



## *Rights and Resources*

by Richard Fransham

[www.operi.ca](http://www.operi.ca)

© OPERI

We are led to believe that “equal opportunity for all” is a priority goal of public education, but it can never be realized with traditional schooling. Young children in one class can have a superb teacher, while in the class next door the children can have a considerably less effective teacher. High school students are plagued in a similar way. One group of students can be taught by the subject expert, while another has a teacher with little or no background in the subject. Even when all students have teachers who are certified to teach their courses, there is still the problem that some teachers are more expert than others.

The injustice of this uneven use of resources is undeniable. At the high school level, a fascinating subject that gives people joy, stimulation, and even a rewarding career can be killed for a lifetime. At the lower levels, children as young as three are spending long hours every school day, for entire school years, in less than desirable classroom situations. A whole school year in the lives of people so young is like an eternity, a third of their total time alive, and it can be devastatingly more damaging than dousing the appreciation of a subject. It can kill the joy of learning, and leave children feeling not good about themselves, and not good about life in general. Fixing this problem, along with a host of others, requires the elimination of formal scheduling.

Teachers are a highly underutilized resource of public education. Traditional schooling forces them into dispensing curriculum and preparing students for tests. With the elimination of scheduling they can become role models, mentors, facilitators, coaches, co-learners, friends, *and* teachers. It’s the difference between teaching students subjects and helping them to become fulfilled human beings. For teachers it’s the difference between having a stressful job or a rewarding career, and it adds truth to the saying that “teaching is the most honourable of professions.” For parents, the fear of schools extinguishing the joy of learning virtually dissipates.

Diminishing teachers to a fraction of their worth amounts to a huge squandering of resources, but worse is the waste in not allowing students to be self-directed. Traditional schools are far from applying the adage that, “You can give a man a fish and feed him for a day, or you can teach him how to fish and feed him for life.” With no more than the time and resources schools currently have available, students could be learning both how to learn *and* the prescribed curriculum. Add to this that students can be learners *and* teachers. The Sudbury Valley School says that age mixing is its secret weapon. The homogeneous classes of traditional schools result in the students having almost nothing to learn from each other.

It is perhaps the most wasteful mismanagement of human resources ever perpetuated.

The OPERI blog post titled *Trust and Equality* argues that a different view of the learner is required to capitalize on all of the learning opportunities made available by the elimination of formal scheduling. With the trust of adults and the attitude of being responsible for themselves, the world of learning is at students' fingertips. There is nothing to keep students and teachers confined to classrooms. All of the learning resources that a school has to offer become available to students when the time is right, but better still, the limitless learning resources outside of schools come fully into play. The switch to self-directed learning is like freeing babies from their playpens, and with proper management, it is not the risky act that skeptics fear it could be.

Transitioning from the traditional model of education to the self-directed one will take time. From studies of paradigm shifts we know that some people take longer than others to accept change, and that some people will never change. These people need to be understood and accommodated, but we need to get the ball rolling with those who are ready for change. A common sense way to do it is with programs like CHIP, described in some detail on the OPERI website. Despite the limitations placed on CHIP, learning resources that are largely out of reach for students become astoundingly more accessible.

CHIP eliminated formal scheduling for a group of twenty-five, mixed-age, high school students, and the teachers became facilitators. Little else was changed. The students still went to the same school, worked on the same ministry prescribed courses as other students, and wrote the same final exams as their peers in the regular program. They were required to follow the same school rules and student code of conduct, and they continued as usual with their extra-curricular activities. Despite how little had changed, the students acquired control of their time, and that made all the difference. Time is our greatest resource. Some people say, "Time is all we really have." The more we have, the more we can do. The more we control it, the more we can make the best use of it.

The students in CHIP were able to work on their courses when it most suited them for as long as they wanted. They were unleashed to go full speed ahead, or slow right down when the going got tough. It provided them with the conditions to learn as efficiently and thoroughly as they wanted. What they soon discovered by being freed from the plodding, regular classroom routine was that they could cover course material in a fraction of the time it normally took, and that put time in the bank for them.

In a less quantifiable way, they banked even more time. They said that as a result of how they learned in CHIP they understood, more than they memorized, their course material. We tend to forget what we memorize, but we remember what we understand. Learning only to forget is a massive waste of time that ingrains bad attitudes and habits that are going to take more time to unlearn at some point if students are to become the competent, life-long learners they need to become. No teacher can plan for the efficient use of twenty-five students' time. It is something students must do for themselves with teachers helping them to learn good time-management skills and how to balance leisure and work activities to stay healthy and to get the most out of their lives.

The OPERI blog post [\*A Lesson About Math\*](#) gives a close-up look at the poor use of time in traditional math classes, and the following story of a student in CHIP adds to the picture. The student was working independently on a grade ten computer course and about three weeks into the semester he asked if he could start working on the next level course. The teacher sat down with him at a computer and within not more than fifteen minutes it was determined that the student knew as much as students obtaining grades in the eighty-five percent range at the end of an entire semester in traditional classes. This one little anecdote gives a good glimpse of how self-directed students can make more efficient use of their time and what they might do to fill what they have to spare. Using only fifteen minutes of quality teacher time this student had gained as much course knowledge as others where teachers spend countless hours planning lessons, delivering the lessons, making tests, administering the tests, marking the tests, and tabulating final grades. It points again to how our human resources in public education are being terribly mismanaged, and it begs the question: “Why are we continuing to impose on children an education that wastes everybody’s time and makes learning such a drag?”

People tend to look for shortcuts and do the minimum when required to do things they don’t want to do. We need only look at students who are forced to study subjects that are of no interest to them for evidence of this, and it can be found with students who are teacher-directed or self-directed. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating are commonplace, but also students get clever at deceiving teachers into thinking that they know more than they do. It’s dishonest and disrespectful, and it cultivates attitudes and habits that ultimately work against the best interests of students. In learning environments like that of CHIP, students are still required to get credits for courses they would prefer not to study, but the teachers are better positioned to combat its ill effects. Student-teacher relationships are better when teachers are facilitators, leaving students less inclined to deceive their teachers. There is more internal discomfort in being dishonest with someone you respect than with someone less esteemed, and the opportunities for teachers to reinforce good values are greater. The personal way the teacher sat down with the student in CHIP made it more possible to determine if things were as they should be. If it seems appropriate in that type of situation, the teacher can initiate a little discussion about the importance of striving to empower oneself with knowledge and skills as opposed to just trying to get credits to graduate. Honesty and respect for others might also be discussed in a nonjudgmental way that considers how they work in one’s favour over the long term.

Something that starts to stand out from the above is that self-directed learning programs have a strong incentive for students to become good independent learners. The more efficiently they learn, the more time they will have for other things. The OPERI blog post [\*Analytical Reading\*](#) sheds light on how this can happen, and the role teachers can play. It’s just one example of how students can develop their learning skills while learning course content.

Of note too is that the whole notion of “homework” takes on new meaning when students have control of their time. The more course work students do “on their own time”, the more time they have to spend on other things during the school day. It’s like telling them, “Get

your chores done and then you can play,” knowing, of course, that play is good. For anyone wanting to learn more about the value of play, Peter Gray’s book *Free To Learn* is an informative read.

Students who are free of scheduling aren’t tied to a desk, and nobody worries that they will get behind in their courses if they miss classes. They can use the time they have banked to take advantage of endless learning opportunities in and out of school all day long, and day after day until their time runs out. The world becomes their classroom. With a little imagination, one begins to fathom how the world of work and the knowledge of the greatest experts, including seniors, become part of the students’ playground. All of the latest learning resources available through technology, from websites like the [Khan Academy](#) to learning from experts and working with teams through video links, can be utilized in timely ways. A short video titled [Evolution of Learning](#), and the related [LRNG](#) website, present the inspired imaginings of one group. Even with the better use of time made possible with programs as limited as CHIP, students are unleashed to explore “the world of infinite possibilities” as described by LRNG.

Principals have a critical role to play in creating these possibilities for students. It is up to them more than anyone to set the tone in schools that maximizes the benefits to operating self-directed learning programs within traditional high schools. William Glasser in his acclaimed book titled *The Quality School: Managing Students Without Coercion* talks of small schools within larger ones as the way to begin the transition to a new learning model. He warns of competing programs under the same roof possibly sabotaging each other, but this is to be seen as a minor concern. A strong principal can easily establish that even with different programs running in a school, it is still one school, and one team, striving to provide for every student the education they need and want. The spirit is that of togetherness in the pursuit of a new system that works for everybody. It becomes a rally cry for the teaching profession to step right up to the challenge of creating the public education system needed for the post-industrial age. Drawing again on insights arising from CHIP we get a bigger picture of how things can look.

A group of the students studying Shakespeare decided to liven-up their learning by integrating their English and technology courses and producing a video of a play they would act out. What follows did not happen, because people did not think to do it until after the video was complete, which points to the necessity of putting theory into practice. For ideas to mature, like the idea of flight has matured from the time of the Wright Brothers to what it is today, they must be applied. Applying the idea of self-directed learning as it was applied with CHIP led to visions of how the entire school staff could become part of the orderly transition to a wonderful new age for public education. These visions would be incorporated into the program and be refined and expanded to make an even better program.

At the time the CHIP students produced their play, the school had a superb English teacher working in the traditional program. He could stand in front of a class and perform a one-man show stepping in and out of the roles of the various characters in a play. If someone had thought to invite him to play a character in the students’ production, it’s almost certain

he would have accepted, and the logistics of including him would be simple. He could learn his lines whenever it suited him and drop in for rehearsals during his prep periods. Performing only as another actor in the company, his expertise would have been on display for the students to model. It immediately leads to visions of all the teachers of the school being able to drop into CHIP to share their passions and expertise. It's the beginning of how to have the special talents and interests of experts available to more students, and it aids the transition to new age learning. By spending time in programs like CHIP, traditional teachers can develop their facilitator skills while they experience the non-coercive way to be with students. It's cost-free, high quality professional development that eases the educational establishment into the 21st century.

As a one-classroom CHIP prototype grows to include more students, teachers and schools, the possibilities for equitably enriching learning environments mushroom. More teachers and students in one program translates into a fuller community of subject experts, mentors and role models all equally accessible to each other. With more schools running these kinds of programs, the more the experts in other places become accessible. The possibilities for exchanges between schools become awesome. The most fabulous of all drama teachers in an entire school district might offer to produce a Shakespearean play that involves students from various schools. This teacher might visit the participating schools to conduct auditions designed to provide real-life, rich learning experiences for students. Those chosen to take part, whether for acting or some other role, could begin learning their lines, building props, sewing costumes, or finding out about lighting in their own schools. Local theater groups might provide students with expert help and invitations to visit their theatres. At some point the group would gather at one school, perhaps for a week or two, to pull the whole thing together. Teachers from the different schools could accompany students, not only for support, but to be co-learners and role models as everyone gets to experience the most wonderful of directors. It's even possible that the director could be someone from outside the school board, perhaps a real-world director volunteering his or her services as a gift to students, a way to have some fun and to grow an appreciation of the arts. The big performance might be an evening event in a major theatre filled with the students and parents of all the schools involved.

At the end of it all, the students return to their home schools. Enriched by the lives of new friends and an engaging experience they naturally enrich the lives of everyone around them. The teachers involved return having had a rewarding time with students, one that leaves them enriched with more of that cost-free, high quality professional development, this time acquired by working with the best. An appreciation for the arts is cultivated throughout the larger community with this kind of activity. Congregated arts schools by contrast limit the most expert of teachers to one school and one isolated community of learners, which works against creating a broad appreciation of the arts.

The students in this example who wanted to participate, but who didn't get selected are not forgotten. Before the selection process even begins, their teachers would help them to determine if it's realistic for them to apply and what they might do to increase their chances of being chosen. The value of taking a risk and how to make a success out of failure are kept front of mind. Instead of feeling disappointed or cheated, students not selected are

encouraged to use what opportunities still remain to pursue their interest. Without leaving their school, they can serve as understudies ready to step in if they get the call. They can still help to make props or costumes and study lighting effects. The attitudes that keep students learning and becoming more qualified for advanced learning opportunities are actively fostered and it's not unrealistic to imagine individual schools putting into practice all that was learned from the multi-school play by doing a production of their own.

This one little example is only a hint of what a profession of innovative educators will be empowered to do once they are unleashed from the stifling practice of formal scheduling. To get to where we need to go, we need to urge our education leaders to take some risk and to stop seeking the shelter of doing what has always been done.

*Copyright 2016*

*Permission is granted to share OPERI material freely with acknowledgement of its source.*