

**The New York Times**® Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



March 14, 2011

# Let Kids Rule the School

By SUSAN ENGEL

New Marlborough, Mass.

IN a speech last week, President Obama said it was unacceptable that “as many as a quarter of American students are not finishing high school.” But our current educational approach doesn’t just fail to prepare teenagers for graduation or for college academics; it fails to prepare them, in a profound way, for adult life.

We want young people to become independent and capable, yet we structure their days to the minute and give them few opportunities to do anything but answer multiple-choice questions, follow instructions and memorize information. We cast social interaction as an impediment to learning, yet all evidence points to the huge role it plays in their psychological development.

That’s why we need to rethink the very nature of high school itself.

I recently followed a group of eight public high school students, aged 15 to 17, in western Massachusetts as they designed and ran their own school within a school. They represented the usual range: two were close to dropping out before they started the project, while others were honors students. They named their school the Independent Project.

Their guidance counselor was their adviser, consulting with them when the group flagged in energy or encountered an obstacle. Though they sought advice from English, math and science teachers, they were responsible for monitoring one another’s work and giving one another feedback. There were no grades, but at the end of the semester, the students wrote evaluations of their classmates.

The students also designed their own curriculum, deciding to split their September-to-January term into two halves.

During the first half, they formulated and then answered questions about the natural and social world, including “Are the plant cells at the bottom of a nearby mountain different than those at the top of the mountain?” and “Why we do we cry?” They not only critiqued one

another's queries, but also the answers they came up with. Along the way, they acquired essential tools of inquiry, like how to devise good methods for gathering various kinds of data.

During the second half, the group practiced what they called "the literary and mathematical arts." They chose eight novels — including works by Kurt Vonnegut, William Faulkner and Oscar Wilde — to read in eight weeks. That is more than the school's A.P. English class reads in an entire year.

Meanwhile, each of them focused on specific mathematical topics, from quadratic equations to the numbers behind poker. They sought the help of full-time math teachers, consulted books and online sources and, whenever possible, taught one another.

They also each undertook an "individual endeavor," learning to play the piano or to cook, writing a novel or making a podcast about domestic violence. At the end of the term, they performed these new skills in front of the entire student body and faculty.

Finally, they embarked on a collective endeavor, which they agreed had to have social significance. Because they felt the whole experience had been so life-changing, they ended up making a film showing how other students could start and run their own schools.

The results of their experiment have been transformative. An Independence Project student who had once considered dropping out of school found he couldn't bear to stop focusing on his current history question but didn't want to miss out on exploring a new one. When he asked the group if it would be O.K. to pursue both, another student answered, "Yeah, I think that's what they call learning."

One student who had failed all of his previous math courses spent three weeks teaching the others about probability. Another said: "I did well before. But I had forgotten what I actually like doing." They have all returned to the conventional curriculum and are doing well. Two of the seniors are applying to highly selective liberal arts colleges.

The students in the Independent Project are remarkable but not because they are exceptionally motivated or unusually talented. They are remarkable because they demonstrate the kinds of learning and personal growth that are possible when teenagers feel ownership of their high school experience, when they learn things that matter to them and when they learn together. In such a setting, school capitalizes on rather than thwarts the intensity and engagement that teenagers usually reserve for sports, protest or friendship.

Schools everywhere could initiate an Independent Project. All it takes are serious, committed students and a supportive faculty. These projects might not be exactly alike: students might apportion their time differently, or add another discipline to the mix. But if the Independent

Project students are any indication, participants will end up more accomplished, more engaged and more knowledgeable than they would have been taking regular courses.

We have tried making the school day longer and blanketing students with standardized tests. But perhaps children don't need another reform imposed on them. Instead, they need to be the authors of their own education.

*Susan Engel is the author of "Red Flags or Red Herrings: Predicting Who Your Child Will Become."*