

## Scarsdale Alternative School

*The Just Community School: A Radical Alternative That Has Worked for Forty Years*

Howard Rodstein

*“I don’t think it is possible to spend a day at the Alternative School and not hear the word community.”*

-- a senior student

### School Profile

The Scarsdale Alternative School, a Just Community School, was founded in 1972, and became dedicated to promoting moral growth in 1977 when the staff began working with Lawrence Kohlberg. The school consists of 82 students (sophomores, juniors, and seniors), five full-time staff, a guidance counselor, and a school secretary. A satellite of the larger public suburban school, Scarsdale High School, the A-School, as it is known, seeks a balance of boys and girls representing a broad range of academic success and experience: it is not a program that caters to a category of student; disaffected, gifted, average, or learning disabled. Rather, it welcomes all of these, so that perspective-taking is maximized.

Significantly, students choose to enter the program. For the past eight years roughly one hundred 9<sup>th</sup> grade students from the larger public high school have participated in the lottery which determines who will take the twenty-six spaces available to incoming sophomores. Students elect to enter the program because they know it personalizes school, because it offers them a narrative report card that gives them authentic feedback about their strengths and deficits as learners, because it gives them practice in the application of skills and knowledge, and because it engages them in questions of moral consequence in their daily lives.

How is that engagement effected? In other words, how does this school community promote positive student development individually and a culture of caring and justice? A senior, writing in the Scarsdale High School PTA magazine commented,

*We are not bound together simply because of our enrollment in the A-School, but also by our support for each other. It didn't take very long for me to realize what effect the A-School community would have on my own personal growth. In my sophomore year, the community elected me as head and organizer of the annual Alternative School fair. I had never been in charge of people older than I, and the idea of telling a teacher what to do was daunting. However, teachers and students alike willingly encouraged me to develop my skills as a leader. The A-School community encouraged me as I learned how to guide a group of eighty people towards a fun and successful fair.*

Implicit in this young woman's comments is a valuing of democratic practice. Indeed, democracy is not just a buzz word in the A-School. Substantive decisions are made by the school community utilizing the principle of one person, one vote, and enforcement as well as enactment of rules are collective obligations. Students at the A-School talk about this set of practices as *ownership*.

### School Structures

#### *Community Meeting*

The school's success is built on the premise that only through foundational structures can all the various kinds of teenagers who enter its doors acquire this unique kind of preparation for life. Throughout the A-School academic year, student-led Community Meetings are held one afternoon a week for one and a half hours. The agenda is the outgrowth of the deliberations of an Agenda Committee that has clarified the issues at hand and has ranked them in the order of

importance to the school community. At the Community Meeting, the discussions result in the establishment of new rules, expectations, and procedures. However, although Community Meeting is the legislative branch of government at the A-School, some of the most important dialogue is not legislative in its intent. Rather, there is often open sharing of concerns, disagreements, and sources of conflict, which lead to the kind of cognitive dissonance based on authentic moral dilemmas that are essential to moral growth in all people.

#### *Core Group*

Once a week, each student also participates in a smaller meeting called Core Group with sixteen fellow students and a teacher/advisor who also holds an individual meeting at least once every three weeks with each of his/her advisees, which significantly personalizes and improves the monitoring of a student's life in school. In addition to forging close relationships among students and teachers, Core Group also serves important administrative functions, including helping students plan for their January Internship, the fourth A-School structure.

#### *Internships*

Begun in 1973 as one of the oldest high school internship programs in the U.S., the A-School Internship program requires that all students grades 10 through 12 access the perspectives available in "the world of work" and benefit from the kind of hands-on education not often available within the four walls of the school.

#### *Fairness Committee*

Agenda, Core Group, Internship, and Community Meeting are closely linked structures designed to push students to enhance their perspective taking skills, helping them prepare for life in a democratic society. In a community in which students are encouraged to make public their expectations of others, to debate proper behavioral norms, and to formalize these expectations

and norms through democratically determined rules, another structure is necessary to determine fair consequences for those who do not abide by the rules and norms. Fairness Committee, initiated in 1979 as part of Lawrence Kohlberg's Just Community concept of schooling, consists of a representative group of students including one trained student facilitator who leads the case. A teacher also sits on the case as a voting member of the Committee. The task of the Fairness Committee is to hear and decide cases of alleged rule violations and to determine appropriate action as well as to try to settle any type of grievance brought before it. Recent Fairness cases have involved cheating, bullying, lateness, use of drugs, violations of deadlines, and disrespect of fellow community members. Every community member regards it as her or his duty to serve on a Fairness Committee when called to do so.

#### Discipline and Moral Education

Because the issues that bubble up in the cauldron of teenagers' lives each year are different and because the conversation around those issues is the opposite of scripted or canned, how the structures come together is different every year. This is character education of the rawest, most authentic type.

An example from the fall of 2010 is illustrative of the process: The A-School math teacher, new to the program, was meeting in the hallway outside her room with an advisee. Inside the classroom, five seniors were studying for a test that was going to be given in the next hour. Two of the seniors saw the test itself on the teacher's desk and began to read it. Another senior, realizing what was going on, confronted her peers and told them to stop, pointing out that it violated a cheating rule that had been drawn up by a committee of students and teachers and adapted by democratic vote at a Community Meeting the previous year. Not only did the two ignore the "confronter" but they then solicited the assistance of a fourth senior who had helped

the two students “get the right answers.” Then, the bell rang which alerted the offending three students to hide their indiscretion before the test was given.

After cheating occurred on the test, the confronter brought it to the attention of the teacher, and they brought the three offenders to Fairness. Consequences included a zero on the test, a public written apology to the class, and an obligation to lead a Community Meeting focused on clarifying how cheating is destructive to a community of learners. This conversation, in turn, led to smaller less formal conversations in Core Groups.

The central role of the Fairness process in making ownership function and serve as the engine for the moral growth of students cannot be underestimated. A 1999 graduate of the Alternative School explained the very personal context in which that growth occurs. Similar to participants in the 2010 incident, she described “sitting on a fairness committee” deliberating over a case in which “a young woman had cheated. She described her experience this way:

*And I remember the teacher felt so horrible for bringing her (the student) to fairness because she (the teacher) really wanted to deal with it on her own. But you know, we have to do it here within the structure. And for me, hearing what prompted the cheating, and obviously it's not justified, got me thinking about the pressure within this district. Fairness, in simple terms, becomes a vehicle for the adoption of multiple perspectives.*

The oversimplification of moral dilemmas becomes impossible. The value of turning the abstract other into a fellow human being becomes a core tool in the skill set of the newly conscious student now attuned to issues of justice, empathy, and care. For students in democratic schools, and more specifically in Just Community schools, justice and caring are not abstractions or homilies. They are lived values that are part of the fabric of their education. They are as important as history, algebra, and chemistry.

## Measures of a Successful Model of Youth Development

Neither conventional academics nor preparation for democratic citizenship are given short shrift at the Scarsdale Alternative School as its record of 100 percent college acceptance over the past ten years suggests.

The A-School demonstrates the way in which work on academics and character education can complement each other. In 2003 the Character Education Partnership recognized the A-School as a “National School of Character.” Just as significantly, studies of A-School students and alumni regarding their growth in prosocial behavior (Markman, 2000), empathy (Barr, 2005) and moral development expressed as committed community, and global participation as alumni (Horan, Higgins-D’Alessandro, Vozzola, and Rosen 2009) confirm the power of the Just Community approach in its impact on the character and moral education for the people who have benefited from participation in this notable kind of democratic schooling.

More recently, in the spring of 2013, responding to James Rest’s Academic Motivation and Integrity Survey (AMIS) 84.6% of Alternative School sophomores reported a positive sense of belonging to their school community and school 90% of A-School juniors reported a positive sense of belonging to their school community. In recent years, the A-School has served as a model utilized by new small schools in communities as diverse as New Haven, Connecticut (New Haven Academy, a public magnet school) and Breckenridge, Colorado (the Peak School, a public charter school).

In the fall of 2009 a freshman at Lehigh University and a recent graduate of the Scarsdale Alternative School put it best in describing the way his high school experience differed from that of his peers:

*The community-oriented values of selflessness, generosity, and compassion that are instilled within every A-School member are beneficial to those members' success in the future. Of course, it can be helpful to have a competitive drive to succeed, but the negative consequences of such a drive can be detrimental to reaching success in the workforce. For example, no one befriends the student who never helps out other students and always says no when asked to share his study guides. In the same way, a disliked professional who is unemployed will have a hard time finding a job because he has not networked well or he has alienated his co-workers. The community-oriented nature of the A-school is more comparable to life after graduation than the fiercely competitive nature of the main school.*

The way to dispel the corrupt morals and values of the students in a traditional education system is to embrace a community-oriented process of learning. It is much more productive to be motivated by a community of supportive classmates and caring teachers than by the destructive do-or-die atmosphere of needless competitiveness and obsessive materialism. I have learned that the skills and experiences we acquire from a nurturing community enrich our lives more than money ever could, and I hope to share that value with my peers at Lehigh.

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