

The fight for alternatives

by Moira MacDonald

Grade Eight was a black spot in my life. I was fed up with teachers who wouldn't relate to me as a person, students who cared more about clothes than learning and an educational bureaucracy where everyone at the top thought things were fine. Only I as a mere 13-year-old cog knew better.

Like manna from heaven I found out about a recently-opened alternative school. ASE 2 (Alternative Scarborough Education 2) took students from grade nine up and made independent study a major feature of its program. It didn't take me long to decide that that's where I was going to be the next year. I would escape high-school hell.

I spent five years at ASE and have never regretted it. Going to an alternative high school taught me self-responsibility, how to think creatively, how to use my time effectively and to use my community as a classroom. We began writing essays in grade nine and were giving seminars by grade eleven. I respected my teachers—who all went by first names—and I knew they respected me.

In addition to independent study I had weekly class workshops and individual consultations with teachers to discuss my work. I also had much more freedom and input into my course content than I could ever have imagined having in a regular school. Above all, I was finally able to exercise my capacity to think.

I liked the other students; they were people who weren't about to have education force-fed to them and there were always heated discussions going on in the student lounge. Everyone had a different story: some were drop-outs, some were involved in extra-curricular activities that required time from school, some had health problems and some (like me) just didn't want any more of conventionalized schooling. The inter-student antagonisms of big schools were absent at ASE; instead there was an atmosphere of mutual caring and respect.

That was ten years ago. Since then the concept of alternative education has expanded to include schools for the arts, co-op programs and adult education. But even before I graduated from ASE I was noticing school board-directed structures insidiously creeping in, eroding the features that made the school an alternative and making it more like a smaller-sized conventional school.

The question is, are alternatives still taken seriously by educators? Alternatives have often suffered from being labelled 'free schools' for students who 'can't hack it' at regular schools, where students never go to classes and never do any work. They are also sometimes seen as an expendable frill.

Bill Douglas, current Head of Program at ASE 2 doesn't think this is the case in his board. "Scarborough Board does take alternatives seriously; the fact that there are two schools speaks well of that."

"The situation now is very different from what it was ten years ago," he admits, however. Douglas maintains that there must be a balance between freedom and study.

"We walk a very thin line. There are some things that we can't make exceptions about. We can't just 'do our own thing'. Because of OSIS (policy on courses and credits) there are more things dictated to us now, many positive things. We're in a society that's much more accountable."

If the existence of two alternatives in Scarborough speaks well of positive attitudes towards alternative education, then the 22 alternatives in Toronto boast of it. In all, Metro has 35 alternative pro-

grams which specifically encourage a high level of student motivation and independent study.

"Our board has a commitment to all our alternatives," says Sandy Best, Toronto Board of Education's alternative schools advisor. "Alternatives are not seen as 'in addition to' regular schools. It's a necessary thing. We don't want to lose kids through the cracks. The dropout rates are so high that boards are looking to keep their alternatives (and realize) that they pay social benefits in the long run."

Nevertheless, School of Life Experience (SOLE) program head Murray Shukyn thinks that alternatives still face the same lack of respect they always have. "The opposition is the same, the words are the same, the faces are different. It's a waste of money, why should we do it, it's a criticism of the regular schools, we don't have the space"

Shukyn should know: he's not only had 25 years experience in alternative schools, he founded the first public alternative school in North America — School of Experience, Exploration and Discovery (SEED) — in Toronto, back in 1968.

SEED was originally based on a combination of the free school model developed in the United States and educational concepts Shukyn learned from camping with kids. Still, Shukyn believes that "alternative education has to be responsive to community needs."

But the quest for responsive alternatives has not always been successful. Says Schookam, "I proposed an idea for an alternative school for the aged [but] it was shot down in flames. We have nursing homes filling up with people whose brains are fine but whose bodies don't work as well as they used to."

The opposition remains but the concept of alternative education has shown its strengths. Many of the students who enrol are considered 'at risk' of dropping out, yet the majority of graduates go on to university. The programs have also proved their flexibility and creativity in quickly meeting the educational needs of a rapidly changing society.

And the need clearly exists. Bill Douglas says a student recently told him "If it weren't for this school I don't know where I'd be."

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