

# THE WALDEN PROJECT





# *Educating Deliberately: A Conversation with Matt Schlein*

Story by Leath Tonino  
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**M**ATT SCHLEIN TAUGHT ENGLISH, PSYCHOLOGY, AND DRAMA at Vergennes Union High School for six years before deciding that he had had enough of the glossy hallways and lousy lighting. His students deserved something better, something more inspiring and relevant and real. They deserved a curriculum and a classroom that were one and the same. In a word, they deserved nature.

Enter Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau went to the woods to understand himself, his role in society, and his place in the ecological system known as Walden Pond. More concretely, he went to observe the muskrats and ducks, read some great books, plant some beans, and hammer some boards. With the transcendentalist tradition in mind, Matt pitched his idea to the school principal: What about a satellite program, still part of the public system, but with its own outdoor campus and its own curriculum? What about wind in the hair and snow in the mind, a school for twenty 10th, 11th, and 12th graders based around three core questions: What is my relationship with my self? What is my relationship with my culture? What is my relationship with the natural world? To Matt's delight (and surprise), the principal took the bait. With that, the Walden Project, now in its 14th year, was born.

I first experienced the Walden Project on a cold, snowless day in December. The "classroom" is a 230-acre farm in Monkton owned by the Willowell Foundation, a non-profit that Matt founded in 2001. I parked behind a crooked old barn, walked for 10 minutes through a field, and entered a deep, dark cedar grove. A bonfire was smoldering at the center of a ring of stump chairs, old office chairs, upholstered chairs torn from automobiles, and simple log benches. A blackened wok filled with fried kale (harvested from the school's garden) rested in the dirt. Strange sculptures made of sticks hung from trees and grew from the ground. I thought to myself: This is a high school classroom? It looked more like a New Age hobo camp.

It would be easy to disregard the Walden Project as some sort of freewheeling hippy experiment. I can hear it already: But what about China? Japan? Finland? How will these kids ever compete in a global economy? Fortunately, it is just as easy to respond with



some simple facts. Walden Project students perform as well if not better than their peers on standardized tests, and approximately 90 percent of them go on to attend college. Nobody is assigned to the cedar grove; in fact, one must apply to be admitted. Just showing up indicates a student's active engagement with his or her education.

Typically, class is held outside, weather be damned, either around the fire pit or elsewhere on the farm. The day I visited was anomalous; the class had retreated to the warmth of a nearby cabin built by a former student (for his math credit). Some wore clean khakis and sweaters, others studded black leather and shredded T-shirts. They sprawled on the floor or stood in corners: knitting, closing their eyes, petting any one of three dogs snuggled down amongst legs and backpacks. All were paying attention in their own way ("following their genius," as Thoreau might put it).

Matt was standing beside a woodstove, holding forth on Hindu cosmology, hands tucked into the bib of his coveralls. The quality of the lecture and the articulate, intelligent responses from the students reminded me of college classes I had taken. This was a one-room schoolhouse for the 21st century! This was public education finding its earthy, intimate roots!

Weeks passed, then months, and I couldn't get the Walden Project out of my head. It was different and cool and a little weird. I wanted to learn more, so one afternoon I called up Matt to talk.

**Leath Tonino:** Can you tell me a bit about the philosophy behind the school?

**Matt Schlein:** A school made with cinderblocks and other dubious materials, fluorescent lights going, everyone in rows, their heads directed to the teacher as if he's the sole purveyor of knowledge, it doesn't create an environment that inspires. With the Walden Project we've been emphatic about bringing the curriculum into the natural world. Nature shouldn't be an abstraction for the students but rather a master teacher, instructing all the time. We call it "educating deliberately" instead of, as Thoreau would put it, "living deliberately."

We're almost always outdoors. There's something contemplative about sitting around a fire in the woods and having class like that. It's one thing to talk about the cycles of nature, it's another thing to really experience them. Gathering in the late summer, going into the dark of winter together, then emerging in the spring, it's metaphoric to the growth that high school students are going through.

**LT:** What is a typical day of class look like?

**MS:** I'll give you a Wednesday. The bus drops the students off by this old barn that was built in 1803. We'll say "What do we want to eat for lunch?" and a few kids will run to the garden and grab leeks and potatoes and kale, whatever's in season, and fill up their backpacks with that stuff. Down in the cedar grove, some students will peel off birch bark and others will gather kindling and others will go to the woodshed for logs. Once the fire is going we'll have a reading from one of the transcendentalists, usually Thoreau, but Emerson, Whitman, Margaret Fuller, they all make appearances.

After that we transition to a class that's formally called Foundations of Social and Systems Theory, but that's a fancy name for talking about what's going on in the world. Students will bring up issues that they're following. Then they'll share some poems or original writings they've been inspired by. Then we'll take a break. Often we have guest visitors, naturalists, and artists especially.

We leave half of the curriculum open to the students. They can take elective classes or they can come up with some big ambitious project of their own. The elective on a Wednesday morning is a phi-



Jake McCarthy and Nathan Unger are engaged in a discussion as classmates listen in the outdoor classroom. Matt Schlein explains, "The way the discussions are organized, the way we sit around the fire, it's all designed to empower the students and get them to own their education."





After a stint of shoveling, raking, and hauling dirt and doing planting, students prepare an impromptu lunch (pizza) from whatever may be in season and available, baking it in a wood-fired oven. The 230-acre site affords unlimited possibilities for meals (including duck, in season).

osophy/psychology/world religions class. It's a tour of big ideas, a map of intellectual traditions. We cover thinkers from the Western enlightenment, Eastern philosophy, and modern contemporary psychological theory. Class moves here and there. I might say "We're going to go over to the clearing by the hickory tree" and that's where we'll have our discussion.

After lunch, Becky Dowdy, the Walden Project's math and science instructor, will teach her ecology class, and that involves a lot of wandering around the 230 acres. We've got 11 eco-zones on the property. Sometimes we'll come across a deer that's slipped off a cliff and broken its neck. Coming on that, seeing that a coyote has ripped its carcass apart, it's powerful. There're moments where the first snow falls and it's quiet, and that

has a sanctity to it, but so too do these moments of rough beauty. Again, it's one thing to talk about the cycles of nature, it's another thing to really experience them. When the students are in sync with nature a lot of unspoken lessons are communicated.

That's a typical Wednesday. Another day of the week is devoted to apprenticeship, so that's a different way the students personalize their curriculum. And another day we take the idea of place-based education and put it in a city context. But we're always coming back to the core questions, always looking to the community, both the natural resources and the people, as a good starting point for the discourse.

**LT:** I like the sound of your lunch.

**MS:** Lunch is always awesome. One year during duck season we had duck almost every day. A student would get up before dawn and shoot ducks and bring them in and we'd roast them over the fire with some maple syrup and apples and sage. Best meals I've ever had.

**LT:** What do you think happens when young people live without much direct contact with the natural world?

**MS:** I think we see it manifesting in all kinds of ways, from obesity to the numbers of people diagnosed with ADHD to a general irritability in the classroom. We ask kids to do something that as adults we ourselves can't do: To sit still! Their hormones are raging, but it's like, "You know, you need to sit still for the next 75 minutes and pay attention to this thing





Co-teacher Max Roche (above) speaks to the class. Classes are typically held outdoors, regardless of what the weather may be doing. Walden Project students perform as well as if not better than their peers on standardized tests, and approximately 90 percent of them go on to attend college. Students (right) troop past a barnyard on their way to class.

that we promise will be important to you many years later.” That’s so antithetical to who they are, physically speaking.

I think a lot of the problems and acting out we see happening result from a lack of connection with those natural cycles I keep mentioning. It used to be that we had rites of passage that would help us transition from childhood to adulthood. But the rites of passage in our culture seem to be SATs and things like that, nothing that restores a sense of “There’s an order and I want to find my place in it.” If anything, these days it’s more like, “Why is this related to my life? I don’t understand it.”

**LT:** What do you think our country would look like if everybody spent a year at the Walden Project?

**MS:** For starters, I want to emphasize that the project itself can vary from region to region. Thoreau works for New England. In California, it could be the Muir Project. In New York City, you could create the Olmsted Project. The possibilities are endless.

But returning to your question: I think that when you’re in nature you experience a larger web of connections. You move away from this “me” consciousness to a little bit more of a healthy “we” consciousness. It would be exciting if everybody had the chance to develop a close relationship with the plants and trees of their community, to think about the environment not as an abstraction but as something that they really know and understand. A lot of the problems we’re looking at in the world today, in terms of

environmental degradation, are rooted in this way we’ve reduced nature to an abstraction. We have a very “it” relationship with the natural world. By spending time in the natural world we gain an understanding of relationships. There’s a context of mutuality. That’s really important.

**LT:** What’s the mix of students like?

**MS:** It’s a heterogeneous mix, and that’s by design. We didn’t want it to be a “gifted and talented” program nor did we want it to be a holding tank for troubled youth. A third of our students fit that “gifted and talented” criteria, a third are in the middle, not causing problems but not doing great, just going through the motions, and then a third would definitely be termed “at-risk.”

People come with different agendas. Sometimes it’s kids groping with the loss of a parent. A disproportionate number, relative to the general population, are dealing with grief on some level. I think being able to witness the cycle of life and death as it appears in the natural world allows them to accept, not to gloss over or forget or ignore, but to just accept. So that’s been an interesting quirk in our demographic, nothing that we thought of, like, “Oh, this program will be great for people who are dealing with grief.” But it does definitely seem like students in those situations have been drawn to the Walden Project. As have students who are dealing with questions around sexuality.

**LT:** What’s been the response from students over the years?

**MS:** For the students who’ve gotten in trouble before, I think they often feel like this is a new start. I think they feel like, “Oh, this is a community of people that gets me.” Often, students who were really alienated start to care about what’s going on. They go to local protests, get involved with politics, help out the elderly. We’ve also had students who’ve come through the program and lost 40 or 50 pounds just from walking out into the woods every day and eating healthy foods. There’s no question that there can be a positive relationship between our physical health and our mental health. And it’s well documented how nature has been helpful to students with ADHD.

The way the discussions are organized, the way we sit around the fire, it’s all designed to empower the students and get them to own their education. We want them asking critical questions of themselves: “What matters to me? Where do I want to go? How do I see this experience aligning with my dreams and aspirations? How can I use a year in the woods to get me where I need to go?”

**LT:** Any memories that stand out?

**MS:** One of my favorite memories is from a late-spring camping trip in the Green Mountain National Forest. The class came upon a moose that had been killed while drinking water at a little stream; it looked as though a tree had fallen on it. Beneath the log the carcass was just desiccated fur and flesh, an anaerobic field day. As a group, we lifted the log, pulled the moose out of the water, and had an impromptu funeral. It was raw and it was beautiful. It was profound. It allowed the students to participate in that larger dance. And it was school. ♣

**Leath Tonino, raised in Charlotte and Ferrisburgh, works seasonally for the U.S. Forest Service in northern Arizona. He spends winter months writing articles, essays, poems, and stories about his great love: The Great Outdoors.**

## JUST THE FACTS

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