

*Edited by* NINA BASCIA,  
ESTHER SOKOLOV FINE,  
and MALCOLM LEVIN

# ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLING AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Canadian Stories of  
Democracy within  
Bureaucracy



# Alternative Schooling and Student Engagement

Nina Bascia · Esther Sokolov Fine  
Malcolm Levin  
Editors

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*In memory of*  
*Bob Davis*  
*Ursula Franklin*  
*Murray Shukyn*  
*Roger Simon*

## FOREWORD

This book presents a world where students actually thrive. Alternative schools blossomed in the late 1960s and 1970s during a time of progressive reform in mainstream education. In Ontario, the Hall–Dennis Report—*Living and Learning*—sparked a great deal of this activity along with broader changes in the culture. Today, schools exist within a climate where students are constantly measured. Given this, alternative schools are needed more than ever to help demonstrate what education can and should be. In general, alternative schools focus on the development of the whole person, democratic decision-making, and self-directed learning.

This book describes the history and reality of life in schools, mostly within the Toronto District School Board. Many of them started in the 1970s and have continued despite the pressures of “accountability.” The journey for many teachers in these schools is not without struggle. In their chapters, we hear their voices calling for a more humane education and showing some of the ways it can be achieved. We also hear the voices of students who have attended these schools. For example, one student comments:

I learned not to take for granted given truths, I learned to ask a lot of questions and decide what the truth is for myself. I learned there are a lot of different opinions in the world and that I need to be aware of them. I learned that people have different learning styles and ways of being, and that these differences should be embraced by the systems we learn and

work within. People kept asking me what I thought at such an early age, and though it took some time, eventually this forced me out of excruciating shyness. I learned I really had to speak up for what I believed was right (Kim Simon, in the final chapter).

This is the kind of learning and growth that we wish for all students. Education needs a much broader vision than that currently offered by Ministries and Departments of Education. This book describes schools where students' well-being is nourished. It also encourages all educators to reflect on the purposes and meaning of education.

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**Malcolm Levin** was a founding parent of MAGU, Toronto's first public alternative elementary school, and later served as the parent representative on the Toronto Board of Education's committee on Alternative and Community Education. Before coming to OISE as a faculty member in 1968, he was a doctoral student, researcher, and supervisor of student teachers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a member of the editorial board of the Harvard Educational Review. At OISE, he taught courses in program organization, history, philosophy, and sociology of education and alternative education, and co-edited a series of classroom booklets on Canadian Public Issues. Later, he served as Academic Assistant Director of OISE, Director of the University of Toronto's Institute for Child Study, and Principal of the University of Toronto Schools, a university-affiliated secondary school for gifted and talented youth. He has been a freelance jazz pianist since his teens and continues to play in retirement.

# INTRODUCTION

## TORONTO'S PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS: AN OVERVIEW

In the early 1970s, long before schools of choice, magnet schools, and charter schools became the favorites of educational reformers across North America, a small cluster of public alternative schools made their appearance within what were then the cities of Toronto, North York, Etobicoke and Scarborough. The first was SEED, launched in 1968 as a summer enrichment program before becoming an alternative high school under the Toronto Board of Education. SEED was followed by MAGU, a multi-age grouped elementary school established by the North York Board of Education in 1970. In 1971, the Toronto Board established ALPHA, an alternative elementary school similar in philosophy and organization to MAGU. In the same year, alternative high schools were started in Etobicoke (SEE) and North York (AISP). The Scarborough Board launched its own alternative elementary school—Scarborough Village—in 1973 and an alternative high school (ASE) 2 years later. Toronto created two additional alternative high schools in 1973—Contact and Subway Academy. Only one of these alternative schools—Subway—was initiated by central administration. The main impetus came from teachers, parents, and students who lobbied and gained the support of sympathetic trustees and school administrators.

These events unfolded in a distinctive climate characterized by a revival of child-centered progressive educational philosophy and practices and a rejection of traditional mainstream institutional schooling.

They were animated by a level of socio-political activism not seen since the 1930s. The revival of child-centered progressive education was fueled by the Ontario Ministry of Education's publication of "Living and Learning," called the Hall-Dennis Report, co-authored by a prominent judge and an elementary school principal. The report drew upon a range of historical progressive education sources from the USA, the UK, and locally from the University of Toronto's own Institute for Child Study (ICS) Lab School.

The Hall-Dennis Report called for a major overhaul of Ontario's public school system from the Ministry of Education down to the classroom. Its overall thrust was to radically decentralize program development and administration. Individual school boards were to assume responsibility for tailoring their programs to the needs of their students within a broad flexible framework. At the high school level, in particular, mandatory courses and examinations were to be replaced by more flexible course offerings under a "credit system" based on hours of instruction.

The report recommended replacing the existing lock-step programs with a more individualized curriculum, taking into account the differing needs and interests of students. It also recommended the establishment of school-community councils to encourage the collaboration of parents and teachers in meeting the needs of students. It called for a more student-oriented curriculum with responsibility for program development delegated to school boards, individual teachers with input from parents and students. The role of the Ministry of Education was to change from top-down inspection and enforcement to establishing flexible guidelines, providing advice and ultimately approving or rejecting submissions from individual boards of education.

The progressive spirit of Hall-Dennis opened the doors to ungraded primary classrooms, new schools with open area designs, new high school courses designed by teachers, and elimination of standardized province-wide examinations at the high school level. While some teachers, administrators, and school trustees welcomed these changes, others felt unprepared to take on the challenges of a decentralized system and felt that the new approach would undermine academic standards and quality. A "Back to Basics" backlash gained momentum with support from Minister of Education Thomas Wells, who spoke of the need to "maintain standards" and "accountability."

Nevertheless, Living and Learning had let the progressive education genie out of the bottle in which it had been corked for decades. Wells'

pronouncements were pounced on in an issue of *Interchange*, a new academic journal of education published by the recently (1965) established Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) by previous Minister of Education Bill Davis. In addition to the present writer, Murray Shukyn of SEED and Roger Simon of ALPHA led the attack.

In 1968, Shukyn and a small group of high school teachers launched SEED as a summer program for Toronto high school students, housed in rented space in the downtown YMHA Community Center. Two years later, the Toronto Board approved SEED as a year-round alternative high school, along with ALPHA, a progressive elementary school spearheaded by a group of activist parents. Both ventures were supported by recently elected young trustees linked to the rising left-wing New Democratic Party of Ontario. These trustees—notably Fiona Nelson, Gordon Cressy, Dan Leckie and Bob Spencer—emerged as prominent figures in a “reform caucus” at the Board.

Meanwhile, in North York, a predominantly middle-class suburb of Toronto, a group of activist parents who called themselves “parents for a Hall–Dennis School” were meeting with Mel Shipman, a sympathetic trustee, and a school superintendent, Claude Watson, to promote the establishment of a non-graded elementary school modeled after those in Leicestershire in the UK. The group included well-connected professional and business people, notably two professors who had left the USA to take up positions at recently created York University. Mildred and David Bakan had elementary school-age children who they wanted to be educated in a modern progressive public school directed by parents and teachers. In 1969, the North York Board approved a “Multi-Age-Grouping Unit” (MAGU) to be housed in one of the Board’s elementary school buildings. Thus, MAGU became Canada’s first public alternative elementary school.

These public alternative schools came into being as a consequence of collaboration and negotiations between activist parents, teachers and students, and a few supportive school administrators and trustees who supported the spirit and recommendations of the Hall–Dennis Report. In this respect, the change process was both bottom-up and top-down. The growth and development of alternative and community school initiatives thrived mainly in the city of Toronto, where politicians favoring community involvement in education and other social services were dominant. The Toronto Board created a School–Community Relations Department and an Alternative and Community Programs Committee to establish

procedures and vet proposals for new initiatives. Dale Shuttleworth, an experienced school–community relations administrator, was recruited from the North York Board to lead the new department and guide its work.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, middle-class parents took advantage of the opportunity to propose new alternative elementary schools across the city (e.g., Beaches, Downtown, High Park, Mountview) and in neighboring Scarborough (Scarborough Village). In addition, a trio of teachers from Deer Park Senior School, located in an affluent area of north Toronto, started the city’s first Grade 7/8 alternative—Spectrum—in a local elementary school building.

New high school alternatives were also launched in the 1970s and early 1980s. The Toronto Board created two independent study alternatives modeled on Philadelphia’s “school-without-walls.” Parkway Program. Subway Academy One and Subway Academy Two were set up along Toronto’s main east-west subway line to provide flexible study arrangements for high school students. Students were expected to work independently and arrange to meet with their teachers at regular intervals.

However, many high school students from poor and working-class families lacked the skills and discipline for self-directed learning but were not being well-served in mainstream high schools. In response to this need, Toronto teacher Harry Smaller and a group of like-minded teachers launched Contact in 1973, soon to be followed by West End and Oasis.

Three independent (private) alternative schools that were experiencing financial difficulties—Hawthorne Bilingual, Inglenook, and Wandering Spirit Survival School—requested and were also granted public school status under the Toronto Board.

The proliferation of public alternative schools continued in the 1980s. Three new grade 7/8 schools—Horizon, Delta, and Quest—and two more high school alternatives—City School and School of Life Experience (SOLE)—opened their doors to students. In addition, the Etobicoke and North York school boards launched performing arts schools.

The efforts of Toronto teachers, parents, and school trustees, supported by a temporarily permissive Ministry of Education, created an institutional process for establishing new public alternative schools and programs across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) which continues to



this day. However, the political and economic environment within which public schools operate today has changed dramatically. Accountability, Assessment, and Austerity have replaced Diversity and Innovation as the central concerns of provincial educational policy. Alternative schools, along with mainstream schools, have had to make adjustments to this turnabout.

In 1990, in the midst of a recession evoking calls for reduced government spending, a three-way provincial election contest resulted in Ontario's first left-leaning New Democratic Party (NDP) government under the leadership of Bob Rae. The results surprised everyone, including Rae and his fellow New Democrats, who found themselves inheriting a substantial budget deficit left behind by the defeated Liberal government. Rae responded by calling for all public-sector employees to take a 5% wage cut. Public sector workers and their unions were furious, especially teachers, who had supported the NDP and felt betrayed.

The next provincial election in 1995 resulted in a sharp swing to the right as a hard-line Conservative party led by Mike Harris from North Bay swept to power with a mandate to curb the powers of local school boards, public service unions, and municipal governments. The Harris Conservatives launched what they called a "common sense revolution" that reversed what the conservatives in the 1960s had started. They re-centralized power at all levels. The Ministry of Education now decided how much each local school board could spend based on province-wide formulas, regardless of local needs. The City of Toronto and its school board was merged with the other five metropolitan boroughs. Toronto was viewed by the Harris Conservatives, whose power base was in suburbia and small town Ontario, as a breeding ground for what they called the "tax and spend" Liberal and NDP parties. While alternative schools continued to operate, they no longer received additional staff resources they had been previously allocated to meet the needs of their students, particularly in high schools such as Contact, West End, and Oasis. The new Toronto District School Board (TDSB) had to operate under the same funding formulas as Harris's rural town of North Bay.

## CONCLUSION

Nearly all the pioneering public alternative schools in Metropolitan Toronto continue to operate today with healthy student enrollments; in 2014, there were 19 elementary level alternative schools and 21 high

school alternatives listed on the TDSB Web site. New schools continue to be proposed and established under the administration of the TDSB. What began as a bold innovation in public education in Toronto in the 1970s has become an integral part of the public school system in the GTA in the twenty-first century. The chapters in this book are an effort to re-capture the history and dynamics of this mini-revolution in public education from the perspectives of many who participated in it and helped shape it as well as some who are presently working in alternative schools.

Malcolm Levin

PART I

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Local Democracy Within Bureaucracy:  
Critical Perspectives

# Curriculum Development in Alternative Schools: What Goes on in Alternative Schools Stays in Alternative Schools

*Nina Bascia and Rhiannon Maton*

Alternative schools allow school systems to meet the social, emotional, and physical challenges of children and youth that are not addressed by mainstream schools. The major features that distinguish many alternative schools from their mainstream counterparts are democratic practices involving students and teachers, and small school and class sizes that allow for personalized relationships among staff and students (McLaughlin et al. 1990; Raywid 1994; Te Riele 2007). Many alternative schools experiment with different modes of organization that encourage curricular innovation (Raywid 1994). Often, teachers and students take an active role in designing original courses and programs (Bascia and Fine 2012).

That public alternative schools are able to develop innovative programs is a remarkable feat given the bureaucratic, top-down school systems in

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which they operate (Darling-Hammond 1997)—the same systems that promote standardized programs at mainstream schools that alienate some students (Wehlege 1989). What is it that buffers alternative schools from the currently prevalent educational practices that constrain teachers' work (Ball 2003)? How does teachers' work in alternative schools mediate the effects of bureaucratic educational systems in order to maintain innovative programming that is responsive to students' interests?

This chapter focuses on curriculum development in secondary alternative schools in the Toronto District School Board. It uses the concept of organizational "loose coupling" to describe how alternative school teachers and students actively select and craft courses and programs within the context of the school board and Ontario's provincial policy constraints. The concept of loose coupling helps explain alternative school teachers' abilities to innovate, as well as the limits of their influence beyond their own schools, and thus limiting curricular cross-fertilization. Research on teachers' careers helps us discern the continuities between teachers' lives and their work.

The data that inform this chapter come from interviews conducted as part of an exploratory study that focused on the work of five teachers. The five schools these teachers worked in reflect the diversity of secondary alternative schools in Toronto. They included academically oriented schools, schools geared to the education of working-class students, schools emphasizing student accessibility, and "transitional" schools for students who have left mainstream schools and may wish to return. Interviews revealed how teachers came to work in the school, how they determined what and how to teach, their working relationships with students and colleagues, school administration and governance, and the challenges and opportunities posed by their work.

A hallmark of many Toronto alternative schools is the extent to which staff (and students) experiment with different modes of organization and participate in curricular innovation. Several courses and practices that are now part of Toronto's and Ontario's official curriculum were developed and delivered first or early in alternative schools; some examples include gender and women's studies, holocaust and genocide education, and peace-making and conflict resolution (Bascia et al. 2014). While new courses and programs are also developed in mainstream school settings, Toronto's alternative schools are a rich source of teacher- and student-driven curriculum innovation. But because alternative schools tend to

operate in a sphere separate from mainstream schools, these curricular “gifts” only rarely enjoy broader dissemination.

### ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AS LOOSELY COUPLED ORGANIZATIONS

The concepts of loose and tight coupling were developed by organizational theorist Karl Weick (1976) to describe the organizational structure of schools in the United States. According to Weick, a tightly coupled organization is managed by a set of mutually understood rules enforced by an inspection and feedback system. In tightly coupled organizations, supervisors know exactly what employees are doing and can coordinate all the activities of different departments according to a central strategy. In contrast, in loosely coupled systems, there is a minimal coordination or regulation and several means might produce the same ends. Loose coupling allows more self-determination, local adaptation, and the development of creative solutions.

School systems are believed to be tightly coupled (Louis 1990; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Many educational practices are assumed to be uniform across public school systems and schools: for example, sorting students by age and presumed academic ability, dividing the curriculum into subjects and grades, the nature of student–teacher and teacher–teacher relationships, and fidelity with officially prescribed curriculum policy (Miles and Darling-Hammond 1998; Siskin 1994). These assumed regularities produce what Mary Metz (1989; also Hemmings and Metz 1992) has termed “real school,” and what Tyack and Tobin (1994) call the “grammar of schooling.”

Metz writes that expectations for “real school” are easily fulfilled when students “accept the staff’s agenda as worthwhile” (p. 87), but when students do not keep up as expected or are disengaged from school, these expectations are more difficult to meet. Educators may respond to such challenges by developing distinct programs within schools (e.g., special education, ESL, vocational programs) that act as add-ons or pullouts to the “regular” academic program without seriously challenging its primacy (Miles and Darling-Hammond 1998). In this way, schools may resort to loose coupling to cope with the students who do not conform to system expectations.

School systems require public schools and educators to comply with system rules and expectations for “real school” with at least the

appearance of tight coupling (Meyer and Rowan 1977). But some school systems may use alternative schools to help manage the dissonance that arises when they are confronted with diverse populations of students. In a sense, the existence of alternative schools reduces the pressure on regular schools to accommodate diverse students' needs and interests.

In order to maintain unique programs while ensuring their continued existence in public school systems, alternative schools may challenge some—but not all—of the expectations for “real school.” In our study, alternative school teachers acknowledge the school board and province's expectations for “real school,” but they also understand that teaching in an alternative school requires something more and different from “real teaching.”

### LOOSE COUPLING AND ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

In the Toronto District School Board, there was a tension “between the diversity required for innovation and the standardization assumed by the normal operating procedures of the Board of Education” (Darling-Hammond et al. 2002: pp. 665–666). A special superintendent for alternative schools operated at the school board level. From the school district's perspective, coordination, and communication were managed efficiently—even though alternative schools maintained unique educational programs (Bascia and Fine 2012). Alternative schools were nominally headed up by principals, although many of these principals have responsibility for multiple schools. A lead teacher (or “curriculum leader”) may have handled daily decision making, and teachers might experience greater autonomy than in traditional school settings. This enabled small alternative schools to maintain a system-required student–administrator ratio while also serving to loosen organizational coupling by reducing administrative oversight. To accommodate provincial student–teacher ratios, Toronto's secondary alternative schools had small teaching staffs, with each teacher typically responsible for multiple grades and subjects.

Secondary alternative schools' small size meant that most subject areas had only a single teacher—and teachers most often taught more than one subject. For example, one teacher at a highly academic school asserted that he was the only philosophy teacher in the school and did not need to work with other teachers, did not have to coordinate the same tests, and was able to customize class reading lists every semester. At another school that emphasized student accessibility, a teacher noted

the absence of overt external control over teaching, saying that there were no “curriculum police” at the school. The relationship between what teachers did in their classrooms was only loosely coupled with what occurred at the school or school board level.

While many teachers reported working independently, the philosophy teacher described how two teachers at his school collaborated to develop a year-long course on “Mathematics in Art,” thus providing students with credits in two distinct courses. He believed that the school’s small size, autonomy and absence of bureaucracy that came with working at an alternative school made such innovative courses possible. A teacher at another school described how he and two other teachers provided a physical education course in response to students’ expressed interest. A three-teacher team taught the course: one teacher’s knowledge of yoga and alternative health practices dovetailed with another teacher’s addressing health issues such as body image and gender awareness. In this case, three out of the six teachers at that school delivered a course for which students would get physical education credits.

In the secondary alternative schools where the five teachers worked, students and teacher participated in democratic practices, thus playing a significant role in shaping course content, activities, assignments, and assessments. Teachers described how student input helped shape the choices of subjects offered. Teachers followed provincial curriculum guidelines but, at the same time, they tailored what they taught under the aegis of provincial courses based on student survey responses. By teaching new courses much of the time, based on student interests, they did a fair amount of curriculum development. For example, one teacher, who had taught in an alternative school for a number of years, reported that she had to work without a textbook and was always bringing in new articles and materials. Being responsive to student requests clearly required lots of continuous work.

One kind of curriculum innovation the teachers engaged in was thematic teaching that connected various subject areas. In some schools, several teachers, or the whole staff, agreed to focus on a common theme across courses. Because of the intense nature of their workloads, teachers sometimes also organized their courses around themes, different each year, in order to allow them to recycle some of the same content across the several subjects they taught. For example, one teacher described how she used the theme of carbon footprints to focus on water as a human right in a Grade 11 World Issues class and ethics about the earth’s



resources in Grade 11 Philosophy. In this way, she said, although she taught four courses per semester, she did not have to overextend herself in terms of her own knowledge base, and students got a variety of different subject-based perspectives on a given theme or topic.

Minimal administrative oversight, small size, demanding teaching schedules and involving students in decision making together created a situation where significant authority was located at the school and classroom level, and where curricular innovation was the norm. But teachers had to walk a fine line between the priority of delivering curriculum that students found engaging and ensuring that students earned the credits required to graduate from high school and be admitted to college or university. For this reason, innovative curriculum was offered under the aegis of regularly approved courses. For example, courses on gender and women's studies (which were not yet part of the official provincial curriculum) were listed on students' academic transcripts as fulfilling requirements for Grade 11 Philosophy. At one school, an entrepreneurship course fulfilled provincial Business Studies course requirements.

### CONTINUITIES AND RUPTURES

Some of the teachers we interviewed had spent their entire teaching careers in alternative schools, sometimes only in their current school. Two teachers had started teaching in mainstream high schools; both said they would never teach in mainstream schools again.

Alternative schools in Toronto existed in a kind of bubble. The curricular inventions created within them did not typically find their way into general circulation in mainstream schools. Teachers' comments suggested that this could be due to the constraints on their opportunities to interact with teachers beyond their own schools. Given the time and energy they put into working with students, several teachers in the study said they rarely attended teacher union or subject area organization meetings.

One teacher said she believed alternative school teachers had less influence outside their schools than teachers from mainstream schools. Alternative school teachers were not typically invited to participate in official school board or provincial curriculum development. Nor, she said, did they have the opportunity to provide professional learning

sessions for other teachers. Loose coupling between alternative and mainstream schools might serve to inhibit the spread of innovation.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SPREAD OF CURRICULUM INNOVATION

Drawing on interviews with five teachers in the Toronto District School Board's secondary alternative schools, this chapter has explored the structural factors and work of teachers that enable curricular innovation, as well as those factors that inhibit the expansion of innovation beyond alternative schools. Using the notion of loose coupling, it described the contradictory relationship that exists between school board and provincial policy expectations and actual curricular practices in alternative schools. On the one hand, teachers and students created or modified courses by using the school board or provincially approved course expectations as scaffolding to ensure students earned the credits they needed for academic advancement and graduation from high school. On the other hand, student and teacher interests were major drivers in developing course content, activities, and assignment practices.

The chapter has identified several features of alternative schools (the small size of staff and student cohorts, minimal administrative oversight, and teachers' heavy workloads) that support curricular invention. Yet, these same factors may serve to limit the spread of innovation to mainstream schools by limiting the access (and therefore the influence) of alternative school teachers to educators beyond their own school walls.

The teachers' comments suggest that structural features of mainstream secondary school programs also make it unlikely that alternative schools' innovative curricular practices could be adopted there: Their large size and their organizational division into academic departments, with teachers' work more tightly coordinated within, and weaker bounds between, subjects (Little and Siskin 1994; Siskin 1994); greater anonymity among teachers and students due to the large cohort size and lack of spatial proximity (Hargreaves 1994); greater administrative scrutiny given the hierarchical relations between teachers, department heads, and school administrators. Mainstream and alternative schools exist at different points along a continuum between innovation and prescription, with limited opportunities for curricular cross-fertilization. Loose coupling serves to enable innovation within alternative school boards even while it inhibits the spread of innovation to other schools.

## AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY

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**Rhiannon Maton**, Ph.D. is an educational researcher and faculty member in the Critical Writing Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on how educational stakeholders understand and enact agency— with particular attention to teacher and community activism, teacher inquiry groups, and the potential for critically engaged action within school structures and systems.

## Alpha Alternative School: Making a Free School Work, in a Public System

*Deb O'Rourke*

*I think my ideal world would have a million little ALPHAs in it. Each one small and kind of different.*

This was the reflection of one of ALPHA's original students, interviewed about his experience 40 years later. Growing up in caring places with strong teacher/parent partnerships, many alternative school alumni might feel the same. The Toronto School Board's first alternative school policy called this the *Toronto Experience*:

Alternative school programs in the City of Toronto may be unique in North America because in almost every instance they were initiated by groups of parents, teachers, students and other interested persons who approached the Board of Education for support of experimental programs within the system. (TBE 1978, *Re: General Policy for Alternative School Programs*. p. 3)

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OISE professor Malcolm Levin maintains that Toronto's alternative schools were originally "seen by many as free schools by another name" (1984, p. 7). In the international *free school movement* of the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of these grassroots schools were created, most outside of school systems.

Allen Graubard called A. S. Neill's Summerhill the "grand-daddy of free schools" (1972: 112). Neill's 1960 book *Summerhill: a Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, gave hope to people far beyond the UK. In 1969, I was a student activist in a Calgary organization that, in communication with the students of SEED in faraway Toronto, created a summer free school. The Calgary initiatives did not last. But 15 years later, I was able to enroll my child in a public free school in Toronto. ALPHA later became my place of employment and the subject of my master's thesis. This chapter is drawn from my M.Ed. research, which included interviews with alumni parents, teachers, and students.

### WHAT IS A FREE SCHOOL?

Founded in 1921, the private English boarding school Summerhill is described by its founder Neill as "a self-governing school, democratic in form." Its students are free to play, and lessons are optional. But its motto is *freedom, not license*. Children are held responsible for actions that affect others: "Everything connected with social, or group, life, including punishment for social offenses, is settled by vote at the Saturday night General School Meeting ..." (Neill 1969). Summerhill had been operating for 39 years when A.S. Neill wrote that it was no longer an experiment but a "demonstration school, for it demonstrates that freedom works" (Neill 1960: 4). But he never allowed his or Summerhill's name to be used in the schools they inspired, explaining: "If a school is set up simply in imitation of Summerhill, that is wrong ... No school, Summerhill included, is the last word in education" (Snitzer 1972: 13).

Schools inspired by Summerhill each survive on their own terms. Teaching in African-American communities for decades, Jonathan Kozol practiced and wrote about urban free schooling. He found that the key to the acceptability of a free school to low-income and minority parents was the "great debate concerning basic skills."

I found myself aligned with those who argued for a policy of undisguised, sequential, and intentional skill teaching. The haphazard, libertarian