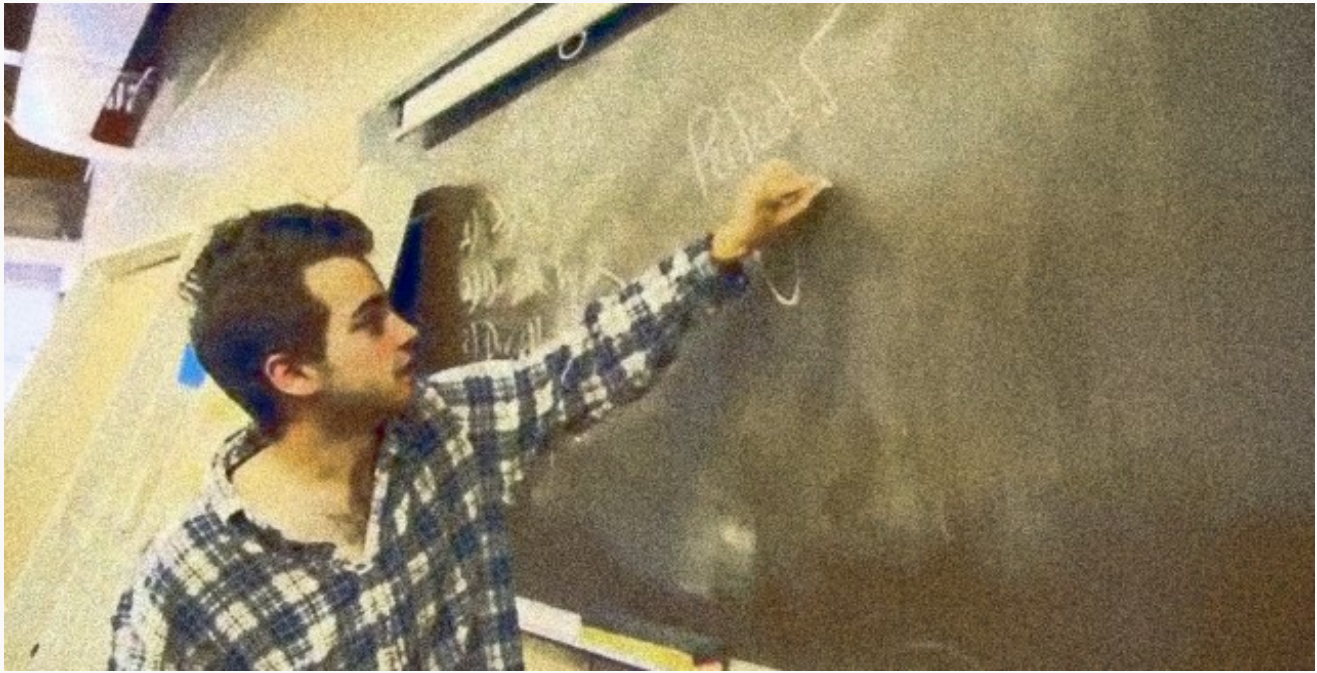


This Is What a Student-Designed School Looks Like

Luba Vangelova



The Independent Project/ image from Charles Tsai's movie

When Sam Levin was a junior at Monument Mountain Regional High School in Great Barrington, Mass., he realized that two things were in short supply at his school: engagement and mastery. He also noticed that he and his peers were learning plenty of information, but not much about how to gather or create their own data. And he noticed that students were unhappy. So he took it upon himself to design a school where students would feel fully engaged, have an opportunity to develop expertise in something, and learn how to learn.

“He came up with a plan where the core areas could still be studied, but in a way where students were more of the driving force,” explains guidance counselor Mike Powell. The administration decided to take a chance on a semester-long pilot project, and The Independent Project debuted in the fall of 2010.

The pilot involved eight students — sophomores, juniors and seniors — chosen on the basis of written applications and interviews. “The idea was that it was for students who could manage their time well, were looking for something more than the traditional program, and had a passion for learning,” says Powell, who served as the group’s primary adviser. Academic performance didn’t matter — the group included straight-A students as well as students who were failing many of their classes. The group was fairly diverse in other ways, too, with the students hailing from a range of blue-collar and white-collar family backgrounds.

“It really establishes an idea of what self-motivation is. There is critiquing, but it all comes back to you. That’s really valuable.”

Their time, other than daily group meetings, was theirs to manage. “This was pretty unheard of — teens being alone most of the day,” Powell notes.

They explored math, science, social science and literature topics that interested them, choosing one question each

week, researching it, and presenting their findings to the group. They also chose books to read, discuss and write about in some form; worked on a semester-long individual project on a subject that excited them (the only requirement was that the project require effort, learning and mastery); and collaborated on a three-week-long group endeavor (they decided to [make a video about education and their project](#)). They were responsible for giving a final presentation about their project, which helped to give them a specific goal to work toward.

As the adviser, Powell checked in with the group every morning; he also offered logistical support and helped the students locate resources. Three other faculty members — a science teacher, a math teacher and a social science teacher — served as an advisory committee, meeting with the students for one period a day to help them in whatever way was needed, such as to talk through some of the more complex ideas presented in a research book. The students also consulted other teachers and outside experts as needed. When members of the community were asked to share their knowledge, “the vast majority of the time, they came running,” Powell says.

CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

The program encountered some bumps. “We struggled with how to do peer-to-peer constructive criticism,” Powell says. “It’s a bit different in a classroom, where there’s a teacher setting boundaries and helping create structure. They found doing that with peers challenging. But that was a big part of the program—they had to be accountable for what they were doing. ... They’re teens, so to think that at that age they will always make good choices and manage their time well is not realistic. Even adults aren’t like that.”

It was also difficult for some other faculty members to accept that students were earning credit for such an amorphous undertaking. So the group tried to be transparent and made their final presentations — which ran the gamut from performances to cooking a large meal — open to the public.

At the end of the semester, “everyone was satisfied – the parents, the students, and the school,” Powell says. The project’s [“White Paper”](#) notes that parents “were very aware of what was going on in the program because the kids were talking about school at home much more than they ever had in the past.”

“There were so many moments where you could see students being inspired,” Powell says. “And they learned that with that much control comes a great deal of responsibility, to manage time and be accountable.”

The school chose to continue the program, which runs for one semester each year and involves nine to 12 students who receive credit and a pass/fail. “It was really risky, because we didn’t know how colleges would interpret this on a transcript,” Powell says. “But so far we’ve had only an overwhelmingly positive response,” including from highly selective colleges, such as Oxford and Williams, that have accepted graduates.

Nevertheless, not a lot of students apply to participate in the project. “They know it involves more work [than taking regular classes] and that they have to push themselves to do it,” says science teacher Daniel Gray, who served as the group’s primary adviser this year. (He also had prior experience with this type of model—he had studied democratic education and then helped introduce some of those principles to a public middle school.)

Most high school students are neither interested nor ready for such an experience, he says. But he adds: “I think that if they had been given progressively more responsibility over the years, they would be ready. My seventh- and eighth-graders, after a year or two, they got it, and they were more mature than you would expect them to be at that age.”

APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED

Although some teachers at Monument Mountain remain skeptical, the majority of them now support the program. Some have even copied elements of it, for example letting English students choose which books to read. It has also spawned “positive” discussions about the most appropriate role for teachers, Powell says.

There have been a number of refinements over the years. One has been to hold the program in the spring, to avoid a

sudden and tough transition back to taking regular classes where students can no longer control what they're learning. And the number of faculty assigned to the project was reduced to three and then (for scheduling reasons) two. Each group has also introduced its own twist — this year the students had even more leeway and no subject-area requirements. The constants have been the weekly research question, the books component, and the individual endeavor, which has ranged from vocational pursuits such as building a kayak, to artistic tasks such as writing a novel, to scientific explorations such as examining how Western and Eastern medicine deal differently with Lyme disease.

Securing assistance from teachers sometimes proved challenging. "It's something most students aren't used to doing," says Logan Malik, a just-graduated senior who organized the program this year. "Instead of a teacher telling you what to do, you're telling the teacher what you're learning, what you want information on, and when you want to meet. And then they would have to do some prep." Nevertheless, "teachers were very willing to help us, even if it was on their own time." (The students also served as "a first-grade support group for each other," Gray says.)

Although he's heading to college to study pre-med, Logan's individual endeavor this spring was to learn classical guitar. He watched a YouTube tutorial to learn the proper fingering and then practiced about four hours a day. He says he would never have been able to dive into the activity like this if he'd continued with his rigorous course load, and learning it over a summer wouldn't have been as productive without a group and some structure. The Independent Project work kept him busy, he says, "but the busy-ness was easier to get through, compared to slaving through something you don't want to be doing and don't value as much."

The stress was also less, because the evaluations (other than the final pass/fail) were formative rather than summative — intended not to judge, but to help students improve their work.

It was challenging sometimes to stay on task to meet deadlines that were not enforced by authorities, Malik says, "but we did well overall." The students tried to be flexible and fair, and to account for the natural ebb and flow in people's attention and motivation levels, as well as unexpected complications. Extensions were granted to students who asked for more time to research a question. "Once the person was given an extra week, they felt they needed to do more, and they worked hard," Malik notes. Other times individuals were given a pass to give them a chance to get back on track. In the past, when tensions have arisen or the group's energy has seemed particularly low, the group has literally taken a hike, while discussing their goals and potential improvements to the program.

Malik enjoyed many of his regular classes and sees this program as a complement rather than a complete replacement for them. "For a lot of subjects, like chemistry, it's good to be taught by someone, so the structure of the class helps. And in social science, it's good to be introduced to ideas by someone who understands those ideas really well." But The Independent Project offers benefits that aren't available in an adult-led classroom, he adds. "It really establishes an idea of what self-motivation is. There is critiquing, but it all comes back to you. That's really valuable."



Sam Levin, creator of the Independent Project.

CHANGES IN STUDENTS

Students who have gone through the program ask more questions and have a greater awareness of how to answer

them; construct their questions more carefully; became more thoughtful in the way they consider ideas and evaluate sources; and became better at managing their time.

The “White Paper” also notes that the project instills a “sense of ownership of their education has stayed with the students long after the program ended. Although some students have continued to struggle academically, feedback from parents has suggested that they are pursuing more interests outside of school than they were before The Independent Project.”

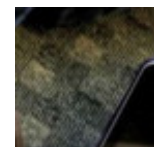
[Reinventing School From the Ground Up For Inquiry Learning](#)

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It continues: “That is not to say no one will fail; any program or system will contain failure. In fact, in the pilot of the Independent Project one student struggled to complete the work, and did not receive full credit for the program ... The goal, then, is to not make The Independent Project so that no one fails, but to make it so fewer people fail than in the current system, and to make success in The Independent Project carry more intellectual meaning than success often does in the current system.”



The program doesn't require a lot of additional resources, and other public schools have visited Monument Valley to find out how to replicate it. (A professional filmmaker has also [produced a video about it.](#)) Powell says it requires administrators who are open to focusing education on students, rather than teachers or a curriculum. But he offers a caution: “Because the focus is on the student, that's where you need to start. This came from a student and was pushed by him, through all the red tape. A program like this probably won't be terribly successful if it's teacher-driven. If a group of adults want to replicate this, ... I would have conversations with the students about it, and see how they respond and where they take it. If students are interested in the concept, it will guide itself.”



Meet some of the students in this video created by Charles Tsai.

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