

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – EAU CLAIRE

SOMETHING MORE THAN A GRADE BOOK:
THE EAU CLAIRE COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER 1971-1974—A FREE
SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

From roughly 1967-1973 there was a Free School Movement in the United States. From coast to coast hundreds of small, alternative schools sprung up in individual communities in a direct opposition to public schooling. Disenchanted with the public school system—its hierarchal structure, its strict rigid atmosphere, and the quality of education they provided—young parents and teachers created their own schools. Each school emerged at the grass-roots level. Despite this, they all possessed similar characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

“The most deadly of all possible sins . . . is the mutilation of a child’s spirit.” It is not possible to spend any prolonged period visiting public school classrooms without being appalled by the mutilation visible everywhere – mutilation of spontaneity, of joy in learning, of pleasure in creating, of sense of self. . . Because adults take the schools so much for granted, they fail to appreciate what grim, joyless places most American schools are, how oppressive and petty are the rules by which they are governed, how intellectually sterile and aesthetically barren the atmosphere, what an appalling lack of civility obtains on the part of teachers and principals, what contempt they unconsciously display for children.

Charles Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom* (1970)

In the 1960s the American Education System was in a state of crisis. At this time there were a number of professional jobs emerging in America’s post-industrial, technologically based society. When it became evident that there was a lack of citizens whose training and education was insufficient to meet the rigors of these new professions, people pointed the finger at America’s education system. This realization forced a major reassessment of America’s school system.

The feeling was further intensified by the sheer number of students attending public schools. Triggered by the baby-boom, the American school system was flooded with an unprecedented numbers of students in the 1960s. Desperate for teachers to serve these children, many schools were forced to utilize sub-standard teachers at a time when “195,000 teachers were needed to wipe out deficits, replace substandard teachers, and reduce class sizes to manageable numbers.”¹

Numerous voices in the media were criticizing the public schools for their inadequacies. Education critics, like Paul Goodman, were the most ruthless in their

¹ Richard Layman, ed., *American Decade 1960-1969s*, vol. 7 (New York: Gale Research Inc., 1995), 114.

attacks on the public school system. Not only did Goodman claim schools were failing children, he went as far as to say they were harming them. He saw the regimentation of formal schooling as nothing more than a day-care for younger children, and a concentration camp for adolescents. He saw public education as completely void of fruitful, intellectual learning.

Having published many books criticizing the system Goodman led the way for a plethora of education critics such as George Dennison, Allen Graubard, John Holt, Herb Kohl, Jonathon Kozol, A.S. Neill, Carl Rogers, and Charles Silberman. These critics, who became the leading free school advocates, endlessly condemned schools for their overall inability to create young individuals capable of thinking intelligently because of the narrowness and rigidity instilled in the public school system. They condemned every aspect that defined a public school, “the large classes, the teacher with absolute power to administer a state-directed curriculum to rigidly defined ages groups, [and] the emphasis on discipline and obedience...”. These critics instead advocated a curriculum where students could engage in their own learning by determining for themselves how they learned, what they would learn, when, where, and with whom they would learn.²

Out of frustration with the education system, young parents and teachers took matters into their own hands. As members of the 1960s youth revolution, these young adults lived in a time when authority was questioned and challenged at every level. And the basis for their actions, was a belief “that society had become corrupted by materialism [and] the best remedy was a return to basic values.”³ So with the works of education

² Mario D. Fantini, “The What, Why, and Where of the Alternatives Movement, *The Educational Digest* (September 1973): 4-5.

³ Richard Layman, ed., *American Decade 1960-1969s*, vol. 7 (New York: Gale Research Inc., 1995), VIII.

critics like Goodman in hand, young ambitious individuals set out to create their own schools which would foster pure learning free from regimentation and bureaucracy. The schools that they created resulted in the Free School Movement which lasted from roughly 1967 to 1973.

To be certain, there were several different types of alternative schools that emerged or operated during the Free School Movement. Some were geared towards the needs of either minority or poverty stricken communities, some were Therapeutic Schools which catered to children who were emotionally disturbed and presented themselves more as a treatment center. Others were Public Alternative Schools which operated as “opportunity centers” within an established public school system. These schools were primarily found in poverty stricken districts with a high drop-out rate. Others alternative schools were Residential Free Schools where students lived and learned on premises in a rural, out-door setting.

However, 80 percent of all alternative schools were Free Schools.⁴ Free Schools were those schools loosely organized by parent programs and developed by middle class parents who believed they were capable of educating their own children.⁵ Free Schools also included Free High Schools which often began when a few high school students got together, sharing a common belief that their current public school was too oppressive. Adults or parents often served as directors or resource people.

Of the different types of alternative schools these Free Schools that catered to the white middle-class, were the most numerous. After a few hundred had emerged across the country in a relatively short time span of roughly four years, their existence gained

⁴ President’s Commission on School Finance, *Free And Freedom Schools: A National Survey of Alternative Programs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), 29.

⁵ *Ibid*, 13-18.

the attention of the government and education scholars. Seeking to make sense of these small, individual schools that strayed from traditional formal schooling, scholars and government commissioned studies sought to study these schools. According to one author, Vernon Smith, “over two hundred articles and books on alternative public schools have been published since 1970.”⁶ Many of the articles Mr. Smith was referring to appeared in scholarly educational journals such as *Today’s Educations*, *Parents’s Magazine*, *The National Elementary Principal* and *Harvard Educational Review*. Authors of the articles and reports sought to generalize characteristics, and find common threads that tied all free schools together.

Of all that was published, there is virtually no publication that tells the individual story of one of the small, white middle-class free schools that emerged during the movement. What remains are government documents, books, and articles that point out common characteristics that existed among the hundreds of grass-roots schools. Therefore, this paper examines one particular free school that operated in Eau Claire, WI from 1971-1974. By examining this one particular school we gain a better understanding of how these individual free schools emerged, operated, and eventually died out.

The first section of the paper will describe the general characteristics shared by most free schools across the country. The second part of the paper tells the story of one such school. With information provided in the first section, the reader will be able to clearly identify the ways in which the school was typical of the movement. It must be clear to the reader that the school was typical of the movement since it’s story is being used to demonstrate more clearly how Free Schools emerged, operated, and eventually

⁶ Vernon H. Smith, *Alternative Schools: The Development of Options in Public Education*. 1974. 23.

died out.

The Community Learning Center in Eau Claire, WI opened in 1971 and disbanded in February of 1974. The first year the school served roughly 50 students ranging in age from infancy to 19. The second year, 1972-1973, the school split and operated as two different schools; the Discovery School which served the younger students, and River City School which served the older students. In the third and final year of the school, 1973-1974, the two sections merged as one school again, but nowhere near the size of the original in 1971. Throughout the third year, the school began to disband as the year progressed and came to an end in the early spring of 1974.

CHAPTER 2

The Free School Movement

Within a five year span, between the years 1967 – 1971, the number of free schools throughout the United States exploded.⁷ By 1971 there were roughly 350 free schools operating in 39 of the 50 states; a dramatic increase when compared to the 20 or so that operated in 1967.⁸

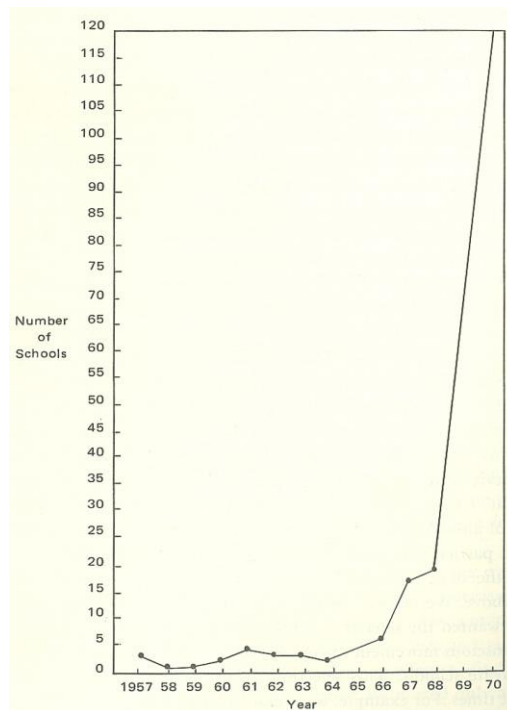


Figure 1. Number of Schools Founded by Year (1957-1971)⁹

⁷ Allen Graubard, “The Free School Movement,” *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 351-373.

⁸ President’s Commission on School Finance, *Free and Freedom Schools: A National Survey of Alternative Programs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), 1.

⁹ President’s Commission on School Finance, *Free and Freedom Schools: A National Survey of Alternative Programs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), 20.

The distribution of free schools throughout the country was not even. They were concentrated in urban areas, “especially those with high concentrations of university and college-associated people.”¹⁰ Such areas included the San Francisco Bay area, the Chicago area, the Boston area, Madison-Milwaukee, and Minneapolis-St. Paul.¹¹

For purposes of studying and documenting these new schools, which sprang up across the country in a relatively short time, the President’s Commission on School Finance, which collected its data in 1971, defined the criteria that would determine if an alternative schools was indeed a “free school.” As stated by the commission, a school was considered a “free school” if it achieved the following: “refrained from institutionalized coercion, de-emphasized traditional curriculum, encouraged authentic self-motivation, emphasized individual abilities and character – not formal training—in the recruitment of teachers, and eliminated rigid age and grade-level separation of students.”¹²

Unlike public schools, which stressed order and discipline, free schools primarily aimed to give students freedom. In free schools, students determined for themselves how they learned, what they learned, and when, where, and with whom they would learn.¹³ The leading free school advocates of the time endlessly condemned schools for their overall inability to create young individuals capable of thinking intelligently because of their narrow and rigid education. It was Allen Graubard, a very instrumental player in

¹⁰ Allen Graubard, “The Free School Movement,” *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 357.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² President’s Commission on School Finance, *Free and Freedom Schools: A National Survey of Alternative Programs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), 3.

¹³ Mario D. Fantini, “The What, Why, and Where of the Alternatives Movement,” *Educational Digest* (September 1973): 4-5.

the free school movement, who most eloquently described the general idea behind free schools:

...children are naturally curious and motivated to learn by their own interests and desires. The most important condition for nurturing this natural interest is freedom supported by adults who enrich the environment and offer help. In contrast, coercion and regimentation only inhibit emotional and intellectual development.¹⁴

In his book, *Crisis in the Classroom* (1970), Charles Silberman gives several examples of the “coercion and regimentation” in public schools that hindered the learning of students.

One example he used was an item from the book, *Up the Down Staircase*:

“[In public schools] there is a premium on conformity, and on silence. Enthusiasm is frowned upon, since it is likely to be noisy. The Admiral [the administrative assistant] had caught kids who came to school before class, eager to practice on the typewriters. He issued a manifesto forbidding any students in the building before 8:20 or after 3:00—outside of school hours, students are “unauthorized.” They are not allowed to remain in a classroom unsupervised by a teacher. They are not allowed to speak without raising a hand. They are not allowed to feel too strongly or to laugh too loudly.”

The result is to destroy students’ curiosity along with their ability—more serious their desire—to think or act for themselves.¹⁵

Persuaded by the arguments of educational reformists like Silberman, young parents and teachers embraced the free school philosophy and began their own schools.

Free schools were typically started by young, white, liberal-minded parents from the middle-class who were looking to give their children the best possible education.¹⁶

Parents who formed the school often took on major roles both in the classroom as teachers and also in administration.

¹⁴ Allen Graubard, “The Free School Movement,” *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 352.

¹⁵ Charles Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom* (New York: Random House, 1970), 136.

¹⁶ Allen Graubard, “The Free School Movement,” *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 351-

In her book *Organization Without Authority*, Ann Swidler further explains why young, middle and upper-middle class parents were the most likely to be active participants in free schools. To do so, she introduced the “Educational Upgrading Model” and the “Postindustrial Model” which suggested the majority of middle-class parents supported the ideas behind free school learning because they were no longer docile, blue-collared workers. By the late 1960s and early 1970s most young parents had been influenced by the postindustrial society that had emerged in the United States when World War II ended. Most middle, upper-middle class parents had become members of the new stratum of educated professionals who, unlike blue-collared workers, needed to possess flexibility, innovation, and intellectual curiosity to meet the requirements of their job. These were also the skills free schools aimed to teach their students, so parents in the upper and upper-middle classes quickly realized these schools were a way to teach their children the skills which had benefited them in their careers.¹⁷ Swidler further explains that the importance society placed on the professional careers, and the value placed on professionals’ opinions, created professionals who were exceedingly self-confident. As a result, self-confident professional, who were also parents, began to challenge many elements of traditional social organizations such as the school system. Swidler’s model explains both why parents of the middle/upper-middle class supported free schools, and also why parents become so actively involved.

Teachers were also part of this growing knowledge society and they too began to revolt against tradition patterns of power and authority. These teachers who began to challenge and rebel against traditional patterns became the teachers who taught in free

¹⁷ Ann Swidler, *Authority Without Organization*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 150-157.

schools.¹⁸ Aside from actively involved parents, free schools were also supported by the young teachers who found themselves disgruntled with the public education system at this time. They too took stock in the teaching of educational reformists and saw free schools as a place to test their teachings.

Whether the teachers were a parent, trained teacher, or a volunteer, the most common characteristic shared by free school teachers was their young age. Sixty-three percent of all free school teachers were in their twenties.¹⁹ Given the unstable financial situation of most free schools it was very difficult for older people to participate – most had families to support and could not risk job security and a dependable income. Younger people, free of many responsibilities and obligations, were therefore the most likely to volunteer their time or be willing to work for very little pay.²⁰ However, this contributed to a high turn over rate of teachers.

<i>Staff* Characteristics</i>		
Number of staff: 2,600		
Ethnic characteristics of staff:		
85% white	11% black	4% other
Age distribution:		
Under 20 years of age:	6%	
20-29	: 63%	
30-39	: 20%	
Over 40	: 10%	
* Exclusive of volunteers.		

Figure 2. Staff Characteristics (Exclusive of volunteers)²¹

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Allen Graubard, "The Free School Movement," *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 359.

²⁰ Ibid, 351-373.

²¹ President's Commission on School Finance, *Free and Freedom Schools: A National Survey of Alternative Programs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), 32.

The young teachers' lack of experience was not considered a disadvantage. In free schools, the role of the teacher was not so much to teach, but to serve as a resource person who would assist a child in any way they could to the best of their ability. Because free schools wanted to individualize learning for the student, nearly two-thirds of free schools enrolled less than forty students. Graubard explains that these numbers, more than anything, reflect a "conscious commitment to a special kind of intimate community... [where] staff people can truly relate to each other and to all the children, thus avoiding the impersonality associated with mass education institutions."²²

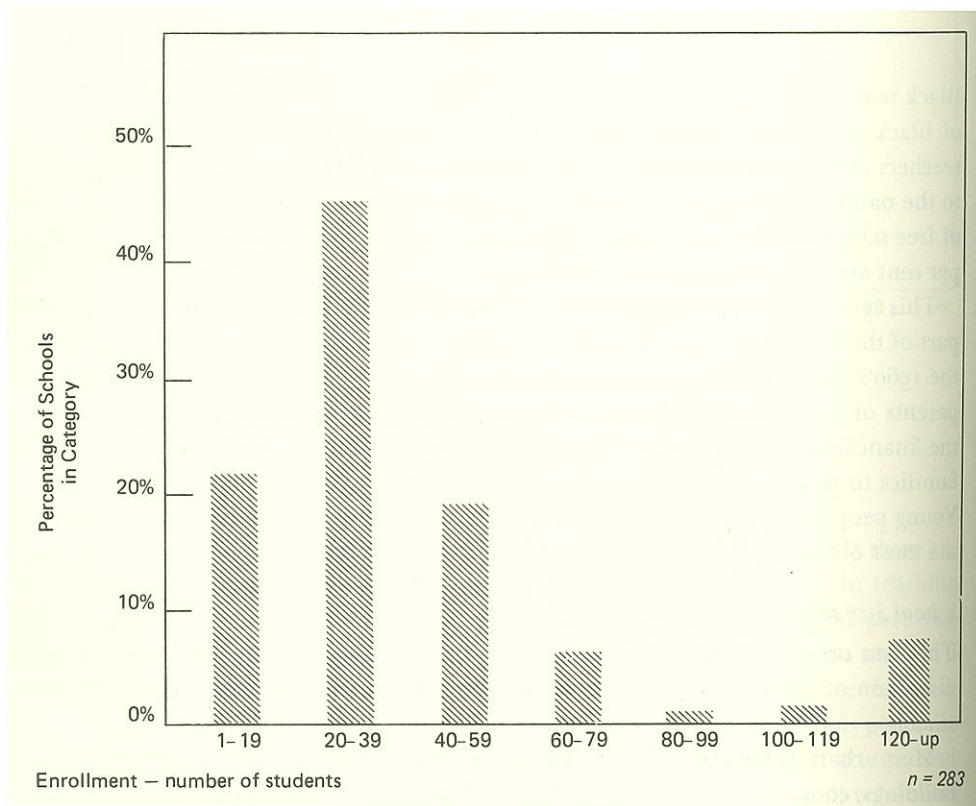


Figure 3. Percentage Distribution of Schools by Pupil Enrollment²³

²² Allen Graubard, "The Free School Movement," *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 351-373.

²³ President's Commission on School Finance, *Free and Freedom Schools: A National Survey of Alternative Programs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), 28.

The main source of income for free schools was tuition. However, in many cases tuition was paid on a sliding scale, which meant parents were asked to pay whatever they felt they could afford.²⁴ This explains in part the financial difficulty many free schools faced. Because free schools did not want to be seen as elitist, many refrained from turning students down who could not afford the cost of tuition. Accepting those who could not afford tuition of course contributed to many of the financial difficulties schools faced. Without tuition there was no way to pay either teacher's salaries or rent for the building in which the school was housed. To help defray costs, or as a result of having very little money, free schools often used private homes as classrooms. Tuition for free schools ranged anywhere from \$0 - \$1200.

The life span of an individual free school was typically very short. As stated by Allen Graubard, an education reformist, "A considerable number of free schools close after one or two or three years of existence."²⁵ However, Suzanne Fremon, author of *Why Free Schools Fail* (1972), stated that many lasted for an even shorter time, and marked the average life span of a free school at nine months.²⁶ She argued that first and foremost, the most obvious problem that free schools faced was a lack of money. Second, she linked the failure of many free schools to the quality of the teachers. She wrote, "The young people who set out to run free schools are, by and large, not yet good teachers. Most of them are untrained and inexperienced. And many have abandoned their own educations prematurely."²⁷

²⁴ Allen Graubard, "The Free School Movement," *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 361.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 355.

²⁶ Suzanne S. Fremon, "Why Free Schools Fail," *Education Digest* (December 1972): 18.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

CHAPTER 3

The Eau Claire Community Learning Center

For [parents], the public schools as they now exist are not places they want their children to be, and there are students and teachers who have similar feelings. So, in keeping with a great American tradition of self-help, these few parents, students, and teachers have decided that if you want good schools and want them now, you'll have to do it yourself.

Allen Graubard, *Free the Children* (1972)

In the late 1960s literature that advocated free schooling had become widely circulated and was growing rapidly in popularity, especially in the academic community. In colleges young, aspiring teachers were studying the popular education critics like Allen Graubard who advocated free schooling. Additionally teachers were experimenting with bits and pieces of the new philosophy in their own classrooms.

One young teacher interested in new, alternative forms of education was LaMoine MacLaughlin. Having graduated in 1964 from the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire with a Bachelors Degree in English, LaMoine MacLaughlin began his teaching career at St. Bede's Academy, a private school in Eau Claire, in 1967. In the four years that MacLaughlin worked at St. Bede's he taught English, History, and Latin.

Throughout his time at St. Bede's LaMoine found himself very interested in, and persuaded by, the new teaching methods that were being discussed in popular literature. One article that LaMoine found very influential was Ray Schofield's "Why Not?," published in *Educators Guide to Media and Method* in 1968. The article presented a series of questions that challenged the fundamentals of the public school system. Author Ray Schofield asked, "Why not dissolve the red ink communication ... The difference

between a student and a teacher should be something more than a grade book or an answer book.”²⁸ Lamoine shared articles such as this with his students and many quickly took an interest in the free school style of teaching and learning that was being advocated.²⁹

Outside of St. Bede’s LaMoine was a husband and father of three. As his oldest daughter Mary neared schooling age, LaMoine and his wife Mary Ellen began to consider the best possible opportunities for their daughter’s education. Like many other educators and parents at this time, LaMoine and Mary Ellen believed that alternative forms of schooling, such as those publicized by education reformists, could provide their children with a more substantive and fruitful education than could public schools. Like many free school supporters, the MacLaughlins believed that learning was a hands-on process; their children would learn best if placed in an environment where they could be actively engaged in their learning process. But unfortunately, there were no alternatives available in the Eau Claire area for MacLaughlin’s young daughter.

While in his fourth year at St. Bede’s, 1970-1974, LaMoine decided he was up to a challenge as a young educator and set out to create an alternative school in Eau Claire, WI. Having kept in contact with several UW—Eau Claire faculty from his time as a student there, LaMoine approached several professors, asking what they thought of his idea, and also if their children would be interested in attending such a school. Of the many professors who claimed they would support the new school, only a handful would truly commit. LaMoine found true support from John Lawler in the art department, Dr. Calvin Eland professor of education, Allen Curtis assistant professor of English, and Dr.

²⁸ Ray Schofield, “Why Not?,” *Educators Guide to Media and Methods* (September 1968).

²⁹ In LaMoine’s third and fourth year at St. Bede’s, he also served as Director of Educational Activities alongside teaching.

James Benning professor of psychology. Upon the formation of the new school, these individuals would all play an active role in the school as well as enroll their own children.³⁰

Throughout the spring of 1971, while still at St. Bede's, LaMoine continued to gather support for his school by advertising to the community. He placed advertisements in the newspaper, relied heavily on word of mouth, and organized community meetings. Some meetings attracted up to 40 individuals who ranged from parents and their young children to high school aged students looking for an alternative to public school. Alongside gaining community support, LaMoine and a few of the most serious supporters began looking for faculty and a building to house the school.

On May 19, 1971 the school, now officially called the Community Learning Center, was granted an Article of Incorporation in order to form a non-stock, non-profit corporation under Chapter 181 of the Wisconsin Statutes. Incorporation secured the personal finances of those involved if a lawsuit were to be brought against the school. It also set forth how the corporation would operate as an entity, and how responsibilities for the corporation would be shared amongst officers, directors, and trustees.

On May 22, 1971 the CLC held it's first meeting.³¹ In compliance with Chapter 181, officers, directors, and trustees were chosen. The officers were: President LaMoine E. MacLaughlin, Vice President Steven Dobson, Secretary Mary Sandok, and Treasurer Patrick Devine. The Directors, who were legally responsible for the school, included: LaMoine E. MacLaughlin, Mary Ellen MacLaughlin, Edward L. Eiserberner, Janet F. Eisberner, Steven Dobson, John Lawler, Robert Smith, and Patrick Devine. At this

³⁰ JoAnne Brandes, "'So much activity, it's exhausting' at Learning Center," *Spectator*, 9 September 1971, 3.

³¹ Community Learning Center will hence forth be abbreviated as CLC.

meeting the trustees of the corporation were also named: James Benning, Calvin Eland, Allen Curtis, Betsy Savides, Janie Aasen, and Mary See.³² Officers lacked any real administrative power, but performed their respective duties: the president and vice president were responsible for organizing and facilitating the corporation's monthly meetings, the treasurer was responsible for the corporation's finances, and the secretary was present at each monthly meeting to record the main points of discussion. The directors, who had to be over age 18, had the most power and were legally responsible for the school. The trustees served as an advisory board to the directors. Because trustees could be under 18, many were students because the directors wanted input from older students as well as parents.

From the efforts made by LaMoine, his wife Mary Ellen, UW—Eau Claire Professors, and numerous parents, one can see that like almost all free schools created in the country at this time; the Community Learning Center was truly the result of a grass-roots effort. Furthermore, it was an effort that grew out of direct opposition to public schooling, the most common reason why free schools emerged.

The Community Learning Center – Year One

On August 23, 1971, the Community Learning Center opened with 50 students with the purpose of providing “an open, stimulating, purposeful, and challenging learning environment...dedicated to the needs, purposes, and interests of its individual students.”³³

³² Articles of Incorporation, 1971. Folder 3. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975. Box 1, Folder ?. UHC 281. Special Collections and Archives. McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

³³ Proposal, n.d. Box 1, Folder 3. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

The new school was housed in a building rented from the Grace Lutheran Parish Church located on West Grand Avenue. The school had libraries, discussion rooms, a music room and several other rooms that were used as classrooms. Each of the classrooms, staffed by an instructor, focused on a different subject: art, history, social studies, mathematics, science, English, French, and Russian.³⁴

However, students were not herded from room to room on a strict time schedule. The school was designed to function as a single, openly-structured, learning environment, with no distinct barriers between grade levels. In a letter to the school's staff, LaMoine described the philosophy behind the structure.

We must understand that all areas of knowledge are interrelated—that any division or departmentalization of knowledge is artificial and academic. Although recognizing the necessity of ability and expertness in certain areas, we must remember that each of our staff members is not a teacher of English, or of science, or of art, but of children.³⁵

Students at the Community Learning Center were free to spend as much time as they pleased in any of the classrooms working independently or with instructors one-on-one. When a child tired of working on a project, they would move to a different room to pursue a new project, or continue work on an existing project. Cal Eland, UW—Eau Claire professor, member of the CLC Board of Directors, and parent of a CLC student, recalled that the atmosphere at the school was very relaxed: "...there was lots of running and jumping. One of the upstairs rooms had a mattress in it...The poor mattress lasted only a short period."³⁶

³⁴ The Community Learning Center, Inc. n.d. Held in the private collection of LaMoine and Mary Ellen MacLaughlin.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Calvin Eland, interview by author, 27 March 2008, via e-mail.

Despite the relaxed atmosphere, a quality education was a top priority for many of the young teachers and parents involved with the school. Even though students were largely in control of their own schedules and course work, their individual curriculum was structured much like today's Independent Study courses on college campuses. Students had advisors that would fill out a form identifying the name of a course a student would take from them, and then list the goals and objectives, activities that would be incorporated, and a bibliography that listed the material a student would read during the course. When a student felt they had met their goals and objectives and completed the readings, the form was signed and dated indicating the course was complete.

The CLC employed a staff of roughly 12 instructors.³⁷ Like LaMoine, there were many young teachers willing to teach in schools that were experimenting with new methods of education; some 300 persons applied for positions at the school.³⁸ As in many free schools, parents, especially, took on active rolls in the CLC. Parents, and the initial founders, LaMoine and Mary Ellen were directly involved with the school as teachers. LaMoine taught English, social studies, and Russian, while his wife, who had a Bachelor's Degree in Biology, taught science. Three of the other instructors were also parents of children enrolled in the school.³⁹ The teachers at the school, along with the building and necessary materials, were financed by a yearly student tuition of 250 dollars.⁴⁰

³⁷ JoAnne Brandes, "'So much activity, it's exhausting' at Learning Center," *Spectator*, 9 September 1971, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ The Community Learning Center, Inc. n.d. Held in the private collection of LaMoine and Mary Ellen MacLaughlin.

⁴⁰ JoAnne Brandes, "'So much activity, it's exhausting' at Learning Center," *Spectator*, 9 September 1971, 3.

Typical of many new corporations the first year at the CLC was not without its hardships. One of the hardships the school faced in its first year was financial difficulty. The budget that was in place, dictated that CLC teachers would receive a set yearly salary. As the year progressed it was realized by the CLC board and staff that this was a poor set-up. The corporation's income depended on an unsteady source – the tuition from an unknown number of students. Therefore, if the number of students was lower than expected, which is indeed what happened, there was not enough income to pay the teachers the full amount they had been told they would receive. By the end of the year, some teachers had received very little of their pay due to a lack of funds. But being whole-heartedly dedicated to students and in many cases, to their own children's education, they continued to teach relying on the income of their spouse. However, by the end of the year, paying back-salaries grew to be a very important issue as many teachers grew frustrated.⁴¹

The second hardship the school faced was a seemingly large divide that emerged between younger students and their parents, and the older students. The young students at the school were very excited about learning and their parents were very passionate about providing an atmosphere which fostered that excitement. The oldest students in the school (the oldest being 19), were less passionate about their education and saw the CLC as cop-out form of education. To them, the CLC was a refuge; a place where they could hang out, smoke, and escape the strict rules imposed by public school teachers and principles.

The attitude of these older students, and those individuals within the CLC corporation who supported them, created a serious point of conflict when matched to the

⁴¹ LaMoine E. MacLaughlin, interview by author, 20 April 2008.

goals and ideals of parents such as the MacLaughlins who were truly focused on providing a solid and fruitful educational experience for both their young children and others'. Calvin Eland, also a parent who wanted a strong education for his children, remembered an event that clearly demonstrates the divide, and actions which triggered it: "Rules at the school were minimal...One of the ten-year old boys smoked a cigar, and that upset me. Apparently other parents weren't that upset."⁴²

Furthermore, as the first school year came to an end, the corporation was forced to locate a new building for the upcoming school year. The building in which the CLC operated from during the 1971-1972 school year was scheduled for demolition to make room for needed parking. This, compounded by back-salaries that were owed, and the clear divide that had emerged among corporate members (members included both parents and the students), motivated LaMoine and Mary Ellen McLaughlin to branch off from the Communit Learning Center to form their own school. In the spring of 1972 LaMoine presented his proposal to the CLC Board of Directors:

Mary Ellen and I want to develop a school for our children where their natural joy and vitality and enthusiasm and spontaneity and concern and creativity and curiosity can grow and develop and flourish...We feel that preserving and developing a child's innate curiosity and sense of wonder—of discovery—is what school is all about.⁴³

Additionally, they believed it was possible to provide a solid education with a balanced budget.⁴⁴ As a way to avoid monetary issues suffered in the 1971-1972 school year, the MacLaughlin's proposed using a bus as the base of operations for the school which was named Discovery School. The bus would enable the MacLaughlin's to use

⁴² Calvin Eland, interview by author, 27 March 2008, via e-mail.

⁴³ La Moine E. MacLaughlin, n.d. Folder 2. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁴⁴ LaMoine E. MacLaughlin, interview by author, 20 April 2008.

the entire community as a learning resource. Roughly half the corporate members supported the MacLaughlin's new school; primarily those who had younger children.

In late July a second proposal was drafted and submitted by seventeen individuals (primarily students and six adults)⁴⁵ to form River City School, another alternative school that would operate under the Community Learning Center umbrella during the 1972-1973 school year.

According to Allen Graubard in his book, *Free the Children*, the split that occurred within the CLC, and the reasons for the split, were both common occurrences within free schools across the country. In discussing why schools would often split, he explains:

People often have differing ideas about the school, even within the generally shared free school framework; and these differences frequently lead to serious conflicts which can result in splits within schools and the spinning off of new schools.⁴⁶

Graubard focused on the Santa Barbara Community School to demonstrate one of the reasons why splits within schools often occurred:

It was felt by some of the staff, and especially the two parents...that this group of the older students created a bad atmosphere in the school [and] they were undesirable as models for the younger children...⁴⁷

In the instance of the Eau Claire Community Learning Center the two schools that spun off from the original were Discovery School and River City School. And the reason

⁴⁵ Of the five adults, four were parents of students who attended either River City School or Discovery School. Two of the adults were Allen and Lucille Curtis whose daughter Colleen Curtis would attend River City School; two more were Patrick and Maureen Herriges whose children (Chris and Greg) attended Discovery School, the fifth adult was Val Schmidt mother of Karen Schmidt who would also attend River City School, and the sixth was a young teacher Kathy Paus (who formally taught at the CLC it's first year)

⁴⁶ Allen Graubard. *Free the Children* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 48.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 49.

why those two schools were created, one to cater to younger students and one to cater to the older, was very typical.

Discovery School – Year Two

On August 28, 1972 the MacLaughlins began Discovery School with 13 students. LaMoine and his wife Mary Ellen served as the instructors and were assisted by four student teachers they had procured from the University of Wisconsin —Stout.⁴⁸

Like the Community Learning Center the school was supported by a tuition fee; \$35.00 per month plus a yearly \$50.00 activity fee. However, unlike the CLC, the MacLaughlins used a percentage based scale to determine the staff's salary. Of the tuition paid, 90% was used to pay staff (which was primarily LaMoine and Mary Ellen) and the remaining 10% was used for all necessary supplies. The \$50.00 activity served to take care of the bus's expenses. As a result of this financial plan, Discovery School remained financially solvent while under the direction of the MacLaughlins.⁴⁹

The base of operations for Discovery School was a bus; a fully equipped mobile classroom on wheels that utilized the entire community as a learning resource. Every morning the MacLaughlins picked up their students, who ranged in ages 5 to 14, and traveled to a new location within the Chippewa Valley. Even though the locations varied every day, and instruction was individualized, there was a daily structure that was followed.

Mornings were spent focusing on analytical skills. While traveling to, and while at the day's destination, students were asked questions that prompted them to recognize,

⁴⁸ LaMoine E. MacLaughlin, Discovery School Monthly Report no.1, September 1972. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁴⁹ LaMoine E. MacLaughlin, interview by author, 20 April 2008.

analyze, and seek out interesting aspects of their surroundings. Around noon, students were taken to any Eau Claire public school where they received hot lunch. After lunch, students re-boarded the bus and often traveled to a park where the remainder of the day was spent focusing on communication skills. Students were encouraged to read about, write about, or draw a picture regarding something that had interested them that morning.⁵⁰

Daily destinations were incredibly varied. They included learning centers such as the UW-Eau Claire, the Eau Claire Public Library, and the UW-Eau Claire and UW-Stout Art Centers. Other destinations included local businesses such as Gilbert's Auto Repair, the Coca-Cola Bottling Co., Lienenkugel's Brewery, American National Bank, and Sacred Heart.⁵¹ There were also many destinations that fostered recreational activities such as horseback riding, bowling, airplane rides, roller-skating, swimming, and go-carting.⁵²

During the free school movement it became very popular for free schools to use the community as a classroom. Free schools who utilized this approach were often called "schools without walls." Joan Kent, who was quoted in a government report titled, "Free And Freedom Schools: A National Survey of Alternative Programs," explained best why the method was seen as an advantage. "American schools imagine students learn best in a special building separate from the community,' in fact: This has created a refuge in which students and teachers do not need to explore, only to accept."⁵³

⁵⁰ LaMoine and Mary Ellen MacLaughlin, *The Basic Daily Schedule*, n.d. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁵¹ Discovery School Monthly Schedules, August – May. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ President's Commission on School Finance, *Free And Freedom Schools: A National Survey of Alternative Programs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), 61-62.

The 1972-1973 school year at Discovery School started out extremely well. According to LaMoine's September monthly report they had reached a maximum capacity of 16 students.⁵⁴ Using the community as a classroom was working out very well, parents and students were actively involved, and they were also doing well financially.⁵⁵

Continuing into the months of October, November, and December the school continued to thrive. The bus had been paid off, a Discovery School Scholarship Fund was established for students in financial need, and the MacLaughlins were looking into purchasing a larger bus so they could expand.⁵⁶

Due to the success of Discovery School, and lingering frustration that the corporation was not fully committed to paying back-salaries from the previous year, LaMoine decided over Christmas break that it was time to pursue an excellent job opportunity that had presented itself prior to the 1972 school year. LaMoine passed up the job opportunity in fall because he was determined to provide a quality alternative education program for his own children and others'. Having accomplished that goal, LaMoine informed the corporation in January that he would be resigning as Director of Discovery School and his wife Mary Ellen would be assuming his position as Director. LaMoine accepted a position in the Wausau area at the North Central Community Action

⁵⁴ By January they had upped enrollment to twenty students: Jane Blair, Kurt Brendt, Janet Brummond, Marm Cederholm, Cal Craker, Mark Craker, Rodine Craker, Anne Curtis, John Eland, Robbi Eland, Jeff Henning, Dawn Lawler, Erin Lawler, Karen MacLaughlin, Mary MacLaughlin, Curt Meyer, Mike Wagner, Chris Herriges, Greg Herriges, and (?) Curtis.

⁵⁵ LaMoine E. MacLaughlin, Discovery School Monthly Report no.1, September 1972. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Agency as the regional Youth Development Director. In this position, LaMoine was in charge of two alternative schools, one for dropouts and one for Native Americans.⁵⁷

In January Mary Ellen MacLaughlin assumed the position as Director of Discovery School and Pat Herriges was hired as the Assistant Director. Pat Herriges had been an active member of the Community Learning Center from the beginning, and was also the father of two young children, Chris and Greg, who attended Discovery School. Prior to teaching at Discovery School he worked as Director of Planning for the Community Action Agency in White Hall, WI.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, Pat Herriges only held the position until April, primarily due to personal financial reasons.⁵⁹ Mike Jamison was then hired as his replacement and began May 1.⁶⁰ Mike Jamison had also been previously involved with the CLC. He served as Chairman since the beginning of the school year in August 1972 and then continued to serve as Chairman of the CLC until the corporation's dissolution in 1974.⁶¹ Mr. Jamison's wife was also an active member of the CLC who served as corporate secretary from September of '72 until December 1973.⁶² Like the MacLaughlins and Herriges, the Jamison's were also active parents of children who attended the CLC.

After the completion of a very successful school year at Discovery School, Mary Ellen and her three girls Mary, Karen, and Laurel moved to the Wausau area where LaMoine had been working since January.

⁵⁷ LaMoine E. MacLaughlin, interview by author, 20 April 2008.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ It was suggested that "personal financial reasons" were the result of an impending divorce.

⁶⁰ Mary Ellen MacLaughlin, Discovery School Monthly Report no. 8, April 1973. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁶¹ Corporate Secretary, Monthly Reports, 1972-1974. Folder 5. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁶² Ibid.

River City School – Year Two

The second school that operated under Community Learning Center Corporation during the 1972-1973 school year was the River City School. Initially organized by parent Patrick Herriges (whose two children, Chris and Greg, attended Discovery School), the school was largely developed and run primarily by its students. In September Mr. William McCarthy was hired as the coordinator and served as the primary teacher.

On Tuesday, September 12, 1972 classes began at River City School with 13-14⁶³ students.⁶⁴ By the start of the school year, no building had been procured for the upcoming year but classes began regardless by meeting in private homes. A letter, written in November by the Eau Claire Superintendent reveals that Mr. Curtis's home, whose daughter Colleen attended the school, was "used as one of the many sites of the River City School."⁶⁵ Throughout the first year of River City School a building was never obtained for the school and students continued to meet in private homes.

One of the generalizations made about free schools was that using homes for classrooms was quite common.⁶⁶ Sources that generalized free schools indicated the reason was financial; rent was a major cost for free schools and holding class in a private home was a way to cut costs. Cost was a very likely factor why River City School never sought a building in its first year.

⁶³ Four of which were: Melissa Coffey, Andrew Karvel, Terry St. Germaine, Steve O'Malley (River City School: January and February Reports Folder 8)

⁶⁴ Monthly Report, 19 September 1972. Folder 5. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁶⁵ Dr. Marvin G. Lansing Superintendent of Schools to Mr. Allen Curtis, 30 November 1972. Folder 2. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁶⁶ Allen Graubard, "The Free School Movement," *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 364.

In preparation for the first school year at River City a detailed curriculum plan had been drafted and titled, “River City School/ Ran-Dumb Directions.”⁶⁷ The one page plan outlined 18 different courses of study that the school would offer, and then broke down what would be taught within each course. For example; listed under “Math” is: algebra, practical/business math, math reading, and logic & geometry. Listed after each course, was the name of the person who would be teaching the course.

However, it is questionable to the extent in which the curriculum plan was implemented. The teaching staff at River City consisted primarily of volunteers who taught whatever they felt qualified to teach, and donated their time whenever they could.⁶⁸ Some volunteered for a 3-4 week period while others taught two days per week over a longer period of time. Volunteers ranged from UW – Eau Claire professors, to a UW – Eau Claire student, to those who simply had an interest in a subject and were willing to donate their time. To recruit teachers and volunteers for River City School, River City School hung posters around the Eau Claire Area.

Having to rely on volunteers, the number of courses offered and the duration of courses were quite meager. For example, in the month of February there were two courses offered; one volunteer taught English and a second volunteer from UW-Eau Claire taught general math twice a week.⁶⁹ Throughout spring there was a woman who taught Spanish, a college student from UW-Eau Claire who taught biology. Bill, the Director, was teaching animal behavior. But for the most part, students at River City

⁶⁷ There is no date or author listed on this document. So it is unclear which director planned to utilize this curriculum and therefore unclear which school year this was intended for. It is safe to presume it is for the first year of the River City School because a monthly report made in September 1972 indicated that 20 classes had been set up at the River City School. This list of classes is most likely what was being referred to.

⁶⁹ William McCarthy, River City School Report, February. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

worked individually on anything that was of interest to them: reading, spelling, practicing with a musical instrument, and other longstanding projects such as films.⁷⁰ By and large, students were free to engage in anything they chose.

This type of un-structured, loose atmosphere was a quality free schools aimed to possess. After all, “the movement began in direct, explicit opposition to the structure, the methods, and the outcomes of public schooling in this country...”.⁷¹ For many free schools, this desire to stray as far from the rigidity of public schools as possible created an atmosphere that was tolerable of somewhat questionable behavior. The freedom and tolerance that students experienced at River City is most evident in an incident recorded by a few citizens from the Eau Claire community who visited a location of the River City School. The following excerpt is from a letter the citizens sent to Dr. Marvin G. Lansing, Superintendent of Eau Claire Schools expressing their distress upon witnessing what was going on at River City.

“... we were bothered most by two things: (1) the great amount of smoking students indulged in, including what seemed to be drug usage, and (2) an incident that occurred while we were there: we actually surprised two young adolescents [sic] in the act of intercourse. We were shocked that everyone there seemed to know that these activities were going on and at least tolerated, if not even condoned them.”⁷²

Furthermore, the letter suggests the extent to which the curriculum was being taught and the overall involvement of the students.

“Talking to students revealed that most only attend on the average of two or three times perweek [sic], and then only part time daily. What brief ‘discussions’ we saw there consisted of brief exchange of opinion.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Robert C. Riordan. *Alternative Schools in Action* (Bloomington, Indiana: unknown, 1972), 7-8.

⁷² Several citizens concerned about education to Dr. Marvin G. Lansing, 26 November 1972. Folder 2. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971- 1975.

⁷³ Ibid.

This letter indicates that the two free schools operating in Eau Claire were fundamentally very different even though they both based their curriculum on the principle of freedom. The same letter that demonstrated disgust towards River City School applauded Discovery School, its Director LaMoine MacLaughlin, and his staff who were described as “very able people [who] are developing an interesting approach to education.”⁷⁴

In April of 1973, River City School Director William (Bill) McCarthy resigned from his position.⁷⁵ Choosing brevity over eloquence, Bill stated in his resignation letter, “I’m broke, moderately discouraged, and have an over-arching need to get the hell out of education for awhile.”⁷⁶ In search of a new Director, student Andrew Karvel located 22-year-old Chris Datta, a former student at the University of Minneapolis, Minnesota, who accepted the position as Director of River City School.⁷⁷

A few months later in April, Chris Datta was interviewed by *The Spectator*, the UW—Eau Claire student newspaper. When asked about the challenges he faced as Director, he identified funding was the number one problem. As a solution to this problem, he mentioned that the students were planning fundraisers to help with financial difficulties.

For many free schools, money was typically the biggest challenge to overcome, and most often the reason why they ultimately failed. Tuition was often based on a sliding-scale so that persons of lesser economic status could still afford to attend. With

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Annie Savides. River City School Monthly Report n.d. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971- 1975.

⁷⁶ William McCarthy to the Community Learning Center Inc., Resignation letter, 20 March 1973. Folder 4. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975

⁷⁷ Sandy Highly, “New Director of free school hopes for larger enrollment,” *Spectator*, 26 April 1973.

the tuition that was collected, many expenses had to be covered: the teacher's salary, rent, utilities, meals, books, and supplies. It was very typical for free schools to raise funds through fundraisers such as bake sales, rummage sales, and car washes.⁷⁸

Tuition for River City School was based on sliding scale of \$20 - \$40 per month depending on the parent's, or student's, ability to pay. In his interview, Director Chris Datta also commented on the tuition as being one of the lowest in the country.

In the summer, prior to the 1973-1974 school year, Dave Kysilko joined Chris Datta as a co-director.

The Community Learning Center – Year Three

The 1973-1974 school year saw the combining of the Discovery School and the River City School as they both relocated to the same building located in downtown Eau Claire on 8 Farewell Street.

The Discovery School was run by Michael Jamison, who had assumed the position of Director when Mary Ellen MacLaughlin and her children moved to the Wausau to be with LaMoine at the beginning of the summer. Unlike the MacLaughlins, Michael Jamison chose not to use the bus as the base of the school, and therefore the school re-located to the building on Farewell Street.

Director Michael Jamison and the Discovery School shared the building with River City School and it's Co-directors Chris Datta and David Kysilko. According to a student who attended the CLC these three men became equal directors of the school at this time. The student explained: "Originally Mr. Datta and Mr. Kysilko [sic] were hired as directors of River City School...and Mr. Jamison director of Discovery School....This

⁷⁸ Allen Graubard, "The Free School Movement," *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 361.

year the two schools have combined, so the three directors work with students from both levels.”⁷⁹ “Both levels” refers to the younger kids who were part of Discovery School and the older kids who were part of River City school.

At the beginning of the 1973-1974 school year, there were 15 students enrolled at the school ranging in ages from 10-17.⁸⁰ The number of students enrolled at this point indicates a significant drop in interest and lack of support for the school. The previous year, there were twenty students alone who attended Discovery School, and a year before that 50 who attended the CLC it’s first year.⁸¹ The combined attendance of both schools being only 15, indicates a significant drop in interest and support for the school.

In September of 1973 the *Spectator* interviewed Kysilko and Datta. In the interview, they described what the curriculum was like at the school. Datta explained, “there is no set curriculum...the structure of the public school may work for some students but others can learn more with the freedom this school offers. Some students become bored in a structured class and at the free school the slower students can work at their own rate.”⁸²

This statement demonstrates that the learning style being promoted at the school was identical to that being promoted by free school advocates such as Vernon Smith, author of *Alternative Schools* (1974). In his book he states:

“Different children learn in different ways and at different times. Yet, for many years American public education has been attempting the impossible – to teach every child in the same way at the same time...The public schools cater to

⁷⁹ Andrew Karvel, Community Learning Center student, “Learning center story in error,” *Spectator*, 4 October 1973.

⁸⁰ Charles Dillett, “Learning Center moves to Farwell St.,” *Spectator*, 20 September 1973.

⁸¹ LaMoine and Mary Ellen MacLaughlin, “Discovery School Attendance 1/8/73—2/16/73” Held in the private collection of LaMoine and Mary Ellen MacLaughlin.

⁸² Charles Dillett, “Learning Center moves to Farwell St.,” *Spectator*, 20 September 1973.

those who learn best in traditional academic programs at the expense of those who need different learning experiences.”⁸³

The free-wheeling curriculum gained a little bit of structure from the courses that were offered. Alongside a few traditional courses, many non-tradition courses were offered, such as: radio, fencing, video tape, philosophy, chess, and photography. The courses lasted for however long there was interest, ranging anywhere from a few weeks to several months.⁸⁴

By November of the 1973-1974 school year Mr. Jamison resigned as Director of Discovery School (still his official title, even though all three men worked as equal directors in the school). Aside from losing a director, the school faced continuous problems throughout the months ahead which contributed to the school’s impending closure.

A report by David Kysilko made earlier in the year described the rough condition of the building: “The school building itself continues to get a little hassle from the Red Cross and certain building inspectors, but we ain’t kicked out yet.”⁸⁵ But by January, Eau Claire City Inspectors declared their building unfit for a school, mostly due to fire regulations, and required that they find a new building within 60 days.

At February’s monthly meeting of the board both Dave Kysilko and Chris Datta announced that they would be resigning. Mr. Kysilko stated that his decision to resign and move was “...due to small enrollment, the scattering of students’ interest and attendance, the coldness of winter, and the various psychological and monetary hassles

⁸³ Vernon Smith. *Alternative Schools: The Development of Options in Public Education* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Professional Educators Publications, INC. 1974), 12.

⁸⁴ Sandy Highly, “New Director of free school hopes for larger enrollment,” *Spectator*, 26 April 1973.

⁸⁵ David Kysilko, School Report: River City School, 20 November 1973. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

attendant upon [the] school...”⁸⁶ These reasons for his resignation demonstrate the further deteriorating state of the school.

The school lingered on for a few more months. After being instructed by the Eau Claire City Inspector that the school would have to move, the CLC Board decided that the school would relocate to the basement of Maureen Herrige’s home. Maureen was an active member of the CLC since its beginning and also served as a teacher both the previous year at River City and also during the 1973-1974 school year.

However, the new location for the school was short lived. Maureen Herriges soon announced her resignation from the CLC and that she would be moving; therefore her home was no longer available for use.⁸⁷

By this time few parents were involved with the school. It was only due to the persistence of a few remaining students, who desperately wanted to remain outside the public school system, that the school continued to operate in its meager, homeless, director-less, state. Stewart Strum was one such student who wished to continue at the CLC. He suggested at the February monthly meeting that Jerold Heidtke, a fellow student, be hired as the new Director.⁸⁸ At the same meeting, Jerold agreed to volunteer as Director receiving no pay.⁸⁹ The eight remaining students⁹⁰ met for class in the apartment of Stewart Strum.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Chris Datta and Dave Kysilko, Community Learning Center School Report, 10 February 1974. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁸⁷ CLC Secretary, CLC Board Minutes, 10 February 1974. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁸⁸ It is not known by the author if Jerold Heidtke was a student at this particular time when he volunteered to serve as Director. According to LaMoine MacLaughlin during his interview with the author on April 20th he was a student. But February’s 1974 monthly report states he would serve “so long as his union was on strike.” That leads one to think he had graduated already and was then volunteered his services at this time.

⁸⁹ Chris Datta and Dave Kysilko, Community Learning Center School Report, 10 February 1974. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

On February 20 the CLC board met for an emergency session to discuss the diminishing state of the CLC. Realizing the tremendous lack of interest on the behalf of both parents and students, the remaining members weighed the schools options: continue the school until June, abandon the school but continue the corporation, or dissolve the corporation altogether. They also discussed where the remaining students would attend school if the corporation decided to dissolve. The meeting concluded with a motion that was seconded to “continue with the present structure...and that plans be made to...discover and mobilize interest in Eau Claire in Education Alternatives with the public school system.”⁹²

The last meeting of the CLC board was held on March 10, 1974 and the state of affairs remained the same. There was no money, only three dollars remained in the CLC account, and no-one, aside from student Jerold Heidtke, had stepped forward to serve as a Director for the remaining students. March’s monthly meeting was the last on file. It can be assumed that after March, the CLC had faded out of existence.

⁹⁰ At the special meeting that was held on February 20, 1974 the students were listed as: Chris and Greg Herriges, Mark and Cal Kraker, John Zchelce, Stewart Strum, and Mary & Karen McLaughlin. However, according to LaMoine MacLaughlin during an interview with the author on April 20, 2008, he indicated that this was not accurate. His girls Mary and Karen were living in Wausau at this time with him and his wife. He speculated that this list of students was presented to the board to make it seem like their were more students interested in attending the CLC then there actually were.

⁹¹ CLC Secretary, Special Meeting Minutes, 20 February 1974. Folder 8. Community Learning Center (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1971-1975.

⁹² Ibid.

CONCLUSION

As seen in their stories, the Community Learning Center as a whole, the two schools which blossomed underneath it, and the school which operated the third year, were all very typical of free schools that emerged and operated during the free school movement.

The Community Learning Center began during the 1971-1972 school year; the year which saw the greatest numbers of free schools emerge.⁹³ Like nearly all free schools the CLC emerged in a town that had a university and relied heavily on the support of professors. Many professors from UW-Eau Claire were active in supporting the development of CLC: John Lawler from the UWEC art department, Dr. Calvin Eland professor of education, Allen Curtis assistant professor of English, Patrick Devine a faculty assistant in the accounting department, Robert Smith assistant professor of journalism, and Dr. Raymon C. Babb from the psychology department.

Also typical of all free schools the CLC emerged from a grass roots effort. Spurred by LaMoine MacLaughlin, young, white, middle-class parents got together and believed that they could create a school and a curriculum that could better educate their children than could the public school. Like most schools, these parents played a critical role in the school throughout its existence – they served as teachers, worked as volunteers, and served on the CLC Board as either an Officer, Director, or Trustee. Everyone who was involved was very young in age – such as Director of River City School Chris Datta who was 22. As noted by authors who wrote about free schools during their height of popularity, the young age of most directors, compounded by low

⁹³ Allen Graubard. *Free the Children* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 41.

pay resulted in a high turn-over rate. This was seen as well throughout the life span of the CLC.

From the school's highest enrollment of 50 students when it first began, to its lowest enrollment of 8 students prior to disbanding, the number of students enrolled was very typical as well. Roughly 86 percent of all free schools enrolled between 1-59 students.⁹⁴ Also like the majority of free schools (some 81 percent), the CLC relied solely on tuition to survive.⁹⁵

The curricula for the original CLC, Discovery School, and River City School was also very typical of free schools. By and large, students were given the utmost freedom to learn and inquire about whatever was of interest to them. The directors and teachers served as resource people who assisted students in learning. Authority, rules, and discipline were left behind to create an environment that would foster a rich and enjoyable learning experience.

Another characteristic of the CLC that was quite typical was the split that occurred after the first school year. It was fairly common that the two schools that emerged from the split, Discovery School and River City School, each catered to a different age group. One of the most common reasons for the split was also demonstrated in the CLC story: parents of the younger students grew unhappy with the attitude and behavior of the older students.

The CLC also encountered other similar problems as did most free schools. As demonstrated by the original CLC and River City School, money was one of the chief difficulties. Many of the teachers at the CLC did not receive their full salary.

⁹⁴ President's Commission on School Finance, *Free And Freedom Schools: A National Survey of Alternative Programs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), 28.

⁹⁵ Allen Graubard, "The Free School Movement," *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 361.

Regardless, they continued to work with a promise from the CLC Board that they would eventually be paid back-salary. However, many did not receive their back-salary because there simply was not enough money collected from tuitions. This situation made many people frustrated. LaMoine MacLaughlin broke off and formed Discovery School because he believed it was possible to have both: a solid education and a balanced budget. As demonstrated by his Discovery School, not all free schools failed due to a lack of finances.

Never the less, most free schools failed in a relatively short period of time. The CLC was a typical example of the free school movement because of its short life-span. Both authors Allen Graubard and Suzanne Fremon generalized on how long free schools typically lasted. Allen Graubard suggested that the majority close after “one or two or three years of existence.”⁹⁶ Suzanne Fremon deemed the average life-span nine months. The CLC corporation as a whole disbanded after three years, and each individual school that was created only lasted 9 months (one school year) before it morphed into something different, or ceased to exist.

By looking at the individual story of one free school we gain a better understanding of how hundreds of schools all created at the “grass-roots” level possessed such similar characteristics. We also better understand how these schools operated, the challenges they faced, and why they ultimately failed.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 355.

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