

Collective Intelligence in Action: The Self-Directed Education Movement

Written by Laura Grace Weldon.

School systems often point to families like mine as examples. We prioritized outdoor play, read aloud daily, took our kids to museums, did chores together, and had a family dinner every night. Still, school didn't really work for my kids. Our five-year-old could read well but still had to complete endless pre-reading worksheets along with his kindergarten class; our eight-year-old's teacher kept insisting he be medicated for ADHD; our ten-year-old was expected to do grade-level busywork although she tested at high school and college levels; our teen was bored by AP classes and hassled by bullies at school.

I dug in, unwilling to give up. **How else, I reasoned, can institutions evolve without people pressing for changes from within?** Ever since my first child entered school I'd headed PTA committees, volunteered in classrooms, and participated in fund-raisers hoping to effect some of those changes.

Sure, there were a few parents who weren't fond of my gentle rabble rousing. I never quite shook the negative impression some people had of me as that mom who changed the yearly ritual of first grade hot dog night to first grade popcorn night, or as the one who turned down free Sea World field trips for my kids because I didn't want them to learn about marine mammals as captive performers.

But all of us parents grumbled in solidarity; united in misery over so many tests, so much homework, so little play. It wasn't lost on us that we were railing against the very structures that we also "had" to enforce if our kids were to succeed in school. These were overwhelming constraints indeed, many tied to big money.

Corporate influence was present everywhere. Free nutritional posters sent by candy manufacturers on cafeteria walls; software offered by petrochemical companies for science classes; math materials provided by credit card companies. Channel One beamed commercials along with daily snippets of news wrapped in PR-speak.

Parents felt helpless to stem this tide. So did teachers and administrators, who insisted they couldn't turn down free resources when budgets were so tight. They were right. Overall funding for schools nationwide has dropped from 2008 to today due to state and local austerity measures.

For several years I volunteered as the parent liaison with the district's food service contractor, but this private company was so focused on profits that fresh produce meant

little more than mealy apples, shredded lettuce, and tasteless baby carrots. All my efforts simply resulted in a wider variety of similarly unappealing offerings. When parents demanded that the school stop allowing the sale of chips, ice cream bars, and candy at lunch time the company threatened to back out of their contract altogether. And our offer to develop a school vegetable garden? Turned down. No extra time in the academic calendar for kids to get involved.

Add to that the effect of big money on local schools.

Plus the extraordinary profits made on grading software, data tracking, e-schooling, for-profit charter schools, even GED testing and teacher licensing exams. That's pretty much how we've gotten to our current test crazed educational system.

But my kids attended a good elementary school with highly motivated parents and positive changes did happen. For example, parent volunteers instituted and ran an annual Art Day, a glorious new tradition. One full school day each year we parents arranged to put artists in every classroom. They demonstrated their work and gave kids hands-on experience. Teachers took students from room to room to learn from sculptors, potters, cartoonists, printmakers, wood carvers, calligraphers, weavers, painters, and others. The whole building was alive with creative enthusiasm. Even then, with so much educational richness available, some teachers didn't allow children to participate in this all-school program until they'd finished their homework or written "I will keep my hands to myself" 20 times — **these kids left in the hallway were, not coincidentally, often minority students.**

Although my optimism had waned, I still held on to a shred of hope that there was value in working from within the system to change it. That ended the day my oldest son was threatened by a gun-carrying student in the school hallway. The next day we became homeschoolers.

I may have been slow to react, but that's often the way collective intelligence looks on an individual level.



We humans form institutions for the value they offer to society. Collectively these structures function with an intelligence based on what works. Ideally, whatever works persists and whatever doesn't work fades away. But sometimes institutions become resistant to change or change in ways that make them more rigid and therefore less responsive. When that happens, people who work for or are served by that institution tend to suffer. It usually takes a certain amount of irritation, unfairness, or real misery before people step back and take a look at the institution itself. Suffering has a way of making us more fully aware and more authentically invested in change. So we react. We resist, compete, struggle, debate, discuss, break away, collaborate, and reinvent.

More and more we see people resisting the structure of institutional education in its current form. Families are opting their kids out of standardized tests. Parents and teachers are seeking out or starting their own Democratic schools and self-directed learning centers. Families are homeschooling or unschooling in ever increasing numbers. We are choosing to integrate learning into our daily lives and our communities. Our choices show the sort of fluid responsiveness that shifts ingrained beliefs about what education is and what it can be.

This is collective intelligence in action.

Whether we intend to impact the larger civic good or not, the collective intelligence of our culture is continually refined as we seek out more conscious and life-enhancing ways to live. It takes a small percentage of people to change a cultural mindset. Often it seems that this kind of wider awareness can't come soon enough. But as philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer observed, "All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident."

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