initiatives and transform the world we live in and who strive to make it better. AERO also offers a list serve school starters support group. Hopefully, these resources and their experiences will help others create more learner centered democratic spaces.

Starting The Beach School: Kristin Simpson

Many people embark on the journey of starting a school with a particular educational

philosophy or approach in mind. In particular, in places where there is a state-funded educational system that can be accessed by everyone, independent schools are generally set up by people who want to offer something different than can be obtained in the regular public system, whether this is a more rigorous approach to the traditional academic curriculum offered in the public system, a focus on a particular area of specialization such as the arts, athletics, or technology, etc., or a different philosophical approach to education and a curriculum that follows this philosophy (e.g. Montessori, Waldorf, Sudbury, etc.).

The challenge of starting a school is putting your chosen educational philosophy into practice. There can be tension, for various reasons, in many areas between your philosophical ideas and what actually takes place in the operation of your new school. The process of starting and growing a school is an on-going effort to marry educational ideals with educational practice. This challenge, however, is very doable and rewarding as I have found during my involvement over the past six years in the start-up of a small democratic school in Toronto. In what follows, I hope to explain what I have learned about starting a school through my own experience and also through the connections I have made with others who have started schools of their own. Although there is a wide range of variables involved in starting a school, I hope that others who might consider doing so can learn from what follows.

In my experience, the bedrock of a school is its educational philosophy. While there are many practicalities that must be negotiated in order to open a school, its philosophy is its soul. Without the soul, the body will not live. Whether you adopt an educational approach that others have already put into practice elsewhere or you come up with something unique based on your own beliefs about how students learn and what is important for them to know, the first step in starting a school is to determine what it is that your school will try to accomplish. How will students benefit from it?

Being really clear about a school's goals lays the groundwork for many of the more practical aspects of starting one. If you are clear about what you are trying to do, you can attract others to your

project, either as fellow school founders or potential students, parents, and staff. You can figure out how your philosophy will be put into practice: What will students learn? How will they learn it? From whom will they learn? When and where will they learn? How will their learning be tracked, or will it be purely self-evaluated? What about the intangibles, like character-building, community and creativity? Being clear about why you are starting a school also provides motivation for the large amount of work you will be doing to get it off the ground. Making time for this philosophical work early on will pay off later when it is easy to get caught up in putting practical details in place as the school's opening approaches.

The school I helped start follows an educational approach that has already been put into place at a number of schools around the world. Our first step in planning was to become clear that this was, in fact, the educational model we wanted to follow. We read books about it and talked to others who were doing the same thing elsewhere. Early on we developed a charter that became our touchstone. Our charter contained the basic principles upon which we were founding our school. People who wanted to join our founders' group were asked to read and sign our charter, showing their agreement with it. Prospective families were shown our charter as a summary of what we were about. When we had disagreements within the founding group on how to proceed in some area, we often returned to our charter to remind ourselves of our cornerstones and receive guidance from them. Having this charter made it easier not to get sidetracked from our purpose. Often we would meet someone who was interested in joining our project but wanted something a bit different than we did. Our charter helped to keep everyone involved more or less on the same page. We could say, "This is what we are trying to do. If you want to do this too, we welcome you to our group. If you want to do something different, we wish you the best of luck on your own project." Having a charter helped us to work much more efficiently and effectively.

It is possible to start a school alone but many people choose to form a group of founders to

share the work. It is a lot easier to do all that needs to be done when there are a number of people to split it. It also helps a lot if a founders' group contains people with different backgrounds and skills in relevant areas. Often people starting schools are either parents who are looking for something different for their school-aged children or teachers looking for a place where they can implement their personal teaching philosophy. It is very helpful, though, for a founders' group to include people who have a background in business, including finance and marketing, as opening a school, unless it is publicly funded, is essentially opening a new business. Our founders' group included a number of parents and educators, but also included a person with a business degree who worked as a project manager in his day job, two people who had experience starting and running not-for-profit organizations, someone who had knowledge of the co-operative sector (we ended up incorporating as a co-op), and a person with a background in sales. All this proved very useful to us. Our founders group, which started with three people, grew organically as we got the word out that we were starting a school. If no one in a founders group has a business background, the founders can try to tap into friends or acquaintances who do. For example, we knew a building inspector and a person who owned a marketing company who helped us out. Depending on the kind of school you are starting and how far it is from the mainstream, it may be easier to find people who can help you out with practicalities in certain areas rather than hoping to find school founders who both share your educational vision and have the expertise your group needs. At some point a group may have to hire an expert to help out in a certain area, such as a lawyer to help with incorporation, but obviously it is better to do as much as possible for free.

In most places, there are a number of legal requirements for starting a school. It is important to find out what these are in your area early on in your school founding process. You should be able to find out most of them from your ministry of education. In some places, laws about schools are very strict, requiring particular curriculum and evaluation techniques, while in other places there are few

rules. Often the amount of regulation that exists is inversely proportional to the amount of funding that a new school may receive from the government. In some areas, there are ways of obtaining some public funding for a new school. This can range from partnering with the local board of education to start a school that it will take under its wing, to a charter school, or a private school which receives partial public funding. In some areas, homeschoolers receive some government funding. Some new schools have started by calling themselves homeschooling groups rather than schools and collecting that money. In Ontario, where my school is located, government funding is given only to schools that are part of either the public or Catholic school boards. Some groups manage to start a school under the umbrella of a school board. This can limit their choices in terms of how the school is run, however, because they must follow the government-mandated curriculum and follow the school board's policies. Independent schools in Ontario receive no government funding. However, there are also very few requirements for private schools here. According to the Ontario Education Act, a “private school” means an institution at which instruction is provided at any time between the hours of 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. on any school day for five or more pupils who are of or over compulsory school age. Private schools must register with the Ontario Ministry of Education yearly by filling out a short form (the Notice of Intent to Operate a Private School) and must make a number of statistical reports to the government. There are no requirements for curriculum, evaluation, staff hiring, etc. so this gives schools who choose this route quite a bit of leeway in terms of their educational approach, if not in terms of their finances. This is the route our school took. We received no public funding but a lot of freedom in terms of our school's practices.

As mentioned earlier, starting a school is starting a business, so school founders need to decide what legal form their business will take. In Canada, there are four options for the legal form of a business: a sole proprietorship, a partnership, a corporation and a co-operative. These vary in terms of how much control as well as liability any individual person has in the business, how difficult or

expensive they are to set up, and how many regulations and record-keeping requirements pertain to them. Although corporations and co-operatives have more requirements and are more complicated to set up, they limit the liability of any one person associated with them. For this reason, they may be a good option. The school I helped start chose to incorporate as a co-operative. Our day-to-day school program ran on democratic principles, and so we felt that the co-operative model, where all members can participate in decision-making, was a good fit for us. Depending on the legal model that the school founders choose, there are a number of steps that they must go through to set up the school as a legal entity. For example, when we incorporated as a co-operative, we needed to file our articles of incorporation with the government, find members for our board of directors, and establish by-laws.

Part of establishing the legal format of a school involves deciding whether to operate as a for-profit or not-for-profit entity. Not-for-profits can benefit from certain tax exemptions. Some not-for-profits choose to apply for charitable status as well. Registered charities can issue tax receipts for donations. However, it can be difficult to obtain charitable status and it requires a larger amount of record-keeping than other types of corporations. Another option for schools wishing to solicit donations is to partner with a charity which will accept donations on its behalf. This can be done either by partnering with an existing charity or by the school founders setting up a second entity for this purpose.

When considering the legal form of their business, school founders could also put some thought into who will have decision-making power in their school. This is somewhat dictated by the legal form of the school but is also a matter of internal policy. Once the school is up and running, what kinds of changes to the founders' vision can be made, and who can make them? What role will the founders play once the school is running? What sorts of powers will parents, students and staff have? Who will make business decisions for the school? In areas that touch upon both the school program and its success as a business, who will have the final say? Some groups may strive to have decision-making be very inclusive, while others may opt for the efficiency of concentrating decision-making powers in

particular roles that can be filled by experts in their respective areas. Some school founders may choose a model in which they still retain much or all of the decision-making ability within their school, in the hope of being able to stick closely to the original vision they had, while others may choose to share decision-making and let the school grow organically as a community effort. This latter option was the one we chose, as a democratic school and a co-operative.

Money is usually a consideration when starting a school. It is less of a worry if you are completely publicly funded or if one of your founders is in a position to fund the school's start-up, but usually start-up groups scramble for money. Some groups ask all founders to contribute a certain amount to start-up costs. In our group, founders contributed what they could and at the same time we tried to keep costs as low as possible until we were able to register students and collect some tuition. A couple of founders loaned larger amounts of money which were repaid once the school opened. Our expenses included some books and other resources about our school's model, printing costs for marketing materials, costs for renting spaces for information nights (mostly we did this in public libraries and community centres where we could just give a small donation), initial rent costs for our school's site, fees for setting up a phone line and Internet connection, and costs for registering a domain name, getting insurance, and hiring a lawyer to help us incorporate. During most of the start-up phase, our costs were kept to printing and room rental fees. When we started getting students enrolled, their tuition fees were placed in a trust account which was tapped into only after we knew the school would definitely be able to open, so it was important for us to keep our costs low. It was also possible to reduce our school start-up costs by seeking out in-kind donations of resources such as furniture, computers and school supplies. It can be intimidating to undertake such a large project as starting a school with very few financial resources, but in most cases a limited amount of money does not have to be a show-stopper.

There is also the question of how the school will receive money once it is up and running. For

schools which are not publicly funded, the main option is through tuition. Being dependent on tuition can have its drawbacks, however. When parents are paying directly for their child's education, it can become very important to keep each parent pleased with the school not just for their child's benefit, but also for the economic well-being of the school. If a parent is looking for something that falls outside of the school's educational approach, this can create a dilemma for school administrators. Tuition can also be a factor that limits the accessibility of a school to people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Many schools try to reduce the cost of tuition in special circumstances (through, for example, a sliding-scale dependent on family income, tuition assistance bursaries, and reductions in fees for families with multiple children attending the school) but many families may still find tuition out of their reach. For these reasons, some independent schools try to find ways to reduce or eliminate their dependence on tuition money.

Depending on the school program, it can be possible to find grants that may assist in funding. Seeking out grants can be time-consuming and schools that use them may come to rely on them, hoping that they will come through year after year in order to keep the school alive. However, they can be a good alternative to tuition if they are available. Some grants may be available to individual students from outside organizations. For example, in Ontario a pro-school-choice organization offers grants to lower-income families to help their children attend private schools. In some cases, the organizations offering grants may also support other activities that are contrary to your school's philosophy, and you will have to decide if you are willing to make this compromise. Some schools actively fundraise. This also can be very time-consuming but if the school has someone who is talented in this area and can dedicate the necessary time, it is an option. Some schools try to attract major donations to help support their programs. A key to this option is to be able to issue tax receipts for donations. Finally, some schools try to find some other money-making enterprise that can fund the school, rather like fundraising on a very grand scale. Some examples of this would be the Highland School, in Highland,

West Virginia, which is partially funded through the proceeds of donated oil wells, or the Albany Free School, in Albany, New York, which helps support itself through the revenue from rental property it owns.

Schools must be concerned with other financial practicalities. School founders will likely need to set up one or more bank accounts for the school. Some banks have options particularly tailored to small businesses. Schools must also find out about the tax regulations and other government financial requirements which apply to them. In Canada, sole proprietorships, partnerships, and corporations must apply to the Canada Revenue Agency for a business number. The business number is used for such government transactions as corporate income tax, GST accounts and payroll deductions of tax for staff. School founders will also have to put together a draft budget for at least the first year of their school's existence and make sure someone in the organization is willing and able to work on bookkeeping, payroll, government reporting and other financial matters.

Getting the word out that you are starting a school is something that can use a lot of money if you have it but can be done more cheaply. The main ways people found out about our school were through our website, through word of mouth (particularly in the homeschooling community, as our school appealed to some as a way to unschool in a group setting), and through posters regularly put up on a busy street in the area. Having a website is definitely a priority. We also held regular information nights at libraries and community centres. Because these were free sessions held by a not-for-profit group, usually we could get free publicity in the community listings of the local newspapers. We also sent out press releases to the local media, which resulted in a small amount of coverage. Some marketing strategies we tried which yielded little success were attending conferences for other organizations which might attract people looking for educational alternatives (for example, homeschooling and breastfeeding support groups) and also, after the school opened, placing paid print ads in local newspapers.

One of the major challenges of your marketing efforts is to convey clearly what your school is about to potential fellow founders, students, parents, and staff. This is where being clear about what you intend to do with your school is important but it is also important to be able to explain this to someone who has not done the hundreds of hours of reading and thinking and discussing that you have done. If you are doing something that is quite different from the mainstream, you may find it challenging to make sure you are speaking the same language as your target audience. For instance, the school where I work is a "democratic" school. When we say this, we are talking about a particular educational model where students are in charge of their own education and have an equal responsibility with staff in building their school community. We talk a lot about "freedom" and "responsibility" and "trust". Not everyone understands the same thing by these words in an educational context, however. To one person, "freedom" means kids have the chance to exercise their creativity; to another, that they help make school rules and choose their curriculum; to another, that they are given a dangerous amount of license and insufficient guidance by adults. Someone may be interested in children learning things voluntarily rather than under coercion, but object to kids being allowed to choose video games over math. Marketing your school may involve educating parents by challenging their assumptions about schooling. It is very helpful to be able to refer people to resources (such as websites or books) that back up your educational philosophy, as this lends legitimacy to an approach that may be unfamiliar to potential school families.

School founders need to create and implement an admissions process for potential students. In my experience, the more a student and his or her family knows about a school before enrolling, the more positive their experience of the school will be. It is also important for the school to get to know the student and his or her family in order to figure out whether they will be a good fit for their environment. It can be very tempting, especially when a new school is desperate for students, to enroll right away anyone who is interested, but this can create a lot of heartache down the road if all parties

are not clear on what to expect of each other. Admissions processes usually include some kind of application form to be filled out by the family. Often schools conduct an interview with potential students as well. These admission processes can be used not just to get basics, such as contact and medical information from families, but also to find out what they are looking for in a school and about any past difficulties in learning situations that the student has had. This is also a time when school administrators can make sure that the family understands their school's educational approach. In addition, it is important that, before enrolling, families understand the school's tuition policy, if applicable, including how or if money is refunded should the student withdraw from the school. Many schools ask for a non-refundable tuition deposit, a certain amount of notice of a student's withdrawal, or even money up-front for the school year. A few schools offer trial periods for families to get acquainted with the school before making an enrolment commitment and, in this case, it should be clear how this affects tuition.

Finding staff for a new school is as important as finding students. If you are starting a school which will be under the umbrella of a public school board, staffing may be done for you by the school board according to their own procedures. However, if you are starting an independent school, you will need to find staff. Some people found schools with the intent on staffing themselves. In this case, there is a perfect fit between the educational approach of the founders and the staff. Otherwise, you will need to look for people who can implement the educational ideas that have been put in place in the founders' group. Not only are staff responsible for implementing your school's program on a daily basis, they are often seen by parents as the face of the school. Many families will enroll in a school on the strength of its staff. School founders will have to decide what qualities, skills and qualifications are important in their ideal teacher or staff member. Some schools require that their staff have received training in particular teaching methods. This certification can be reassuring to parents. However, it is important to consider that, if your school is very alternative, traditional teacher training may not be helpful to your

staff. At the least, most schools require their staff members to have police background checks on file in order to alleviate safety concerns. Your local police can explain their process to you. Some schools may also require other safety measures, such as first aid or child abuse prevention training for staff.

Besides the general marketing you are doing to attract students to your school, you may want to do some marketing specifically to find staff. Teachers' colleges can be good places to publicize, either by flyering or on-line postings. If you are opening a school that is based on a philosophy already in practice elsewhere, you may be able to get a veteran teacher or an alumnus/a from a similar school to help you start up. As most start-up schools cannot afford to pay staff very much, you will probably need to find people who are willing and able to work for little. Sometimes people will be willing to work at your school in exchange for discounted or free tuition for their children. There are also people who are just very interested in educational alternatives and are in a financial position to be able to work for less. On-line postings in places such as the AERO website can link you up with such people.

Finding an appropriate site for your school is a major step towards making it a reality. Having a physical location that you can show potential students and their families helps them to picture what it would be like to attend school there. This can create a chicken-and-egg situation if you have a tuition-funded school. It is hard for you to find a site because you don't know how many students you will have and you do not know how much money you will receive from their tuition. At the same time, it is hard to attract students because you do not have a physical location they can see which lends stability to the concept of your school. With the school I helped start, we addressed this somewhat by giving a discount to families who enrolled early while we were still looking for a site. As well, tuition money was kept in a trust account, untouched until the school had opened. That way, families knew that if we failed to find an adequate site, their money would be refunded. However, this required that the founders have access to some money from other sources during the start-up process which could be repaid after the school opened.

When looking for a site, there are a number of things to consider. Location will affect the demographics of your pool of potential students as well as various aspects of the school program. A rural school has different resources available to it than an urban school. The safety or perceived safety of the location will also be a key consideration for parents. The availability of public transportation close to the site may influence the school's accessibility. Price is obviously a major consideration when choosing a location, either to buy or to rent. There are also a number of legal considerations when choosing a site. The school must be located in an area which is zoned for schools. The city planning department can help school founders understand the zoning regulations in their area. A local building inspector can also be helpful in this regard. School buildings must also conform to fire code specifications particular to schools. This means that many buildings, including some commercial spaces and most houses, would need renovations in order to be used as school sites. Renovating may be worthwhile if the school owns its own building, but many people would be reluctant to spend their money to get a rental property up to code. For this reason, many school founders seek out buildings that are already in conformity with the law (for example, buildings which have previously housed schools, camps, etc.). Our school found rental space in a school building owned by the local school board but which had been closed for financial reasons. School founders should also be aware of any other regulations pertinent to their site. For example, in Ontario, schools are responsible for the water quality in their building and must keep records regarding water testing and the regular flushing of their pipes.

School founders should also be aware of their legal obligations in general regarding safety. Schools in some areas have particular legal public health obligations. For example, in Ontario, students must be immunized against certain diseases before they can attend school. Schools need to keep immunization records or documentation of exemptions for religious or philosophical reasons on file. Schools also need to report to the local health authority if their students contract certain communicable diseases.

Schools generally choose to purchase insurance to protect against liability in various situations. Because there is a lot of potential liability involved in a school, it can be difficult to find insurance. Some insurance companies specialize in school insurance. School founders may be able to talk to people at other schools currently in operation in their area to find out which insurance provider they use. Sometimes it is also possible to get insurance through an umbrella group for independent schools. By becoming a member of such a group, a school may be able to get insurance more easily and at a better price. Insurance companies will want to know about a school's policies in various areas before they will sell it insurance. The school may have to moderate its activities, especially in terms of field trips and transportation, in order to conform to insurance company policies.

Conclusion: Carlo and Kristin

We hope that this paper will add to the rich resources already available and that it will help and inspire others to create gates. We would like to end with a comment that Mintz (2007) made at the 2007 AERO conference during a workshop titled School Starters. “There is an infinite amount of things and the more you hear stories about what people have done and what they have gone through the more your database gets built up.” Good luck in creating more gates and in making the world a better place.

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