

## Never Under-Estimate Student Power

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*“The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out.”*

- Arundhati Roy

Sam Levine could not keep quiet. He was a typical secondary student who was doing well in school, but he became concerned that friends of his had lost interest in school and were not happy. His story is told in *Beyond Measure*<sup>1</sup> and introduced with these words, “. . . an innovative solution for student engagement came from the most important (and obvious) source: a student.” He went to the school leaders with a proposal to create a school-within-a-school led by the students themselves. The principal was sympathetic and together with other students and staff members they created the Independent Project where students stayed together for a whole semester. In the mornings they pursued questions related to English, history, science and math. During the afternoons they worked on semester-long projects of their own design. One teacher was present to help with whatever they needed.

A similar student led school-within-a-school was called CHIP.<sup>2</sup> For administrative purposes a three or four letter code was needed for the program which led to its name. The word CHIP was arrived at with reference to the computer chip to suggest education for the digital age. It was derived from the first letters of terms describing features of the program. “C” is for the development of communication skills; “H” for hands-on learning; “I” for the integration of subjects, and “P” for practicing real-life problem solving.

The program was initiated by two teachers, but as Sam has shown, it could have originated from students. The teachers went to their principal to pitch their idea for a school-within-a-school. They had in mind the Sudbury Valley School described in *Free at Last*<sup>3</sup> and wanted to provide a mixed-age group of mainstream students with a similar non-coercive, self-directed learning environment in their school.

The principal listened to what the teachers proposed and when they were finished the first thing he said was, “There is no way the school board will approve what you propose.” He pointed out that the board was required to have students study mandated curriculum defined by the government and that the teachers union might have concerns about the shift in power from teachers to learners. He then worked with the teachers to get as close to what they wanted as possible while meeting all of the requirements of the government, school board and teachers’ union.

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<sup>1</sup> Abeles, V. (2015). *Beyond Measure*, Simon & Shuster, pp. 173-174.

<sup>2</sup> For details about CHIP see *Wellbeing for Schools: Details of a Pathway to Mental Health*.  
<https://www.ucyottawa.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Wellbeing-in-Schools.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Greenberg, D. (1987). *Free At Last*. Sudbury Valley School Press.

The result was that twenty-five grades ten to twelve mainstream students would be permitted to work free of the bells on four mandated ministry courses. They would have to adhere to the student code of conduct and all of the school rules about attendance and times to be in class. To match the qualifications of the teachers, the courses had to be in the subject areas of English, math, art and computers. Essentially, the students had control over *how* they learned, but not over *what* they learned. Having control over how they learned allowed them to complete their course requirements in significantly less time than through conventional practices, which gave them time for other interests. In order to fulfil the required twenty-five to one student to teacher ratio the CHIP teachers were assigned a half day each to the program and would work in the regular program during the other part of their day.

At the time employers were saying that school graduates lacked competence in the 4Cs - critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication, and it's a concern that endures. These are attributes among what are referred to as soft skills, or 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills needed to succeed today, and they are important not only to improve one's employability. They are skills needed for successful living, and programs where students take responsibility for their own learning create the conditions to practice them. Acquiring these skills was regarded as the primary curriculum of CHIP with students honing them while working on mandatory courses.

Highly significant is that any grade ten to twelve student could enrol in CHIP. As was the case with the Independent Project, it was an option for the mainstream and not stigmatized as a last resort for the disengaged or struggling students. There were only two criteria for students to be accepted into the program. They had to be coming to school to learn and committed to building a community of learners. It turned out that the CHIP students represented a good cross-section of the grades ten to twelve school population. There were three very unhappy and disengaged students, two of whom were ready to drop out of school. Three were identified as gifted and had been feeling held back by classroom routines. Others were motivated by a pioneering spirit that had them wanting to explore new territory.

High Tech High is a network of public charter schools in San Diego, California that applies project-based learning with an emphasize on equity and personalization. One of its founders, Larry Rosenstock, says that the single greatest impediment to education change is the formally scheduled school day.<sup>4</sup> One immediate benefit of eliminating the bells is the opportunity it creates for age-mixing. When asked what he thought was the key to the success of the Sudbury Valley School, one of its founders, Daniel Greenberg, said age-mixing was its secret weapon. Commonly people think this refers to what younger students learn from older ones, but it offers so much more. There is a saying that if you want to feel better about yourself, do something for someone else. Age-segregated schools highly limit what students can do for others. They are almost always on the receiving end and treated as if they have nothing of value to give back. The delivery of curriculum is the constant preoccupation with the teacher dispensing it to the

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<sup>4</sup> Beyond Measure, pp.

students. Mixed-age learning environments help to mitigate this problem. Everyone can be a teacher as well as a learner.

Although the age-mixing in the CHIP program was limited to only a three grade span, its benefits were felt. About six weeks into the program, two grade twelve boys went to one of the teachers with a confession. They said they had been deceptive when they enrolled in the program. They would be coming to school to learn, but they were not planning to help build a community of learners. They wanted to spend all their time, just the two of them, learning about computers and they “wanted nothing to do with the little grade ten kids.” They summed up their confession saying, “We don’t even notice the age differences anymore.” They were feeling that they had become better people. They had learned something of true value from the younger ones - we are all human. It was quite the confession and speaks to all sorts of discrimination. To appreciate each other, students need to be able to really get to know one another in a safe setting, and it doesn’t happen with formally scheduled school days.

This incident gives an indication of the level to which a community of learners formed in CHIP, and crucial to its development was that students had a safe haven. A few days before the new school year, the CHIP teachers met at the school to set up the room for the students. They found a typically furnished high school classroom with small tables and two chairs on one side of each facing the teacher desk at the front. On a side wall were a couple of long low books shelves butted against each other. Otherwise the room was stark. As they surveyed the room one teacher said to the other, “What are we going to do with this?” There was a long pause, and then the answer. “I don’t think we should do anything. I think we should let the students decide what to do with it.” It was the perfect response and led to the teachers scouring the school for any unclaimed furnishings the students might want to use. They found more shelves, cubicle wall dividers, an end table, coffee table, a few individual desks and a lamp, and they took all these items to the CHIP room. The teachers then brought in the relevant ministry course syllabuses, textbooks and other course resources such as teacher made course timelines, tests and past exams.

When the students arrived they entered what looked like a cluttered storage room. Accustomed to classrooms nicely organized for them in advance by their teachers, they were puzzled. “The first challenge you need to face together is how to organize the room to suit what you will be doing here,” the morning teacher told them. “Consider all the possibilities for a couple of days before you act on what you think will work best. You can always rearrange the room later.” The students then spent the morning gathering the resources for their courses and planning how to achieve the desired outcomes.

The afternoon transpired differently. The students couldn’t wait to make the room their own and by the end of the day they had it organized in a way that months later no one could think of how it could have been done better. Using the cubicle dividers and long low shelves stacked one on the other they partially partitioned off the four corners of the room into working areas, one for each of the subject areas they would be studying. An airy feeling was preserved with a large enough center area left open for full class meetings. One corner was the computer centre with

five desktop computers. In another the individual desks were set up in front of a blackboard for math tutoring. Four tables were butted together in another corner well-lit with natural light coming through the windows. They created a large rectangular surface for students to work on art projects. The fourth corner was called the lounge. It was where students could sit and read and have discussions arising from their English courses. In it they placed a large screen TV, the lamp, coffee table, and end table. Space was left for a couch they were going to acquire from somewhere. In short order, they had created their clubhouse. The only place many high schools students have to call their own is a tiny hallway locker that some decorate in an effort to feel better. In contrast, the CHIP room became a place where students felt they belonged.

While the acquisition of soft skills was considered the primary curriculum of CHIP, something far more vital to human flourishing was in play. The learning environment, as already evident with the above account, was conducive to mental health. Social justice and self-determination are listed as core values by the Ottawa branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association.<sup>5</sup> The CHIP room was a place where no one was to feel superior or inferior to anyone else. This is social justice. The student led environment responded to the need for self-determination by respecting the right for people to be involved in all decisions that affected them. Je'anna Clements and Sifaan Zavahir shed light on what this involves when they launched the Rights-Centric Education Network at the *INSPIRE Education Summit* on World Children's Day November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024.<sup>6</sup> This Network, founded by over a hundred and sixty people advocating for the young to have agency, aims to align education with human rights as defined by the United Nations in its *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and its *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Programs like CHIP and the Independent Project point the way to a new social contract for education.

Typically education innovations like CHIP and the Independent Project are short lived. Neither of them survived much past a change of principals. It is not that the new principals were against the program, but with innovations that challenge status quo principals need to be clearly *for* them. Managing programs with competing philosophies under the same roof has its challenges, but it's completely doable. The principals on the ground floor of CHIP and the Independent Project had what it took, but in general, principals are not trained for this kind of change management. The results can be that worthy innovations get discredited and education remains stuck in the industrial model unable to respond to changing times and the individual learning needs of students.

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<sup>5</sup> Social justice and self-determination are among five values to which the Ottawa branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association is committed: <https://ottawa.cmha.ca/about-cmha/vision-mission-and-core-values/>. (Retrieved August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025.)

<sup>6</sup> The title of the their talk was *Choosing the 'Rights' Direction - Using the UNCRC To Steer Education*. It can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn21dQosbGg>

James Mannion is at the forefront of educational change management. In his recently published book titled *Making Change Stick*,<sup>7</sup> he presents the idea of slice teams which aim to achieve support for change from an entire school community. These teams are to take into account the views of all stakeholders. They compare to what some people call school improvement teams, although they may strive harder to gain the input and support of all stakeholders. Slice teams have the potential to provide sustainability for programs when there is a change of personnel. An idea is only as good as its implementation and if the originators of CHIP had been aware of the importance of slice teams, they would have created one to help ensure the benefits of the program were understood and that it remained an option. A change of principal would not happen without the slice team exerting some influence.

William Glasser, author of *The Quality School*, is well aware of the problems involved with running schools with competing philosophies under the same roof. “But if we want quality secondary schools,” he says, “I do not believe we have any viable option other than to try to create an on-site model.”<sup>8</sup> He is referring to schools-within-schools and they are key to transforming education to better promote human flourishing that leads to a populace more able to address pressing world problems.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” is a refrain of bike racers like those in the Tour de France. If a breakaway group can get far enough ahead to be out of sight of the pack, the pack is less likely to chase it down. Operating as a school-within-a-school CHIP was not out of sight. It created much discussion in the whole school community. Students and teachers in both programs mingled in the hallways and staffroom. Some teachers in the conventional program dropped in on CHIP from time to time to see what was happening. In addition to the serendipitous awareness building that took, the program led to over twenty staff members purchasing *What’s Worth Fighting For? Working Together For Your School*<sup>9</sup> and meeting a couple of times after school to discuss it. It worked to prepare students and staff for the expansion of the program. Prototypes of new age learning need to be scalable and this can easily be accomplished with schools-within-a-school by adding in more classrooms, teachers and subjects to accommodate student demand.

The school-within-a-school concept further respects the rights of students. School choice where students have to change schools is not real choice. It disrupts families and friendships and tends to favour the more privileged students. Choice of schools within schools can be real choice. It meets the conditions of equal visibility and accessibility; it does not require students to forsake their friends and extra-curricular activities, and it does not risk fragmenting communities with young neighbours living an important part of their lives elsewhere. It also simplifies life for parents by providing choice in their local school.

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<sup>7</sup> Mannion, J. (2025). *Making Change Stick: A practical guide to implementing school improvement*. Hachette Learning.

<sup>8</sup> Glasser, W. (1990). *The Quality School*. HarperCollins. p. 285.

<sup>9</sup> Fullan, M. and Hargreaves, A. (1991). *What’s Worth Fighting For? Working Together For Your School*.

A final plug for student led education brings us back to the story of the two computer boys. The mother of one of them worked for a software development firm, which helps to explain their interest in computers. Her firm was expanding and had purchased more licenses for a state-of-the-art programming language than it needed at that time and she arranged for the boys to use one of the licenses for their computer course. Schools are often working with dated resources which adds to perceptions of them being irrelevant. Free of the constraints of conventional classrooms the opportunities to take advantage of community resources become boundless. Visions of the possibilities are emerging with the exploration of local learning ecosystems and the work of Education Cities.<sup>10</sup>

Education for mental health and human flourishing are on the horizon. Two essential conditions for cultivating this outcome are social justice and self-determination. CHIP and the Independent Project help to demonstrate what happens when these conditions are met. As more students like Sam Levine decide they cannot keep quiet, and by applying what we now know about managing educational innovations for sustainability, change can happen faster than one might predict.

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<sup>10</sup> hundred gives this explanation of Education Cities: <https://hundred.org/en/innovations/education-cities>. (Retrieved August 29, 2025). For an example of the ideas it presents, see how Karema Akilah's project *Unschooling High School w/o Walls* is using the whole city of Atlanta as its classroom: <https://geniidae.school/atl>