

SECRET GEMS

- NOT MISFITS! -

True tales of school refusers and
the case for alternative schools



GAB McINTOSH

Secret Gems, Not Misfits

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alternative schools



Gab McIntosh OAM

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Preface

I have put together this booklet to share some of my experiences of being a principal of alternative schools for over 20 years, and to tell the stories of just a few of the many hundreds of school refusers we brought back into the classroom over that time.

I have also written it to advocate for the importance of alternative education contexts for school refusers, many of whom are Indigenous kids, and to argue that schools like ours are a crucial part of the education landscape in NSW and beyond. If alternative schools do not always conform to every education standard, it is not the schools, but the standards – and the institutions that govern them – that must change, for without schools like ours, hundreds of young people end up on the scrap heap of society.

By reading this, I hope you get a glimpse of why alternative schools are necessary for our wonderful kids who, for various reasons of their own, refuse traditional forms of school. I hope it inspires you to join us in calling for the re-establishment of alternative schools, the valuing of their place in our communities, and an end to the absolute power of the bureaucracies to close down schools that are the last place where our kids can hope to find any meaningful kind of education.

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PART 1

Why we need alternative ways of doing school

Kids in trouble

Some kids never do as they are told and manage to fight with every adult they ever cross paths with. They are every parent's nightmare and every teacher's headache. This obstinacy usually escalates dramatically in the teenage years. The police may become involved.

Embarrassed parents and caregivers front up to some patient deputy's office to discuss their child, but the basic message they hear is, "Your kid is a disaster zone. Fix it." But what if we have it all wrong? What if most of these tricky kids are our best treasures, secret gems just covered with a bit of muck, waiting for that muck to be removed?

The assumption made by all of the important education professionals and many parents/caregivers is, "Well, the school is doing its best. It's over to the home (or an army of professionals) to sort out this messy kid." But again, what if this assumption is wrong? What if the real way forward is to change the type of schooling that tricky kids have to engage with?

The premise of this booklet is that alternative schools that determine their own curriculum, adopt the teaching style that works for them, choose their own hours and actually ask kids to have input into how the school should run, are best placed to solve this problem and will go some way to giving parents peace of mind.

The second premise is that school refusers and tricky teenagers often have gifts that are not apparent to our anxious, driven world. We need to let those gifts shine; we need to get out of the way with all of our "shoulds" around education.

Weak politicians are allowing bureaucratic minds to smother education, and as a result, in either ignorance or fear, are helping to

destroy education in NSW not only for school refusers, but also for the teachers who want to reach out to all kids.

Indigenous communities are among those who are most desperate to see genuine school education alternatives in every region in every state. While initiatives that target the brightest Indigenous kids are applauded, seeking them out and placing them in elite schools, the sad truth is that thousands of Indigenous kids are left to languish every day across the country. This is a huge waste of talent and an ugly mark against our cheap reconciliation talk.

Indigenous communities need to have control of indigenous school education so everyone gets to benefit. Their natural inclination is to have kids and adults learning together in the one classroom, regardless of age and skill level. This is a great idea that the non-Indigenous world would do well to consider.

Where it all started

The 80s were an exciting time for youth work in NSW. There were poetry groups for unemployed youth, council-based high school kids committees that were listened to by local councils, and youth collectives designed to support unemployed young people to start a small business like t-shirt designs or garden maintenance or even an earthworm yabby farm.

I was the Youth Development Officer at Blacktown City Council in the mid 80s. We did all of the above and more. We held dances in the Bowman hall. It was the major community venue for Blacktown City back then. The mayor would show up at the end of the dance to thunderous applause. Finally, government, those in power, realised young people wanted a voice and a chance to contribute to civic life, as well as useful employment.

But even in those enlightened times, there was a dark shadow haunting the bright, vibrant youth-are-love initiatives. Schools. Kids, more than most people expected, were deciding not to go to school any more. Many of these young people were from disadvantaged backgrounds, but certainly not all. This phenomenon, now known as 'school refusing', has grown and grown since the 1980s.

School refusing leapt into the lime light in the late 80s as the number of full-time paid positions for young people dried up. This led those in power to conclude that if kids couldn't get work, they must stay in school. We couldn't have them wondering the streets all day long and getting into trouble. And that *is* exactly what happened, before mobile phones. They got into trouble with the police as dead time filled their days. You saw teenagers hanging around Blacktown station or at the PCYC in the middle of the day. They never looked happy. Truancy officers would chase them up, but to no avail. It is

still like that today, though with the more worrying situation that school refusers are never having to leave their bedrooms. These days, school support people are sometimes forced to climb through bedroom windows and drag kids out into the light of day.

The unemployed youth poetry group in Seven Hills, which I had the pleasure of supporting in the 80s, gave me some insight into the world of early school leavers. The young people said school never made them feel good. They were mostly poor readers, but there were also some really bright kids. A sense of failure as a human being had stalked them during their time at school. It was never said directly, but in a hundred small ways they received the message that the purpose of their lives was to take any menial job they could get and never complain about life or school or anything. Don't buck the system; never complain.

True, some had difficult circumstances at home, but certainly not all. It got me thinking, why is this happening? Schools had some terrific teachers, so that was unlikely to be the heart of the problem. It must start somewhere else.

Ten years later, and now a qualified English teacher, I was ready to do something about it. I was going to start my own school. I had no money, no connections, no premises, no resources and no students - at first. But there was one teacher, a friend, who believed in my ideas. What were those ideas? That learning had to be enjoyable for the entire day, and not a chore. If that meant tests and homework and uniforms had to go, well, they had to go. In addition, no one can enjoy learning if they can't read, so time had to be spent getting literacy levels up. We used funny stories mostly, and sometimes literacy crosswords. Another thing was: work/life balance. Teachers wanted to work four days a week, not five. Teaching carries a heavy work load, so we decided that the school would run for four days a week, not five, so teachers could feel like human beings, too, and have a decent family life.

My first school premises was a rundown fire trap in Rooty Hill. It was actually a heritage cottage from the 1920s, but no one was restoring it. It didn't have a single classroom but it did have a tiny kitchen and a small white board. It wasn't smart; it was ordinary. The chief features of our rent-free decaying cottage were a fantastic electric fry pan and a beautiful ginormous pepper tree in the big back yard. We made many a quick-shake instant pancake in that electric fire pan and would munch on them any time of the day, including during our two classes. Another thing: kids who didn't like school only tolerated a couple of hours of learning each day, so every afternoon was free activities. Even in those very early days, we saw school refusers become happy kids. They bemoaned our school holidays; they didn't want them. They wanted our illegal school to continue all the time, with no breaks.

Money finally became an issue after a year in the run down cottage, so I sold my house and used that money to get better premises and hire a second teacher. This took time and we had to make do with temporary premises, such as a youth refuge in Doonside, and later the Blacktown PCYC. We shared the PCYC with the "Golden Girls" dance troupe and African refugees – young, thin men who were in love with basketball. Eventually, we got those good premises and became a legal school. The icing on the cake was getting some government funding to expand our quirky little place of learning.

Sometimes I think we have all have lived through a terrible undeclared war. A war whereby Australian governments, whether progressive or conservative, have thrown hand grenades into crowds of their own people. Economic rationalism, the well-known name for this warfare, has undermined once free and reliable institutions. Its handmaiden managerialism has robbed enthusiastic professionals and anyone with an ounce of initiative of the ability to make decisions in the work place that respond to real human needs. These two ghouls have turned schools into nightmares in the 21st century. The NSW Education and Standards Authority (NESA) is a good example. Once known as the more helpful 'Board of Studies', this new authority is only concerned with the one million rules that now

govern schools. Even the minister seems powerless against them. NESA has the power to close small alternative schools, almost on a whim, and that is exactly what they did in 2018 to my alternative schools. After 20 years of providing rejected kids with an alternative education, suddenly 103 teenagers were thrown onto the streets. Sixty-five of these teenagers were Indigenous and some have since died or been incarcerated. All four of my schools were closed despite the fact that the kids had nowhere to go and that we had glowing reports from an independent psychologist saying how well the kids were doing at our upside-down schools.

Some, like Indigenous communities, see the truth. The education system in NSW doesn't care about kids or teachers or schools, anymore. It cares only about box-ticking. That cruelty, perpetrated on teachers and kids alike, is kept alive by blind politicians, most of whom know nothing about teaching, and a bureaucracy in love with its own ludicrous power. Of course the grief of kids who experience schools as a kind of torture is hidden from view. Just like the grief of teachers, who are desperate to do a good job but are stopped by compliance, is hidden from view.

Once upon a time, kids who missed out on reading, could go to a well-funded TAFE and learn there. Now TAFE is just a shell with empty buildings. TAFE campuses are like ghost towns in NSW. Where are the courses, the students, the happy canteens selling fried food and fruit salads? Indigenous academic Jack Beetson points out that governments seem unable to get their heads around funding small, community-based literacy programs with minimal structure and lots of freedom. The same applies to alternative schools with minimal structure, lots of freedom and a big emphasis on literacy. Politicians think that highly structured traditional schools and formal RTOs do the trick. They don't. They don't even come close for kids outside the box, including many Indigenous kids.

I have the Order of Australia (2007) for my work in education, so government did once understand how powerful and effective

alternative approaches to school education can be. Let's hope those days return – and quickly.

PART 2

True tales of school refusers

All creatures great and small

I like difficult teenagers – the sort that, when on a crowded train with no spare seats are spread out in royal comfort, arms and legs akimbo, taking up the space of four adults. The ones that, if you approach and say, “Excuse me, can I sit down, please?” look at you like you’re a stupid bug, flailing helplessly, so squashable.

Since doing my teacher training, I had always wanted to work in an alternative school. However, no chance presented itself, neither paid nor volunteer. The answer on turning forty was to set up my own school.

In alternative education we ask kids what they would like to learn. This is the opposite to regular schooling where it is assumed that the teacher knows everything, including what kids must learn.

So, I asked my rejects from the system, “What would you like to learn?”

“Nothing,” they said.

“Oh,” I said. “Ok, well, what did you like about your last school?”

“Nothing,” they said.

“There must have been something!” I cried.

“Art was ok.” whispered my only girl, who was fourteen years of age.

“Yeah,” said the others (five boys), “art was OK.” So off we all went, the kids and I, driving around the streets to pick up the junk from the side of the road before council pick-up night. This junk became the materials for our art classes. We found old paint brushes, bits of wire, paint, foam, pipe cleaners, dressmaking dummies, coloured stones, wooden boards, bits of metal and loads of other interesting

stuff. Now we had two subjects: a bit of English, which I insisted upon, and a lot of art.

Of course, my school was completely illegal. However, I did the ethical thing and informed the kids and their parents that my school did not meet state approval or regulations. The kids replied, "We like it here. We couldn't care less if it's legal." Parents, more cautious, said: "They won't go to other schools. They like it here. Maybe you could write a letter to the government, and ask them to make you legal."

"Animals are cool and we should have some," a boy said one day. The others agreed. But where was I going to get a free pig or a sheep?

"We need to do more work outside, too, under that tree," they said.

It was one way of getting them to do the English work, which wasn't much more than literacy review, letting them sit together on the wooden bench under the pepper tree. Sheets in hand they settled quickly, like contented lambs, in the generous shade of the tree on hot days. The better students willingly helped the strugglers, preferring not too much interference from me. As for animals, we found some very small ones.

We started an earthworm farm in a shoe box, purchased from the local exchange and trading system, known as LETS, with pretend money. One boy fell in love with it, instantly. He always wanted to dash out to check on the squirming pink worms.

A funny thing happens when you leave kids alone and just let them learn at their own pace. Provided they are not isolated from others, their capacity for learning suddenly jumps. They start to understand things that once eluded them. They lose all interest in telling you to get fucked.

They missed school during the holidays. Occasionally, one would try normal school again, hoping their new found maturity would do the trick, and make them acceptable at last. Mostly, it didn't work because schools overall have not changed.

As for myself, I loved those early days when we had nothing and begged everything – even pens. I was a volunteer at the school, obviously. Occasionally, I did casual teaching at other schools, to stay alive and earn some income. In those schools the students often seemed washed out; their individual colour rarely shone. My rebels were alive, however – totally their own people. There was a wonderful energy and sense of delight in their total commitment to tell the world, with all its rules, to go jump in the lake.

The park bench

One standard-size wooden park bench sat in the foyer of the Blacktown PCYC, a poor area in the Western suburbs of Sydney. It had been painted green, long ago, but now its paint was peeling off in big flakes. No one knew why the bench was there. Why was it in the middle of a foyer? Most of the time it sat there alone and friendless, though sometimes sweaty basketball players would put their smelly shoes and socks on it. Plain as it was, this flaking old park bench sitting in a draughty foyer was the official office of the principal of Blacktown Youth College. That principal was me.

Blacktown Youth College was a school for 33 struggling teenagers – school refusers – based inside the Blacktown Police Citizens Youth Club. Our premises were cramped, tiny even, but the basketball court was terrific. There was a quiet garden out the front too, where kids could chill out and talk freely to whoever was free to listen. Sometimes it would be the local copper stationed at the PCYC, who saw it as a both a love and a duty to get on better terms with the at-risk kids. Best of all, these premises at the PCYC were almost free for our small alternative school.

Anthony and his mum came for an interview with me to enrol Anthony in the college, and so they sat on the park bench. Tall, energetic African boys – refugees – were playing basketball nearby and the occasional ball would fly out of the door and into the foyer. One nearly hit Anthony in the head. It was plain to both mum and Anthony that confidentiality was not going to be a top priority at this school, given that the intimate details of his life were aired to the sound of crashing balls and the footsteps of vague passers-by.

Anthony was tall with long dark hair that hid his warm, brown eyes. When questioned he whispered the response, afraid to be heard.

When I asked what had happened at his previous school, a standard question I asked each new applicant, he murmured that he did not like sport. Mum said that the local Catholic school was sport obsessed.

“They also didn’t like his long hair or his nose studs or his earrings,” she said. “He just can’t fit in. They said we should try here, an alternative school, as the local high school had a bad name. Where else is there to go?” she cried.

“Anything else?” I asked. “Reasons he can’t hack school?”

“Well, yes.” His mother leant in close. “His art is considered to have too many devil symbols and... There is something else.”

She was going to reveal a terrible secret. Anthony turned his head, and looked as if he might take off and keep running, forever. “He suffers from depression,” she said. “He won’t get out of bed till midday and he refuses to go back to school and I don’t know what to do”.

The mum was close to tears. Anthony stared at the dirty colourless floor tiles in the chilly foyer. The basketball boys kept bumping into the park bench, chasing runaway balls and laughing. Their fleeting presence provided some relief from the shame engulfing mother and son.

To this day, I don’t know why I did what I did next. I jumped up from the peeling bench, paint chips sticking to me, and threw my arms in the air. “That’s the most marvellous news I have heard all day! Anthony, it’s fantastic that you are depressed. Tell me what I can do to help keep you depressed. Do you know we get extra money from the government because you are depressed and we can sure can use it.”

Mum was stunned. “And we don’t mind devil art. It’s interesting!” I went on. Anthony raised his eyes from the floor. He held my gaze. Could this be a place where crazy was good? Could he relax here? Was he going to be accepted, bleeding oral-sex skeleton t-shirts and

all?. He specifically asked if he would be allowed to wear these provocative t-shirts to school. “I don’t see why not,” I replied.

Anthony adored the school, as it turned out, and mum was pleased she didn’t have to drag her boy out of bed each day – and it was free. However, there was one major drawback. I had over-estimated my resilience to daily t-shirts depicting bleeding skeletons performing oral sex acts. I found it hard to speak to the quiet boy without being stupefied by scenes of blood pouring from various private orifices. I would freeze and struggle to remember what on earth I wanted to say.

A solution was found one day. “Anthony,” I said, “chatting to you is good, but I think if you turn around, so I only speak to you back, it will be easier for me.”

Anthony went on to become one of my most successful students, starting his own diesel mechanic business when he was in his 20s. Training defence force personnel in the finer points of diesel mechanics was a high point of his career, he told me ten years later. His cannibal corpse t-shirts were still cherished but had been neatly packed away in his old wardrobe in a special cellophane pack with other treasures from the past.

Many interviews were held on that green park bench, my only office. One day, a boy with a thousand freckles came for an interview with his grandad. The boy merely snarled when asked a question, as if it was all too much trouble, but he couldn’t take his eyes off the basketball players, the African fellows. These tall, gleaming boys were clearly visible from the park bench: shooting hoops, laughing, falling over – then doing it all over again.

The grandad, the boy and I made a cosy fit on the official park bench. Leg to leg, there was not a whit of privacy as the litany of school failures of this vulnerable teenager were aired to anyone who happened to be passing by. Neither boy nor grandad seemed to mind. About halfway through the interview, I got the feeling the teenager wasn’t interested in the alternative school, after all. He

showed no interest in its being different to other schools. That was unusual.

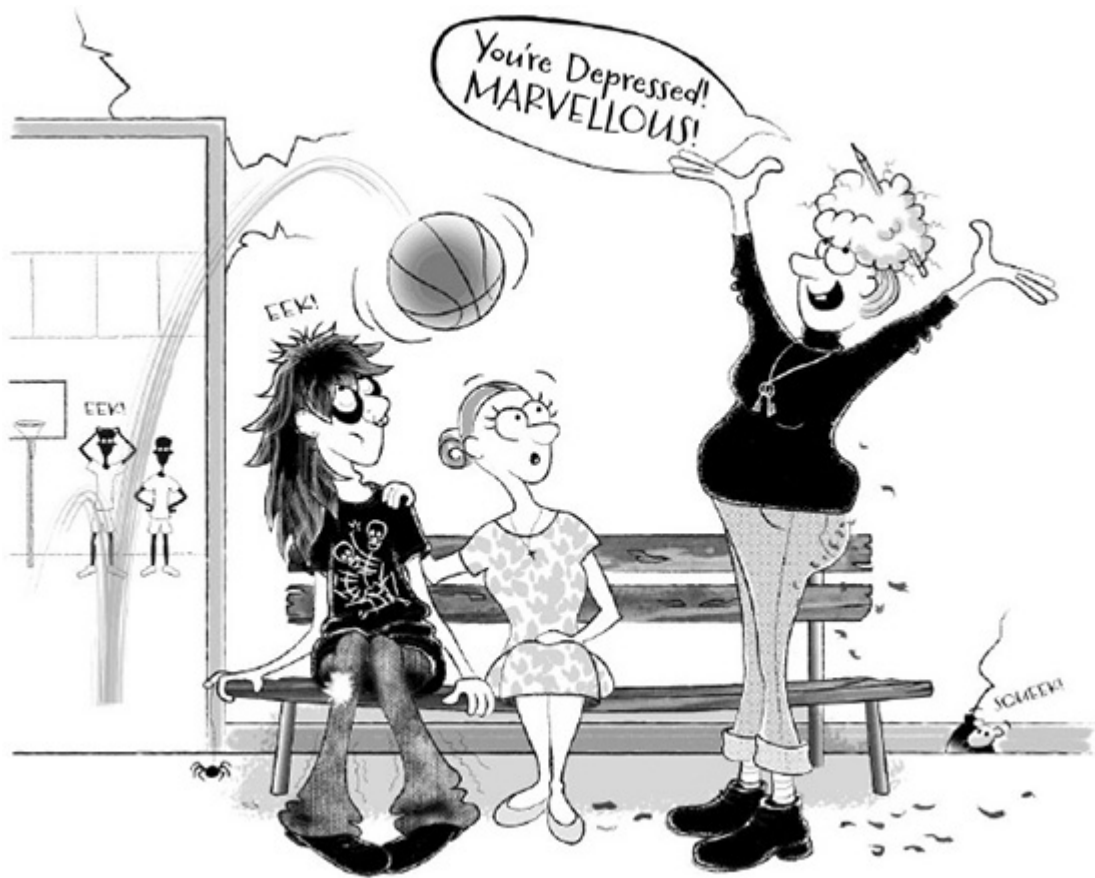
I was considering how to end the interview when I saw that grandad was winking at me, unseen by the boy. Did this elderly gentleman have a nervous tic? The winks seemed sly and were followed by a knowing nod of the elderly head in my direction. Was he suggesting there was some secret attraction between us? Was he suggesting a liaison later, perhaps? I tried to look away. Surely, grandad was not using his grandson's interview as a "pick up" place. I had not worn my wedding ring that day in my hurry to get to school. Now I was regretting that. All of a sudden, even more keen to bring the whole thing to an end, I rose, and with as much dignity as I could muster, said, "Well, that's it really. Ring tomorrow if you want to enrol." The boy tore off at high speed to the basketball court to join the jovial refugees. I wanted to do the same - run - but to the safety of the tiny storeroom full of chip boxes, which was actually the maths classroom. Grandad had different ideas. He roughly grabbed my arm and pulled me towards himself. Our lips almost touched. What now! Surely nothing lewd would happen in this public setting with a police officer from the PCYC ten metres away, I thought. Should I scream?

"Bloody brilliant!" said grandad. "How did you know my grandson was a basketball fanatic? He'll want to enrol for sure. He hates being inside. Bloody genius doing the interview on the bench where he could see the basketball players. How did you know?"

Stepping well back, I gave grandad a winning smile. "We pick up on these things," I said, with a sigh of relief.

Schools try to convince themselves, and others, that a lot of money must be poured into difficult students. It's not true. They need flexibility, freedom, limits on their time in the classroom, and to be applauded, publicity, for whatever strengths they bring to the school setting. They need to be needed. Many are willing to perform simple public services, such as assisting the elderly at home, and most are much happier helping others than sinking in the fog of the classroom.

We should be freeing up education, not setting the bar ever higher for anxious kids and their families. Students should be permitted to leave school at fourteen-and-a-half, with parental permission, if they were prepared to work or attend TAFE. Some could work in the regions, boarding with a family who would keep an eye on them, while learning about life outside of the city. Curriculum, too, could be negotiable, again with parental permission. Forcing kids into doing eight subjects, with all that home work week after week, is a recipe for disaster for many kids, especially those who do not take to learning within the four walls of the classroom. If parents are happy that their kid studies English, maths, science or music - for example - that should be enough. Schools should be about what works for kids, with all their manifest differences, not what works best for bureaucrats or politicians.



Quiet girls

It never ceases to amaze me the variety of kids who fall through cracks of the school system. Fourteen seems to be the crucial age for things to go kaput. Parents and caregivers tell me they feel helpless, as staff at the school sigh wearily on hearing the name of their son or daughter. It is, ironically, left to me – a supposed education radical – to defend the local school. I usually start by suggesting one more try at the local school, this time having a face to face chat with someone closer to their child, a favourite teacher or maybe the school counsellor. I explain that if they continue to get the “your-kid-is-terrible” routine, to remember that most teachers are over-worked and drowning in paper work, leaving them little time to do what they are meant to do: teach and help kids! I also tell them to beware the fool’s gold of the pricey private school. You will not get better teaching, and more importantly, you will not get better listening to your child, particularly if they are a non-conformist type.

Two teenage girls, sisters, Rowena and Rosemary, enrolled with little fuss at the PCYC school. Tall and blonde, each had a long, thick golden plait that sat to one side, reaching to their waist. They had sparkling blue eyes and seemed sweet-natured. They didn’t say much at the admission interview, but they were composed and well mannered, speaking in soft voices. They reminded me of Nordic goddesses, and I thought they would offer our small school a touch of grace and Nordic calm, something a bit different from the norm.

Their parents, however, were angry, very angry. It was hard to discern the exact reason for their anger. According to them, everything was wrong with the local school. Every teacher had taken a set against their lovely girls. The boiling point came when a maths teacher had accused the elder, Rowena, of being the most difficult

student he had ever been forced to teach. Rowena had burst into tears and fled the room. She asked to be taken home. Her sister came in solidarity. The older girl told her parents she would never return to that school, never.

As both parents were unemployed, my no-fees alternative school seemed a reasonable option, worth a look, anyway. The parents were not put off by the lack of fanciness of our single room school, or the lack of standard amenities, like a canteen. I told them student art was our pride and joy and our walls were covered with student creations from floor to ceiling. By this time, my devil-loving student had produced a number of creations, mostly good ink drawings with splashes of blood. I never looked too closely but tried to provide encouragement where I could.

“Gosh, that foot is very life-like. Amputated? Wow. Hard to get something like that right.” Comments of that nature. At the interview, the parents of the two new girls said that they were Christian fundamentalist. They examined the student art closely. I held my breath, but they didn’t say a word about the mutilated body parts or upside down crosses. They happily enrolled their daughters, and these sweet-looking girls did indeed turn out to be sweet natured. I never had an ounce of trouble from either.

Towards the end of their two years at the school, they told me an interesting story. Around the time of all the yelling and screaming from the teachers at their previous school, a family catastrophe had occurred. Their adored handicapped older brother had taken a turn for the worse. Suddenly, their parents were looking down the dark tunnel of institutionalisation for their 20-year-old son. Everyone was holding it together, trying to find a way forward for the incapacitated brother, which didn’t involve putting him in some God-awful nursing home. The girls were crumbling inside at the very idea of it. This stress, along with the constant demands at school for tests, homework, uniforms, “you’ve got the wrong socks on”, “don’t be late for assembly” etc. etc. may have caused these girls to abandon their agreeable natures and start hurling curses at any teacher nearby as

a way of dealing with the pain. This release of anguish sheltered the parents from their daughters' true feelings of helplessness at the tragedy unfolding before them. That was my take on it anyway. It was unlikely that the previous teacher's claims, that the girls had become extremely difficult, were much exaggerated.

We hugely under-estimate the amount of pressure schools place on ordinary working parents, and we hugely underestimate the amount of pressure schools place on teenagers who are struggling with life's terrible losses. The girls went on to do unlikely work: they went overseas to work on aid programs, though they had no HSC.

They came to visit one day, a couple of years later. One was a new mum and brought her baby. We rejoiced at seeing each other and I cooed over the lovely little boy.

"Tell me," I asked. "An overseas aid program. You never seemed interested in that kind of thing at school. You both rarely said boo in any class discussion."

"Probably not, but we just wanted to try something different. Like this school," said the younger sister.

"We'd go back again any day" said the new mum. Their long golden plaits were still shining and swinging in the warm afternoon sun as they waved goodbye."

Rosie

Her mother had a PhD in the health sciences. At the interview she produced a thick folio of documents in a red leather folder and placed them firmly on my desk (I now had one).

“Here,” she said “All here. Every last piece.” She tapped the folder, firmly, with her index finger, to reinforce its importance. Rosie, the prospective student, seemed mesmerised by the red folder. She stared at it wide-eyed.

I wasn't sure how to tackle this interview. I thought that mum had brought in a catalogue of all the wrong things her daughter had ever done. I was framing in my mind how to explain that listing all that was troublesome would not help Rosie to make a fresh start. However, I didn't want to sound like I was putting mum down in her attempts to be helpful at the interview.

“Pick anything at random, go on,” she said, blue eyes blazing. She was referring to the folder.

“Maybe that isn't necessary,” I replied. “Why don't we talk first,” I added.

“It's important background,” mum returned, tapping the folder, again. I was going to have to look inside the red thing. Mum would be satisfied with nothing less.

I was expecting to find many dull reports from psychologists, with lots of graphs and measurements, snippy reports from deputies and plenty of failed examination results. And that would have just been for starters.

Tentatively, I opened the folder. I picked up the first piece of paper. It was a record of what a teacher had said to mum over the phone

about Rosie storming out of her class, a few months back. It also recorded a neighbour seeing Rosie on the same day at the local shops. There was a conclusion at the bottom of the page: "This teacher has not provided an accurate picture as to the time Rosie is said to have left without permission." The second piece of paper recorded mum's chat to the deputy. It said, in essence, that the deputy made a commitment to send someone to the river at midday to look for Rosie. A week later the deputy claimed no such conversation had taken place.

Suddenly the purpose of the red folder dawned on me. It did not chronicle Rosie's faults, but rather those of the local high school.

"She comes home a mess, all upset, then sits in her room and hardly speaks. They keep saying to me she must pull up her socks, do her homework, concentrate. But all I see is that my daughter is miserable," mum concluded. "And when I talk to anyone down there, what they say never makes any sense. Why can't they see that Rosie is not a trouble maker? She doesn't want to be there."

Mum was close to tears. She grabbed the red folder. Rosie did not have a great deal to say for herself but she didn't contradict mum or suggest, via a shoulder shrug or an eye roll, that it was all bollocks. "I've looked into this alternative school and heard enough to think we should try it," said mum.

"Ok," I returned, still unsure how to proceed. "Look, we have rules here too. Dashing out of class for no reason is not acceptable here either." Neither mum nor Rosie said a word. "We have five basic rules. Stick to them and you might even enjoy your time here. Number one: we're drug and alcohol free. Number two: no swearing.

"Sometimes, I say 'shit'," interjected Rosie.

"Shit's alright. No 'f' or 'cf.'" I returned.

Her shoulders relaxed.

"Number three: no violence or harassment. Keep your hands to yourself."

I went on to expound the other two rules.

“What should she wear?” asked mum. “She won’t ever get out of shorts and a t-shirt.”

“No worries.” I said. “Wear the same ones every day. It won’t worry us. Do you like your sport, Rosie?” I added.

For the first time she smiled a great big smile which crinkled her freckled nose.

“Can you stick to those rules, Rosie” asked mum, sounding unsure. Rosie nodded, they signed the right forms, and then they left. Rosie started the next day.

It turns out that Rosie could play sport all day and all night – basketball, rugby, handball; it didn’t matter to her. And she wasn’t fussy about who she played with – good players, poor players and a boy on the spectrum who was terrified of all balls. She gently coaxed and cajoled this bright young man until he could hold and then throw a ball, with no trouble at all.

Sometimes it was just her and him on the court, with Rosie providing encouragement. “Come on, Arthur, just a little throw. First, put your hands out, to catch the ball.”

“It could hurt!” cried Arthur.

“It won’t. Promise.”

“Double promise?” moaned Arthur.

“Absolutely,” returned Rosie, and the sheer delight on Arthur’s face when he caught the ball, fish like, flapping his hands, was a treasure.

As time went on, Rosie got better at expressing her views in class and many of her contributions were thoughtful and intelligent. She completed Year 10 and 11 with us but tired of the whole thing by Year 12. My perceptive head teacher called her mum in and together they worked out a transition plan that Rosie approved of herself. Rosie went on to complete her apprenticeship in carpentry at a Western Sydney TAFE. The thank you letter from mum to the school

can be read at one of my talks on the hidden talents of school refusers.

Mum had, at one stage, feared the worst. Her previous school had been close to the Hawkesbury river and Rosie would run to the river bank in the middle of the day when she was feeling overwhelmed. She would stare at that muddy river for hours. She was basically a happy kid when out in the open. She was a doer. But the whole school thing just rubbed her the wrong way. When adults said, “Get your act together, do your homework, stop daydreaming,” it made Rosie want to rebel and she became even more defiant. In addition, the constant criticisms aimed at her carried the message, no doubt unintentionally, that she was basically not up to scratch as a human being.

We can never afford to ignore vulnerable young people who might be having thoughts of suicide, yet the previous school had not seemed worried about a depressed unhappy teenager running away from school to stand at the edge of a wide, muddy river staring into its murky depths. No doubt the school struggled with staffing issues, but should the worst have happened, a lack of staff would have seemed a very poor excuse indeed.

Alternative education gives kids permission to just be themselves. By reducing extraneous demands like homework, assignments and uniform we allow the bright jewel of the child to shine through. Being yourself is the best protection against the woes of adult life, which one day they must face. Being yourself protects kids by reinforcing the message, “What you are is just fine. Don’t pretend to be anything else because you are good. The others, your true friends, already know this.” This is a crucial message in this age when many young people are subject to intense media pressure to be perfect and conform – or to rebel in only a few accepted ways.

I struggle to understand why so many schools seem unable to grasp the simple idea that acceptance, with few demands, is one of the greatest gifts we can offer any child, particularly the child called to the beat of a different drum.



Cooking

They were trying to wrench him from the back seat of an old battered Holden that had been abandoned in the school car park.

“Get off me! Lea’ me alone!” cried 13-year-old Jason. He swatted the hands away and went to bite the fat fingers, which appeared dismembered as they dove through the car window to grab him. The support worker didn’t want their fingers to get bitten, but they’d pretty much do anything to yank Jason out from the back seat of the car. That was their job, after all: Deliver Jason to his interview at the alternative school, no matter what.

This was the only school prepared to have a bar of him. Jason wore a baseball ball cap back to front, torn jeans and thongs on big feet.

“I hate schools. They’re all shit!” he yelled. Another Barina pulled up. Another four support workers emerged, all long legs and friendliness.

“Hey Jason, bro, remember me?” cried one.

“Fuck off,” returned Jason. At last one set of hands seized its prey and, unlocking the car door, they frog marched Jason to the front office for his interview. Minus his bench seat cave, Jason shrank, couldn’t look anyone in the eye, and withdrew into humiliation and pain.

“Well, are there any objections to Jason shooting some hoops with Levi while we gather all the paper work?” I asked as I got out the forms for enrolling Jason at the school. Levi, the gentle teacher’s aide, emerged from the shadows. He winked at Jason. He had been careful to avoid the support army. Their whispers and snide comments were corrosive, if unintentionally so. Jason was out the door before anyone had a chance to say he wasn’t allowed to leave.

Finally, the support army's purpose was revealed. The five of them had been called upon to deliver a weighty 200 page report on Jason. They drew attention to the many complex psychological assessments and the withering conclusions that had been drawn about his behaviour and character, the appalling report cards and the scathing remarks from head teachers. Examples read: "Failed, not up to scratch, defiant. Impossible to work with."

Jason had once counted over thirty adjectives assigned to him with his favourite literacy support teacher. He didn't know someone could be so difficult in so many ways. His mother had laughed. Now the factory-worker mother found her comments riffled through for signs of incompetence and neglect.

Released from the iron grip of officialdom, Jason had fled to safety: the boys' toilet. That is where Levi found Jason hiding. He asked Jason if he liked touch footy. He received an imperceptible nod of the head. He asked Jason if he would watch a few kids have a game, later. He received an imperceptible nod of the head. The support workers left with a collective sigh. Jason must shape up, or ship out. They were never seen again.

Levi's eyes were extraordinary. More fluid and a deeper green than the Caspian sea; they had a language of their own, a language well understood by teenage boys. Levi was from Armenia and a recovering addict. We all pretended that we didn't know, as he had such a way with the boys. He held them in a warm net of masculine friendship. It was like a terrible thirst for some boys, to experience gentleness in a man.

It wasn't long before Jason was never far from Levi's side. His rejection of school started to melt away, turning into rose-flavoured Turkish delight as he played footy and hand ball for most of his time at our school. He managed to get out of many classes early. He always seemed to find a plausible excuse, and he had other important things to do, namely cooking. Jason's best dish was spag bol and he soon ascended to the role of kid head chef, as most days the kids cooked lunch for everyone.

Jason fell in love with cooking. As kid head chef, he test-tasted everything, inviting others to do the same. Did it need more salt, more garlic? His dark eyes smiling, he savoured the rich red sauce, test tasting the warm spaghetti in his mouth while other students did their maths in the classroom, a safe distance away. He excelled at getting out of maths. Jason, smiling, enriched the voluptuous, red mixture he had made with specially chosen tomatoes – the biggest, reddest, fattest tomatoes – and maybe some capsicum and mushrooms too.

He would stir the big pot joyfully, for half an hour or more. There was always enough for a second helping for anyone who wanted it.

Jason was a light on the hill for all those boys who just seemed to be too difficult to work with. He graduated with our no exams Year 12 but wanted to work. His family had no money. Jason got work on building sites, though he faithfully promised everyone that he would return to the kitchen, one day.

Mists of Dreamtime

Big John was an Indigenous artist. His tribe was Dharruk. We hired him to do Indigenous art with the kids. Everyone loved his huge murals of spears and Crack men: long, thin, shadowy figures watching and protecting everyone at our upside-down school. His goannas, painted on paperbark trees, seemed to crawl to the top in their slow, deliberate fashion. And their leathery long tongues were sure to grab a kid's chip if he or she got too close.

Big John didn't say much to the other teachers, but the Indigenous boys found him hilarious. Their whispered conversations, paints in hand, sounded like yarning Dreamtime spirits. And everyone loved the art. The problem was, the art class was all day long, and even art can get a bit dull after a bit.

One day I said to Big John, "Be good for you to do some reading with those kids in the morning."

"I can't read," he replied.

"Good. Start teaching tomorrow," I said.

At the end of the day a few of the staff approached me. "He really can't read. He's not exaggerating," said the English teacher, glaring at me through her dark long fringe.

"The kids will laugh at him. How humiliating," said the maths teacher in his Nirvana t-shirt.

"And he barely writes" added a third teacher, who dressed formally every day and struggled with the school's lack of rules.

"Well, let's just see," I said. "He can just start with a couple of the boys." The teachers walked away mumbling darkly.

This is what happened.

“Now, yous boys gotta teach yous to read, so we gunna start with this easy story, Cowdung Custard, by Paul Jennings,” said Big John, the next day. I had given him that story and told him what it was called. He opened it at page one. He was a bit nervous. The two boys and Big John were seated in the echoey basketball court. There was no other place for them to go. They each had a small table in front of them.

“Well, who wants to read the first page?” asked Big John.

“You read!” cried the kids.

“O...k,” he said. “Ok. Well, um here we go. O...k. This... is... the s... s...s... t...t... o...o... That’s an ‘O’ he said to the boys, pointing to the letter. As if that explained a lot.

“Big John, you can’t read,” said one of the boys.

“It’s hard,” he replied.

“Will they sack you?” asked the second boy.

“I dunno,” replied Big John.

“We’ll teach you!” cried the first boy. “And they won’t find out,” he added.

“Yeah” said the second.

This was how two boys, both non-readers, and one big man, came to be seated at a tiny desk, struggling and stumbling until they had taught each other to read. Sometimes, they’d ask a compliant kid, a good reader, who happened to be passing on the way to the loo, how to say a hard word like “neighbour”. These consultant students were happy to oblige. There was always a lot of laughter coming from that group. In the end it grew to ten, mostly boys, with Big John in the middle, slowly learning to read while being corrected by other boys, who also struggled to read. There was never any resentment, or complaints about “stupid reading” from that group of teenage boys, which was a minor miracle on its own. Every now and again,

when everyone had had enough of reading, Big John would grab his digeridoos and have a blast. Even the kids with the head phones on would put them down to listen.

Sometimes I wish a Dreamtime mist would come to all schools and wrap itself around the trained teachers so they could fall into its soft embrace and be taken away. There they would learn how to make bark canoes and dilly bags and forget everything they ever knew. On their return the children would teach them many things and everyone would be a lot happier.

A Dog's Fart in English

No one wants to see kids exposed to danger, but the new obsession with making every learning environment “safe” is highly detrimental to enjoyable learning and will simply shut down spontaneity and creativity. Life involves risk, and we all must adjust to that. Animals in the classroom are a good example of worthwhile risk. Supposedly a distraction to learning, they transform cold, unimaginative spaces into places of warmth and acceptance. Besides, kids love dogs and lizards and trained rats and all sorts of animals and this love can enhance learning.

At the Blactown PCYC school we had a trained pet rat. In fact, we had two at one stage: Scabbers and Scum. Scabbers, the small grey one, was the more adventurous. He would poke his little grey head with its long whiskers out of his home, a large calico shoulder bag, which hung from the board, whenever he heard the voice of his mistress. His mistress was Jan, our young science teacher. Each lesson our friendly rat would study the science lessons, by peering at the work on the board with his beedy rat eyes. He must have recognised the voice of his mistress, and so raised his head to see her, as she launched into an explanation of the day's science lesson.. “Look, there's Scabbers,” the kids would cry as soon as his little ratty face emerged from its calico home. Scabbers would seem to stare at the notes on the board, as if these were of great importance, never letting Jan out of his sight. If a student yelled or broke the silence of room, Scum would vanish to the depths, to the straw at the bottom of the bag. No one wanted that. His bag hung most days on the white board, but his appearance could only be guaranteed by student silence. It was a unique way to keep the kids' eyes glued to the board and they were less prone to daydreaming, or to cry “This is boring,” whenever Scabbers was around. This meant

they learnt more science because they were looking at the board all the time, and listening to the teacher, anticipating that grey furry head and pointy nose.

Bill, my dog, was a kelpie cross. He too came to school most days, before the day's of Scabbers. Black and tan with patches of white, he had a gentle, loving nature and was very attached to me. He followed me everywhere! Bill arrived with me, in my run down white Holden Gemini, his head still sticking out the rear window as we pulled into the driveway. Everyone adored Bill.

"Bill, Bill, Come here Bill," the kids would cry as soon as we arrived, in imitation of me. Bill would sidle up to them and get his pat on his black and tan head or, tickle on his white tummy. But one day a boy made a startling discovery: Bill did not like devil signs. In a devil sign the second and fifth fingers are extended, pointed like goats horns, while the other fingers are retracted. Then this evil sign is shoved into the face of the unsuspecting innocent. "Hey Bill, what's this," the boys would say when they realised the impact of the devil sign on Bill. Terror would rise into those soft brown eyes, though a moment before Bill had been peaceful. Howls of laughter would fill the classroom. The devil inches from his face, Bill would bolt. And the kids would jump up ready to give chase. "Hey, no leaving till you have finished your work," I would say. Suddenly finishing their work became a top priority. "How do you do question two again?", they might ask. Now they would be listening to me, at last, while I helped them, though initially indifference ruled.

Bill, however, would seek his own revenge in time, using his own deadly weapon. Shivering and shaking, under my feet this particular day, after a prolonged chasing, he drifted off to sleep at last and slow-released his weapon. This weapon would prove to be a great friend of poetry.

"Gary, Dom, Louisa, time for English. Class, please, now." I said this particular day.

"Oh no, not English. Just the three of us?" Gary asked

“Yes, you three missed yesterday.” I said.

“I can’t concentrate” said Gary, “unless Bill is in the room.”

“Can Bill sit in, please?” asked Louisa

“OK, but no teasing him,” I said. No answer from the boys meant they would try to concentrate, but teasing Bill may still be needed to make the 40 minute lesson less painful.

“I hate poetry and I can’t write a stupid poem,” said Dom. He was the practical type, not dreamy like some of the others. He looked down at Bill, resting peacefully at my feet, sleeping at my feet. His paper remained blank. He stared at the ceiling.

“Look at the examples, again, I’ll help you” I said.

“This is just f.....”

“No swearing” I returned before he could finish. And then it happened. The air exploded with the unbreathable. Lumpy canned dog food, rotten egg gas, rancid meat with flies, and off milk - all mixed together in our tiny air, in our tiny classroom, without windows.

“What the..” Now the swearing began in earnest. A poet myself, I recognised the gift of this moment.

“Quick, write it down,” I said

“What?”

“Your reaction, to Bill, how he makes you feel, now. Just put those words down. Don’t lose this inspiration!”

Here’s the result

Dog Fart

What the f....

It stinks, I’m gagging. I can’t breathe....

I’ll faint any minute

Worse than puke

Worse than spag bol vomit in your mouth

Look at him. He's sleeping. How can a dog sleep through its own farts!



The Scottish play, toads and three schools

Fair is foul and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air

– Shakespeare, Macbeth

She wanted to run her fingernails slowly down the face of the lead school inspector, hear her screams, then gouge out those cold blue eyes and watch the blood drip to the floor, neck veins pulsating, hands clawing at the black holes that once held eyes. She wanted to hear all three of the inspectors from the NSW Education and Standards Authority screaming.

Instead, the principal said, “Ladies, if you would like to come this way, I have the roll books ready for you to inspect.”

“I’ll need space to examine them,” said the first inspector, the one with the permed hair and the wrinkled neck.

She said nothing for the next hour. While entering the attendance figures into her book a “tisk” emerged, at intervals.

The other two inspectors asked to see the children check register and risk-assessment forms and timetable. They sat amidst a sea of forms. Notes were made.

The principal remained standing. Nothing was forthcoming from the inspectors; the only sound was the scratch of pens on paper. A few of her teachers hovered in the next room like ghosts. With them were some Indigenous elders. They didn’t want to see the one school their kids loved, closed for good. The principal walked to the kitchen to make tea. The heavy hearts longed to speak, but the air was filthy.

At last one inspector declared “Your risk assessment forms are reasonable. That’s good.” The children’s books remained unopened.

Didn't they want to know how hard these kids had tried? *They win us with honest trifles to betray us in deepest consequence.*

At last the wrinkled neck spoke. "You're attendance is 60 per cent and that is way below average. This cannot be an effective school."

The principal blinked. How could she make such a remark? Did this woman have any idea? The neck smirked, its deep wrinkles moving and resettling in their cavernous splendour. *Why do you start and seem to fear things that sound so fair?* the creases seemed to say.

Fair, fair, fair! You've got to be joking. Could she but smite the whole damn bureaucracy and bring bloody execution on the entire NESAs, she would probably do it. She would certainly see it as a workable option, if it meant preventing the 103 vulnerable teenagers at her school being tossed onto the streets like bits of garbage. Who wanted her rebels, her wonderful rebels who tell the world to get stuffed. Who wanted them, anyway? Answer: no one. Why not let them stay at her upside-down school where they were cherished and even learnt some things, like how to read – and on some days, even algebra!

Should she yell in their faces "Wake up, wake up, you privileged turds!" Surely, something must rouse them from their slumber. A slap in the face? Instead the principal said "Would you allow me to give you some of the reasons why the attendance appears to be poor, but is in fact quite good? She smiled.

Three set of middle aged eyes turned upon her, three sets of teeth in three lipsticked mouths. The teeth said, *sure, go ahead, but what's the point? We have already been unsexed, our blood made thick and filled with direst cruelty.*

The principal began, "I might sit down and explain, as you haven't asked me, yourselves."

"Go ahead," said the teeth.

"You need to understand that we have many chronic school refusers. *Chronic.* That means 13 and 14 year-olds who have not been to

school, at all, for six months or more. They get good at avoiding detection. They move around. If we can get those kids to show up two days a week, most weeks, we consider it a great victory.

No reply. *God, they don't get it*, the principal thought to herself.

"You need to understand that as a registered school, you have many responsibilities," said the lead inspector. "Your fulfillment of those responsibilities must be thoroughly documented," said the second set of teeth. "Show me the student files," said the third set.

Thy words become my wounds.

Again there was a long time of the scratching of pens on paper. The silence stretched out the door and all the way to Broken Hill regional airport. One of the teachers from the kitchen couldn't bear it any more. He leapt into the classroom where the inspectors were seated.

"Hey, I'm Brad," he said. "I'm one of the teachers here. I just wanted to let you know that this is a really great school and the kids love it." Six eyes, beheld him, perhaps wondering if he could be squashed under heel. Instead, they turned him to stone and crumbled him to rubble. With a wave of a hand, he blew away as if dust returning to the red dirt.

"Vital documents are missing from each file," said a mouth. "So you'll have nothing to prove your claims."

"We... we ran out of time," stammered the principal. *The kids are more important. We attend to their deep needs, not to your endless forms*, yelled the silence. *But I have spoke with one who saw him die, who did report that very frankly he confessed his treasons.*

They rose. The kids' books remained unopened. "We have seen enough for our report. There are serious issues here."

"Is that it?" cried the principal. "You know nothing about these kids and have not shown the slightest interest in anything they have done. You have the power to throw 30 staff to the wolves and take away the only place these 103 kids have ever learnt anything at all – in their own words." *Is this a dagger which I see before me?*

“Enough,” said the lead inspector. “You will receive a copy of our report. *Come Greymalkin. I’ll do, I’ll do, I’ll do.*”

And in the wake of that bitter report, Eagle Arts and Vocational College closed. 103 teenagers across the state, who had no other school option to turn to, were tossed aside like used condoms. Some ended up in jail, others just died slowly.

The principal considered the situation, a year later. Something grew inside her. “Now nature seems dead. Witchcraft celebrates withered murders, There will come the time when I’ll do, I’ll do, I’ll do.”

Suddenly she had an answer. “I will tell the world what happened and stand as an Independent candidate in the NSW State Parliament. I will tell everyone how we must right this wrong.”



PART 3
Solutions

The Columbo method

If you have a school-refusing son or daughter, you're probably thinking: "What did we do? How did we get into this mess? We are well-adjusted people, well ... In the main. Our other children did not reject high school; our friends say their kids are positively glowing at school (well, that's what they say). Where did our school go wrong? Where did we go wrong?"

If you are not asking yourselves these questions, start now. This is not to apportion blame, but rather to get you ready, to set the scene, to see the entire situation through a different lens: the Columbo lens.

Before we begin on our Columbo journey, a quick word about addictions. If you or anyone in your close family circle is abusing drugs or alcohol, you must get immediate help. Joining a 12-step program such as Al Anon is one way to do this. Meetings are free and are held all over the country. It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to get help for the family members if a loved one is abusing any substance, whether legal or illegal. Your school refuser does not need this extra burden.

So now for Columbo. If you have not seen this family-friendly detective series from the 1980s, try to find it. It can be found on Google Play store and no doubt other places too. Being old, the series is cheap to purchase.

Columbo is a detective with a difference. He often manages, to the surprise of all, to solve the most complicated murder mysteries. Wearing an old raincoat and munching on a sandwich, he's like an eccentric uncle who has wandered into your living room to chat and annoy the hell out of you about burnt toast or some other piece of

trivia. Listen up. You need to be like Columbo, if you are to solve the problem of the school-refusing teenager.

Colombo knows that all suspects in a murder enquiry will do anything to prove their innocence, and convince him they are incapable of such a despicable act as murder. There are many types of murder. (A teenager who feels that their school is undermining them, is not seeing or hearing them, is experiencing a type of murder.)

Knowing the above, Columbo takes everything the suspects have to say with a big pinch of salt. His job is to get underneath the obvious, to steer clear of the plausible yet fake sounding answers to his probing questions. You will need to do the same.

He does not confuse appearance with substance. But what kind of substance does a school refuser seek in a school? Why, the most gentle kind of course. The one that will have the most tolerance of their unusual ways, the most willingness to be flexible and bend the school rules to fit them – not the other way round.

In the first episode, a famous writer is murdered. The wife hears the shots while on the phone to him. She calls the police, fearing he is already dead. Colombo arrives but instead of demanding answers, he escorts the lady home and starts to make her an omelette. They chat about her life, the omelette, the murder. Indirectly, Colombo is getting a feel for the kind of person she is and of course he is alert to any statement that is at odds with a bereaved wife. Any sharp or unsympathetic remark from her will stick out like a sore thumb.

You will need to do the same with each new principal you interview to determine if their school may be suitable. That's right. You will interview them, even if it appears they are interviewing you.

You are going to have ask a variety of principals or program managers, how they might cope with your school-refusing son or daughter. They will be keen to give you a very good answer. That is a problem. Education has been turned into a business in Australia. Your child represents dollars to the new school or program. While I'm

not suggesting that you will be told deliberate lies, most will say they would be incapable of treating your child inappropriately. Remember Columbo? Remember that big grain of salt? This is where the chit chat and asking things that may seem irrelevant becomes important.

Try some of the following:

“Can we speak to a couple of students, privately, at their next break, on how they find this school? And could one of those students be someone who has struggled with school?”

“What if our Sally refuses to go to maths and sits in the quadrangle? Will she be punished? Do you have that kind of flexibility? If the response is one about standards that must be kept, you can finish the interview. This school will not suit your school refuser. They need flexibility and creativity, not standards.

Ask about work experience too. You might say “Our Tom is crazy about classic cars. He loves to tinker with them. Can he be placed in a work experience program in Year 9, to work on cars, if we cover the insurance? (schools pay a lot for insurance). Could the work experience last for six weeks? If the answer you get is that the curriculum would not allow it because of x, y and z, finish the interview. Try elsewhere.

Other solutions.

Some schools run school-refusers programs but again, remember Columbo. Some may be good, others butt awful. Ask those questions, face to face. There are alternative schools too, though way too few. Some of these are quite good. I ran a few for 20 years till the NSW Liberal Government closed us down. Still, apply Columbo. There is a home schooling network too and home schooling collectives. Take a look. Leave all your options open. Think like Columbo. Get a vibe for what is happening on the ground and ask irrelevant questions that show the spirit of the place.

You are looking for great flexibility, the school that bends to the student and not the other way around.

In you are still stuck, try contacting an alternative education network such as the Australasian Democratic Education Community (ADEC). Find them through Google.

Start your own school

This is not an easy option, but it is a very worthwhile job for any parent or teacher interested in alternative schooling. Alternative schools stand the best chance of helping kids outside the box. In most cases, they strive for flexibility. They tend to avoid rules. That is what you need.

What does starting an alternative school involve?

Generally, those who claim an interest in alternative education want schools to be more relaxed, less concerned with formal testing and more open to giving kids time for the arts, sport and just daydreaming. Smaller schools almost always do a better job with tricky kids than bigger schools. It is simply wrong to think that the arts need to be sacrificed to academic pursuits. In my schools almost half of every day was devoted to the arts or sport or daydreaming while colouring in or plaiting hair or gardening, or other simple activities.

The following are the suggested steps you need to take to have a chance of making an alternative school happen:

1. Form a loose informal collective of like-minded people interested in establishing an alternative school. This will usually be the parents of kids not coping with school. This collective should include a couple of the kids who would hope to attend your proposed school. The group shouldn't include more than seven adults. Too many makes it hard to agree on anything. Five is a good number and even three can make it work with enough commitment.

2. Decide on the main features of your school. This is where the opinions of the kids will really count. Examples include deciding on an age range. Do you want to have kids as young as ten and go through to fourteen? Would you prefer to concentrate on 13 to 17 year-olds, the most difficult period when the need for alternatives becomes most urgent? Do you want to have all homework completed on the premises, so none is taken home? Do you want no homework at all? Do you want to do a shorter day? Your young people will almost certainly say yes to that. Perhaps there will be no academic homework at all, which is how I ran my schools. Our homework consisted of things like “cleaned my room”, “washed up for Mum”, “helped the lady next door with her baby”. Your group needs to decide how much freedom students have. Can they vote to establish school rules? Can they alter your curriculum to suit their tastes? Write it up, but this document must only be two pages in length. Remember to ask the kids for their views. This is not the time for fine detail. Now is the time for getting clarity around the outline of your school. That will prove difficult enough. (The fine detail will come later, when you must put in a formal school application.)

3. You are going to think this next step is not so important but it will turn out to be crucial. You can leave this step till last if you prefer, but on no account leave it out. Do not miss it! Take your polished notes and pay a visit to your local member of parliament. Explain your motives and ideas. He or she may be uncertain about your plans but they will want to be seen as a good gal or fellow looking after community concerns. This step is important because when the heavy hand of bureaucracy tries to stop you, and it will, one of the few breaks on their power will be the fear that the bureaucracy will be seen as an interfering power-driven monster out to undermine a solid community initiative: an alternative school. Bureaucrats will want to be more co-operative with your group if the local member of parliament is watching them.

4. At some stage in this process, your group should start to visit other schools who are doing education differently. Most will be very welcoming. Stay the whole day. Talk to kids, teachers and the principal. Ask to look at some of their paperwork or curriculum. Ask if you could use some of their paperwork in your own application in return for a donation to that school. Visiting other alternative education schools, you will see what is working well and what is not working as well. It will ground your own ideas.
5. Now you are ready to talk to your education bureaucracy about starting your own school. Do not let these people bully you. It will take at least a year, and most likely longer. You will need to establish a board, and find money for insurance and rent for a small space. Government money will not arrive until you are actually up and running, so you have to fork out in advance.
6. Stay open minded and willing to negotiate. Remember that the voice of students counts for a great deal. Make sure student views are heard and acted upon, wherever possible. Be brave. Don't allow your group to be bullied.
7. Join an organisation sympathetic to the establishment of alternative or progressive schools, as they are sometimes known. The ADEC and Transformative Education Australia are both good. They will want to help you. Reach out to them but the bulk of the heavy work will fall to your group.

My run for the New South Wales Parliament

I hope, dear reader, that you have some idea now of how alternative schools can tackle education, differently. Despite the problems, and all the heartache endured by our rejected kids and their families, there is real joy in the way alternative schools can operate.

We bring out the special qualities and hidden talents of school refusers. We drive home to our students that they count and that whatever has pushed them away from “normal school” will turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Maybe their reading is awful or their maths is behind, but there is a hidden flower there and we know it will burst into bloom, in time. Right now, it may be painful, very painful, for our school refuser, but the wheel turns and their experiences will give them a depth of understanding and a kind of courage in their adult years that others may not have. And of course they will beat that blasted reading, writing and maths.

Alternative schools can give peace of mind to worried parents and caregivers who are weighed down by the mystery or shame of their son or daughter who is refusing to go to school. We are beloved by every regular school principal with 20 or 30 kids under his or her watch, who they know cannot flourish at their school. We take them off their hands, for free, and do what they cannot because we are small with a high staff to student ratio (about 1 to 8). We are different, and proudly so.

We welcome grandparents, business people, artists, trainee teachers – anyone who wants to make a contribution. They can teach a class as a guest teacher, or work with a student one-on-one; they can hang around and have a cuppa. They don't have to have any qualifications. Another myth in education is that only trained teachers are good at teaching. That might be true for specialised

subjects at Year 12 level, however many of the things kids like to learn – such as cooking or making a worm farm – might be better taught by people who love these activities and are patient with rebel teenagers.

One of the best teachers I ever had was an untrained, middle-aged Indigenous woman who gave kids very straight forward comprehensions every day. They were comprised of simple questions requiring short answers. Examples included questions like: “What year did Captain Cook land in Australia?” At first I secretly balked at them – the lack of complexity needed for the answers. They seemed misleading. However, over the following months I watched a revolution take place in these kids’ confidence. Here were young people who, for a variety of reasons, got nearly every question wrong at their local school, but who were suddenly getting everything right at our school. I can’t tell you the confidence boost that was for those kids. Sure, at some point harder work had to come their way, but their attitude towards the more difficult was transformed by their glowing run of 100 per cents. They were willing to give “harder” a go rather than run away, and that alone was great progress: the willingness to try.

We take on community projects in alternative schools that others deem uninteresting. In my schools, homework could consist of mowing the lawn for the lady next door, washing up for mum or babysitting. We have painted, by laborious hand, ginormous wall murals in back alley ways in Blacktown that were once scattered with syringes, and transformed these lanes into interesting walk ways. This project, which started during art class, was completed during the school holidays. No one complained about coming in the holidays.

What has all this to do with my running for parliament?

Well, for almost 20 years the NSW Government was very happy with the results we produced in our schools, just like our kids and parents were. We even got a mention in state parliament. But then, for reasons no one seems to know, dark and ugly clouds wiped out the

bright sunshine of alternative education, as practised at the schools where I had been principal.

This dark sky had a name: the NSW Education and Standards Authority, also known as NESAs. Overnight, this new authority decided that all schools must conform to a certain standard. We did not fit the standard, so we were closed. All 103 students across four campuses, 65 of whom were Indigenous, were thrown onto the streets as if they were rubbish. Most of them never went near a school again. We took the new NESAs to court, we protested out the front of state parliament, we got reports from independent psychologists to say we were doing a great job, we got support letters from Indigenous elders and organisations. It amounted to nothing. The school was shut down completely and I was banned from being a school principal for five years (until 2023).

I have asked myself, do I have anything left to try to bring alternative schools back to life, for the benefit of all kids, everywhere in the state?

Well, yes, there is one more thing. I can run as an independent candidate for the NSW State Parliament in the 2023 elections, and advocate for saving and promoting alternative education. Of course I won't get in, but it will allow me to travel far and wide, bringing my stories and experiences of alternative schools to local libraries, for regional and city audiences in country towns and suburbs across the state. I want all communities to understand just how precious is alternative education. Aunty Colleen Fuller, an Indigenous woman who is also running as an independent, may come with me. Indigenous people have a soulful connection with alternative schools. If you would like me to come and tell some heart-warming stories about school refusers and the importance of alternative to your schools community, well, I will see what can be done.

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