

Skolinspektionen  
Box 23069  
104 35 Stockholm

By email: [friskolor@skolinspektionen.se](mailto:friskolor@skolinspektionen.se)

27<sup>th</sup> March 2009

Dear Sir or Madam

### **Preliminary proposal to establish a Sudbury model school in Sweden**

I am writing in English primarily because of the rapidly approaching deadline of April 1<sup>st</sup>. For me to formulate this document in Swedish would take too much time given the urgency, so I hope you forgive the discourtesy.

I write with questions concerning my intention to establish a Sudbury model school in Sweden. The "Sudbury model" is based on an existing school in Massachusetts, USA which was founded in 1968 – the Sudbury Valley School. Since then a number of other schools based on this model have been operational, primarily in the USA but also in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Israel and Japan.

### **The Model**

In essence, the model is founded on the following principles (in no particular order):

- children should be allowed complete freedom in deciding what and how they learn – they are ultimately responsible for their own education;
- no activity is viewed as more or less important or relevant than any other;
- there is no discrimination on the basis of age – activities and classes, should they be sought, may be participated in irrespective of age;
- learning is a vital and inborn desire of every human being, a necessary drive that persists throughout one's lifetime in order to adapt successfully to one's environment;
- as each person has a unique fingerprint, so does each person have a unique mental and emotional constitution. Therefore the rate at which, and the ways in which, learning takes place cannot be dictated by outside forces;
- an educational system based on Victorian values, and structured primarily to produce efficient support for an Industrial society, is outmoded. It often fails according to its own criteria, and dictating what, how and when students learn does little to support self-confidence, creativity or self-understanding. Furthermore, the standard practice of enforced, scheduled learning reflects less and less the increasingly divergent, multi-faceted, rapidly changing society we currently live in, and that our children will need to feel confident in successfully interacting with;
- as part of a democratic society, the students' involvement in the running of the school at every level is their absolute right, irrespective of age.

There may be more, but these strike me as the most significant.

What does this mean in practice? The following are some of the key divergences from a traditional school:

- there is no curriculum, as decided by the state or a governing body within the school;

- all decisions concerning school rules, alleged breaches of rules, requests for materials and resources, and hiring and firing of staff, are handled in a weekly School Meeting. This is a formal meeting where all present – staff and students alike, irrespective of age or position – each have one vote;
- there are no pre-arranged classes for students to follow at predetermined intervals. Instead, should a student or group of students express a genuine interest in pursuit of a certain topic or activity, the staff will do everything within their means to provide it. This may from time to time result in hiring someone with relevant knowledge on a temporary basis. It may also result in the request being discussed by the School Meeting;
- students are not “guided” by staff in respect of how they should spend their time;
- staff are not hired indefinitely, and may not necessarily be required to be qualified teachers. Their ability to communicate with ease and respect with children of all ages, and to act as a positive role model for the students, is as important as their particular field of expertise or qualification to “teach”;
- there is no externally imposed grading system at any time within the school.

This is certainly a revolutionary departure from the traditional school system of most developed countries. Before one jumps to any conclusions about the inherent values of the system or its practices, the following are worth knowing about Sudbury Valley School:

- on average, 80% of those who graduate from the school go on to higher education – destinations have included a wide range from Yale and MIT through to centres specialising in various artistic disciplines and crafts;
- since the school opened, there has not been one recorded case of dyslexia amongst the students, despite the national average being about 10% of the population;
- despite having no arbitrarily scheduled classes in English, and admitting students from the age of 4 and up, not one student has failed to learn to read;
- once a student or group of students decide they want to learn algebra and arithmetic, it usually takes a course of approximately 20 hours staff/student contact before they are at the same level as the national average at the equivalent of årskurs 9. Some students prefer to learn individually, seeking help from staff if there is something they do not understand;
- the range of professions and trades that graduates pursue after leaving is highly varied, from academics and business people through to musicians, performers, engineers and medical professionals;
- the ability to “fit in” with a structured, regulated environment that can be common as part of a company or other large organisation is not considered a problem by graduates who have spent a large part of their early life deciding themselves how to use their time. Instead, their own sense of personal motivation, strength of self-esteem, and ability to pursue goals and resolve problems provides them with a stable background against which to tackle any aspect of adult life they see fit;
- having been involved in all decisions made at the school, including a period on the school’s Judicial Committee, graduates have a practical understanding of the nature of a democratic society, and real experience of what it means to be a member of a community;
- there is often a stigma attached to “free” schools and “alternative” education, as some sort of vague, idealistic organisation that fails to adequately prepare children for the “real” world. Sudbury Valley was from the very beginning both a pragmatic and visionary school, looking to the failures of standard educational systems and towards the changing future of Western democratic culture. Its principle founder is in fact a professor of Physics, and has written

continuously and extensively on the School model, and its relationship to many aspects of modern culture, economic theory, educational practice and human behaviour.

### **The Proposal**

It is my intention to establish a Sudbury Model school in Sweden that incorporates Förskoleklass, Grundskola and Gymnasieskola. I have read information on your website, together with relevant documents such as Skollagen. In terms of some of the significant details of the law, it would seem on the face of it that such a school would not be feasible – that it would not be approved by Skolinspektionen. On the other hand, the two principal aims of the Education Act are supported entirely by the Sudbury Model:

- *Utbildningen skall ge eleverna kunskaper och färdigheter samt, i samarbete med hemmen, främja deras harmoniska utveckling till ansvarskännande människor och samhällsmedlemmar*
- *Verksamheten i skolan skall utformas i överensstämmelse med grundläggande demokratiska värderingar. Var och en som verkar inom skolan skall främja aktning för varje människas egenvärde och respekt för vår gemensamma miljö*

There are three key questions at this stage:

1. Is there a form of private school, that a) would satisfy the legal requirements of skolplikt, and b) that may be operated without recourse to approval for teaching methods and periodic assessment (and therefore state funding)?
2. If no such legal entity exists, may I propose that a pilot scheme be run, with a view to changing the legal provisions? The project would carry out in depth research on the Sudbury model, including extensive reading and visits to some of the key schools in operation abroad, with a view to preparing a report and proposal to establish a school in Sweden as a pilot model. If this were to happen, contracts may need to be drawn up ahead of opening that could agree on some measure of assessment, should it be deemed necessary, that would not compromise the essential principles of the model – that is to say would not be a series of imposed academic tests at predetermined intervals, and would not compromise the school's independence.
3. Given that the 1<sup>st</sup> April deadline is rapidly approaching, is there any merit in me making a formal application for approval of a Fristående skola – even though the legal position of the school is as yet very unclear?

The Sudbury Model challenges many of our accepted values about education. With the current state education system in many Western democratic societies often referred to as being in a state of crisis, even by those within and in charge of maintaining the system [see for example *Skolverkets missiv till utbildningsdepartementet – problembeskrivning och förslag till åtgärder på alla ansvarsnivåer i skolsystemet* - <http://www.skolverket.se/content/1/c4/23/08/missivNU03b.pdf> ], it seems evident that serious alternatives need to be sought – not simply changing pedagogical methods within the existing structure. New structures ought to be created and tested. The record of the Sudbury Valley School over 40 years speaks for itself. The key principles of trusting children to find out for themselves, in their own way and in their own time, what their interests are and which paths they wish to follow, has been proved to be valid. When these interests are allowed to be followed without prejudice from outside forces, and fostered within a community where everyone has a genuine, effective influence on how the community is managed (in other words, they know the trust and freedom they are given is genuine and not a token of politically correct “educators”), true qualities of independence, resourcefulness, inner strength and creativity flourish – and the perennial human thirst for knowledge is never quashed or compromised.

It should be noted that, precisely because the model challenges the views that many of us grew up to accept as “the right way”, it will likely not appeal to the majority of parents. My point here is that it might be easy for legislative authorities to view such an alternative model as a threat to the stability of the current system, but experience abroad indicates that this is an unfounded fear. That said, the model will certainly be supported by some, probably avidly by others, and it is my belief that Sweden, as an open, forward-looking and democratic society, ought to allow parents the choice.

I propose a model that is based very closely on the original Sudbury Valley School. The school has a vast amount of documentation available that discusses principles and practices both in general and in detail, so that anyone who is motivated can clearly study the history and working mechanisms of the school – including administrative practices, documentation of school meetings, rule books and the decisions of its own internal judicial structure. In establishing the school in Sweden, there will be additional questions that relate to Swedish society in particular. I am confident that all of these can be satisfactorily answered, without compromising the essential principles of the model. Further, there exists a strong network amongst Sudbury schools the world over, and experience is readily shared – potentially a valuable resource where legal questions within Europe and Scandinavia may be concerned.

### **About Me**

I came from England to live in Sweden with my family in 2005. I was educated in the very traditional British private boarding school system, where I developed my interest in the theatre. I trained intensively for four years as an actor and then theatre director under a Russian principal in drama school in London, accredited incidentally by CSN since the early 90s. Since my training I have taught a great deal – to students in various environments from the ages of 5 and up, including courses for adults that I set up and ran myself. I have often received high praise for my teaching. Shortly after leaving drama school I was asked to set up a Quality Management System (ISO:9001) for the school, which I did and then audited for several years. I also worked in the office as the school Administrator. The school was a registered charity in the field of education, which espoused a philosophy that was challenging to the prevailing view. I later worked as the General Manager and CEO of the Directors Guild of Great Britain – a trade union for directors across all media. In these respects, I consider myself well qualified to establish a Sudbury school. Though my level of Swedish is not fluent, I have received VG or MVG in the components of TISUS at Göteborgs universitet, and am currently looking into the possibility of employment as a teacher and/or taking steps necessary to receive Swedish lärarbehörighet. I have two children in early school age, and my motivation to establish a Sudbury school has been brought into sharp focus by considering their needs, the options available and reflecting on the purpose and practice of education in general. I believe that human nature is inherently and inexhaustibly curious, which in terms of a school environment means that children want to learn – and that they themselves are the best judge of what, when and how they want to learn. As adults, by virtue of our physical size and the pre-established order, we hold the power to largely control children’s environment. The best service we can provide them with is to honour and support their inherent dignity, individuality and creativity. I am deeply committed to this model, and willing to do all I can to see that Sweden grants its citizens the privilege to choose, without prejudice or discrimination and on equal terms, the form of education they see fit.

Yours faithfully,

Jim Whiteford.

cc Jan Björklund, Utbildningsminister.