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REFORM SCHOOL OR SCHOOL REFORM?

**ROSS BENES**

Learning about life from Victor Frankl, earned privileges, and living off the land

Editors note: FEE is celebrating *National School Choice Week*.

What's gotten in the way of education in the United States is a theory of social engineering that says there is ONE RIGHT WAY to proceed with growing up. —John Taylor Gatto

Freedom Mountain Academy (FMA) is a one-room, unaccredited boarding schoolhouse and farm in the Appalachian Mountains. The school caters to students who've struggled in regular school settings, but the public schools might learn a thing or two from FMA's model.

Parents from around the country send their children to schools like FMA in hopes that it will get their lives back on track.





systems, said Cullinane, a former marine and former counterinsurgency intelligence expert. And according to FMA alumni, Cullinane has found a novel way to motivate students and get them to change their attitudes.

In traditional schools, students start with all of the ordinary privileges, which are then removed for bad behavior. At FMA, 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—all of which is kind of like life.

When students first arrive, they forfeit their electronic devices and all use of electricity. FMA has this rule in order to “eliminate constant trivial pursuits,” said Margaret Cullinane, the school's director and Kevin's daughter. And it comes as a rude awakening.

Former student Taylor Meidinger, 16, of Packwood, Washington, said most students can handle the isolation for a week or two. But after a few weeks, Meidinger said, students miss their electronics, the outside world, family, and friends. They usually hate their new environment until they reach the two-week holiday break in December, when they go home. “At this point everybody tries to talk their parents into letting them stay home,” added Meidinger. “Then they come back for the second semester and start to realize what opportunities they have . . . and they start liking it.”

Relying on One Another

FMA also incentivizes students to develop a sense of collaboration. 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.



FMA from Omaha, Nebraska, had to work with his classmates to set up camp, chop wood, start fires, and cook food. Learning to cooperate didn't teach him rugged individualism, but rugged collaboration. After completing this first expedition, students reach the first of four levels of achievement. Each level grants both privileges and responsibilities in return for students' adapting and adhering to expectations at FMA. Level one gives them permission to leave the building at will as long as they stay nearby. Reaching level two means students can range farther from the building. At level three students are free to roam the entire campus. For more than 90 percent of the students, this level is the extent of their achievements.

A select few, however, reach level four, at which they can help teach a class of their choosing. Fewer than 10 percent of the students reach this level, though more than 95 percent complete FMA's nine-month program.

Pissed at the World

Incentivizing privileges had an effect on Meidinger, who came to the school because she was disobedient, refused to try in school, and rebelled against her parents. Like many teenagers, she was "pissed at the world" and felt her actions didn't matter. But after being stuck at level one and not being allowed much access to the rest of the academy's campus, things changed.

"I learned that if I did my homework I could access more privileges," she said.

"Having to go through the different levels . . . taught me that if I don't put in any effort to make my life better, I'll just keep running in a circle." She is now enrolled at a local high school in Washington.

FMA caps enrollment at 18 students each year, which helps with community building.

"I really enjoyed the small school atmosphere," said Ackerman. "It helps with one-on-one interactions . . . since the group is small and you do everything together, they treat you like family."



School, Work, Release

When students are not in class or on an expedition, they must rise early to work on the farm, which produces 70 percent of what students eat.

Mitch Dawe, 18, of Longmont, Colorado, said he enjoyed the three-part curriculum, as it allowed him to break up the day.

“Work sounds terrible,” he said. “But it’s relieving from school work, where you just sit six to eight hours a day.”

Having to do hard labor and “not be coddled” instilled an eagerness to work in Dawe, whose parents sent him to FMA because he was getting poor grades and not doing his homework. After completing FMA’s academic program, he enrolled at Redstone College in Colorado, where he’s studying aviation mechanics.

As you’d probably expect, what goes on inside the classroom is no less unorthodox than what goes on outside.

“We don’t teach political history,” Kevin Cullinane said. “Instead we teach the history of human progress. That way we won’t be subject to people twisting words and turning them into weapons.”

These “freedom classes” taught by “Mr. Kevin” were Meidinger’s favorite part of FMA. The classes give students an alternative look at history, politics, and government.

“The classes don’t just teach you what a public school would teach you. He teaches the truth about things the government might conceal,” she 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.

This unconventional approach to education also appealed to Travis’s father, Ken Ackerman, a retired real estate broker with an M.Ed. who now runs an online



Community College in Omaha. He hopes to transfer to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he can study film.

Travis's father saw a change in his son's attitude after he came back from the academy. He had an attitude of self-reliance, respect for his parents, and pride in his accomplishments.

"It helped me realize a lot of things," Travis Ackerman said. "I didn't feel like I had a true identity to myself before I went to FMA . . . It helped me realize who I am in a way. It helped me mentally in that I now know I can accomplish goals I set."

Lessons

Educational consultant Lon Woodbury, who runs a website that provides information on alternative schools for struggling teens, estimates there are about 400 to 600 private residential programs and schools for teens with problems. Although there are many other schools with missions similar to FMA's, these schools cannot address the behavioral issues of troubled students.

- In 2011, 7 percent of high school-aged students **dropped out of high school**.
- An estimated **1.9 million crimes** took place at a public school in the 2009–2010 academic year.
- More than **2 million students were suspended** in 2009.
- Up to **7.5 million students miss a month** of school each year.

These numbers are too large for schools like FMA to combat. It would be unfair simply to project FMA's small-scale model onto large public schools. Still, perhaps there are some takeaways.



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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