

Teachers Who Quit to Create Schooling Alternatives

It's not uncommon for public school teachers to experience burnout or feel demoralized by the weight of their work. Many leave the classroom and the education profession behind to pursue other careers. In fact, U.S. Labor Department data reveal that public school educators are quitting their jobs at record-breaking rates.

But some public school teachers wonder if conventional schooling may be the root of their discontent, not education itself. They are frustrated by standardized curriculum expectations, more testing, an emphasis on classroom compliance and the antagonistic relationships between teachers and students that a rigid schooling environment can cultivate. Rather than abandoning their passion for education, some of these teachers are building alternatives to school outside of the dominant system that nurture authentic teaching and learning relationships.

Learning Is Natural, School Is Optional

One of the pioneers of schooling alternatives is Kenneth Danford, a former public middle school social studies teacher who left the classroom in 1996 to launch a completely new learning model. Along with a teacher colleague, Danford opened North Star, a self-directed learning center in western Massachusetts. They sought to create a space for young people, ages 11 and up, that prioritized learner freedom and autonomy, while rejecting the coercion and control they witnessed in the conventional classroom. This involved building the learning center as a resource for peer interaction, optional classes, workshops, and adult mentoring while providing teenagers with the opportunity to come and go whenever they chose.

Using homeschooling as the legal mechanism to provide this educational freedom and flexibility, North Star members attend when they want, frequently using the center to supplement community college classes, extracurricular activities and apprenticeships. Full-time, annual membership up to four days per week is \$8,200, but no family has ever been turned away for an inability to pay these fees. Some families choose part-time enrollment options that start at \$3,250 per year for one day a week at North Star.

In his new book, *Learning Is Natural, School Is Optional*, Danford reflects on his more than 20 years of running North Star and the hundreds of young people who have gone through his program, often gaining admission to selective colleges or pursuing work in fulfilling careers. He told me in a recent interview:

I feel like I'm making an important difference in teens' lives, perhaps the most important difference. And all this loveliness has social

implications and can be shared.

Liberated Learners

Sharing this model with others was the next step for Danford. After receiving many calls and emails from educators across the country and around the world who wanted to launch centers similar to North Star, in 2013 Danford helped to establish Liberated Learners, an organization that supports entrepreneurial educators in opening their own alternatives to school.

One of the centers that sprouted from Liberated Learners is BigFish Learning Community in Dover, New Hampshire. Founded by Diane Murphy, a public school teacher for 30 years, BigFish allows young people to be in charge of their own learning. Murphy opened the center in January 2018 with five students; today, she has over 30. Full-time tuition at the center (up to four days a week) is \$9,000 per year, with part-time options also available.

An English teacher, she never expected to be the founder of a schooling alternative. “I loved my job,” she says, but she quit to create something better. “The main reason I left is because the kids began showing up more and more miserable,” Murphy continues.

In my last few years, I was meeting dozens of students who were depressed, anxious and burned out at just 13 years old. More and more rules, more tests, and more competition had sucked the fun out of learning and truly broken many kids.

Granted more freedom and less coercion, young people at BigFish thrive—and so do the teachers. “Real teachers understand that our role is to support and lead young people to discover and uncover their talents, most especially to find their passions and their voice,” says Murphy. Working outside of the conventional school system may be a way forward for more teachers who want to help young people to drive their own education, in pursuit of their own passions and potential.

Entrepreneurial Teachers

According to Kevin Currie-Knight, an education professor at East Carolina University, it’s rare for teachers to recognize that their dissatisfaction as an educator may be a schooling problem, not a personal one. Currie-Knight, who studies self-directed education and alternative learning models, says that the tendency is for teachers to internalize the problems they encounter in the classroom. If children aren’t engaged or are acting out,

teachers typically assume that it must be their poor teaching and that they must not be cut out for the job, rather than seeing it as a problem with coercive schooling more broadly.

“School isn’t challengeable,” says Currie-Knight of its entrenched position in our culture.

The teachers who leave to create alternatives have a really amazing ability to separate learning from schooling. It takes a higher level of thought and an amazing ability to detach.

Currie-Knight explains that most teachers go into education either because they really like a certain subject area or they really like kids, or both. “In the conventional environment,” he says,

teachers are going to be in rooms where the vast majority of students just really don’t care about that subject at that point.

Many of these teachers conclude that it’s their teaching that is the problem, rather than the underlying dynamics of conventional schooling that compel young people to learn certain content, in certain ways and at certain times.

Teachers who leave the classroom to create schooling alternatives can be an inspiration to other teachers who may feel frustrated or powerless. Rather than blaming themselves, entrepreneurial teachers are the ones who imagine, design, and implement new models of education. As BigFish’s Murphy proposes:

We need to flip schools to become community learning centers filled with mentors, classes, programs and materials, and we need to trust young people and let them lead.