

Windsor House School

Systems, Procedures and Curriculum that Support a Democratic Educational Philosophy

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It is my belief that people learn best in situations where they respect and value the people from whom that are leaning as well as feel respected and valued themselves. For these reasons human relationships in learning environments are very important. Democratic structures help to support respectful relationships between people and when students engage in them they practice the skills related to being a socially responsible person and are therefore an essential piece of an ideal learning environment. Windsor House Parent Participation Non-Coercive School has been a state funded alternative school within the North Vancouver School District for almost 40 years. The school has gone through many changes over those years, evolving as we learn from working in a democratic school environment. An essential part of our school is that we stay flexible enough to respond to the current population of the school and yet we also preserve the main values of the school. We are committed to students becoming self-confident and self-aware as well as able to work within a community. It is our stated aim for all students who attend the school to, “within the context of self discovery, develop and strengthen the skills and attitudes necessary to become self-directed learners. Specific objectives which support this goal are to work on relationships within our community, engage with WH systems and procedures and take advantage of learning opportunities.” (WH document, Individual Education Plan, Long Term Goals) Our systems and procedures have developed with this goal in mind and we continue to refine them in order to become as effective as possible. This article will describe our current school environment, specifically School Governance Systems, Parental Agreements, Curriculum Choice and Assessment.

Windsor House is a participatory democracy. We have School Council meetings three times per week at which times any community member (student, staff, parent or community-approved volunteer) can suggest a Resolution to create or modify rules, classes, activities, agreements, etc. Attendance is open to everyone, but not mandatory. There must be one staff

person at the meeting and a student must be chairperson. There also must be an equal number of young people and adults attending the meeting or no new business can be voted on. There are at least seven steps to a Resolution being passed: 1. Chairperson reads Resolution, which has been submitted in writing, aloud. 2. Chair asks if there are any questions regarding clarifying the resolution. 3. Chair asks if anyone is planning to vote against the resolution, if anyone present says “Yes”, then move to step 4 otherwise skip to step 5. 4. Speakers “For” and “Against” the Resolution speak when recognized by the Chair. 5. Chair runs a vote of all community members present during discussion, must pass by at least 2/3 majority, consensus if the resolution regards very important decisions that will shift school culture. 6. All resolutions that pass are published in the weekly newsletter. 7. If no one requests to revisit the discussion after the Resolution is published, then it comes into effect within the next week. 8. If the Resolution requires financial support, the School Council treasurer’s accounts are consulted before the decision is made.

School Council business can also be discussions of important issues affecting the majority of the school as well as overseeing Room or Equipment Councils. Each week School Council hears a report (assembled by a staff person) about the Room Councils operating in the school. Our school has a number of rooms and a lot of valuable equipment. In order that the resources of the school may be most freely available to responsible community members, we have developed a system of Councils. Each Council governs either an area of the school or specific equipment, e.g. the Library Council or the Laptop Council. Each council must meet at least bi-weekly, post the rules governing the use of resources, the names of people allowed to use those resources and their meeting time. Each council deals with complaints regarding the use of the resources that they oversee. If a council is not following these guidelines, e.g. not meeting regularly, not dealing with complaints, or is seen to be operating in a way which is unfair by other community members, then School Council may suspend the use of the resources and return them to only being available when a staff person is available to supervise.

The Judicial Council also meets three times per week to help solve problems that community members cannot solve on their own. Sometimes the people involved in the problem write it up and submit it to the council and sometimes a community member who has observed the problem and is concerned about how the people involved have decided to solve it, files the complaint. The people involved and all of the details of the problem are written down and submitted to the meeting (time, place, witnesses, etc.) If the people involved are not present at the meeting, they are informed that a problem they have been part of is going to be discussed and they can then choose to attend or not.

The emphasis of the discussion is always on solving problems. We work very hard to be respectful to all people involved and never to humiliate or punish someone for making a mistake. We also try very hard to let a person make restitution for their mistakes – in whatever way all participants agree will repair any damage to relationships. We also often support students who have interpersonal conflicts with a staff person, who will meet with them privately to resolve their conflict. We currently use Marshall Rosenberg’s “Non-Violent Communications” techniques during conflict resolution sessions and all staff has had training in “Restitution Self Discipline” with Diane Gossen.

Roughly eighty per cent of students will have only one or two problems discussed at this meeting each year. Ten per cent will have a few problems per month and then the last ten per cent (usually new students) will have problems every day. We have seen this system have an important effect on students who struggle socially with other students and also with how to be

responsible. The strengths are that the tone is non-judgmental and that students can hear from their peers about how to fix problems and change their behaviour in a respectful atmosphere. Older students have a large influence as mentors on younger students. All problems discussed are kept on file, mainly to keep track of the types of solutions that have been tried and so we can check on whether a student is repeatedly having similar problems. Our Judicial Council has an enormous effect on helping to create and maintain trusting relationships between community members, which are essential in a learning environment.

Our school year starts with an “Open Space” meeting. Students, teachers, parents and volunteers all come together to make suggestions about what they would like to do and to study for the next few months (or all year). Anyone can request or offer a class; we post all the suggestions and people sign up for sample classes. The next few weeks are then dedicated to allowing people to set up and sample the classes and activities. Students then make their choices and we create a schedule. It takes about one month to get everything organized.

While all of the planned activities are going on there are also many students who are not engaged in pre-organized activities. They are using school resources and engaging with staff and students as they wish. There is always at least one staff person available to do something with that needs adult supervision with a small group, e.g. off campus trips or physical activity in the gym. Otherwise, there are many places in the school that are available for spontaneous activities as long as students use the resources respectfully. There is also always at least one staff person circulating around the school, every fifteen minutes helping students as necessary. This choice-based curriculum is essential having students become self-directed learners: to be able to follow their passions, to learn what is most important for them at the time and also, to choose consciously to learn something, sometimes even when they are not interested but because they understand it is a requirement for a further goal.

Students at Windsor House are also encouraged to value the learning they do outside of school, either with their families or in the community. In order to support this, some parents who enroll their children at the school, sign agreements with the school to allow their children to attend part-time and to be able to leave the school campus under certain conditions. Parents can also allow their children to use the Internet on school computers without direct staff supervision, as long as they follow school-generated guidelines. These family-school agreements also encourage strong family connections in each student’s education. To support the school and also to encourage strong school parent relationships, parents are required to volunteer at least three hours per week with the school, either by being present during school time or working from home on other projects.

Systems for assessment of learning in such a unique school need to be much different than the usual teacher written report card. In order to help students recognize and value the learning that they are doing at Windsor House and in the rest of their lives, we are working to create new procedures for assessment. These include some students having weekly “Learning Group” meetings where they discuss their learning so far, their short and long term goals and then check in weekly about how they are accomplishing them. We also have three conferences with each family over the year, for staff to share their observations of student involvement at school and the student to share their reflections about their learning that term. These observations and reflections are kept in each student’s Portfolio. At any point the student can use their Portfolio to explain their education to another school or potential employer. Our aim is that assessment be a useful tool for students to become aware of their skills, abilities and knowledge and then to be able to plan for their next step of learning. These

systems to promote self-assessment also support the overall democratic educational philosophy in that students who are following a curriculum of personal choice can sometimes be so involved in their activities that they never take the time to notice what they have achieved, and can therefore feel like they are not learning anything of value. It is also essential that the student (with staff and family support) mainly generate the assessment because each student is following their own curriculum and the teaching staff cannot be the only ones assessing the learning.

Students who attend Windsor House can be assured that they can engage in governing the school, solving interpersonal problems, choosing what to study and when. Their learning experiences are valued wherever they take place and their important family relationships are supported. They are also provided with support to recognize and value their learning through self-assessment procedures. All of these structures work together to provide an environment in which students are respected and relationships are valued, in essence, a democratic education.

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Internet Links

<http://whs.at.org/> Windsor House independent website.

<http://www.nvsd44.bc.ca/SchoolSites/WindsorHouse.aspx> Windsor House -- School District website.

<http://sane.at.org/> Society for the Advancement of Non-Coercive Education, (Non-profit society that supports Windsor House School Council financially and philosophically) Helen Hughes, retired founder of Windsor House is the president.

<http://www.idec2008.org/> The 2008 International Democratic Education Conference was hosted in Vancouver by S.A.N.E. and Windsor House.

<http://www.realrestitution.com/> Diane Gossen's "Restitution Self Discipline" (Canadian based)

<http://www.selfmanagedlearning.org/> Ian Cunningham's Self Managed Learning (UK based)

<http://www.cnvc.org/> Marshall Rosenberg's Non-Violent Communication (US based)