

## TWO UNUSUAL SCHOOLS

### 1 Brooklyn Free School in New York



Free schools operate on the belief that children are naturally curious and learn best when they want to, and not when they are forced to. Students in Brooklyn Free School choose what and how they want to learn. They can choose any class they want and they make the school rules. At this school, there are no grades, no homework, no tests, and students don't even have to go to class. Unless they want to.

For some students, being a part of a group of classes on a regular basis is what suits them best, and for some students, doing individual projects, individual reading, is what they prefer.

One recent day at the Brooklyn Free School, the 'schedule' included the following: chess, debate, filming horror movies, and making caves for Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Not that the students had to go to any of these sessions.

The Democratic Meeting is the heart and soul of Brooklyn Free School and everybody has to be there. Once a week the entire school meets to work together and take responsibility for the governance of their school. Students participate in the design of classes and they discuss the problems they have. Except for issues of health and safety, all students and teachers have an equal vote in decision-making at school.

## 2 Wellington College in England



Wellington College is a boarding school that introduced 'happiness classes'. The teachers there believe that they should help students discover who they are, what they love in life, and what they really want to be in life. At first, people were sceptical that children could be taught the skills of living happier lives. Of course, you can't teach someone to be happy. What the school is trying to do is give students some sort of basis, so that when they have a time of sadness or grief, they can deal with it constructively rather than turn to false comforts of drugs and alcohol. Students learn how to manage their anger, how to resolve conflict with others, and that it is not good to immerse themselves in the fantasy world of television and video games.

Happiness classes resulted in positive changes at school, including an atmosphere of encouragement and a zero-tolerance attitude to teachers treating children badly or unkindly.

We tend to think that parents are only concerned with exams. However, all parents want their children to be happy, to smile, and even talk to them sometimes. And young people will perform better if they are calm and happy; which means they are more likely to end up doing what they want to in life.

'Our culture is dominated by advertisements about wealth, cars, and the happiness which material possessions offer so it might seem that in order to be happy, you must be rich. We have lost contact with the meaning of true happiness. These lessons bring students back to the roots of living a healthy and productive life. They can take their mind off work and learn something about themselves for a change. So what if you have

failed the test or you didn't get into the university that you wanted? If you are happy with your surroundings, and with the people around you, you don't have to be hard on yourself', says Mark, one of the students.

**A Which of the two schools are these sentences about, Brooklyn Free School (BFS) or Wellington College (WC)?**

- 1 Students learn how to deal with sadness.
- 2 There is no tolerance for teachers treating children badly.
- 3 Students don't have to be in the classroom.
- 4 Meetings are held once a week.
- 5 Students choose what they want to learn.
- 6 Teachers help students discover what they want to be in life.
- 7 Students don't have any homework or tests.
- 8 Students learn how to manage their anger.

**B What do you think?**

- 1 Which school seems better to you and why?
- 2 If you could choose, what kind of classes would you like to have? (creating videos, cooking, painting, debate, sport, technology, gardening, science experiments....)
- 3 Would you rather go to some such school or you prefer a traditional school, like the one you go to?

**C Research time**

Find out about some other unusual schools in the world and report about them to your classmates.