WHY DO THESE KIDS LOVE SCHOOL?

A film by Dorothy Fadiman

STUDY GUIDE

CONTENTS

This study guide was written by Murray Suid (M.Ed., Harvard School of Education), author of more than fifteen books related to learning, including *RECIPES FOR WRITING: Creativity and Competence* (Addison Wesley, 1989).

The Story Behind
WHY DO THESE KIDS LOVE SCHOOL?

In 1984, I set out to make a documentary about Peninsula School, a nursery through eighth grade independent school founded in California in 1925. My own children had thrived there. They, and the majority of their fellow students, continued to do well academically and socially in high school, college, and after. The challenge which so many educators and parents face how do we engage students in school? was not an issue in that environment. I felt impelled to document this example of a place where children love school.

With the support of KTEH, a local PBS station, I spent several years videotaping at Peninsula. As the project evolved, I realized that it was essential to include examples of innovative public schools from around the country. Through further research, I discovered many public schools, from coast to coast, which demonstrated that it was indeed possible to transform individual classrooms, whole schools, even entire districts, into places which

meet the deeper learning, social, physical and emotional needs of children. This filming odyssey, which took me to schools in California, New York, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Colorado, Massachusetts, and documented the fact that vibrant, effective education, involving a wide range of ethnic and economic populations, is already happening.

What I learned when I visited these schools is how creativity and energy are unleashed when a school community—relatively free of outside interference—is free to assess, and meet, its own needs. I observed that schools flourish when given individual freedom to determine the best programs and fund allocations for themselves. All of the schools featured in the documentary share certain common elements with other progressive settings around the country.

Among these are:
- That *learning is an active process,* based not only on thinking, both creatively and critically, but even more essentially, on personal experience.
- Ideally, *school is a supportive community* where the responsibility for what happens, (the frustrations and challenges, the successes and breakthroughs, the setting of goals, etc.) is shared by everyone involved: administrators, teachers, parents and students.
- The goal is to have *students enjoy learning, feel competent as learners, and feel good about themselves as individuals.*

The most significant single quality I saw in all of the schools I observed, no matter how different the approaches, was this: The adults who were responsible for the children's education trusted that these children, given the opportunity, could become active participants in their own educations.

—Dorothy Fadiman (Producer/Director WHY DO THESE KIDS LOVE SCHOOL?)

The Roots of Progressive Approaches to
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Alternative education is not a fad. While the ideas presented in *Why Do These Kids Love School?* may seem innovative to many viewers, they have been developed and refined through two centuries of debate and experimentation. What follows is a capsule history. Those who want to know more about the origins and people who contributed to the evolution of these approaches will find a rich variety of resources in the bibliography.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, most American children received the basics of their education at home. The student-teacher ratio was 1:1. Instruction, by a parent or other relative, was individualized. The curriculum focused on real-world matters food, shelter, clothing, moral — behavior. Physical activity was an integral part of the process. The goal was to improve performance, rather than compare one child with another through the use of grades.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, all this had changed. The industrial revolution caused widespread migration from rural areas to cities. Children ages 6 to l6 were compelled by law to be in school—away from their primary caregivers. Influenced by the unprecedented efficiencies of mass production, education became "mass education," wherein one teacher had the responsibility for "shaping" dozens of students. This new educational system had the following features:

- **Learning flowed in one direction**—from teacher to students; thus, student questions and conversation about the material were seen as unnecessary and even distracting.

- Removed from everyday life, **the content of learning became increasingly abstract and packaged in isolated units.** Because students often failed to see the relevance of lessons, educators were led to invent extrinsic motivators such as stars, stickers, awards or the threat of failure and humiliation.

- The packaged, mass-produced curriculum required increasingly **less teacher involvement** in its creation, causing a decline in the status of teachers.

- Given the focus on content, rather than on the learner, **the pace of learning became pre-determined**—"so much material" had to be covered in "so much time." Children who were unable to keep up with the pre-established sequence were pejoratively labeled "slow learners." Other students, for whom the pace was agonizingly slow, became bored, or even became troublemakers or wise guys.

- **Evaluation became normative/comparative;** students were graded—like mass-produced products.

- For ease of management, **children were expected—and required—to remain inactive and quiet** for long periods of time. For the sake of efficiency, children were separated according to age—despite the fact that throughouthistory youngsters had always played a vital role in teaching each other.

- Gradually, **control moved from those most directly involved in learning students, teachers, and parents, to centralized administrations** and to even more distant manufacturers of textbooks and educational materials.

- Essentially, through the system of education, **children were being prepared to play their part in the industrial revolution.**

At the turn of the twentieth century, certain educators and others recognized the negative implications of mass education. John Dewey (1859-1952), an educator and philosopher, became an articulate critic and activist, one voice in a growing movement committed to implementing humane reform in education. Dewey and his colleagues characterized the system as "joyless, anti-creative, antidemocratic, and ultimately counter-productive." They outlined alternatives to the existing system, based on the assumption that children were natural learners who took real pleasure in mastering ideas, tools, and materials.

Among the major contributors to this movement, which had its roots in 17th century Europe, are John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) who advocated

universal education, with equal access for women; Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1712-1778) who affirmed children's natural goodness; the Swiss humanitarian J.H. Pestalozzi (1746-1827) who emphasized the balance of "head, heart and body" in education; Joseph Neef (1770-1854), William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), A. Bronson Alcott—father of Louisa May Alcott (1799-1888), Francis W. Parker (1837-1902); Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), founder of the kindergarten system; social philosopher Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925), developmental stage theory of Jean Piaget. 1896 –1980 and Maria Montessori (1870-1952) who held that children's development issues came from within themselves.

The work of all of these educators, and their many colleagues who are not listed here, emphasized that learning could be active, practical, cooperative, joyful, and integrated. For them, learning was a process that extended beyond the walls of school and was integral with one's life. This vision, as it evolved, did not seek a return to a pre-industrial "Golden Age." On the contrary, it was "progressive." We can now see that it anticipated the kind of dynamic learning

found in today's most productive businesses, laboratories, and think-tanks.
These educators anticipated the pitfalls of sterile, mass-oriented schools.
They would not be surprised by today's dropout statistics, nor by the despair of so
many teachers, nor by the low level of academic achievement found in many sectors
of the nation. At the same time, they would be buoyed by the continued and daring
experimentation of many teachers and parents, innovators who see education in
human—rather than mechanistic—terms. They would honor schools that measure
their worth not primarily through test scores, but more through the attitude the
children have about learning. *Why Do These Kids Love School?* was made to celebrate
this vision and to honor the people who have kept it alive.

Preparation Related to Screenings
AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT

Why Do These Kids Love School? was originally created as a TV special. You might
simply choose to let the hour-long program play, then afterwards, discuss ideas which
it stimulated. However, if you wish to create a more structured viewing experience,
the following easy-to-arrange activities may prove valuable. The intention of what
follows is to get people thinking about their own experiences, in personal terms, and
about the nature of schooling in general. Hopefully, viewers will also be stimulated
to think about what changes would be valuable, and what might they want to do in
order to become part of this larger vision of change toward more humane education.
To maximize participation, we recommend dividing the audience into small groups
for discussion.

BEFORE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

The following activities can be done any time before the screening. Or, if the program
is being shown as part of a class, you might ask participants to write responses to
these questions ahead of time, then discuss the responses during class time.

• **Memories**: Have participants share positive and negative memories of
school. What are their strongest memories? In discussing these, observe patterns
about what are common features people have liked and disliked about school.

• **Word association**: Have audience members write or share aloud what
comes to mind when presented with some or all of the following words:

report cards	sitting at desk	math	stars
grades	friends	whispering	rewards
being late	being called on	art	picking teams
getting homework	taking discipline	music	sports
tests	creative	drama	laughter
asking questions	writing	teachers	tears
passing notes	cheating	gym class	failing/success

(add words to   might open   associations)
the list which   provocative
  punishment

Discuss what features make school appealing or unappealing...and why.

• **Teachers' Hall of Fame**: Ask participants to recall their favorite teachers and then list qualities that make those teachers special. It might be useful, also, to list the qualities of the least liked teachers and compare those features as well.

• **Learning Success Stories**: Ask participants to list skills of which they are proud or areas in which they feel especially competent, then describe the circumstances under which these developed. What are some of the common factors: peer relationships? individualized instruction? mentors or examples? time alone? cooperative learning? workbooks? grades? outside reading? field trips? direct experiences?

• **Viewing Pointers**: List key themes and activities such as individualized instruction, teacher autonomy, hands-on learning, etc., and look for examples of these during the showing of the program. Use the following Scene-by-Scene Tour (starting on page 6) as a guide.

AFTER--VIEWING ACTIVITIES

• **Criteria for good education**: Brainstorm a list of features that participants would anticipate finding in an effective learning situation.

• **Invent a school that kids love**: Ask each viewer to write and share their own idealized "10 Commandments" for creating a humane school.

• **Self-evaluation**: If you are working with members of a particular school teachers, parents, students you might consider discussing some of the following topics:

• **Community:** Is there too much competition in our school?
Do we provide students with models for cooperative learning?
Do we have opportunities to work together as a community?

•**Discipline:** Do we teach students how to handle problems or are our responses reactions to crises?
Could we give students more responsibility in evaluating the behavior of their peers?

• **Environment:** Do we value quiet for quiet's sake? Are the classrooms as comfortable as they could be?
Could the "decor" be softened or made to look more natural?

• **Faculty/Administration:** Should there be more time for sharing among teachers? If yes, how can we make that happen?
Could responsibilities be divided more equitably, between teachers and administrators? How?

• **Parental involvement:**
How frequently are parents seen in our classrooms?
Do teachers invite parents to help with the academic program?

Is homework designed to involve parents?

• **Self-esteem:**

What opportunities do our students have to study what interests them?
Do we help students find ways to serve their peers and the school?
How do we reward positive behavior/academic performance?

A Final Suggestion: Look Again

The most useful post-viewing activity might be to see the program a second time, particularly if the scene-by-scene outline is referred to before and/or after the screening. For many viewers, a second viewing proves even more valuable than the first in terms of clarifying specific issues, picking up subtle points and suggesting strategies for next steps.

IMAGES AND IDEAS:
A Scene-by-Scene Tour of *Why Do These Kids Love School?*

In *Why Do These Kids Love School?* the ideas are woven into a series of scenes. While the program delivers a holistic view of education, understanding the individual concepts may be enhanced by looking closely at specific scenes in the program. The following outline will provide a springboard for discussion, by highlighting one or more relevant ideas in each scene.

SCENE 1. Nursery School: Children painting
Learning to make choices

> • With the support of adults who help them recognize what they want, children become skillful in making choices. This skill requires practice in a variety of situations where a child has a chance to exercise real options.

Introducing communication skills

> • Developing the ability to communicate effectively with other people begins at an early age. As early as nursery school, children are able to work on expressing themselves clearly in order to resolve problems.

SCENE 2. Kindergarten: Body tracing
Celebrating individuality

> • A simple, inexpensive an activity body outlining can be used to acknowledge the uniqueness of each child. Ideally, reinforcing each child's distinctive nature begins early and is continued throughout the years.

Building self-esteem

> • There are many ways to help children build a positive self-image. Giving them individual attention is the most direct. Even within a limited budget there are ways to do this. Among them would be: encouraging parents to come into the classroom more often; arranging for seniors to volunteer a few hours a week; planning times for the children to give individual attention to each other; inviting college students to spend time at school; etc.

SCENE 3. Singing class (Grade 1)

Supporting ways of doing things differently
> • A child-centered teacher will always try to "make room" for individual capacities. By allowing a student to sing "...in his key," rather than insisting that he conform, the music teacher respects this child's own creative expression. Holistic instruction focuses less on the product, and more on the producer.

SCENE 4. Reading (Grade 1)
Having fun
> • Integrating pleasure with learning increases academic success.

Offering a variety of techniques
> • Recognizing the needs of different learners, teachers employ a wide range of methods and materials.

Parental involvement
- When parents become involved as an integral part of the program, they can offer valuable assistance in the classroom.

SCENE 5. Science Lab (Grade 1)
Exercising the power of observation
- In this science lab, the children begin with "ordinary" materials and an opportunity to make "simple" observations. Allowing students to discover the point of the lesson invites them to be young scientists, rather than just recipients of information.

Creating chances for discovery
- Young children can be introduced to the fact that science is not a collection of facts, but rather a process of discovery. As Einstein put it, "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

Treating childrens' ideas as contributions
- Any lesson, in any subject area, can provide a chance to honor the students' contributions, such as when the teacher says to her class: "You're the ones who showed me how to do this."

SCENE 6. Teachers' Meeting
Collegiality
- Cooperation is a process that can and should involve everyone in the school community. Teachers, particularly, need time to be in dialogue with each other. Cooperation does not necessarily mean "group think". To be creative, teachers need a forum to exercise their individuality, just as the students do.

Flexible curriculum
- The curriculum of a school like the culture of — a community—can be a living, shared "invention".
- Learning activities need not be age-limited; e.g., "This is supposed to be for junior high kids, but I think that..." As Bruner suggests, any lesson can—with imagination—be adapted for children of any age.

SCENE 7. Math (Grade 2)
Independent learning—freedom and responsibility
- If children are to love math, they must experience for themselves the thrills of finding truths in math. The math facts that we prize and want students to prize came to humankind by the process of discovery.
- Because most textbooks require conformity, the teachers must take responsibility for fostering independent learning, in addition to, or even instead of, textbooks.

Freedom to move in class...while learning!
- Mathematics has its roots in physical activity; i.e., measurement. Children need the same kind of kinesthetic learning in their classrooms. Thus, the freedom to move around and talk with fellow learners may be productive.

SCENE 8. Creative writing (Grade 3)
Writing as a creative process

• Effective self-expression evolves from the difficult—sometime scary—process of struggling with ideas. Students may need guidance to get started. Then, they can ask for help, if they need it, while they work. The conversation between students and teachers remains active throughout the grades.

The students learn that writing can be both a social, as well as a solo, activity. For many writers, the ability to ask questions is the source of their work. To nurture powerful writers, means teaching children to be willing to ask questions.

Making mistakes as part of learning

• Correction of grammar, spelling, and punctuation is necessary. But fear of making mistakes can hamper a child from writing creatively. It is important that what a child has to say is valued, before it is criticized.

SCENE 9. Students reading their own stories (Grade 3)
Developing personal courage for self-expression

• Writing, ultimately, is not only about what gets put onto paper or onto the computer screen. It is also what happens between the writer and the reader, or the writer and the person who listens. To borrow from Martin Buber, it is an "I thou" activity. Thus, a key element in writing instruction is giving students opportunities to share their work with peers, not for criticism, but for pleasure.

Cultivating "the fine art of listening"

• Sharing aloud not only cultivates self-confidence for the speaker, but also gives the other students a chance to practice the art of listening.

SCENE 10. Parent concerned about no report cards
Creative forms of evaluation, such as progress reports, rather than letter grades or numerical scores

• Alternative schools try to avoid competitive evaluation systems, and seek to find other ways to give important feedback about how a child is doing, such as written or oral progress reports with an evaluation relative to a child's capacity, interest and situation.

Parental support crucial in non-traditional situations

• The case for non-competitive student reports is compelling. However, for some parents, this approach may cause anxiety. Interaction with parents is crucial, if parents are to understand and support a system of ungraded evaluations.

SCENE 11. Crafts Workshops (Mixed grades)
Experimenting with the Arts provides learning opportunities for young people, not only in using their imaginations, but in preparation for "real life" as well.

Woodshop

• Creative activity is not merely about creativity. It is a powerful means of developing self-confidence for functioning resourcefully in the world. Being comfortable with real tools, for example, is vital in a technological society. This exposure can begin as early as 1st grade, which is the age of the children using

the hammers in the documentary.

• Developing hand-eye coordination lays the foundation for other fine
and gross motor control activities, both in school and in work situations later.

Weaving

• Staying with a tedious task, such as warping a loom and then
completing a weaving, teaches perseverance.

• When math has a clear application for a pleasurable elective, numbers
and mathematical processes become relevant, and gain new meaning.

Metal Shop

• To foster individual autonomy, the teacher must encourage students to make their own decisions. This can be done through the simplest kinds of verbal interactions, such as when the teacher asks "Are you sure? Is this the way you want it?"

• Developing self-confidence means, at times, deferring to the child's desires and opinions, even if the teacher might know a "better" way: "You stop when it's the way you want it."

SCENE 12. Workjobs
Do effective schools necessarily cost more?

• "Good education does not need to cost more." While having a bigger budget helps any institution with its program, more money is not the factor which makes any of the schools in *Why Do These Kids Love School?* effective. Rather, it was the spirit and the vision of each school, and, based on that, the way money was then spent.

Participating in the maintenance of the school

• In terms of cost-cutting, having children and parents help with chores at the school can amount to a major savings.

• Having children help maintain the school and take pride in it is also an effective-and inexpensive-antidote to vandalism.

• One way to create and maintain a democratic environment within the school community is to have everybody share in regular chores.

SCENE 13. Carnival (Grade 4)
Developing community spirit

• If we want children to become nurturing adults, we must give them opportunities to practice the art of nurturing. What better place to do this than in the school?

• Cross-age interaction increases the number of teachers available in a school. It also benefits the older children who act as teachers, for, as Seneca wrote centuries ago: "While we teach, we learn."

• Carefully structured, so-called "extra-curricular" activities can have enormous educational value. For example, the carnival gives children a chance to plan activities for others, manage money, practice building skills, troubleshoot, clean up when it is over, and so on.

SCENE 14. Mask making (Grade 4)
Building trust and comfort with class members

• A cooperative classroom environment cannot be wished into existence. It is created through interactive activities, in which children actually learn to trust each other.

• Touch handshaking or hugging, for example is a powerful route for building trust. Activities that permit students to touch each other can lay the foundation for a cooperative learning atmosphere throughout the whole school curriculum.

SCENE 15. Sports/class meeting (Grade 5)

Conflict resolution as an integral part of the curriculum

• If teachers or other authorities step in to resolve conflicts, students will not learn to solve problems themselves. Ideally, the teacher will structure situations which enable young people to work out solutions with each other.

• Giving and accepting feedback are arts that can be learned. But like all arts, practitioners improve through practice. Such practice requires a safe environment, such as regularly scheduled meetings.
• Regular meetings enable students to air grievances, articulate suggestions and, perhaps most importantly, build a community of mutual careand concern for each other.

SCENE 16. Geography: making model mountains (Grade 4)
Hands-on activities
   • A learning-by-doing lesson requires materials that invite direct involvement. While interacting with such materials, students can relate the content of a lesson to the world they see and touch.
   • Tangible results enhance learning. Holistic teachers demonstrate the power of the words of the great French scientist Claude Bernard: "A fact in itself is nothing."
Integrated learning
   • Many disciplines can be brought to one subject...geography, measurement, the arts, learning cooperative group skills.

SCENE 17. A graduate in his seventies
Appreciating the historical context for this education
   • This approach to education has withstood the test of time, and is still evolving. The idea of integrating disciplines, for example, has been one of the foundations of this philosophy of education since its inception.

SCENE 18. Medieval history (Mixed Grades 6-8)
Self-directed learning
   • Many adult vocations involve participating in self-directed groups. Learning to be self-motivated, and how to be a productive member of that kind of group, is an asset in any undertaking or profession.
   Connecting social skills to learning
   • An atmosphere where academics and social development are combined makes both kinds of learning more meaningful.

SCENE 19. Economics lesson-auction (Grade 8)
Student interest as one of the most essential motivators
   • Beginning with children's interests e.g. food, as — in the auction—is an ideal starting point for building a motivating lesson.
   • No subject is inherently dull. Teachers in these settings are continually challenged to provide a dynamic and, if possible, fun context for the material to be learned.

SCENE 20. Evaluation meeting (Grade 7)
Self-evaluation
   • Student-centered learning must extend to the process of evaluation in order for students to reflect on their own experiences, on the material they've been given, and on their teachers. If the teacher is the only one to evaluate the

learning experience, extremely relevant information is lost, and the students become passive learners. Self-evaluation is a valuable life-skill that a rich school curriculum can nurture.

SCENE 21. Transition to a traditional school: grad night, interview with a parent, interview with a high school teacher
Oral tradition "passing — on" information
> • Parents of students from alternative schools frequently worry about the academic challenges that must be faced in non-alternative settings. There are natural expectations and, often, questions about future performance. Because of alternative evaluation procedures, it may not be possible to know exactly how well prepared alternative students are. Though most students go through an initial period of adjustment, they generally do extremely well, because they have learned how to learn. However, it makes sense to have past students and parents talk about how it was for them to travel the road ahead.

Why do graduates of these programs do well in structured settings?
> • Teachers in more traditional schools often report that students from innovative settings tend to be independent, creative thinkers, who can work on their own and are good problem solvers.

SCENE 22. Building the playhouse (Grade 8)
Contributing to the community
> • Working together to make something to give to the school is a culmination of learned skills. It is also a ritual, preparing students to go on in their lives, to become contributing citizens in society at large.

Applying skills
> • Using learned skills for a real purpose helps students recognize the value of what they have learned.

SCENE 23. Graduation
Ritual and ceremony
> • The ceremony of graduation serves to acknowledge the completion of one period, and celebrate entering a new phase, bringing attention to a young person's approaching adulthood.

SCENE 24. John Chubb's interview
School autonomy
> • Researchers are finding that schools which have greater autonomy are more likely to create programs that work for their populations. At the same time, to quote John Chubb of the Brookings Institution, due to a number of issues, "Autonomy does not come easily to America's schools." With that caveat in mind, it is important to note that there is a strong and growing movement in the United States toward innovation and greater autonomy for schools and teachers. There are a number of relevant resources (organizations, newsletters, magazines, books, etc.) supporting this direction in education.

SCENE 25. Carlos Medina, former Superintendent of Dist. 4 in E. Harlem
Alternative schools are proving to effectively address a spectrum of real challenges
> • Alternative programs now outnumber traditional programs in East Harlem. They have grown in popularity because they have demonstrated

success in educating core disadvantaged populations, who have traditionally had a high dropout rate. The fundamental change is that these are programs in which students feel engaged in what goes on in school, and genuinely like being there.

SCENE 26. Central Park East II Elementary School, East Harlem, NY
Validating children's communications
- Learning how to communicate is the foundation of learning at schools like CPE II. This approach involves encouraging children to share what they learned at home in their own day-to-day worlds.
- The simple act of writing down what children say validates their knowledge and builds self-esteem. It says to the youngsters: "Your ideas are important. You are important."

SCENE 27. City Magnet, Lowell, Massachusetts
Academic content has relevance when students are involved
- Studying math in a bank, for example, allows the processes to become genuinely useful activities, as opposed to rote memorizations.

Involving students in the disciplinary process
- Discipline makes sense and is seen as something positive — —when it is a process in which children get involved—writing laws, judging cases—rather than a structure imposed from the outside.

SCENE 28. Clara Barton, Minneapolis
Honoring individual learning styles
- Every child has a unique learning style. To reach each learner therefore, requires flexibility in teaching methods and materials; for example, for "kinesthetic" learners, using their bodies in a geometry lesson is ideal.
- Creating lessons that involve all the senses—visual, tactile auditory, kinesthetic—maximizes the odds that learning will occur for each individual.
- Multi-sensory lessons tend to be more exciting for children.

SCENE 29. Davis Alternative, Jackson, Mississippi
Cooperative learning
- It takes considerable planning to set up a cooperative learning environment. However, the investment pays off in that this method creates a fertile atmosphere for all learning.
- Cooperative methods reduce discipline problems since children learn to focus on helping each other.

SCENE 30. Tanglewood Open Living School, Jefferson, Colorado
Responsive curriculum
- The best way to create a curriculum that truly interests young people is to start with their actual interests, and build from there.
- Any subject that interests children can serve as a vehicle for teaching all of the traditional school subjects. Integrated learning is not a pedagogical trick. It happens because real-world topics, by their nature, connect with a host of related topics.

Opportunities for service
- Genuine learning involves giving, and not just receiving. Inviting children to share what they know through internships, cross-— age instruction, and so on—makes learning whole and natural.

• Giving students opportunities to share, and to do some form of service, meets one of their deepest needs—the need to be needed. Satisfying that need is one of the surest ways to head off behavior problems. When people are valued for what they do, they don't have the same desire to assert their power through indirect, disruptive means.

SCENE 31. Graham and Parks, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Teachers are central to the evolution of the curriculum
> • An involving curriculum cannot be purchased. It must be created by and for those who will experience it. Most teachers would like to, and are able to create imaginative lessons, which will suit their teaching styles. In many situations, teachers are not given the freedom to do this.
> • Allowing teachers to create their own curriculum is a powerful way to head off teacher burnout. Teachers who invent their own lessons are more likely to be excited, and to develop the courage to "close the textbook and teach."

Participation of everyone in the school community
> • Parent involvement is infectiously appealing. When children see that their parents and teachers are actively involved and participating in the learning process, they become more involved themselves.

SCENE 32. Central Park East High School, East Harlem
Encouraging and practicing leadership skills
> • Leadership is not a prize to be won by the most popular or most adept student. Leadership is an experience that every child must have a chance to practice, for it is a major way to empower young people.

Teacher collaboration
> • When teachers overcome isolation by talking about — what they teach and how they teach—they inevitably gain respect for each other and for themselves.

Emphasizing the value of education
> • Creating bridges between school and the world outside not only makes lessons more interesting, it helps create responsible, self-respecting adults who believe what they think and feel matters. Writing to elected officials is a real action, not just an exercise.

SCENE 33. New Orleans Free School
The struggle for school autonomy
> • Every school must have some autonomy in order to create its own program, but creating alternative approaches in traditional systems is not easy.

The importance of giving older students a chance to choose and follow
their preferences, and to exercise the power of choice
> • Placing a "choice program" at the heart of a school ensures variety and increased self-confidence. Options among activities make it more likely that school will appeal to a wide range of children, to a wide range of their needs and talents—and to a spectrum of teachers as well.

The need for patience in establishing alternatives
> • The task of creating and establishing alternatives is not the work of a day. It is an ongoing struggle of the sort that characterizes any truly creative act.

SCENE 34. Interview with Bill Thomas, Assistant Superintendent
The importance of communicating with other uninformed about alternatives
> • Effective alternative programs can be learning, transforming, experiences for administrators.

SCENE 35. Interview with Bob Ferris
The essential nature of school-site decision making

- Real program development must happen at the school level in order for a program to meet the real needs of its community.

SCENE 36. Singing "LEAN ON ME" with sign language
Expanding young people's worlds

> • One of the most profound effects of exposing students to a rich and varied curriculum is giving them an expanded sense of themselves, as capable, multi-faceted beings, with much to offer.

CREATING SCHOOLS THAT KIDS LOVE

After viewing *Why Do These Kids Love School?* you may wish to revitalize an existing school or start a new one. As you might guess, imagining a school is far easier than actually starting one in reality. However, an increasing number of brave souls are accepting this challenge. So, if you have decided to read on, here some practical steps to consider:

A) Form a planning group.
   Creating or recreating a school is not a one-person — — job. It requires cooperation and community building. You'll want a core group of teachers, parents, students, and others who care about learning. You might begin by inviting prospective planners to a showing of Why Do These Kids Love School?, followed by a discussion and a chance for people to share their own dream about a school.

B) Create a "vision statement."
   Discussions about education sometimes end up as gripe sessions: cathartic but not productive. If you want results, have the group brainstorm the features of a school they would value. Make the ingredients as specific as possible. For ideas, use the "Alternative Education Checklist" at the end of this section.

C) Learn more.
   Your "vision statement" will undoubtedly suggest areas requiring further study. A good bibliography will help you get started. Form sub-committees, and ask group members to report on various topics. Also invite experts from the local school district or college to make presentations to your group. Consider attending workshops sponsored by one or more of the organizations listed in the resource catalogue. You may also want to subscribe to the newsletters listed there. (Information about ordering an extensive alternative education bibliography and resource catalogue are listed at the end of this study guide.)

D) Assess educational options already available.
   People often have only a vague idea of the educational options open to them. To avoid reinventing the wheel, get to know the schools in your area. Begin by contacting local school districts and independent schools. In a letter or over the phone, briefly indicate the type of school you are looking for. This description can be based on your vision statement.
   There are two straightforward ways to investigate a school that claims to offer the type of program in which you're interested. First, you can visit the school yourself and draw your own conclusions. Also, you can have someone who knows the school fill out the "Alternative Education Checklist (see page 20).

E) Clarify your needs.
   Your survey of available programs may reveal that the program you want already exists. Maybe the only need is for that program to become better known.

On the other hand, your research may convince you that an alternative is needed. If so, read on.

F) Decide whether you want your alternative to be a private school or to be part of the public school system.

If you are going to create a private alternative school, your first consideration will be funding. Schools are expensive to start (building, furniture, etc.) and to operate (salaries, insurance, materials). Invest time in learning the economic realities by visiting with several private schools and by reading about the operation of such schools.

If you want to establish a public alternative school, you'll eventually need to meet with the district administrator in charge of program planning. This might be the superintendent or one of the assistant superintendents. Your initial meeting will have two functions: first, to explain what kind of alternative you are looking for, and second, to find out about the district's procedures for starting alternatives. Proposing an alternative is a delicate matter. The better prepared you are, the more likely the chances of success. One way to ready yourself is to read *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Starting a Public Alternative School* by Nancy J. Hall and Douglas Jenner (COLORADO OPTIONS IN EDUCATION) coloradooptions@gmail.com

This 57-page booklet covers basic steps such as:
- Establishing a program-development time line
- Creating an effective political organization
- Establishing a working relationship with the district's staff
- Overcoming objections from the power structure
- Publicizing your program
- Troubleshooting your plan before trouble happens
- Developing a realistic budget
- Choosing a site
- Recruiting students
- Hiring the staff
- Opening the school
- Evaluating the program
- Networking with other public alternative schools

Starting, or restructuring a school is tough work. All of the schools in the documentary were started, or restructured, by people with extraordinary determination. In every case, their commitment was fueled by their passion to realize a dream, and sustained by the support they got from people who shared their vision.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION CHECKLIST

This list provides an overview of some of the key characteristics of successful schools. These features can be used to evaluate an existing program, or review one which is being envisioned.

LEARNING ATMOSPHERE
__ A primary goal is for students to like being at school, and to enjoy learning.
__ Learning is an active, rather than passive, process.
__ Learning involves direct, personal experiences for the students.
__ Individual learning styles and paces are respected.
__ Learning often happens cooperatively, and takes place in groups.
__ Teachers encourage feedback and questions.
__ Original thinking, both critical and creative, is encouraged.
__ Discussion engages students in what they are studying.
__ The approach to subject matter is interdisciplinary.

__ Teachers strive for understanding —not memorization.
__ Many lessons are planned so that children may move freely around the classroom.
__ Alternatives to numerical scores and letter grades are considered options.

CURRICULUM
__ Course material is relevant and engaging.
__ Service activities are encouraged within the school and community.
__ Curriculum includes courses such as environmental studies, peace education, ethnic history, and awareness of global interdependence.
__ Arts, crafts, music, drama, trips, sports, etc. are valued activities.
__ Students' needs and interests help shape the curriculum.
__ Teachers participate in curriculum building, as well as text selection.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS AND PERSONAL GROWTH
__ Each child's uniqueness is honored and encouraged.
__ The ability to make choices is developed throughout the curriculum.
__ Evaluation focuses on an individual's achievement, relative to ability, and is not comparative.
__ Class meetings build community and address concerns.
__ Discipline is not arbitrary. Students are involved in the process of discussing appropriate penalties.

THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY
__ The staff provides opportunities for cross-age interaction.
__ Parental participation in classrooms is encouraged and supported.
__ Mutually respectful relationships are cultivated throughout the school, among students, among teachers and students, between faculty members, etc.
__ The skills of conflict resolution are both used and taught.
__ Teachers, students, parents, and administrators share responsibility.