Introduction

In self-directed democratic schools, kids practice life in a microcosm of society, empowered as voters, bound by laws, challenged by choice, supported by community, and driven by nature. In this book, I'll tell you all about it: philosophy, theory, and practice. I'll tell you how schools are governed by students and staff together, and what happens in school day to day. I'll tell you why it feels morally right, practically effective, and deeply satisfying. Along the way, I'll tell you dozens of personal stories.

Agency in Community

"Agency" is a word coming into its own these days. Agency is the capacity to choose and act on your own behalf, and may be a hallmark of life. A rock just sits there, but living creatures can do things, can take actions. Even bacteria detect and move toward nutrients, taking action in a primitive sort of agency.

In human beings, agency is conscious and even self-conscious: we can reflect on our choices, actions, and experience — and learn. We can retain what works, and drop what doesn't, adapting and evolving ourselves in a lifelong practice of self-authorship. If agency is a distinguishing feature of life in general, reflective agency may be a distinguishing feature of humanity.

Agency is like muscle: stronger with work, weaker without. Just as physical inactivity weakens muscles, chronic restraint of children's choice

and action weakens their ability to choose and act. Inactivity and restraint are sometimes necessary or wise, but greatest growth is prompted by conditions in which choice and action are exercised, constrained by limits of safety and society.

That last part — constraints — is worth emphasizing. Agency is biologically installed, but its actions may or may not lead to good outcomes. Unbridled pursuit of inborn impulses is unlikely to work out well in the long run. The opportunities and taming influences of community and societal structure are crucial and central in human experience. Just so, at the heart of self-directed democratic schooling is the bounded freedom of agency in community.

In this setting, nature and culture mix and merge, stirring a uniquely personal stew of existential and situational challenges, stimulating satisfying growth. Instead of the brute force of conventional education, democratic schooling channels natural forces to drive development.

Transcending Culture Wars

Education is a frontier in the culture wars of values and public policy. Schools are in the crossfire. Each of the several cultural movements hopes to embed their own favored values in curriculum, methodology, and policy, to be imposed on all children and families. In contrast, the democratic schooling discussed in this book might be called post-curricular. It stands entirely outside the current debate, and implicitly suggests a new policy direction and a new role for government in education.

Democratic schools impose no curriculum at all, and no particular teaching-learning methodology. Instead, democratic schools are more like a venue — hosting any curriculum and any teaching-learning methodology, while imposing none. One could argue, with some merit, that this is just another set of values vying for dominance. But democratic schooling is not just another flavor of curriculum and methodology. Instead it is the first to integrate *all* flavors, first to include and accommodate all of the competing value sets, while also transcending the limitations of coercion and a one-size-fits-all approach.

Instead of government picking favored curriculum to be applied universally, I imagine a world in which government's role is to ensure universal access to a wide array of possibilities in schools. This is not about

charter schools, vouchers, privatization, or the politically charged versions of school choice. My wish is simply that education policy would catch up with science, scholarship, and common sense — which all recognize the significance of diversity in values, socioeconomic circumstances, family composition, and especially individual developmental paths. There is no one flavor of schooling that is right for every family and every child, and there is no good reason that schools cannot better accommodate human variety and children's individuality. The one-dimensional homogenizing function of schooling a hundred years ago is out of sync with today's multidimensional diversity, and no longer serves (if ever it did) to equalize opportunity and cultivate personal fulfillment and societal engagement.

Although self-directed democratic schools today are not part of public schooling (which is ironic in democratic nations), they very well could be, and that is what I hope for. Alas, it doesn't seem imminent.

I will not pursue this thread any further in this book. I mention it mostly to help situate democratic schooling in the current education landscape.

About Me

I'm in a good position to tell you about democratic schooling. I'm a staff member and founder of The Circle School (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania), which opened in 1984, and I'm the father of two now-adult Circle School "lifers." The school's students, mostly 4 to 19 years old, have brought every sort of joy and challenge we could imagine — and almost every day they bring yet another surprise, something entirely new, even now, 30-some years later. We have consulted with dozens of other self-directed democratic schools and their founders, some during their founding period, and learned much from cross visits, conferences, and daily interactions within the national and international community of democratic schools. We have conducted and published two statistical and analytical studies of one particular brand of self-directed democratic schooling (Sudbury schools). We have been visited by hundreds of educators and examined closely by dozens, including years of sustained deep dialogue with professors of education from several universities.

My interest in schooling extends back to my teenage years. For 11 happy years, I was a compliant A student in conventional government-run

public schools. Then an itch, an opportunity, and a whim landed me in a partly democratic school for my last two years of high school, back in the era of the "free schools" movement. There I found two lifelong loves: democratic schooling and my wife, Beth L. Stone, who is also a Circle School founder and staff member.

As a teenager, I studied alternative schooling as a hobby. I volunteered as a classroom tutor and later, in college, a Big Brother. I aspired to be a 5th-grade classroom teacher, but that never happened. (It was specifically 5th grade. Now I wonder if that's because part of me happily "locked in" at that age — something I suspect now, as I rejoice in the adventures and mischief of 10-year-olds.) After high school, I attended Yale, dropped out, and later attended night classes at Penn State for a few years. Early in fatherhood, I established and staffed a playgroup for babies and toddlers in our local library. My training and nine years of volunteer work as a telephone helpline counselor awakened me to the amazing power of people, when given the opportunity and support, to navigate difficult situations and personal transformation. Before and overlapping with The Circle School's early years, I enjoyed 5 to 10 years each as a history magazine editor, business analyst, independent software developer, and management consultant to manufacturers.

In this book, my point of view is that of a practitioner, rather than, say, a journalist, academic, or social commentator. I'm speaking from my perch in a school and a movement of schools, drawing mainly on my firsthand experience here, my own years as a student, and a lifetime of learning. Although I'll refer to ideas from beyond my world of democratic schooling, I have not systematically studied the canon of education and developmental psychology. Maybe I have it all wrong. I'm an expert about my own experience, but nothing else.

About This Book

In this book, I'll present democratic schooling as articulated and practiced by The Circle School, because that's what I know best and can describe from firsthand experience spanning four decades. Sometimes I'll highlight similarities and variations among democratic schools, to the best of my knowledge, but I do not speak for them. My aim is that you will experience the flavors of democratic schools in general, partly by tasting

the particulars of one. Although The Circle School is not typical in some ways — such as checks and balances in its legal structure — it is typical in the most important way: students experience personal and community self-determination in democratic freedom, responsibility, and authority.

This book is especially for three overlapping groups. First, I hope to feed hungry parents, teachers, and students seeking a better way, perhaps from hopeful anticipation or disappointing experience. May this book point you in a fulfilling direction and help you develop realistic expectations of what is possible. Second, I hope to challenge and inspire those who are already involved in democratic and alternative schooling, who want to deepen their understanding of what's going on. I'll be especially pleased if this book helps guide you in founding or refining a school. Let me know. Third, I hope to inform and provoke response from scholars, commentators, integral theorists, citizens, and policymakers who are on the lookout for promising developments that could help transform schools.

More generally, this book is for anyone who wants to learn more about democratic, Sudbury, and integral schooling, including philosophy, theory, structure, administration, daily practices, and personal stories.

Part One introduces self-directed democratic schooling generally, and The Circle School in particular, drawing on the school's literature to outline school structure and philosophy. Here's an important caveat. Other democratic schools are similar in program structure, daily practices, and personal stories. Colleagues tend to accept our descriptions of these as similar to their own, and smile knowingly when we tell our stories. On the other hand, The Circle School's statements of philosophy, theory, and beliefs are specific to The Circle School. Other democratic schools and individual practitioners might or might not agree. Indeed, practitioners within any school might disagree with one another. Such is the nature and strength of democracy.

Part Two builds a case for democratic schooling: half a millennium of cultural, social, and economic trends; elegant alignment of democratic schooling with society, children's lives, and basic aims of education; science and scholarship in education and human development. This is not intended to be the definitive or comprehensive case for democratic schooling, particularly as it omits some matters that have been well covered by other writers. Part Two also situates democratic schooling as the first (and

so far only) developed school paradigm of integral education — so-called for integration in three dimensions, and also alluding to Integral Theory.

Part Three addresses two questions in education theory. First, how do children learn in democratic schools? More specifically, what new methods and modes of learning are enabled by democratic schooling? Second, how can we account for the frequent observation that democratic schools cultivate critical thinking? Specifically, by what mechanisms do students develop cognition and higher thinking skills?

Part Four moves from philosophy and theory to daily practice, describing a typical day (although there's no such thing), details of school government, law enforcement, Judicial Committee, legal structure, housekeeping, safety, and college.

Part Five answers Frequently Asked Questions with summaries and abbreviated material, good for grazing but also covering a few ideas that are not discussed elsewhere.

Appendix A presents the table of contents of The Circle School's Lawbook (listing the "short title" of every law) and the operations manual (listing elected officials, committees, corporations, and certifications). Appendix B presents most of The Circle School's bylaws, detailing the school's legal structure as a nonprofit corporation. Appendix C lists colleges attended by Circle School graduates.

For your ease and mine, I'll now mostly drop "self-directed" and instead refer to "democratic schooling" to mean the kind of schooling this book is about. Keep in mind, though, that other schools have democratic features or call themselves democratic, but are not the self-directed democratic schools of this book. I'll point out the differences and defining features in a moment.

Part One:
Self-directed Democratic Schools

Jyles was ten when he first came here. After a day or so, he thought it was like kindergarten: no required classes or homework, lots of things to do, busy children moving about, and friendly adults.

Time passed and Jyles changed his mind. It's not like kindergarten, he thought. It's like college: demanding rules and requirements and voluntary commitments, but no nagging parent types; each person responsible for their actions; groupings based on interest and attraction rather than age; diversity in kinds and levels of skill and ability, freely mixing; scholarly respect for each voice and point of view.

More time passed and Jyles changed his mind again. No, it's not like kindergarten, he thought, and it's not like college either. It's like life: we're free and accountable citizens in a democratic society. We make laws and we live by them, change them, or get taken to court for breaking them. We make our own decisions about what to do today, and we find our own best ways of dealing with the world, with all kinds of examples to learn from.

That's it, thought Jyles: I just come here and I live my life.

Chapter 1:

What's a Democratic School?

THOUSANDS OF SCHOOLS CAN CLAIM TO BE DEMOCRATIC in one way or another. I suppose you could even say all of America's 130,000 schools are democratic simply because they are run by democratic governments serving a democratic nation, or because school boards are elected by voters. But in this book, I'll narrow the focus to schools that are themselves small-scale democracies.

In the narrower meaning, there may be dozens or hundreds of democratic schools in North America and around the world, and new ones are sprouting all the time. Just as no two democratic nations or towns are quite alike, no two democratic schools are quite alike either. Each is uniquely situated geographically of course, inheriting some of the culture and demographics of the surrounding area. As with any small community, each school has its own character, social norms, traditions, and values. Beyond such cultural variation, there are also differences in governance, philosophy, and theory of education.

Almost all democratic schools have been founded in grassroots efforts, rather than within state school systems. Democratic schools do not easily fit in today's government-run school systems, which generally focus on curriculum, classrooms, and top-down control. In contrast, democratic schools operate bottom-up, like democratic societies.

What the various democratic schools share in common is that students experience free, responsible citizenship in a formal democracy and democratic society. A 17-year-old boy put it this way: "I like that the kids

and the teenagers have power here, and it's not just some kind of mock thing. This is real."

Small-scale Democracy

The term can be misleading, so let's clarify further. For our purposes in this book, a democratic school operates as a free society and democracy of staff members and students, embracing student civil liberties, rule of law, due process, one person one vote, and absence of mandatory curriculum. Specifically, laws and executive actions are proposed by any student or staff member, voted by students and staff who choose to participate, and not generally subject to veto or override. Laws and executive actions are limited by constitution or tradition to protect student civil liberties, the democratic structure of the school, and the school's long-term assets such as real estate. Participation in governance is voluntary. School offices are filled by elections. Allegations of rule infractions are settled in open judicial processes with careful regard for defendants' rights. Students are generally free in school to pursue lawful activities as they choose, subject to civic duties such as housekeeping chores, fire drills, and jury duty. Students are typically required by state law to attend school for a certain number of days and hours, but within the school they are free of curricular coercion such as mandatory studies.

Does this sound familiar? Except for the bit about compulsory school laws, this roughly describes national democracies in North America and Europe, and increasingly elsewhere. That's the point: immerse kids in a scaled-down version of the world beyond school, complete with liberty, community, and constraints. Children's innate tendencies drive them to explore the world, adapt to it, acquire knowledge, and strive for fulfillment. Practicing life, as we say.

Sense and No Sense

Rasheeda had recently heard of self-directed democratic schooling. Her daughter Riane, in a standard school, got good grades and conformed as a good student is supposed to. But son Brady, 8 years old, wasn't motivated, she said. He was doing okay, but not thriving and not happy, and that worried Rasheeda. She wanted to come see this new kind of school for herself, so she made an appointment to visit, along with Riane and Brady.

Rasheeda had read the school's literature before visiting. She was intrigued by the idea of school as a scaled-down version of the larger world, but didn't understand how it worked. She had been a conscientious A student through all her schooling and right on through college. As a parent, she made sure her kids did their homework. If their grades faltered, she'd worry they were falling behind.

Twenty minutes into our conversation, Riane and Brady were beaming. No required classes? No required testing? No required homework? They were sold. I hadn't yet told them we have 200 laws in our Lawbook, and they are responsible for helping to enforce them, but I knew from experience that wouldn't diminish their thrilled reaction.

"Is there a dress code here?" was 11-year-old Riane's first question — understandable for someone approaching adolescence and subject to a strict dress code in her current school. "Well, you have to wear clothes," I said. Riane looked at her brother, and both laughed nervously. "Yes," I continued, "but you can probably wear what you like. Mahlyn likes to wear a wolf tail, and sometimes ears to go with it, and Ashley once wore a long skirt she made entirely with colorful duct tape."

There's a little more to it, I told them, launching into my "community standards" speech. I mentioned our laws and social norms related to the three big hot-button topics — sex, drugs, and violence — and how those standards relate to clothing and other forms of expression. Dress as you choose, but if it makes people uncomfortable — perhaps because it's too revealing, or the tee shirt humor is too vulgar — then you might get charged with breaking a school law, and you will have to stop dressing that way. Or you can plead "not guilty" and argue your case before a jury. Basically, I concluded, it's like freedom of speech in the world beyond school: a balance of personal rights and public standards, calibrated to our community of people from 4 years old to 19 years old, and adults.

By this point, Rasheeda was almost bursting. "This makes perfect sense!" she exclaimed, "but it makes no sense!" School that works like the real world makes perfect sense, but how do they learn? How do they get what they need? How do they get into college? What do they do all day? We talked for two hours, and they left with a lot to think about. Perfect sense and no sense.

A few weeks later, Rasheeda brought her husband in for a visit. They had decided to enroll daughter Riane for the coming school year, but not Brady,

because they weren't sure he could "handle the freedom and the responsibility." I didn't remind her that it was Brady's unhappiness that led Rasheeda to the school in the first place. Again we talked for a long time. Near the end of our conversation, Rasheeda sighed and commented to her husband that maybe Brady needed this more than Riane. They enrolled Riane a few days ago. I think Brady won't be far behind.

In addition to the self-directed democratic schools I know, there are thousands of other schools that have democratic features, but do not count as democratic schools in my meaning. For example, in some schools, the chief administrator or the board of trustees is elected by parents. This does not make the school democratic in my meaning. Nor would I count as democratic a school that imposes curriculum, classes, learning projects, or religious practices. Nor would I count a school in which students vote on a few limited matters, as student councils commonly do, but not on the basics of governance, such as legislative, judicial, and administrative actions.

I do not disvalue those other schools. To the extent their democratic practices support students' personal and collective self-determination, they share some of the basic values of democratic schools. In fact, they represent a tidal shift in cultural values: greater enfranchisement of all human beings in self-determination, and less reliance on coercion and autocratic control. I applaud and celebrate the spread of democratic values and practices in schools, and offer my sincere encouragement to teachers, administrators, parents, and students in schools of all kinds.

I find that what I most appreciate in democratic schools — power to ignite joy of life and its attendant development of personal potentials — is rooted in children's genuine liberty, responsibility, and authority. I find that informal and isolated democratic features in classrooms and schools merely soften and gloss over the sting of coercion, and sometimes the teacher's misgivings about being an agent of coercion. For example, student selection from multiple choices of mandatory assignments arguably provides a measure of self-determination, but a meager measure only, and unlikely to ignite much joy. Moreover, isolated and informal democratic features may be regarded cynically, as though intended to give

the illusion of democracy, too often leading to alienation and feelings of powerlessness.

I am not suggesting that coercion is bad and always to be avoided. To be clear, democratic schools apply school laws with the school's full force, in a small-scale adaptation of American judicial practices. I'm also not arguing against compulsory education; I hold that a democratic society can reasonably require some level of development of its citizens. I'm simply reflecting commonsense truths, both practical and moral: self-motivation outperforms coercion in its power to educate and fulfill; and coercion is generally a moral last resort. Pushing children through a lockstep curriculum is suboptimal as educational strategy, and unnecessary coercion is out of sync with today's values.

Sudbury Schools

Sudbury Valley School (Framingham, Massachusetts) was founded in 1968 and is among the oldest and best known self-directed democratic schools, still thriving today as a flagship. Sudbury Valley School has been a vitally important influence and support in the history of my own home base, The Circle School. It is also the inspiration and template for the democratic schools I know best. A few years after its founding, The Circle School adopted and adapted many structures, methods, and terms we first encountered at Sudbury Valley School. We gratefully celebrate their pioneering work and generous support. Although The Circle School does not identify itself as a Sudbury school — having significant differences in philosophy, theory, and governance — I believe the two schools are both entirely democratic in the meaning of this book, and similar in student experience.

Some schools associate themselves with Sudbury Valley School, indicating their similarity by using the word "Sudbury" in their name or describing the school as a "Sudbury school" or "Sudbury model school." Many but not all of the Sudbury schools I know are democratic in our meaning, and this book is about them. A growing number of self-designated Sudbury schools incorporate selected features of the Sudbury model combined with other features, including some that are incompatible with Western-style secular democracy, making the school an innovation, a hybrid, or a monster, depending on your point of view. Thus the term "Sudbury" does not reliably indicate a democratic school for the purposes of this book.

Summerhill School

Summerhill School (England) was founded in 1921, is still going strong today, and calls itself the "oldest children's democracy in the world." Summerhill is neither a democratic school in the meaning of this book nor a free school (discussed below), but inspired both and remains an esteemed colleague school.

Integral Education

"Integral" education points to the possibility of a new era to emerge as the next generation beyond traditional and modern education. Although nobody knows just what it will look like, some of its principles and properties are coming into view, and may be exemplified in democratic schools. Integral education, in my conception, better integrates children's and teens' lives in school, better integrates schools in society, and draws on Integral Theory in ways to be mentioned later (although Integral Theory itself is beyond the scope of this book).

For now I just want to outline the relation between integral education and democratic schooling. Most of the theory and practice of integral education so far involves the classroom setting in conventional schools, and particularly the dynamics of teaching and learning in the classroom. In contrast, this book explores a different context — the structure of the school itself — and proposes that democratic schooling may be the only developed paradigm of integral education at the school level: governance, administration, structure, culture, and daily practices. In my view, democratic schools and many Sudbury schools are integral schools because they are in harmony with society and children's lives, because integral teaching-learning practices are inherent, and because the integral worldview is better satisfied. I anticipate other kinds of integral schools in the future. In any case, I believe democratic schools can lead the way into a new era in education, perhaps with the ripening of postmodern values and thought, or maybe moving beyond to post-postmodern.

Free Schools

The democratic schools in this book stand apart from the "free schools" movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Free schools emerged from that era's social revolution, counterculture, and liberation movements, rising

against social injustice, abuse of power, and repression of the individual. Free schools were less about education and more about the values of the social revolution: rejection of authority and structure, and building a just society — values of hippies and civil rights activists, respectively. Free schools were part of the grassroots social movement to undermine the established order and bring about a vaguely conceived new society. As such, the free school movement had little to say about education per se. Children were swept along as the adults around them found new empowerment and pioneered new cultural norms.

Reflecting the social movement, many free schools sought to eliminate power, structure, and authority generally, sometimes tending not to distinguish the real targets of the revolution: *abusive* power, *oppressive* structure, and *illegitimate* authority. The result was not usually *anarchy*, but instead pervasive informality: *informal* power, *informal* structure, and *informal* authority. Some free schoolers tended to gloss over or "not see" the presence of power, structure, and authority in their schools. In contrast, the democratic schools in this book are about *formal* structure and *formal* authority — meaning structure and authority are visible, valued, acknowledged, and documented.

In free schools, with wide variation, teachers improvised curriculum, rules, and administrative policy. Curriculum tended to be more or less conventional, and more or less imposed as mandatory. Teachers engaged students in informal decision-making in a spirit of democracy and empowerment. The student experience varied widely, but tended to be one of relaxed community, subject to adult direction and school administration. Thus, free schools continued the tradition of top-down control, softened with group decision-making; and continued the traditional curriculum, relaxed and taught with flexibility in method, sequencing, and assessment.

In contrast to free schools, the democratic schools described in this book explicitly embrace structure and authority within a constitutional democracy of students and staff. Legislative, judicial, and administrative matters are decided or overseen by the governing democracy, following Western principles of rule of law, civil liberties, due process, one person one vote, and so on.

Today's surviving free schools and their descendants have collectively matured from expressions of a social revolution to respected educational

choices. Some retain countercultural values, structural informality, and community decision-making. Others bear little resemblance to the free schools of history.

The term "free school" has thus come to have various meanings today: sometimes indicating roots in the historical movement, sometimes signaling a free-spirited rebelliousness, sometimes reflecting the ongoing struggle for social justice, and sometimes simply alluding to free citizenship in Western democracy. Some may blur the lines between free schools and democratic schools, and occasionally the terms are (mis)used as synonyms.

I value free schools and many hybrid species as cousins and colleagues in promoting democratic values and self-directed education. I celebrate them and also the innovative educators who introduce features of democracy and self-determination in schools of all kinds.

In my meaning in this book, democratic schools empower students in a formal democracy of its students and staff, with primary authority for the substantial matters of running the school and governing the daily community. By whatever name, democratic schools immerse students in something like the adult experience of lawful citizenship in a secular democracy. Keep reading and you will see in detail how it plays out, and why it is good for children, families, teachers, schools, and society.

The Most Wonderful Thing

It's your first day in a self-directed democratic school, and you are Alice down the rabbit hole. You are in a strange new world: fascinating, mysterious, confusing, but somehow the most wonderful thing. You signed in, like someone told you, copying the numbers from the clock with lots of people and noise all around you. You put your lunchbox on a shelf where other people were putting theirs while someone said helpful stuff that you didn't understand but said you did. Then two kids took you around the school and talked fast while you nodded a lot. But what were they talking about? Then you were alone. You found yourself lost. Someone asked who are you looking for, and you mumbled something and walked away. Later you met someone and joined a group, and stayed with them for a long time. An adult came in, and you thought they were going to tell you what to do but they didn't. They just said hi and asked you how is it

going? Later someone said it was chore time, and you sprayed and wiped some doorknobs. A big kid looked at the doorknobs and said okay you're checked. And then it dawned on you. They are treating you like a regular person, like they don't know you are a kid, four and a half years old. It was a strange feeling but very nice, the most wonderful thing really. And at the end of the day, it was nice to go home, a relief sort of, and tomorrow you want to come back.

Chapter 2:

The Circle School

Founded in 1984 by educators and parents, The Circle School is located in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and enrolls 80 to 100 students from four years old through high school. Most students are from low-income and middle-income households, most receive substantial financial aid, and the school receives no government funding. Family demographics, including household income, roughly match those of the surrounding area, with students split more or less evenly by gender and age. Graduates attend college and earn degrees at higher rates than high school graduates generally. The school is nonprofit, tax-exempt, and licensed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

At The Circle School, children practice life in a scaled-down version of the larger world. Children experience freedom, responsibility, democracy, and community:

- freedom to explore the world, guided by personal choice;
- responsibility for self, others, and the school;
- democracy in school governance, free market, and access to resources;
- community in fellowship, social standards, and shared challenges.

Students decide for themselves what they will do at school, prompted by their own interests, abilities, aspirations, opportunities, priorities, and

preferences, as they develop from day to day and year to year. Life and schooling are blended and fused, thoroughly integrated, serving the highest personal aims of education: self-awareness, self-direction, developed knowledge and skills, general intelligence, and individually effective ways of being and relating.

In structure, culture, and governance, The Circle School echoes the wider world beyond school. By thus integrating school and society, the broadest social aims of education are well served: thoughtfully active citizens, individual self-responsibility, vibrant culture, supportive community, continuity of technology, and responsive evolution of societal institutions.

Thus the school achieves what we deem to be education's two basic aims: supporting students' personal fulfillment and bringing young people into society's fold as productive members. Thus, too, the school realizes essential values of integral schooling as we conceive it: self-satisfying expression in many dimensions of personal development; self-organizing community; pathways and invitations to higher orders of being, thinking, and doing; social structures for co-existence of divergent perspectives.

Given freedom to explore and practice as citizens in a manageable world, students find individual paths and ways of being effective. Democratic education cultivates wholesome self-reliance, responsible freedom, original exploration, critical thinking, and active community awareness. Children become experts at life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

Scaled-down World

Think of the school as a self-governing society of children, teens, and staff adults, in some ways comparable to American society scaled down. Students and staff together, in School Meeting, govern the school community and manage school business, including funds, campus, staff, and more. A Board of Trustees preserves the school's democratic structure, students' civil liberties, and the school's long-term assets.

Adapting principles of democratic government, the School Meeting manages executive, legislative, and judicial functions. Weekly sessions of the School Meeting are conducted by formal parliamentary procedures. Actions generally require a simple majority vote. Each staff member and each student, regardless of age, is entitled to one vote. Staff members hold no veto power.

Together, students and staff enact and maintain hundreds of laws and policies governing the school. Elected officials and committees perform administrative functions. "Corporations" manage designated equipment, space, and activities.

The school's judicial system is founded on cherished American principles of individual rights, due process, and rule of law. In hundreds of cases per year, students and staff together methodically investigate allegations, gather evidence, take testimony, make findings of fact, issue indictments, arraign defendants, negotiate pleas, impose sentences, and conduct formal trials when defendants plead "not guilty." The School Meeting hears appeals.

Within this distinctly democratic milieu, students pursue activities of their own choosing or creation, constrained by imagination and school laws, but not by curriculum or adult demands. For example, they may hang out with friends, build a fantasy world with wooden blocks, organize a math class, work at a community externship, do "nothing," play Capture the Flag outdoors, browse the web, build a virtual world in a cyber simulation, take a nap, earn money doing extra chores, obsess over social media and pop culture, write a blog post, attend Spanish classes, produce a video, run a committee meeting, organize a blues band, paint a mural, take apart a microwave oven, operate a business, teach a friend to apply makeup, learn chess, make and sell baked goods, create a school corporation, prepare to take college entry exams, advocate for legislation, give an election campaign speech, put on a play, organize a week-long backpacking expedition, build a Tesla coil, and so on from daily novelty to creative infinity.

Furthermore, students may spend mere minutes on an activity, or an entire day, or they may immerse themselves in a passionate interest for months on end.

Importantly, students also break school laws, get in trouble, experience rudeness, try out dishonesty, cause damage, experiment with vulgarity, test limits, and so on from frequent novelty to transgressive infinity — a scaled-down rendition of the larger world, indeed.

Astronomical Planning

As I write this sentence, nine of our students and two of our staff members are making their supper over a campfire far away from here, anticipating an

extraordinary event tomorrow. In their nearly two years of preparation, they conducted more than a hundred meetings. Meticulously they planned every detail of their 16-day adventure on America's west coast: hour-by-hour itinerary with route maps to guide them in a rented 15-passenger van; reservations at a dozen campgrounds and sightseeing attractions; presentations to families; lots and lots of paperwork. They conducted dozens of fundraising efforts, including two online campaigns. They sold milkshakes, spaghetti lunches, dinners at evening events at school, and on several weekends, they sold hotdogs outside Walmart. Two restaurants — Friendly's and the Sweet Frog frozen yogurt store — sponsored donation days. In all, they raised almost the entire $10,000 cost of the trip.

To test their equipment and their ability to work together, they conducted two practice events: a schoolyard overnight campout (which proved the inadequacy of a leaky tent), and a 3-day road-and-camping trip to the Niagara Falls region.

Now they are at the climax of their adventure, poised to see something most people never see, or maybe once in a lifetime. Tomorrow morning, under a cloudless desert sky in Oregon, they will see, in its path of totality, the Great American Eclipse of the sun.

In addition to general expectations of compliance with school laws and responsibility for enforcement of school laws, the School Meeting imposes a few other civic duties, such as judicial system service, jury duty, giving testimony, and daily housekeeping chores. Students are not required to attend classes, which typically happen only when initiated by students. Homework, testing, and grades are assigned only as part of studies initiated by students, and there is no requirement or expectation that students will initiate formal studies. The school does not issue report cards and does not routinely report to parents about their children's activities, behavior, or development.

Students are citizens making their way in a free society, subject to the authority of legitimate government in which they share equally, and entitled to its protections. Thus the structure of the school echoes the "real world" and places real authority in the hands of children and teens. This essential aspect of the school engenders extraordinary power to educate.

Foundation Principles

Education is about developing self and society. Across time and cultures, scholars and thinkers have said so in many ways. The Circle School agrees, committing itself to children's personal fulfillment and engagement in the world.

We hold that children are born with a tendency to grow, to develop their potentials, to strive and thrive, to self-actualize as psychologists say. The impulse is universal, durable, and motivating. Given the opportunity, children find individually effective growth paths.

Thus the school is committed to ideals of trust and respect: trust in an inborn tendency to self-actualize and respect for self-determination.

Seeking Infinity

The school is founded on the principle that we each embody grand possibilities, and we grow towards their realization. Children are born with a tendency to self-actualize; to strive, thrive, and grow. Children are driven by natural impulse to seek increasingly effective ways of understanding the world and taking action, in response to never-ending existential and situational challenges. We are born with this inclination to strive, and this power to develop our abilities. These vital gifts of nature are highly adaptive, a form of instinctive wisdom.

This notion of growth driven by inborn impulse and potential is common, perhaps universal, with expressions both sacred and secular. On the *sacred* side, the world's major spiritual traditions include belief in a latent or potential higher human nature, the grandest possibilities that are sought after. Each tradition has its own prescriptions for how to realize higher nature, and warnings about pitfalls along the way. Each tradition holds out the promise of realization of grand possibilities through exercise of inborn powers.

On the *secular* side, developmental psychology is the study of progressive possibilities of the mind: stages of growth, common pathways to their realization, and pathologies along the way. Children's growth proceeds along many lines of development, with increasing abilities and higher stages emerging in common patterns and individual variations.

Thus both religion and science, each in its own way, recognize innate possibility and its essential role in human fulfillment. Each recognizes inborn potential, impulse to seek, power to find, and patterns in growth.

Each suggests a natural compass pointing in the general direction of well-being and wholeness. In any particular occasion, the compass reading may be imperfect or obscured or overwhelmed by other signals. Across time and experience, though, the cumulative influence appears as a tendency to strive, thrive, and grow.

This cycle of expanding capacity appears not only in growth of individuals but also in societies and even the cosmos. In all three dimensions — self, culture, and nature — development proceeds unevenly, this way and that, sometimes seeming random. Yet a story line unfolds across billions of years in the cosmos: a progression from void to matter to life to mind; from nothingness to rocks to plants to animals to self-aware consciousness.

A parallel story echoes across millions of years in human society: progressing from family to tribe to nation to planet-spanning community. And across thousands of years in human culture: the march of technology from ages of stone and metal to ages of industry and information.

Yet again a parallel story of unfolding echoes across tens of years in each human life: oblivious infant to naïve toddler to concrete child to idealist teen to reasoning adult to transcendent sage.

In all three dimensions — nature, culture, and self — each stage brings greater complexity, enlarged awareness, and extended range of expression, both "good" and "bad." Earlier stages are not wrong or evil, but simply partial. Later stages are not right or virtuous, but rather more inclusive, more whole, more capable. Each stage brings deeper truth and grander possibility. Each stage brings humanity new joys, burdens, opportunities, setbacks, capabilities, and pathologies.

In all three dimensions, the stories are animated by inherent wisdom: an impulse toward wholeness, an imperative of nature to seek infinity. Thus animated from birth, children enact the human story of growth in body, heart, mind, community, and spirit, each by an individual path and a unique expression of nature. Thus animated from birth, children joyfully seek growth towards infinity. Enabling that growth through children's agency in community is the heart of the school.

Self-determination

The school holds that society ought to treat all persons with respect in equal measure without regard to age. A school, as an agent and microcosm

of society, ought to do no less. We use the word respect here in its common meaning, "to show deferential regard for." We want to suggest a principle and moral value not to needlessly repress natural autonomy and personal self-determination.

The American Declaration of Independence expresses the school's view, asserting that each person is born with certain inalienable rights, including rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. We hold that children in school are entitled to exercise of inalienable rights endowed at birth.

We do not propose exaggerated freedom for children. We simply propose that schools can perform their societal functions best by respecting and promoting children's practice of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

Moral and Practical

The school is committed to ideals of trust in an inborn tendency to self-actualize, and respect for self-determination. There are both moral and practical components to these commitments.

The moral component holds that we are each entitled to personal and collective self-determination as a birthright, simply by dint of our humanity. The school respects that birthright because it is morally the right thing to do.

The practical component holds that respect for self-determination leads to the best outcomes of education. Self-determination tends to lead to self-actualization, and actualized individuals tend to lead to actualized society. The school values self-determination for the practical reason that it maximizes benefits both for the individual and for society generally.

Melting Pot of Values and Worldviews

We regard the school as a public domain for children and teens, rather than an extension of family and parenting. Parents are not expected to adopt the school's values, rules, and practices at home. Conversely, the school does not take on a duty to instill in children the worldview and values of their parents. Nor does the school have any mechanism for enforcing parents' wishes about what their children do at school. Students are independent citizens practicing life in school society.

Parents need not hold the school's beliefs as their own, nor commit to any particular childrearing practices at home, in order for their children to get the benefits of democratic schooling. Indeed, within the school community, we find great variety in family ideals and practices. We value the school's ready accommodation of various worldviews and lifestyles, some in striking contrast to one another, and the cultural pluralism it brings. Democratic schooling is well-suited as a paradigm for education in democratic nations.

Privacy and Independence

Children's journey from dependence to independence is often more difficult for parents than children. Supporting your child's growing independence — from you — is surely among the most tender and trying of parents' duties. Democratic schools serve this crucial function, helping parents give their children experience of independence from home and family, in a larger world. Think of the democratic school as a halfway house between home and world, between dependent childhood and independent adulthood.

As with other civil liberties, the school applies standards of privacy that are adapted from general social standards. For example, the school does not disclose students' birthdays. School law requires consent before posting photos to social media. Tests and grades, which are part of some students' studies, are for the student's own purposes and do not become school records. The school does not issue report cards to parents, nor other academic assessment. Judicial infractions are also not generally reported to parents.

Exceptions are made when health or well-being are seriously threatened; when School Meeting votes to suspend or expel; and during the "practice period" of four weeks at the beginning of each new student's enrollment.

Absence of parental reporting supports growth of independence in two ways. First, knowing that the school does not generally report to parents, children are partially released from the habits and expectations of family life. They are freer to think expansively about themselves and their place in the world, and freer to overcome limitations and assumptions developed in family life. In their independence at school, children try out

new ways of interacting with people, new areas of knowledge, new mental models of how the world works, new physical feats, and a host of other personal innovations. The school functions as a laboratory for self-experimentation and self-authorship.

Second, knowing that staff members are not here to assess and report, children are freer in self-disclosure with them. Combined with other social leveling factors, children freely develop trusting personal friendships with staff members, providing exquisite opportunity for close-up study of how to be an adult and what makes them tick — vital curriculum for every child, and especially for teenagers.

Student privacy also promotes learning efficiency. Assessment, reporting, and surveillance undermine self-motivation, thus reducing interest, learning depth, and retention.

The educational and developmental benefits of student privacy are significant, but its most important basis is simply common human respect. The gift of independence, enabled by respectful privacy, is an important reason that parents choose democratic schools. Even parents who have been accustomed to micromanaging their children find deep benefits, and sometimes personal liberation from worry, as children assume increasing self-responsibility.

On the other hand, parents naturally attend to their children's well-being. Student privacy notwithstanding, we invite parents to discuss with staff members their concerns related to their children, especially when parent-child communications haven't resolved the concern. Staff members can usually provide helpful information and perspective without undermining privacy, independence, and trust. Parents can also post questions, with due respect for personal privacy, to the school's online forum for parents, students, staff, alumni, and alumni parents.

Student experience of the school is strongly influenced by parents' experience of the school, so we encourage parents and students to make every effort to address parents' questions and concerns.

Ends We Seek

Extending principles into practices, The Circle School highlights a dozen ideals or "ends we seek." Most of the democratic schools I know hold similar values, with significant variations, but The Circle School is unusual

in making them explicit and incorporating them as binding aims of the school:

Opportunity. Students have abundant opportunity for personal fulfillment and societal engagement.

1. **Community.** Students experience fellowship, common culture, collective self-governance, and shared responsibility.
2. **Order.** Students experience safety, order, and access to community resources.
3. **Knowledge.** Students have opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in self-chosen domains.
4. **Staff.** Students experience adults who dependably steward the program's facilities, finances, and business; facilitate student access to resources; exemplify mature practice of personal fulfillment and societal engagement; and anchor school culture to values of interpersonal respect and trust in the natural impulse to self-actualize.

Growth. Students grow in many dimensions, such as physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual.

5. **Personal fulfillment.** Students increasingly actualize personal potentials, and seek satisfaction in self-chosen domains of activity, knowledge, and skill.
6. **Engagement in society.** Students develop increasingly fulfilling ways of participating in culture, community, and society.

Self-determination. Students enjoy natural rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, paralleling adult experience in the community beyond school.

7. **Civil liberties.** Students enjoy civil liberties such as freedoms of speech, press, thought, attention, religion, privacy, movement, association, and peaceable assembly.
8. **Curriculum.** Students are free of curricular coercion.

Governance. The daily school program is self-governing, with authority and responsibility shared among the governed, students and staff alike.

9. **Voice.** All members of the daily school program — students and staff — enjoy equal rights of voice and vote in matters of governance and the common good.
10. **Rule of law.** All members of the daily school program are subject to the authority of school government according to duly adopted laws that are publicly disclosed in writing.
11. **Responsibility.** All members of the daily school program share responsibility for the common welfare.
12. **Protection.** All members of the daily school program enjoy equal protection and due process under school law.

The Circle School thus lays out broad beliefs, general philosophy, operating principles, and ideals in practice. Now let's turn to evidence and reason in support of democratic schooling.