

# ***Review of Deb O'Rourke's Can This Be School? Fifty Years of Democracy at ALPHA***

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## **Abstract**

This is a review of Deb O'Rourke's newly-released book *Can This Be School? Fifty Years of Democracy at ALPHA*.

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Only the quiet children who had spent the morning playing passively were rewarded with gold stars, a five-year-old Deb O'Rourke astutely observed at the end of her very first day of kindergarten. And she wasn't one of them. Thus began the system's unwitting creation of a future educational troublemaker and the author of this brilliant new book on democratic schools.

*Can This Be School? Fifty Years of Democracy at ALPHA* is part memoir, part thoroughly researched polemic, and part history of the democratic school movement. Then, perhaps most importantly, it enters into the permanent record the dramatic story of what is arguably the planet's oldest, publicly funded democratic school for elementary-age children.

O'Rourke is the best one to share it because she arrived, as the parent of a sensitive young child just like she had once been, early enough in ALPHA's history to be able to catalog all the ins

and outs of convincing the Toronto District School Board to sign off on a radically different kind of public school. It's a compelling account of how possible it is for a committed group of parents to help create something better for their children so that they won't have to endure the same educational misery.

Here O'Rourke glosses over nothing. She describes in painstaking detail the messy infighting that soon broke out between parents, staff, and the school board once ALPHA opened its doors and everyone had gotten to see what it looks like when you all of a sudden unleash 100 energetic children on the third floor of an old, urban YMCA for seven hours at a clip. While the notion of educational freedom is lovely and seductive in theory, in practice it's another matter entirely.

Which was precisely the problem: No one—students, teachers, parents, administrators—had had any practice whatsoever

doing a kind of school that allows children to move about as they please and choose what and when they want to learn, gives them a loud voice in the proceedings, and eschews formal curricula, grades, and standardized tests. The noise, as one might imagine, was incessant; and before long there was conflict everywhere you turned. Rambunctious kids locked horns. Anxious, faction-forming parents feared their children would fall behind academically and pleaded for more structure. Overwhelmed teachers discovered they neither agreed with nor liked each other, and irate school board members demanded to know what the hell was going on—all without the pre-established means for resolving any of it.

In a word, writes O'Rourke, it was "chaos." In its purest form.

But no one got hurt, and ALPHA survived its shakedown cruise. Parents willing to gamble on the school's experimental approach replaced those who weren't. They found staff who were more comfortable with such a child-led, improvisational way of teaching and learning—and with each other. And the school board failed to form a majority to defund it. In its second year and beyond, the school relaxed into a vibrant learning community like none other in the city.

It's not an uncommon story of that period—the late 1960s and early '70s—when thousands of educational alternatives sprouted like dandelions and experienced similar birth pangs. What makes ALPHA's story extraordinarily unique is the way succeeding generations of ALPHA's supporters have continued to fight, not only to keep the school alive, but also true to its founding principles—in an official climate that stopped being friendly toward it a long time ago. It's a stubborn victory for democracy in every sense of the word.

O'Rourke, who joined the staff a decade after her role as an ALPHA parent had come to an end and retired in 2015, is the one to tell the second chapter, too, because she was there to witness it. It doesn't hurt that she's such a good storyteller—maybe it's the Irish in her. She moves seamlessly between reports of the countless battles to defend ALPHA against the displeasure of increasingly conservative school authorities and a deft, insider's description of what sets it apart from conventional schools and makes it so worth saving. Along the way, she seasons the narrative with nuggets of wisdom from visionary educators like AS Neill, Ivan Illich, George Dennison, John Taylor Gatto, and Jonathan Kozol, along with her own insights that stem from someone who deeply understands children. It's a hard book to put down.

*Can This Be School? Fifty Years of Democracy at ALPHA* is a welcome addition to the alternative education literature, with Deb O'Rourke adding a fresh voice to the movement's ongoing campaign to smuggle its ideas and approaches into the mainstream. Her book is a must-read for anyone interested in starting an alternative, or who simply wants a clearer picture of the inner workings and importance of genuinely democratic schools for young children. In addition, I highly recommend it to lovers of history interested in learning more about such a fascinating and provocative era. Having come of age at the exact same time, I savored every morsel!

### **Author Bio**

**Chris Mercogliano** is the author of *Making It Up As We Go Along, the Story of the Albany Free School* (Heinemann 1998), *Teaching the Restless, One School's Remarkable No-Ritalin Approach to Helping Children Learn and Succeed* (Beacon Press 2004), *How to Grow a School: Starting and Sustaining Schools That Work* (Oxford Village Press 2006), *In Defense of Childhood: Protecting Kids' Inner Wildness* (Beacon Press 2007), and *A School Must Have a Heart* (Oxford Village Press 2014). The father of two wonderful daughters and grandfather of five, he lives with his wife Betsy on a one-acre farm in downtown Albany, New York.