



WHAT IS A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL AND CAN WE LAUNCH ONE IN CORK?

What is the difference between a democratic school and an Educate Together Schools?

The founding of Educate Together schools was a big step forward for education in Ireland, especially regarding diversity. However, democratic schools are a much more radical alternative to mainstream education than Educate Together schools are. In democratic schools, there is no set curriculum, no compulsory lessons, and no formal assessment (unless requested by students). Children have full control over what and how they learn - and also contribute significantly to the running of the school. In essence, an Educate Together school education is teacher and parent-led, while democratic education is child-led.

Is the East Cork democratic school and the soon-to-open OAK Sudbury School the same thing?

No. We started this group early in 2019 and with Bernadette and Sean O'Brien as members very early on. Not long after, Bernadette and Sean proposed opening a Sudbury School as a group this September, the project which the current members of this group decided not to be part of. While we are very encouraged by the new OAK School and believe there is plenty of room for many small alternative schools in Cork, we want to move at a slower pace and continue to explore the broad spectrum of educational models that fall under the umbrella of "democratic schooling". We find our

original aim to open in September 2020 more appealing. We wish Bernadette and Sean the very best and look forward to hearing all about the new addition to Cork.

When are we going to open?

We hope to open in September 2020.

Where will the school be located?

We hope to open in the Cobh or Midleton areas.

Can we have a democratic school in Cork City?

Certainly! As soon as we assemble a committed core team, we can work towards that goal. The East Cork group would always support other democratic schools.

Will there be fees?

Yes. Most democratic schools are fee-paying and ours will be no different. We are still not sure how our fees will look as it depends greatly on the location we set up in and other running costs. We will not be a for-profit school but our staff will be paid fairly. In the Wicklow Sudbury school, the fee is 12% of the household's gross income (with a reduction for siblings). In the Sligo Sudbury school, the fees are approx €2,500 or €4,500 depending on the household income. We expect to follow a similar model but have not decided what our fee structure will be.

How will the school be staffed?

It's worth remembering that we will not be hiring people for the role of "teacher". Instead, we will be hiring socially conscious adults with something to offer the students. Teaching qualifications will not be necessary, but respect and passion for children and the child-led education will be! Along with full-time members, we will also be looking for part-time staff, mentors and experts in areas children are interested in who are willing to volunteer a certain amount of hours a month or on an ad hoc basis, depending on the requirements of the children at any given time.

Will you allow screentime?

Different democratic schools have different policies on this. All evidence suggests that if children are allowed to create their own rules of conduct, they are far more likely to follow them. While we continue to discuss the issue of screentime, there is certainly a case to be made for allowing this to be a decision made by the school - children and staff together -, which will make it a changeable rule.

Is it a Sudbury School?

That remains to be seen. We may decide to adhere to the Sudbury model (named after Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, MA: <https://sudburyvalley.org/>) or settle on something slightly different. The founders' group meets weekly and discusses, debates, brainstorms and explores the merits of different models and topics. We continue to explore these big questions, with a view to having a clear idea of how the school will run in due course.

Is Democratic Education new?

No. The oldest extant democratic school (Summerhill in Suffolk) is almost a 100 years old. Sudbury Valley is 50. However, as the world changes to one that respects children, mental health, and the innate joy of learning, along with technological advances that have blown open pathways to knowledge, a flurry of new democratic schools have started to open (including three on the way in county Cork!).

It's clear from endless research and studies that the education system as we know it, which has changed very little in decades (except, one could argue, to add only more stress and pressure on students) is broken and alternatives are direly required if we want to raise and nourish healthy minds and bodies.

Are you looking for more founder members?

We are always interested in hearing from people who are passionate about alternative education and willing to commit to meeting once a week to progress the school. Please feel free to contact us via our Facebook page if you would like to discuss this further.

What does being a founding member require?

The founding members commit to meeting every week. While we can be reasonably flexible with the day/time and video calling in from time to time is fine, we do expect that members attend the meeting regularly.

The meeting has a rolling chair and secretary and is led by an agenda and minutes are taken with actions on the relevant member noted. These tasks and their completion are discussed the following week.