

You Don't Have to Go to School

Contributed by Ksenia Podrova
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Introductory comments by Dmitry Orlov: A small but already by no means negligible number of Americans is starting to realize what their future looks like: no retirement, no job, no savings, plus they are getting old. Their only possible means of support in old age is their children.

And so, in the meantime, let's continue to mindlessly send our children off to "learning" institutions, where they will be properly supervised at all times, bored half to death, medicated into submission should they rebel, even by simply refusing to pay attention, not taught anything worth knowing by demoralized, underpaid public servants, and then spat out into the world with their spirits crushed.

On second, thought, let's stop doing that. When thinking about making big changes, sometimes it's healthy to hear of places halfway across the world, which may have their own issues to deal with, but they are not the same ones we have here, allowing us to see past them. But the problem of institutionalization of children and emphasis on mindless discipline and rote learning is the same in all "developed" nations, being part of the worldwide legacy of industrialization and militarism, which we all have to deal with somehow. And a good first step is to starve this mindless suicide machine of fresh cannon fodder - by denying it access to our children.

Here is the story of a Russian woman's experience with pulling her three children out of school that I thought would provide some valuable perspective to people in the States who are confronting the same decision, so I translated it.

You don't have to go to school

by Ksenia Podrova, St. Petersburg, Russia

Translated by Dmitry Orlov

I have known this for sure for twelve years now.

During this time, two of my children have received high school diplomas while sitting at home (since it had been decided that these could turn out to be useful to them during their lives). My third child passed exams for the primary grades without attending classes, and is not about to stop there. Honestly, I am unconcerned. And I don't get in the way of them choosing whatever substitute for school they manage to think of.

When my eldest was in secondary school, I started noticing that all too often he would recall situations of the following type: "I started reading a really interesting book during math class today;" or "I started composing a new symphony during history class;" or "It turns that Peter plays chess quite well -- we played a few games during geography today."

And I started thinking: why is he going to school? Is it to study? But then he does completely unrelated things during classes. Is it to socialize? But then it's possible to do that outside of school.

Shift of consciousness

And then a sudden shift occurred in my consciousness. And I thought: "Maybe he shouldn't go to school at all?" For a few days we discussed this idea. Then I went to see the school principal and told her that my son will no longer be attending school. (Afterwards many of my friends told me: "You were lucky to have such a principal! What if she didn't agree?") But it had nothing to do with the principal. If she didn't agree, this would not have changed our plans at all. It's just that in that case our further steps would have been slightly different.

The principal (whom I remember with sympathy and respect to this day) was sincerely interested in our motivations, and I was quite open with her concerning my opinion of school. She herself proposed how we should proceed: we should write a statement requesting that my child be transferred to home schooling, and she will make arrangements with the Department of Education, so that my child (supposedly because of his superior talents) will, as part of an experiment, study independently, and take tests as an external student at this same school.

And so we forgot about school almost until the end of the school year. My son was absorbed in all the things for which he had never had enough time. He spent entire days composing music and performing it on "live" instruments. He spent nights in front of the computer, building his own BBS (those of you who were fans of Fidonet know what that means). He also managed to find time to read anything he wanted, to study Chinese (just because he found it interesting at the time) and to help me with my work in translating and typing documents in various languages, installing email (still a difficult task at the time that involved consulting an expert), entertaining the younger children... In all, he was incredibly happy with his new freedom from school, and did not feel that he was missing anything.

The Price of Freedom

In April, we suddenly remembered: "Oh, we must prepare to take exams!" My son pulled out the dusty textbooks and concertedly read them for two or three weeks. Then we went to see the principal and told her that he is ready to take the exams. At this, my involvement in his school affairs ended. On his own, he caught up with the various teachers and arranged with them when and where they would met.

He managed to pass in all the subjects in one or two visits. The teachers themselves decided on the form of the exam. Sometimes it was just a conversation, sometimes a written test. Curiously, almost none of them wanted to give him an 'A', although my child certainly knew no less than the others. Our favorite grade became 'B', but this was not the least bit upsetting: this was the price of freedom.

Some time ago it had been considered that a child must attend school every day. If it turned out that someone doesn't do this, one could get a visit from some special government agency (with something like "guardians of childhood" in the title, but I am no expert in these matters, so I could be wrong). In order for a child to gain the right to not go to school, it was necessary to receive a medical certificate that he is unable to attend school due to bad health. This is why I often heard confused questions such as: "What are your children sick with?" "Then why aren't they in school?!" "They don't want to be."

An awkward silence ensued. By the way, later I found out that some parents simply bought such certificates from doctors they knew.

But in the summer of 1992 President Yeltsin issued a historic decree which announced that henceforth any child (independent of medical condition) has the right to study at home! Furthermore, the local schools must pay to the parents of such children, because they are spending the government's education funds not on teachers and not on school buildings, but independently and at home!

And then there were two

When my daughter became old enough, I told her that she didn't have to go to school at all. But she was a socialized child, having read many children's books which stressed the idea that going to school was highly prestigious. Since I was in favor of a free upbringing, I wasn't about to forbid it. And so off she went to first grade.

She lasted almost two years! Only around the end of the second year did she get sick of this empty waste of time, and she announced that she is going to study at home, like her older brother.

I delivered yet another statement to the principal. And now I had two children who did not go to school.

Yet another statement

Once in September I went to see the principal and give her yet another statement that this year my children are studying at home. She gave me the text of the presidential decree to read. (I didn't think to write down its title, number and date, and now don't even remember. If you are interested -- search the Internet, and let me know.)

And then the principal said: "Nevertheless, we aren't going to pay you for not sending your child to school. It's too complicated for us to get these funds. But, on the other hand, we won't charge you for their exams."

I was quite satisfied with this. It would have never occurred to me to take money from her. And so we parted satisfied with each other and with the changes to our laws.

Spelled out in black and white

Last year I went to arrange home schooling for my third child.

Imagine this situation: I come to see the head teacher and tell her that I want to register my child to attend school, first grade. The head teacher writes down the name of the child and asks for the date of birth. It then turns out that then child is ten years old. And now -- the really pleasant part: the head teacher reacts calmly, and even shows me an official

document that stated that any person has the right to come to any school and request to take exams for any grade, and is not required to show any documents regarding completion of previous grades. The school administration is required by law to create a commission to administer all necessary exams.

That is, you can go to any school when you reach 17 years of age (by the way, along with my daughter, there were two bearded fellows who had suddenly decided that they wanted their diplomas) and directly take the exams for 11th grade. And you will receive that same diploma, which so many people consider to be so necessary.

As they explained to us

Once, after we moved, and more out of curiosity than need, I went to the school nearest to our new house, and asked to see the principal.

I told her that my children have long since and irreversibly stopped going to school, and that I am currently looking for a place where they can take exams for 7th grade, quickly and inexpensively. The principal (a pleasant young woman with progressive views) was very glad to meet me, and I was glad to tell her about my children. But at the end of our conversation she suggested that I look for some other school.

They were, by law, indeed required to accept my children, and indeed required to allow them to study at home. That would not be a problem. But, she explained, ordinary teachers, which are the majority at this school, will not agree to my conditions of home schooling: letting the child pass the entire annual course at one go. The child cannot pass the entire program in one visit! The child has to work a certain number of hours. That is, they have absolutely no interest in what the child actually knows, they are only interested in the time spent studying. They want the child to attend all quarterly exams. And, of course, the child is required to participate in the life of the school: wash windows on Saturdays, collect trash on school grounds, and so on.

Obviously, I refused.

We just do not understand

But in spite of this the principal gave me what I needed, simply because she enjoyed our conversation. Specifically: I needed to borrow all the textbooks for the 7th grade from the library, to avoid having to buy them. And so she immediately called the librarian and ordered her to issue me all the textbooks free of charge until the end of the school year.

And so my daughter read all these textbooks and, with no fuss or "class participation," passed her exams somewhere else. Then we brought the textbooks back. After that, if only she wanted to, she could have gone to any school and studied alongside her peers.

But somehow she doesn't want to. Quite the opposite: she, just as her brothers, just as I do, considers such a suggestion to be pure nonsense. And we just cannot understand why a normal person would want to go to school.

Original article at <http://ruk.1september.ru/article.php?ID=200701613> (Set encoding to Windows-1251)

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cluborlov.blogspot.com