



CORK DEMOCRATIC
SCHOOL
A SPACE FOR SELF DIRECTED LEARNERS

WHAT IS A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL?

Democratic Education Ireland — a recently established informal federation of Irish democratic schools — came up with the following definition:

A democratic school is a place which meets the six learning fundamentals as outlined by Professor Peter Gray¹:

- ✓ Education is the child's responsibility
- ✓ Unlimited opportunity to play and to develop passions
- ✓ Unlimited opportunity to play with the tools of the culture
- ✓ Access to a variety of caring adults that are helpers, not judges
- ✓ Free mixing among children of different ages
- ✓ Immersion in a stable, moral, democratic, community

In operational terms, we take it to mean:

- ✓ A school that is governed as a direct democracy. Rules by which the school is run - including rules of conduct and as well as health and safety – are decided collectively through deliberation and vote. Every member of the school — whether a student or a staff member — has equal voice and equal vote in those decisions. The enforcement of those rules is the subject to the same democratic process. The only limit to that democratic governance process is the law of the land, which must be observed at all times.
- ✓ A school where children have freedom to spend their time as they see fit, within the limits of the law and the rules of conduct agreed by the whole school body. There are no compulsory curricula, no compulsory learning or recreational activities, and no compulsory assessment. All types of pursuits and activities are valued equally.
- ✓ A school that accepts students between 6 and 18 years of age, who are allowed to mix freely. That age range may be extended.
- ✓ A school where staff members support the students in their pursuits, uphold the school ethos, ensuring that the school fulfils its mission and meets its obligations under the law.

¹ Gray, P. (2016). *Self-directed education: What is it, and how does it work?* An address delivered at the 2016 Alternative Education Resource Organisation Conference, Portland, Oregon 4-7 August 2016. Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYYbYyGbEcc>



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Did you know?

- The oldest running democratic school, Summerhill in Suffolk, UKK opened in 1921.
- The Sudbury Valley School in Boston, USA was founded in 1968.
- Our current school system, with set curriculum, compulsory lessons and segregation of pupils by age, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Throughout much of human history, children learned through free play in mixed-age peer groups, and also through various forms of apprenticeship.
- Children are naturally curious about the tools of their culture and will learn how to use them when developmentally ready.
- In the literate environment, children will teach themselves to read when ready, asking others for help as and when they need it.
- Internal motivation is a powerful driver of learning, much more effective than grades, material rewards, or the desire to avoid punishment.
- People are much more likely to follow the rules that they themselves established, and which they have the power to change.