



[www.filmnewsandviews.com](http://www.filmnewsandviews.com)

## "Imagine a School...Summerhill"

by [Erik Sean McGiven](#) Oct 01, 2008

"Imagine a School...Summerhill" is a documentary about a famous coed alternative boarding school that faced closure by Tony Blair's Labor Government. Directed by William Tyler Smith, this extraordinary story is about how big government and its cookie cutter mentality attempts to rein in a remarkably successful program. Founded by educator A.S. Neill, Summerhill is the world's oldest and most influential democratic free school. It was established in 1927 in the village of Leiston on the northern coast of England.

The film begins by presenting A. S. Neill's principles and educational philosophies, which to many may at first appear irresponsible. Yet as the film unfolds, skepticism turns toward curiosity and finally to admiration. A. S. Neill's methods not only work, they work much better than the standardized British curriculum. Summerhill's test scores are often well above the national average.

Summerhill students, teachers, and alumni explain this unconventional learning process in short conversational clips. There are numerous facets and I'll try to clarify it as best I can. As I see it, Summerhill is a democracy where students and teachers together determine the rules of conduct and also the punishment for breaking them. Thus there is a code of behavior, which is reached by consensus rather than imposed by school administrators. At Summerhill, each child is free to make their own decisions: whether to attend lessons, play on the school grounds, or read a book all day, as long as their actions don't interfere with anyone else's life. The school also creates an environment where the human capacity for learning and cooperation hidden within each individual is explored and nurtured to the fullest. It frees up the child's natural instinct to learn.

This explanation is reached via interviews with engaging students and teachers. Celebrities such as alumni Jake Weber and Rebecca DeMornay add to this testimonial. This image of unrestrained flow of ideas is likewise reinforced with images of class discussions and students exploring topics among themselves. To the one-size-fits-all educators this method would create anarchy and chaos. To these people structure, discipline, and standardize methods are the accepted mantra. Summerhill, on the other hand, feels that every child is unique and if given freedom, will find the proper learning pathways. The school points out that once a child decides to learn, he or she will typically learn five years worth of material in two.

But the film is more than a testimonial to its educational method. It's the struggle to maintain its very existence. When Tony Blair's Labor Government attempts to shut them down as part of their promise to improve standards of education, the fight is on to save this prestigious institution. Lack of supervision, non-compulsory attendance, and no standardized curriculum are the main grievances. However, the government underestimates the intuitive and persuasive powers of students and faculty. Using their formidable arguments a few formidable barristers take the case to court where discrepancies in the indictment are openly exposed. In court, the testimony of the headmistress, other adults, and, most effectively, the students bring sanity to the lawsuit.

As no cameras are allowed in the courtroom student's notes, crude drawings, and voice over recollections skillfully give an ironic picture of the proceedings. I say ironic in that the government's case was prepared and presented by supposedly well-educated people schooled under existing standardized curriculums. Yet it is the testimony by the students and faculty that sets the record straight and returns the focus to educational results rather than arbitrary regulations. This section of the film had the most impact as the students documented the proceedings and comment on deliberations. It shows that they are extremely perceptive and knowledgeable beyond their years.

I was won over by the articulate and rational manner in which these students present themselves. This I assume is a product of their Summerhill education. They are emotionally healthy, happy and intellectually developed children and far better prepared to face the world and its enormous problems. Likewise, they have far better tools to shape society and deal with harsh realities in the real world. I left this film with a feeling of envy. Why couldn't I have been one of them?

The filmmaker's valiant efforts bring to light this innovative teaching philosophy and the perils should it be snuffed out. And if there is a weakness in this film, it's that we don't get to hear the inspectors talk and experience firsthand their plan to shutdown this school. We have only their written report which students debunk pointing out the flaws in the inspector's investigation. The menace of government intrusion and their old school mentality is thus implied rather than seen.

The catch as catch can camerawork presents a fly on the wall perspective and in only a few scenes does the action seem contrived. The editing of the courtroom recollections is highly inventive and the highlight of the film. Handwritten notes, sketches, and doodles skillfully augment the voiceovers. And when the grievance about the lack of toilets at school comes up, it is countered delightfully with a long series of toilets flushing. The film is an evenhanded portrayal and the sections on swearing and sneaking out after lights out seemed as much a part of the story as does the classroom activities.

"Imagine a School...Summerhill" is a film that challenges one's thinking on education and government's role in regulating it. This film illuminates alternatives as well as hope for the future.

CREDITS: Director: Willam Tyler Smith; Executive Producers: William Tyler Smith & J. D. Hoxter; Producers: Morris S. Levy, Emma Broomhead & Ann Jackman; Associate Producer & Sales Agent: Jill Gambaro, Director of Photography: J. D. Hoxter; Editor: Ann Jackman; Music Composer: Justin Samaha; Produced by 418 Films, Ltd.; Intended Running Time: 67 minutes; Filmed in Great Britain & United States.

# # #