

HOW TO START YOUR OWN SCHOOL

ASK ANYONE CONNECTED WITH AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL what you can do to help the educational situation, and one thing he will include on his list (besides giving financial, spiritual, and physical help to *his* school) will be "start your own school." One's first impulse, of course, is to laugh; starting institutions like schools is for saints and missionaries, willing to dedicate their lives to others. But if you continue the conversation you will find (1) that the person you're talking to is neither a saint nor a missionary and (2) starting such an institution is merely a matter of taking one step at a time and keeping at it.

Here, derived from the experience of Atlantic Canada's three alternative schools — The St. John's Cooperative School in St. John's; the Atlantic Cooperative Community School in Halifax; and The School in the Barn in Fredericton — is a scenario for starting your own school.

★ Read as much as you can on the subject and give the books to friends (for a list of useful and sometimes exciting books, see the review elsewhere in this issue.)

★ Discuss the school with as wide a range of friends as possible. Try, as well as talking about the need for the school generally, to evolve some specific indications of the kind of school which would attract support and participation in your community. This means being very specific

about assumptions regarding things like children, curriculum, aims. One of the effects of a specific discussion here is that everyone involved will have some idea of what all are aiming at *before* it occurs and will not have committed himself to something he doesn't believe in. The School in the Barn used a very specific position paper to make sure that everyone involved agreed on basic assumptions.

The St. John's Co-Operative School almost failed because it had to work out aims and structure *AFTER* it was in operation.

Some questions that might prove to be important in this connection are:

1. How important is a stated and defined curriculum? How is everyone going to feel if a child gets to be 12 or 13 and hasn't learned multiplication.
2. Do we believe that children should be encouraged to act in complete freedom, or will we place limits on the situation — and what kind, and when?
3. Are we primarily a demonstration school (to show the existing establishment what can be done) or a social action school (to stir up change in the community) or purely development, concerned with one child at a time and not concerned with the consequences?
4. What sort of physical setup — classrooms, equipment, numbers of students and teachers — would be acceptable?

It is important, at this early stage, to be as ruthlessly specific as possible. One of the major causes for failures among such schools is the conflict that results later from vagueness at this point ("I had no idea there would be no report cards").

Assuming that enough people can be found still interested to justify going ahead — enough is six or eight at this stage, especially if they have kids — begin discussing how to make it economically viable. And don't rely on foundation grants; they run for a few years — if you can get them at all — and then give out, leaving you totally unprepared to go it alone. In some communities, especially if someone connected with the school has the extortionary talent of a community charity drive fund raiser — you can count on support from a fairly large proportion of the community — especially service clubs and businesses — but this, too, is uncommon and dangerous. (Those funds can dry up too).

★ How, then, make it economically viable? You have to start projecting the school pretty concretely at this point; find out how much you're likely to have to pay for premises (you can often get them for free for really small schools by holding them in someone's home; for slightly larger schools you can often get a break on the rent from an institution like a church. Unitarians seem especially interested in helping out and establishing alternative education).

Find out how much you're going to have to pay a teacher — or teachers. Sometimes these, too, can be had free. Very few free schools have been started by a group that didn't include at least one teacher — look around for one with ideas and dedication who seems frustrated by his day-to-day situation. Or look in the "People Seeking Places" columns of the *New Schools Exchange Newsletter*. Or contact the Teacher Drop-Out Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. And stay in touch with people establishing schools near you; they usually get lots of applications for jobs. Many teachers are very eager to teach in such circumstances and will take substantial cuts in pay in order to work there.

Be careful here, though; some very strange people are likely to volunteer their services.

★ OK, Now you know how much it's going to cost for space and for personnel (and don't forget volunteer teach-

ing help; one of the most rewarding things about starting such a school is volunteering yourself and involving other parents and the community in volunteering to educate children.). Now estimate how much you're going to need for supplies — furniture, toys, writing stuff, books. And here don't forget the possibility of encouraging merchants in your area to donate such items (offer them tax-deductable status — more about that later — good publicity and a clear social conscience. And, here as elsewhere, stress that your school is directed at kids who — for probably unavoidable reasons — don't get a fair shake in the regular school system). Remember, also, that you're not establishing a homogeneous classroom, so you only need one copy (if that) of each text you might use. And an awful lot of what is indisputably junk can be converted into educational material simply by placing it in a classroom full of kids. Now you have a figure representing expenditures on supplies; double it.

Now find out how many children your school can count on having, at this point, there probably won't be very many. Few people are willing to commit their kids to an institution of whose existence they're not even sure. Don't let this worry you, how many of them can afford to pay, and how much. Usually, especially if you've been ingenious about space, personnel, and supplies, you'll find out that you can extort enough from parents who are really desperate to have their kids in such a school to support the school at their subsistence level. And as soon as your mathematics have reached this point, you are ready to start looking for a site, hiring, and buying (or procuring in some other way) supplies.

BUT BEFORE YOU DO, CHECK THE LEGAL SITUATION. In most of Atlantic Canada there is no provision for what you're doing and so people view you with suspicion (but not the hostility you would probably encounter in more polarized areas of North America). The most desirable thing you can do at this point is to interest a lawyer in the school, because things can get complicated enough to need one and expensive enough to need a generous one. Things to check include:

1. Zoning regulations on your site. Schools are usually more welcome than taverns or pawnshops, but there still may be problems with having one in your basement or coachhouse or garage. You can usually check this with the city.

2. The desirability of incorporating. This is usually not difficult (to do it in New Brunswick contact The School in the Barn or the Rubber Duck Press who will give you advice) and is usually desirable, both from the point of view of bank accounts and financial management and liability. Your lawyer friend can help you there.

3. The attitude of the educational establishment. This can hurt; in most cases they have ultimate responsibility and can close you down if you don't seem to them to be meeting their standards. This is true even where — as seems to be the case throughout Atlantic Canada — the departments of education don't have a procedure for handling alternative schools. The best way to handle this at the present time seems to be to describe what you are doing and the advantages it proposes to the participants and to the school system as a whole and go directly to the provincial minister of education with your proposal and ask his support and permission.

Universal experience in the mysterious east has been that provincial departments are more than eager to give you permission and are genuinely interested in your project — as long as you don't seem to be a threat to them. In most cases their lever on you is that they can determine that the children going to your school are merely playing hooky

ST. JOHN'S COOPERATIVE

THE ST. JOHN'S COOPERATIVE SCHOOL is the result of discussions which began in August of 1969 among a group composed of concerned parents, educators and university people. At the school's beginning, it was quite self-consciously a free school, with great emphasis on lack of structure and opposition to coercion of any kind.

It evolved over the course of a year of operation, however, toward increased structure and eventually the "free" dropped from the name and the actual running of the school moved into the hands of the parents, thus producing a genuinely cooperative school.

Like many other alternative schools — and all of those in Atlantic Canada — the St. John's Cooperative School is hesitant to label itself or its educational beliefs and methods. "We find that by avoiding any categorization we are able to run our school in any manner that we find is beneficial to the children and parents," says Mrs. Paul Kelly, one of the school's founders.

This month, the school will begin its second full year of operations in a private home in St. John's, with fifteen students between the ages of five and nine and a volunteer staff of parents and friends.

To find out more about the school, write Mrs. Paul Kelly on Portugal Cove Road in St. John's.

THE SCHOOL IN THE BARN

THE SCHOOL IN THE BARN was begun last winter by a group of parents, and began operations in January in rented quarters in the Unitarian House in Fredericton with six students and one fulltime teacher, plus a number of volunteer helpers.

This month, The School in the Barn begins its first full year of operation in an especially redesigned and reconstructed barn at 140 Aberdeen Street in Fredericton, with fifteen students and a doubled staff.

The school has received the support of the provincial department of education in that it has been accepted as "efficient instruction" — equivalent to the public schools. It has received donations of equipment from various local firms, and as a result has been able to offer two half-scholarships. The tuition of one student is being paid by the welfare department.

The school is interested in attracting a wide variety — in terms of age, class and culture — of students, and because of its low student-teacher ratio is able to give individual attention to students with special problems or talents. Students range in age from five to eleven years.

Committed to the value of individual attention to each student, the school believes in voluntary learning without coercion, community involvement — through parents, volunteer teachers and classroom visitors — and attempts to get the classroom out into the community as much as possible through trips and excursions.

For information about the school write to 140 Aberdeen Street, Fredericton.



ATLANTIC COOPERATIVE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

THE NAME IS STILL TENTATIVE, because, it is suggested, the students might well want to change it, but under whatever name the Atlantic Cooperative Community School will be beginning operations in Halifax this fall.

Begun as a home-school in the home of Mrs. Peggy Hope-Simpson, the school has attracted a nucleus of volunteer teachers, all of whom are anxious to share their enthusiasm and their ideas about how their subject ought to be taught.

Like the other two Atlantic alternative schools, spokesmen are careful to point out that it is not, in the usual sense, a "free school," but that a reasonable amount of structure is envisaged. It will differ from the public schools primarily in that much of the structure will arise from the students themselves and from consultation with the teachers, and, as a cooperative venture, the school will involve close liaison between the community it serves and the school itself.

The school will be located in the Unitarian Church building, which already houses a nursery school, and will employ the services of three fulltime people — called resource coordinators rather than teachers — and, as usual, a number of volunteer instructors. The school will have a student body of 25 to 30 students between the ages of about 11 and 16.

For further information, contact Mrs. Peggy Hope-Simpson through the Unitarian Church.

from the "real" schools and send the truant officer round; they don't if they judge that your school is the equivalent of public education. Most have no standing methods for judging this; be cooperative in helping them work out a method. Remember, it's to their financial advantage to have your school exist: they get funds according to how many children are in their constituency and if you pull your kids out and pay to educate them yourself, that saves them one unit of finance — something over threehundred dollars a year at least.

4. Insurance. Check with your lawyer; it's usually desirable to buy insurance so that if a kid breaks his leg the school can't be bankrupted — this is especially important as the school grows and people outside the original group get involved.

5. Tax-exempt status. As a nonprofit corporation you are probably eligible to have yourself so declared by the government, so that businesses or individuals who make donations can deduct it from their income tax. Again, see your lawyer about this one.

Now you're ready to get underway. Do this as quickly as possible; it's much easier to sell a going concern than it is an idea. Even if you have only three or four students, get it going. And start working on publicity. Call the local paper; take pictures yourself. Invite concerned members of the community to observe. Ask people to volunteer. Put up a sign. Speak to service clubs and church groups.

ONCE ACTUALLY IN OPERATION, there are a number of courses you can take to increase your financial stability. Until the government releases tax money to alternative schools, this remains, unfortunately, a high priority. One thing you can do is attract students who can afford to pay; but remember that students who can't afford it are often not only those who need it most and can profit most from it, but have the most to offer your classroom situation, in terms of diversity and excitement. There are a number of ways of attracting such students; one is to offer scholarships yourself. Remember, it really doesn't cost you much more to have eight children than seven; so as soon as you're financially viable you can give a scholarship. (Be cynical about whether people can pay or not, though; don't give scholarships to people who simply don't want to give up their second car or colour television.) Another way is to try to get the welfare department to pay a tuition or two; usually you have to make a presentation showing the way in which the specific child in question would benefit from your program. Call all the social workers you know. Call Indian Affairs, too; they have expressed interest in sending children to such schools. And go and talk to service clubs, this time suggesting that they underwrite a scholarship for a needy child.

Use your community. Wherever you have located your school, there are likely to be kids; encourage them to come into the school. Hold events there during the summer, like film shows, workshops. Keep the school itself visibly moving in the neighbourhood; there's no place for social studies to be meaningful like a city block.

And as soon as your school becomes so established that its survival is the most important criterion in every decision; when the rules become more important than the kids; when everyone doesn't know everyone else and when your teacher's most rewarding moment is when he picks up his paycheck; when kids, when sick, WANT to stay home from school — and as soon as ANYONE bolts down a desk or talks to more than six kids at a time

Pull out and start over.