

One response to the "educational crisis" in the U.S. has been the creation of over 2,000 "free" schools. These schools are organized along radically different lines from the traditional school. There are usually no grades or credits, sometimes a different content, and a much more loosely defined distinction between teacher and student. Every large city, and many smaller ones, around the country now have free schools. Each year more and more young people are turning to them rather than face the boredom and tediousness of the regular school program. The public educational system sometimes welcomes free schools, sometimes opposes them.

Even with this tremendous growth rate . . . and every indication that it will continue . . . some people in the free school movement have begun to question what they're up to. Some have come to the conclusion that it is the idea of school itself that is bringing on the present crisis. They are talking seriously about the "de-schooling" of society.

The best explanation of this idea came from a friend of mine. He said that the more a free school becomes a good school, the less it becomes a school. And the more it becomes a community. I think he would add that there are very few of these around.

My own experience as a staff member and the director of a free school during the past year has made this pretty clear to me. I think I have a few insights as to why.

A major assumption of the education system is that people are sick. They need a tonic—called education. A walk-in clinic is created where the tonic gets administered. A patient's progress gets evaluated every so often, and when he's "well" (educated) he is released.



One of the neat things about the clinic is that most of the "therapists" don't even realize that they are therapists. Thus they also are patients receiving treatment. A nice circle game.

Most of the free schools have the same old assumption. They still think people need treatment. The only change is that they don't evaluate the patient's progress in the same way. And the chief effect of that change is to disorient people. They expect someone to tell them what to do. And no one does.

The few schools that are working toward community aren't having much success. One reason is obvious. It has to do with common assumptions. The word school implies a place where a lot of different things are going on—all supposed to be generating "learning". Quite often, so many things are going on that it's impossible to get an idea about what the group is doing, what it wants to do, or how it will grow. Many school groups have broken up over just this question.

At schools, NOTHING can happen because EVERYTHING can happen.

Many of us grew up with this attitude. School is a place where you go not to do anything. In the old system the avalanche of trivia makes the point. In the new one it's people's ideas about what they will do at school and about what the school will do for them.

Community: a group that shares a set of common assumptions. I don't see how that can happen in a school. Free or not.

Alternatives? There are some around.

One good idea: Learning centers could be established all over the country. Anyone would have access to them. They could be used to gather (and generate) information in any area. The necessary technology already exists . . . but technology alone isn't enough. Centers would have to be extensions of living communities, dealing with the things that are important to the communities. Ideally they would be located on a neighborhood scale.

Learning centers aren't just going to happen. Many current institutions would have to change. Family, government, business. . . .

A mother of five told me she liked the idea but that it would never work. Too many parents want to get rid of their children. This is a statement on the nuclear family.

One way of moving in a positive direction would be to establish sets of "institutes" (new word needed) organized along fairly specific lines. (e.g. man/man, man/society, etc.) These could replace free schools. They could be places where people would work together on interests vital to them.

Another short-term alternative would be to allow free travel to young people and set up hostels where travelers could stay.

I'm sure there are other possibilities.