

# **AMS as an Educational Model**

By, Jeff Goodman, teacher 1991

The most recent debate about the state of education in this country has led me to wonder what role a successful alternative school like AMS has in the process of educational reform. What is it that makes AMS work? How do we meet the specific needs of today's kids? I am drawn to try to articulate the reasoning behind our program in hopes that it might serve as a model for others.

Now, more than ever we need schools which allow students to be involved with the world around them in real ways. The lives of most children today, both at home and in school, provide few opportunities for them to do meaningful work. Kids are, for the most part, adjunct members of society: at best, unnecessary, at worst a burden. Television, video games, and other forms of electronic entertainment dominate the lives of many children; they are growing up passive, unconnected, and uninvolved. While the society values self-confidence, creativity, and responsibility, there is little in the experience of most children to help foster these qualities.

In contrast to the structure of most schools, AMS is set up in a way which facilitates student involvement in all aspects of the school's functioning: the physical work and upkeep requirement, the decision-making process, and the academic classes. Through work projects and community service, students have the opportunity to do work which matters to themselves and others. Hands-on academic classes allow students to explore how the material they are learning relates to the world around them. Our decision-making process, based on consensus and student empowerment, requires that every person at AMS has a part in the decisions that affect them.

Elizabeth Morgan recognized that the AMS program would be specifically suited to the needs of young adolescents. The outcome of such an environment is that students not only show marked changes when they are here, but, as I have gathered from numerous AMS graduates, tend to continue to be active, self-motivated people after they leave. Children who take part in an educational process, which values them, come to value themselves. As their self-esteem develops, so does their creativity, which by nature, requires a willingness to take risks. And children who have been given the opportunity to be a part of a community and develop solutions to problems will apply these skills to conflicts throughout their lives.

While teenagers are particularly needy of a feeling of "place" in a society which seems to have no use for them, the need to feel necessary and involved transcends age boundaries. All of us need to be given a chance to see that we matter, that we have something to contribute. I can attest to the fact that AMS works the same magic on staff as it does on students. The non-hierarchical nature of the staff allows teachers here to experiment, learn and grow in the same ways as the students. The result is an environment which models education as a life-long process.

The success of AMS is related to our small size and rural environment, but there is much in our experience which would translate to any school. Today's educational system, modeled on the factories of

**the late nineteenth century, is failing to provide for the needs of students and teachers. The society must come to think of schools and education in a new way. Through physical work, hands-on academics, and shared decision-making, both students and teachers must be allowed to feel connected to the basic processes of their school and their world. The model provided by AMS has been tested here for thirty years, and deserves attention.**