

CULTURE

Schooling for Troubled Kids, from the Libertarian Tradition

BRIAN DOHERTY | 1.27.2014 12:15 PM



The Freeman has an [interesting account of a specialized school for troubled teens](#) called "Freedom Mountain Academy," written by Ross Benes.

While the story doesn't stress this, the school's operator Kevin Cullinane started as a chosen successor to early libertarian guru Robert LeFevre who ran the mid-60s all-libertarian Freedom School, later known as Rampart College. (LeFevre's story is told in my book [Radicals for Capitalism](#).)

You might or might not agree with the specific tenets and techniques of the school. They involve:

students start with few privileges but gain more and more as they demonstrate commitment and personal responsibility. That little twist from entitlement and punishment to earning and reinforcement rekindles motivation in FMA's students. The curriculum reinforces this approach by rewarding students' efforts....When students first arrive, they forfeit their electronic devices....



Fee

and:

The first book they read is Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, which chronicles Frankl's struggle to find purpose in his life as an Auschwitz prisoner. Students discuss the book's theme of suffering and how it relates to their own feelings. At this point they go on their first expedition into the wilderness, where they live off the land for 10 days, learning to work with and rely on one another.

"When you're out in the wilderness you really can see how we're all connected to each other," said former FMA student Travis Ackerman. "They teach you how to grow up and take care of yourself. They don't just teach you to memorize facts but they push you to think of new ways to solve problems," he said....

The level of regimentation they put the kids through isn't something I'd be comfortable with, but then again I don't have "troubled kids" (or any). The students also work on the farm connected to the school, which provides most of their own food. The article gives at least some anecdotal evidence that the structure helps some kids who needed self-discipline.

The quality of the education itself is libertarian-flavored, even if the relationship between the school and its students is not:

"We don't teach political history," Kevin Cullinane said. "Instead we teach the history of human progress...."

"The classes don't just teach you what a public school would teach you. He teaches the truth about things the government might conceal," [one student] said, noting that class discussions about the Waco siege and the confrontation in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, opened up her mind. But rather than just take his word for it, Mr. Kevin instructs students to do their own research, she said.

Benes draws the lesson that, whether or not the FMA methods are good for everyone, its existence is:

an example of how independent philosophies can be more effective in helping troubled young people than any uniform system or standardized regime. If Cullinane had to follow rules from a higher district or board, he would not have been able to create his unique program. And his students would likely not have found a program that worked for them.

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