

HFTFS PRIZE 2018

APPLICATION PART 1

READING #2

HARBOR FREIGHT
TOOLS FOR SCHOOLS

Student-Designed Learning for the Skilled Trades

Excerpted from [*A School of Our Own: The Story of the First Student-Run High School and a New Vision for American Education*](#)
By Samuel Levin and Susan Engel

In *Patterns of Culture*, the anthropologist Ruth Benedict noted that many cultures lead their youngsters toward maturity by gradually giving them more autonomy and accountability. But our culture, she pointed out, did not. In fact, she argued, our society was notable for the disjuncture we create between childhood and adulthood. We baby them for a very long time and then fling them into a free fall toward adulthood.

That's just as true today as it was when Benedict wrote her book, in 1934. We tell kids what to do every moment they are in school. We don't even trust them to keep track of time, ringing a bell whenever they should get up and begin moving to the next class. If you've spent time in a public school, you'll know what I mean. The students sit, slouch, or fidget in their seats. Then suddenly, from nowhere, a loud, ugly chime sounds, and everyone jumps up (even when the teacher or another student is still talking, or a film is showing), puts their books in their backpacks, and begins shuffling toward the door. There is absolutely no decision making involved. They each begin moving, like sardines on the conveyer belt, toward their next destination, another classroom in another hall.

And it's not just their time we control. We tell them what to learn as well. For the most part adults decide what topics are essential to study, what books they should read, which math they should learn, and what kinds of experiments they should conduct.

Teenagers are typically treated as if they have no clue how to choose what to apply themselves to, what they are interested in, or how to go about pursuing those interests. We also tell them how to learn the topics we have selected: what material they should study, which skills to practice, and the best way to prepare for a test. We even relieve them of any responsibility for deciding when they actually know something well enough. Instead, we tell them, usually with a test score.

By directing them through every waking moment, we all but guarantee that they are unlikely to feel much zeal or drive for what they are learning and trying to do. In the early 1980s, the psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson wanted to get a detailed, vivid picture of adolescent experience. They gave teenagers in Chicago small beepers to take with them everywhere, and a packet of questionnaires. For more than a week, each teenager in the study was beeped at random times. When the subjects in the study heard the beep, they would take a moment to pause and answer a host of questions about where they were, what they were doing, who they were with, what they were thinking about, and how they felt (they had a chance even to sketch pictures of their moods). The study offered a gold mine of information about how teenagers spent their time and, more important, provided an amazingly intimate and gritty picture of what it felt like to be a teenager. The answers made it vividly clear

that most kids feel listless and disengaged for most of the school day.

But there were places and times during the school day when the opposite was true—when kids reported a sense of focus, energy, and excitement about what they were doing. When did those moments occur? When the students were doing things they had chosen: Whether it was during a class or not, kids felt much more alive when they had some say in their activity. Sadly, however, these moments were the exception, not the rule.

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