

= Albany Free School =

The Albany Free School is the oldest independent , inner @-@ city alternative school in the United States . Founded by Mary Leue in 1969 based on the English Summerhill School philosophy , the free school lets students learn at their own pace . It has no grades , tests , or firm schedule : students design their own daily plans for learning . The school is self @-@ governed through a weekly , democratic all @-@ school meeting run by students in Robert 's Rules . Students and staff alike receive one equal vote apiece . Unlike Summerhill @-@ style schools , the Albany Free School is a day school that serves predominantly working @-@ class children . Nearly 80 percent of the school is eligible for reduced @-@ price meals in the public schools . About 60 students between the ages of three and fourteen attend , and are staffed by six full @-@ time teachers and a number of volunteers .

The school runs on a shoestring budget as a tradeoff for its financial independence and accessibility to low @-@ income students . Tuition is billed on a sliding scale based on what parents can afford . Revenue from rental properties and fundraising supplements tuition income . The Free School started a high school program in 2006 . It later spun off as the Harriet Tubman Democratic High School and enrolls about 20 students in both self @-@ directed and traditional classes . Alumni of the school have attended a variety of colleges . Journalists have noted the school 's similarity to unschooling and homeschooling , and its work to that of prefigurative politics . The Albany Free School is one of the few schools remaining from the 1960s and 1970s free school movement . It inspired the program of the Brooklyn Free School .

= = History = =

The Albany Free School is the oldest independent , inner @-@ city alternative school in the United States . It was founded in 1969 by Mary Leue , who wanted to start a school that was free both by " democratic principles and accessibility to poor children " . Leue approached A. S. Neill of Summerhill , the democratic school 's progenitor , for advice on how to make a similar school for working @-@ class children , he replied that " she would be mad to try " . The school 's first pupils withdrew from the public school . Chris Mercogliano came to the school in 1973 and became " its co @-@ director and figurehead " . The school is located in a socioeconomically and racially diverse downtown Albany in a building that once housed a parochial school . They purchased a number of buildings in the early 1970s for " next to nothing " in the impoverished neighborhood . The Albany Free School is one of the few free schools to persist from the hundreds once open in the free school movement of the 1960s and 1970s .

Over time , the Albany Free School became a " safety net " for children with special needs who were not fully accommodated in the public schools . The school 's waiting list grew accordingly , and its program was also impacted by the difficult home situations that these students would often bring to school . The school 's " unofficial adage " is , " Never a dull moment , always a dull roar . "

= = Program = =

The school 's philosophy is that students learn best at their own pace . The original curriculum was a cross between " instruction and home life " . The Albany Free School has no firm schedule and does not grade students . The day begins at 8 : 15 a.m. and students are asked what they want to do each day . Students are grouped by age and present their own plan for each day . They pursue various projects including writing , filmmaking , and studying language or history . The school also offers structured math and reading classes for those who want it . Classes tend to have five to seven students per teacher and the school 's teacher ? student relationships are close . Teachers report a relative ease in holding students accountable to their stated plans . In 2006 , the school had ten teachers , four interns , and a number of parent volunteers for 58 students between the ages of three and fourteen (pre @-@ K to eighth grade) . The school has a " Living and Learning " program between 10 a.m. and noon , followed by lunch , which the students make themselves as part of the

program . The children play sports until their 3 p.m. class and school ends at 4 p.m.

The Albany Free School self @-@ governs through a weekly " all @-@ school meeting " where students and teachers each receive single votes of equal weight in deciding school policy . Teachers recommend that children resolve their disputes themselves or through small groups . If a conflict is irreconcilable , any member of the community can call a school @-@ wide meeting . After this person informs the school , everyone sits in a circle in the basement . The group chooses three students to run the meeting in Robert 's Rules . Adults facilitate more than lead , and rarely intervene in the meetings , which are intended to teach " mediation and compromise " . The school prioritizes self @-@ expression , " honesty , and emotions " . One teacher explained the " free " in " free school " to represent the freedom to be oneself without coercion , which comes with the responsibility to listen to others and respect their feelings voices . In the late 2000s , the school expelled a student for the first time by vote at the community meeting .

The school privileges its financial independence and accessibility over sufficient budgeting , a result of Leue 's governance choices . The Free School does not receive government funding and instead subsists on student tuition and supplemental income from rental properties and " extensive fundraising " . Student tuition is billed on a sliding scale : parents give what they can afford . In 2012 , about 80 percent of the school 's families were eligible for free or reduced @-@ price public school meals , and Free School parents paid an average monthly tuition of US \$ 160 (substantially below the US \$ 215 cost per child) . In 2012 , one half the school 's students lived in Albany 's inner @-@ city South End (mostly black and Latino , with a burgeoning immigrant population) , one fourth lived in uptown neighborhoods , and one fourth lived in the suburbs . Leue initially struggled to recruit children of upwardly mobile families , who thought the school would limit their children 's chances to join a suitable income bracket . She found that low @-@ income , black families were the most skeptical about the school 's usefulness . The school also provides inexpensive (or free) preschool and daycare for young children , operates a car collective (wherein a dozen people share a minivan) , and provides low @-@ interest loans through a community credit system .

The school operates on a shoestring budget of US \$ 100 @,@ 000 , or US \$ 150 @,@ 000 when including the kitchen program . The Free School intentionally foregoes government funding to avoid external control and needless bureaucracy . A volunteer staff performs the school 's administrative duties , and as of 2012 , six teachers are employed full @-@ time at forty @-@ hour weeks for a US \$ 11 @,@ 000 yearly stipend . Many take second jobs . Their school 's website notes that it has become harder to keep teachers , who are qualified for salaries at least three times this amount plus fringe benefits at public schools . In 2012 , co @-@ director Chris Mercogliano , who arrived in 1973 , continued to receive the same pay as a new teacher . Teachers report high interest in their work and less interest in the low pay . Younger teachers have expressed more of an interest in racial and social justice , and have tried to increase the school 's diversity . Within the school community , some have " half @-@ jokingly " expressed a mix of philosophies between the school 's " young anarchists and ... old liberals " .

= = = High school and graduation = = =

The Free School began a high school program in late 2006 . It later became the separate Harriet Tubman Democratic High School , and was accredited by the Department of Education . As of 2011 , the school enrolls 17 students , plans to expand to 40 , and employs one full @-@ time teacher , though part @-@ time workers , volunteers , interns , and graduate students keep the ratio of one staff to five students . The school offers both interest @-@ based and " traditional " classes : the former lets students play musical instruments and teach music theory , while the latter prepares students for the state Regents exams . None of the traditional classes enroll more than 11 students . Students are not turned away based on inability to pay tuition , and 80 percent of the school receives tuition aid . As such , the school includes students from the city as well as the suburbs . The pupils also participate in staff hiring and school maintenance chores . The director has said that the school is best suited for independent students .

Free School graduates apply to college with essays and interviews rather than standardized test

scores . Tubman High School graduates have attended Clarkson University and Hudson Valley Community College . Albany Free School alumni have continued into occupations including development director at an alternative education organization , and an undersecretary for the Governor of New York .

= = Reception = =

Matthew Appleton wrote that the day school 's existence proved that the Summerhill method could work in non @-@ boarding school environments , and Ron Miller noted the Albany Free School as an " anomaly " and model for American free schools , which tend to serve upper @-@ middle class children . The Albany Free School inspired the program of the Brooklyn Free School .

In contemplating the role of democratic schools in addressing race @-@ based inequities , Astra Taylor saw the Albany Free School " as a microcosm of an American society that had failed to come into existence " . She thought that the school sounded " like unschooling , but in a group setting " , where children are free to cross age lines , learn from older idealists , and manage their own affairs . Children are trusted to " learn responsibility , problem solving , and self @-@ governance in the process " . Taylor added that the practical needs of tending the chicken coop and vegetables turned " necessity into virtue " as lack of money became " self @-@ reliance and simple living " . She compared the school 's work to Rebecca Solnit 's prefigurative politics : one small group models a different way to pursue a principle , such that the group can live by its ideals while affecting a change they seek .

In comparison to the Albany Free School , the City School District of Albany felt that it was better prepared to fit the needs of all students by offering more social services and learning opportunities , such as an elementary school " dual language enrichment program " and the International Baccalaureate . In contrast , a Free School teacher said that the school 's graduates were better able to empathize and emotionally interact , and thus were better equipped to address the fear and mistrust of authority that leads to " laws , judges , courts , prisons " .

The Times Union reported the Tubman High School as an " educational island ... outside the public , charter , and private school sphere " that served as a " refuge " for students who disliked traditional public schools . The newspaper wrote that the school , " perhaps the most unique educational experience in the region " , was closer to homeschooling than traditional schooling , like a college dorm where small roundtable discussions prevailed .