

Alternative School on P.E.I. - It finally does exist

"Really? You mean it's not just talk?"

"No. It's a fact. There really is an alternative school on P.E.I."

So it goes. For years people have been discussing the possibility. Now that it is here, announcement of the fact is often met with surprise, if not down right disbelief.

But it did happen. The Charlottetown Independent School (C.I.S. for short) opened it's doors this September in the basement of the Spring Park Church. It started with one full-time teacher, ten children of elementary school age, a qualified assistant, and a company of eager and actively involved parents.

Small beginnings? Indeed. But the idea has become a reality. And it's working. Moreover, those involved in its creation, parents and non - parents alike, are supremely confident that the island's first alternative school not only will continue but that it will also set a precedent for more to come.

Why? In a word PEI is uniquely situated for this kind of breakthrough in education.

For one thing the tradition of the one-room school is still alive here, at least in memory. It is a cherished tradition and it is one into which an alternative or "free" school easily fits.

For another thing, a basic principle of alternative education is community orientation, something far less difficult to achieve in a rural society than in the urbanized complex.

To be sure, the C.I.S. has a long way to go. There are certain problems - staring it in the face. The most obvious one is that of money. The school seeks funds to expand facilities, to increase staff, to pay the rent.

Then there are the characteristic difficulties of how to adjust curriculum input to non-compulsory (free) learning situations. In this connection parents meet regularly in open sessions and invite outside consultation to discuss the educational goals of C.I.S.

But the school has already come a long way, in an incredibly short span of time. An important first step has been accomplished, one that says a great deal in support of the value of a non-coercive approach in education. It is this. The pupils themselves sparkle with excitement about C.I.S. Each parent attests to the fact that his or her child never resists attending school, and becomes unhappy at the thought of missing a day.

In this C.I.S. has already fulfilled one important goal of the free school movement in general.

THE FREE SCHOOL MOVEMENT

Alternative schools vary from place to place, even as individual pupils. Many common points of view and approaches exist, however. In fact, people speak, for lack of a better term, of a free school "movement".

One basic shared attitude is that education should be child-centered rather than teacher centered. The alternative school, therefore, seeks to create free, open learning environments. It stands against compulsory, regimented, drill-type "schooling".

In this connection the movement developed as a genuine counter to the public school system of mass education or, more properly, of education in mass. It remains a genuine alternative and should not be confused with interesting experimentation or liberal reform.

More precisely, the "philosophy" behind the free school holds that whatever the reforms and however well-intentioned teachers may be in the system, the public school system itself is severely limiting and counterproductive. And that it becomes even more so as it grows in size and complexity. Thus, more uniformity not less is required. More regimentation. More need for teacher education which stresses class-room control.

All of this mitigates against the goal of free inquiry and adds to the paradox of "free" compulsory

education, the paradox upon which the public school system is largely based. It is no accident, then, that standard teaching methods for large classes turn out to be little more than variations of rote-learning process because they often feel confined.

As suggested the Charlottetown Independent School certainly has its problems. But aside from that of the lack of adequate funds, they reduce in the main to the rather "happy" ones of how to channel the energy, enthusiasm and ex-

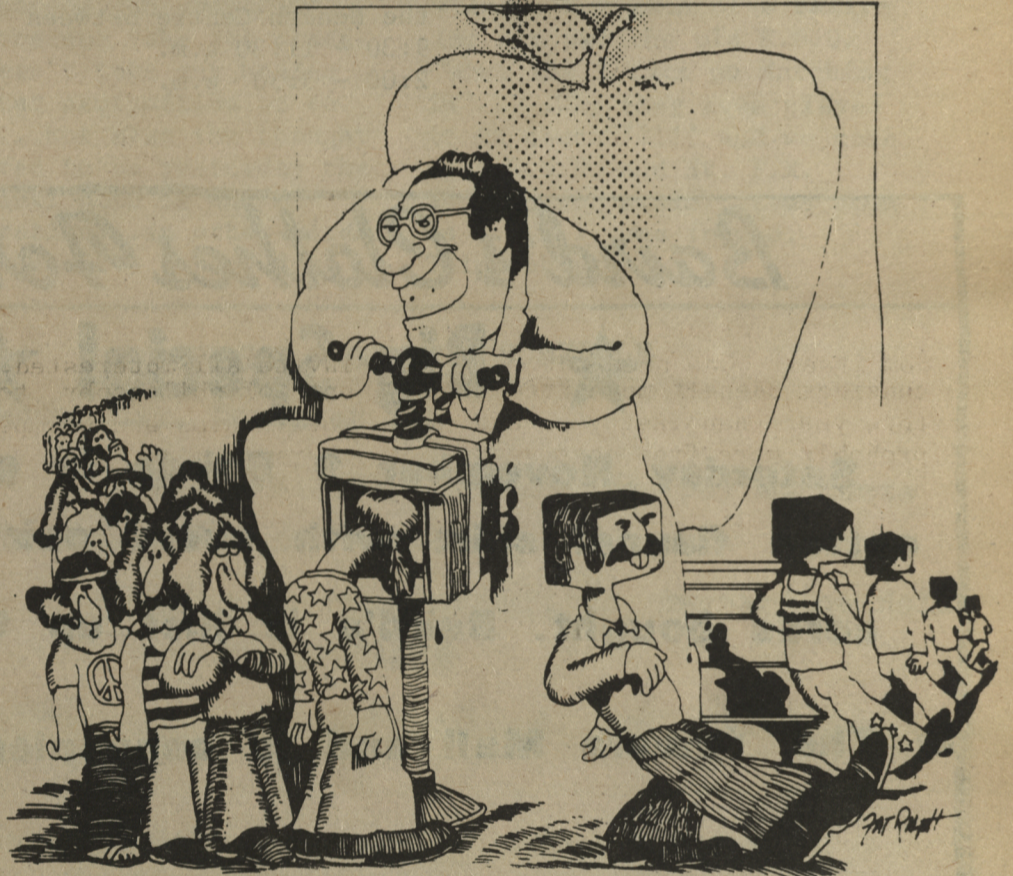
citement of its children.

With this in mind C.I.S. is confident that it will contribute to the community. The school feels confident also that it is worthy of the community's support, and asks for it without reservation.

Certainly, one would assume, that first in line to offer support will be students who have been involved in education for a great part of their lives and faculty members for most of their lives. And this is one of the reasons this piece is appearing in the U.P.E.I. paper.

Contributions will be accepted by Don Mazer of the Psychology Dept. and also by the CADRE.

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