<u>Alpha II Handbook</u>

Created by Kristina House and Carol Nash
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V1.0

Introduction

Over 2018/2019 school year, Kristina House, Alpha II School Council Chair and mother of Mentee Claire, worked to put together the type of handbook that Kristina had wished were in place when her family joined Alpha II two years before. During the summer of 2019, assisted by Carol Nash, Co-founder of Alpha II, the finishing touches were put on the Handbook and care was taken to ensure the ideas expressed were true to the Alpha II philosophy.

The purpose of this Handbook is to give new and returning parents/guardians and Mentees a better understanding of everything that is important to know about Alpha II. It is intended to be a part of the welcome package for new families joining the school as a kind of compass for connecting easily with the current ideas, and processes.

Although Kristina and Carol feel this handbook gives a current understanding of Alpha II, Alpha II is always a work in progress. That means the Alpha II community is free and encouraged to update this handbook as things evolve at the school. If you feel a section is missing or would like to contribute to the overall feel of the Handbook please reach out. Alpha II can only be as good as the families involved.

Reach out to the parent chair if you'd like more information on how to be involved in the school alpha2parents@gmail.com.

What is Alpha II?

Alpha II Alternative School is a Toronto District School Board (TDSB) public school where teens self-direct in response to a passion for learning with respect to what they personally value. Mentees must be willing and able to be part of a community based on consensus where each person's values are honoured and added together in developing ideas related to the shared space. There are no grades, marks, or standardized tests at Alpha II. Mentees proceed to any post-secondary learning based on their personal portfolios of work and meeting the stated requirements of the post secondary institution, similar to homeschoolers.

Self-Directed (vs. Other-Directed vs. Self-Expressive)
Mentees come to Alpha II ready and able to self-direct their learning. Their experiences at Alpha II are individualised in respect to their own passions and interests. They are responsible to take actions for the outcome of their experience at Alpha II drawing on their interests, exposure to peers' interests, as well as individual and community excursions. Throughout their time at the school, Mentees seek out knowledge and create results worth documenting in their individual portfolios. Through this approach Mentees are able to appreciate that the learning they engage in has meaning, inspiring them to continue with purposeful work of which they can be proud.

To be self-directed means that at any one time a learner is thinking about: what is needed for them to learn, how to learn, the learning itself, or how to record their learning. A self-directed learner is not thinking about how others might be hindering their learning. Ideally, the only legitimate problem a self-directed learner could have with another learner is in determining how common resources and spaces are to be shared at Alpha II. This is what Alpha II aspires to be, however, because Mentees are growing into being self-directed learners at different paces, at times how Mentees function in the space may be asynchronous. It's important to note also that a learner who is bothered by the behaviour, look or beliefs of others at Alpha II is not being self-directed but, rather, an other-directed learner. Other-directed learners do not fare well at Alpha II. They find it difficult to learn and they are unwilling or unable to share resources. They concern themselves with how others perform making judgements or criticizing others instead of focusing on their own projects and personal growth.

Alpha II at its best operates like traffic; anyone can drive any vehicle they like, in any way they prefer, following the agreed upon rules of the road. As long as people follow how to share the resources, as established at the Friday Mentee Meetings, all that is needed is to find the time and place to drive as you like within those agreed upon boundaries. People should not be barreling down the centre lane making others change their behaviours to accommodate their desires (that would be self-expressing rather than self-directing). That is how accidents happen.

Another way of thinking about it is that if what a Mentee says or does is not something they would want to include in their portfolio of work, to apply for post secondary education, to get a job or get clients, they are not self-directing their learning, they are merely self-expressing.

Consensus-Based Decision-Making
Consensus-based decision-making directs the community on how to navigate within the Alpha II community. We follow a Quaker-based model which works well within secular settings. This particular model of consensus decision-making is a form of democracy where ideas from each person are added together in making community-wide decisions. To achieve this all-inclusive consensus, individuals participate within the community because they are interested in being involved–this is key. Consensus based decision making provides a space to express opinions and experiences and identify one's values that they would like recognized within the school space. Community Members and Mentees support one another in their efforts to express their values by listening carefully to one another and considering differences non-judgmentally.

Consensus at Alpha II does not mean that everyone will necessarily come to one specific idea. This differs from agreement, compromise or giving in. There are no "votes" or "majority-rules" at Alpha II - each view point is represented as equal and the idea is that each person's wants or needs are addressed and the community works to find a way to represent each value. This is important in a community where each person is expected to self-direct based on what they personally value.

What sets Alpha II apart is that there is consideration for each person's needs/values and the community works to meet those needs. It is a harder, more challenging approach to create a

community that requires individuals to listen and honour the various perspectives. At times consensus is not met because everyone's values have yet to be included, and there may be weeks of discussion to find an iteration that meets everyone's needs.

Friday Mentee Meetings

The Mentees at Alpha II are self-directed learners who come together within a space where resources and the environment needs to be shared. The Friday meeting is a dedicated time for discussion about each person's values and needs regarding the shared space and resources. The meetings are intended to be run by the Mentees, for the Mentees. It is not to be Mentor run, or Mentor directed. It is not the time for Mentor announcements. The Mentors can participate by sharing if their needs are not being met in some way within the space, however, the adults in the space are there as community members, not as meeting directors. This is considered a unique time set aside for the Mentees to come together and re-group.

Anytime during the week, Mentees can note down a problem they are having in regards to sharing the space or resources. There is a dedicated space on the main room blackboard where all can see these notes throughout the week. This acts as the agenda for the Friday meeting.

On Friday, the person who has noted the first problem begins the discussion by describing what the issue is and proposing a solution. Then using the circle format Mentees are asked if they have a point of view related to the issue and the proposed solution. When their turn arrives in the circle, everyone has the option to either speak or pass. If a Mentee is not comfortable verbally expressing a desire to "pass", they can physically move their chair out of the circle to indicate to the group they do not wish to participate.

If there isn't agreement regarding how the problem should be solved, those who feel strongly that their solution be enacted need to find a time and a place for each of the different proposed solutions to take place. It's important to note that a solution is a thoughtful and reasonable alternative; it is not merely self-expression.

Each of the reasonable solutions is then posted so that all are aware of the result. Those who have not let their point of view be known regarding the issue (either because they were not present at the meeting or they passed) are expected to abide by the decision that has been made regarding the shared space or resources until the next Friday meeting when the issue can be discussed again if the dispute continues.

Depending on how important the first issue is to each person and how many people participate in the discussion, the first item on the agenda may take the entire meeting. This can be frustrating for Mentees who have noted other items that were to be discussed on the agenda. However, in a space where people self-direct their learning, all points of view need to be heard and added to the discussion for the final result to be reached. This means that either Mentees agree to extend the

time for the Friday meeting to deal with other pressing issues or they agree to hold off on a resolution until the next Friday meeting.

The Friday meeting is the foundation of community at Alpha II. When the meeting runs smoothly and everyone's point of view is part of the solution then the school functions as a self-directed community.

Resolving Issues or Conflicts

Alpha II holds the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the TDSB Equity Policy in high regard. Human rights are regularly discussed and Mentees are reminded when they are in range of violating these. The challenge in a free learning environment is that sometimes boundaries can be crossed without people realizing. Part of the goal of the self-directed environment is finding a way to self-regulate without being policed by Mentors or adults in the space. At times, this can be very challenging for both the Mentors and Mentees. Knowing that the goal of Alpha II is to create a healthy, positive learning environment where individuals are free to explore their ideas without judgement is important. The Mentors work continuously to encourage a positive environment and foster a safe space.

If there is a concern that may affect the whole school or a philosophy that you feel is not being upheld then initially bringing it up for discussion within the Parent Google Forum would be beneficial so we can all weigh in and help understand the issue and how we'd like to approach it. This is also the type of thing that can be brought up at the Community Meeting if you have a solution to propose.

When someone has an issue or concern about something specific at Alpha II the best course of action is to contact a Mentor who can offer suggestions, resources and support. When there are issues, Mentors are able to work with each person involved one-on-one to help resolve concerns by providing perspective, time and space to listen and create a plan. The Principal is also always available for support and can help guide you through the process.

When a Mentee is having an issue at the school, and cannot resolve it on their own, then again the best course of action is to first approach a Mentor for support, and to get suggestions for next steps. The Mentor may offer suggestions for conflict resolution, such as: one-on-one discussion, peace circle, community peace circle, formal written complaints, etc.

If the Mentors are not made aware of any issues, then they are not able to support the growth and learning of all the Mentees. Transparency and open discussion is important for a healthy community at Alpha II.

Monthly Community Meetings

All parents/guardians and Mentees are encouraged to attend the Alpha II monthly Community Meeting. Our Community Meeting represents the School Council to the Toronto District School Board. The Alpha II parent community hosts the Community Meeting as a forum where parents/guardians can discuss the school, resources, and make changes or suggestions for the direction of the school. Parents/guardians, Mentees, Mentors and any administrative staff that would like to attend are welcome at these meetings. We have discussed everything from the philosophies of fundraising to whether to allow animals in the school. Any topic concerning procedures and policies related to the entire school is open for discussion and exploring. Questions related to the day-to-day activities involving individuals are to be brought to the weekly meetings, the Mentors and/or the Principal.

Community Meetings take place monthly in the Alpha II main room and typically run for two hours. We try to alternate the meetings each month on either a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday evening, throughout the year. Suggestions can be sent to the Parent Chair leading up to the meeting and the final agenda is generally sent out a few days before the meeting. You can also add an idea onto the agenda once you're at the meeting but keep in mind that if we run out of time and it is not scheduled into the meeting beforehand, we may have to carry your idea over to the next month. Meetings are not currently accessible through the web or through a conference call, but if this is something you would like to have implemented feel free to research solutions and bring them forward to the community meeting.

Community Meeting Process
How the Community Meetings run is rather different than other school councils. At Alpha II because we are a space working to honour everyone's values, the first step is listening. To do this the meetings operate in a circle format. A topic is brought forward plus a proposed solution and then we go around the circle of participants giving each person time and space to speak about their opinions on this topic and the proposed solution, or to pass. There is no interrupting or adding to someone's ideas until the circle comes back around to you. We continue to go around the circle until everyone feels their opinions and ideas have been represented and heard. We may not have a way to deal with various solutions after only one meeting, and sometimes the meetings can go on longer than expected. Listening and honouring each person is hard work, and it can be tricky to not interrupt, challenge or correct someone in the moment. The wonderful thing is that the circle will always come back to you, so you will get to speak again, it just takes patience. At times we all have felt the need to jump in and speak over someone, but that is part of our learning as a community.

Speaking at the Meeting
It's important at the meetings to be mindful of how much floor time you take. The idea is to speak to your values, not to convince others out of theirs. Everyone's voice needs to be heard so when someone monopolizes the time then others may feel they don't have the time to truly speak and propose suggestions to the extent they'd like. If the discussion is lively, a timer will be set for each person to speak (approximately 2 minutes each) so that all voices are heard in an equal manner.

Making Suggestions for the School
At Alpha II each person chooses to be involved in whatever capacity they have an interest. One thing to keep in mind is that if you have the idea and bring it to the group/meeting then you take ownership of implementing this idea. Suggesting something to the group and wanting others to take on your idea is not in the spirit of self-directed growth and learning. The school runs best when more people take on roles and work on what they're passionate about — if you're passionate about your suggestion it will show and will impact the school in a positive way.

Communication

Alpha II's main phone number is 416-393-0501. This number can be used to reach the Office Administrator to report an absence or to reach one of the Mentors. Personal email addresses of each Mentor are also available and you're welcome to email them at any time.

Other ways we communicate at Alpha II are: a Parent Google Group, Alpha II Facebook Group dedicated to each school year, parent email addresses, and weekly Community Newsletters written by the Mentors/Mentees highlighting the week's events.

There is also a parent outreach form that we ask each family to fill out which asks what special skills you have to contribute to the school and how often you'd like to be involved at the school. This information is shared with the Mentors to help in connecting Mentee's with parent experts.

When you first joined the school you will have received an email inviting you to the various communication channels but if not, to become connected to any of these platforms please email: **alpha2parents@gmail.com**

We recognize we're all busy therefore online contact is the best way to stay connected.

Mentor/Mentee/Parent/Guardian Meetings
At Alpha II each Mentee is assigned a Mentor who is responsible for checking in regularly and being a point of contact for the parents/guardians. This does not mean Mentees or parents/guardians can't go to other Mentors (everyone works together) but it is someone who will be mindful of your teen, what they're up to and of their needs. Twice a year (late Fall and Spring) Mentors will reach out to parents and offer to have a sit down meeting with the parents/guardians and Mentee. This is a chance for parents/guardians to ask questions, reconnect with the school, and find out what is going on day-to-day.

The parent community requested these twice yearly meetings at a monthly Community Meeting and it is now implemented. This is in lieu of report cards or progress reports which have never been a feature at Alpha II.

Parent/Guardian Involvement

Many schools ask for volunteers and commitment from families in order to have a more enriching environment. At Alpha II this is even more important, because family engagement and support shows that Alpha II is seen as a valuable space for important work (otherwise it may be regarded as "just a hangout"). When families hold the school in high esteem and see it as a space worthy of their time, the Mentees in turn take ownership of it. This is how the school becomes more about community and less about self, which is ultimately one of the pillars in this self-directed environment.

Parents/guardians have many unique skills and world experiences they can share within Alpha II, such as:

- Hosting classes/workshops with Mentees
- Initiating/Organizing Parent Social events (annual summer potluck, pub nights, etc.)
- Evening parent workshops
- Outreach - to keep the school going we need a strong outreach committee
- Helping to clean or organize the school - refreshing the spaces throughout
- Attending monthly Community Meetings
- Helping with online/digital forms
- Writing grants and proposals for funding
- Attending the annual Open House
- Attending the Alternative School Advisory Committee (ASAC) meetings (in person or through conference calls)
- Attending the Ward Council meetings hosted by the school Trustee

Figuring out how you can contribute in a meaningful way to you and your family is what makes Alpha II diverse and interesting. Whatever you imagine for the school there is a time and place that can be agreed on where you can make it happen! That's the beauty of Alpha II.

Hosting Mentee Workshops/Classes
Volunteering at Alpha II is both important for the community as well as personally fulfilling. Seeing the space your teen is in regularly and being able to connect with their peers and with the Mentors provides a sense of connection to the community. Offering these opportunities allows the parents/guardians to be present for all the Mentees in the community and provides varying experiences for deeper enrichment through discussion, hands-on-learning and even suggestions to further learning.

Below are the steps you need to take in order to offer your time in the space. If you are coming to the school only once or twice a Criminal Reference Check/Vulnerable Sector Screening may not be needed. However, anything regular requires the CRC/VSS (see below under Criminal Reference Check and Vulnerable Sector Screening for steps on how to obtain this).

Steps for offering workshops/classes:

1) Contact a Mentor (and CC the Principal) and request to attend a Friday meeting where you can propose your idea to the Mentees to gauge if they are interested in what you have to offer. If you're unable to make a Friday meeting the Parent Chair may already be going. The Mentors, or your Mentee, could also ask the group for you.

2) Establish a time and duration with the Mentees of when to offer your class and/or workshop and how long they would like it to run; once, on-going, project to project, etc. You can decide the minimum number of Mentees you'd like to be present to run your program.

3) Prepare all that you'll need and bring it to Alpha II to run the workshop/class.

4) Have fun!

Volunteering in a self-directed environment needs to be fulfilling for all involved. Only take on what will give you enjoyment. Mentees may come and go out of your workshop or class (even in the middle of it!) and that is ok and encouraged. If they're engaged they'll learn; if they're forced, enjoyment is lost. Ultimately, we'd like Mentees to use their time in a meaningful way so remaining open and flexible as the facilitator is key.

Any parent/guardian is able to suggest and take on projects within Alpha II. If you have the thought "I wish that…" then you are empowered to approach the community and offer your time.

Criminal Reference Check and Vulnerable Sector Screening

For parents/guardians volunteering regularly at Alpha II (e.g., coming in once a week) the TDSB requires that a Criminal Reference Check/Vulnerable Sector Screening be obtained by the parent. Here are the steps involved.

1) Obtain Criminal Reference Check and Vulnerable Sector Screening (CRC/VSS)
      a) Form can be picked up at the Bloor Collegiate Office
      b) Fill out form and obtain a certified cheque or money order made payable to Toronto Police Services for $20
      c) Submit completed form and payment to Bloor Collegiate Office, or to the TDSB Police Records Check office by mail or in person:

            Toronto District School Board Police Records Check Office
            Fairmeadow Education Centre
            17 Fairmeadow Avenue, Rm 107
            Toronto, ON M2P 1W6

      d) The CRC/VSS may take a few months to complete. So, if you think you will be volunteering regularly, it's best to apply in September. You will receive the certified document at the home address you provided. This then needs to be brought into Bloor

Collegiate office and the original document will be submitted to the principal and TDSB (keep a photocopy for your own records).

Parent/Guardian Conduct Within the Alpha II Space

As a parent/guardian volunteering within the Alpha II space, it's important to be aware of yourself as a Community Member, but more importantly, as a guest. Mentees and Mentors work together daily to maintain or improve the attitudes and environment at the school. A person entering the space will only have a snap-shot of what takes place or will only be privy to certain sides of situations. Therefore, observing with curiosity is a valuable perspective to take. Inappropriately challenging Mentees, parenting Mentees being authoritative and enforcing rules, and speaking negatively to Mentees is not the relationships we want between Mentees and volunteers. If Mentees do not feel safe with you in their space they can request to not have you there for workshops/meetings, etc.

It is important that you trust the process within the school. Understand that there are Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in place, personal development in process, and situations arising and being resolved at all times. Mentors will work with Mentees privately if an issue is seen, which means you may see a situation arise and a Mentor not respond immediately. Don't disrupt the process by demanding Mentors find an immediate resolution — Mentors may be waiting for the time and space to meet one-on-one with the Mentee. So, if you see something not quite right, speaking with a Mentor privately is the best approach. If at that point you don't feel the issue is being handled, a meeting with the Principal can always be requested. Allowing the Alpha II space to be a work in progress is part of the letting go and learning that is helpful for parents/guardians to embody. The school shifts with each new family joining or leaving so know that it will never be "done". Enjoy the fun and curiosity of the Mentees and you'll get more enjoyment from the experience than you thought.

Alpha II Staff

At Alpha II the Mentees grade range is from Grades 7-12, therefore, the school falls within two TDSB unions: Elementary and Secondary. Although the Mentors in the space are free flowing and work with all Mentees of any grade level, for the purposes of staffing, they are divided as Elementary and Secondary. As of the 2019/2020 school year we have been allotted 3.5 Mentors: 1.5 for Elementary and 2 for Secondary.

Alpha II Funds

Alpha II is publicly supported by the TDSB which means we are allotted money annually to run the school. This amount varies depending on how many students are enrolled at the school the previous year. In other words, if the number of students changes dramatically from one year to the next the funds available may be out of sync with the current needs.

The parent council has approximately $600 each year to use for parent meetings, engagement and workshops. We have also used this money to support Mentee projects such as murals and school beautification projects.

In keeping with the spirit of public education, Alpha II does not ask families to pay a yearly fee for activities, workshops or experts. Instead money is gathered for each event from the Mentees wishing to participate. It is always "pay what you can" with a suggested amount. If your family has the ability to add a little bit more money to each outing or event that is very helpful for families who may not have extra funds for these experiences but their teen would like to participate. Just indicate that you've paid extra to be used for other Mentees.

Fundraising is an on-going discussion at Alpha II. In the past families and Mentees have taken on activities that help to raise funds for the school such as: holiday bazaars, A Mad Hatter Meal, dramatic performances, and selling items that have been made by Mentees. The idea is that the fundraising is in alignment with Alpha II philosophies and is also Mentee led. Fundraising should correspond to the two pillars of the school: self-direction and a community based on consensus - from the making or creation of the idea, to the implementation and gathering of funds. The parent council simply going out and selling popcorn or cookie dough would not support these two pillars of the school. Mentees creating tote bags with screen-printing of their artwork, and costing and selling them, would fall in line with the school's two pillars.

The school welcomes extra funds for providing a variety of opportunities but not at the cost of giving up creativity and learning. If this approach to fundraising appeals to you and you'd like to bring forward any ideas we would love that. You can discuss your ideas at the parent Community Meeting or contact one of the Mentors and request attending the Friday Mentee Meeting to see if any mentees are willing to help.

Another way to gain funds that has been very successful in the past is through proposal writing and submitting for bursaries and grants for the school. This would mean researching various grants and putting together the application. If this is something you're passionate about or enjoy the hunt and challenge of getting grants then feel free to take this on! Other parents/guardians may be able to support you with this or help so don't hesitate to ask within the parent forum or at a Community Meeting.

Examples of Grants and Bursaries awarded to Alpha II in the past:
Parent Reaching Out Grant, Staples $1000 Tech Award

Enrolment and Selection Process

Alpha II is "a school like no other" therefore we need students like no others! Mentees at Alpha II tend to be teens that want a truly alternative way of learning and thinking, with families that support their teen's vision for learning. The initial way families find out about the school is through

word of mouth or by searching the school's TDSB website. We also have an annual Open House in January (which current parents/guardians are invited to attend) and we offer monthly school tours on the first Monday of each month.

The important thing to remember is that the school thrives when there is a strong population of diverse backgrounds. This is why it's important to talk about this school to others, share what your teen is doing, and also share on your social media pages. Let people know about this really unique school and all it has to offer.

Families spreading the word is one of the core ways the school population will grow and this is the parent's responsibility to take on. Mentors are busy with the day-to-day goings on of the school and providing outreach is challenging for them to take on.

As well a current parent needs to be present at the monthly tours, and it's important that families volunteer for the Open House evenings. Prospective parents/guardians being able to talk to current parents/guardians to provide their experiences is truly beneficial. Remember when you were exploring Alpha II and what you had or wished you had when gathering information—be that for the families that are exploring the school. Also, please be sure to remind new families that parents/guardians *and* potential Mentees should attend the tour or the Open House together.

Annual Events

Portfolio Nights
Throughout the year Alpha II will put on a Portfolio Night where Mentees are able to showcase the work on which they have been focusing. These evenings are somewhat informal and we wander the different spaces dedicated to projects such as: art installations, writing samples, video/movie viewings, prepared food, and musical performances. Mentees are encouraged to display their work. It is both inspiring for the community to see and it encourages us to learn more about each other. These evenings take place 1-2 times a year; sometimes they are organized by Mentors and other times by parents/guardians. Having a parent help organize or take the lead in conjunction with Mentees is always helpful and another way to get involved!

Annual Coffee House
Just to clarify, there is no coffee, or house! This is the final showcase of the year—typically an evening in May or June, with the vibe of a night enjoying performances in a Coffee House. It originally started as the anniversary celebration of Alpha II (April 18 is the day Alpha II was first approved by the TDSB) but because some years Mentees have chosen for it to be outside in the courtyard it has moved to later months to take advantage of warmer weather. Leading up to the evening Mentees work with Mentors to organize this event where there are performances of all kinds (music, drama, dancing) as well as tables set up for Mentees to present items they've made. Art work and movies/documentaries are on display for all to enjoy and at times some of the pieces are for sale. Food and drinks are offered and families are encouraged to bring food to share. This is an evening of fun and socializing as we wrap up the year.

Summer Picnic
Some time in the final few weeks of August parents/guardians host a picnic/fire/potluck at Dufferin Grove Park. Please bring food to share and blankets, cutlery, cups, etc. BYOE (Bring Your Own Everything!). This is a chance for new families entering in the Fall to connect early with the community and for returning families to re-connect. Parents/guardians are encouraged to take on hosting this event.

Pub Nights
Occasionally parents/guardians want to get together and chat! Traditionally, Duffy's Pub has been the choice for parents/guardians to come together and hang out. Any parent is welcome to take on organizing a pub night—just send out a request to the Google Forum!

Getting the Most from Alpha II

Alpha II Alternative School was founded by a dedicated group of parents from ALPHA Alternative School (elementary sister school of Alpha II) who wanted to see the self-directed, community based learning at ALPHA carry on to the secondary level. Fundamentally, these parents were no different than you. They believed in the self-directed, community-based model and they were willing to work with the TDSB to make that type of learning publically available in Toronto.

Although not every Alpha II parent has the time and dedication to construct a school from scratch, every Alpha II parent has the ability to make a meaningful contribution to the growth of Alpha II as it is transformed with each new family that joins Alpha II.

The two pillars of Alpha II remains - self-directed learning in a community based on consensus decision making - but the success of what that model looks like day-to-day at Alpha II depends very much on parents/guardians to keep these pillars in good working order as strong foundations.

Alpha II fortunately attracts the type of parents/guardians who are committed to maintaining this model of learning. Showing your own commitment through communicating with your Mentee, the Mentors and with other parents/guardians through the Community Meetings and online through social media are ways that Alpha II can continue to ensure that our pillars remain intact and supportive.

## Journey Checkpoints
Self Direction Continuum

	DISCOVERY — DEPENDENT	EXPLORATION — INTERESTED	ESTABLISHING — FOCUSED	EXPANDING — DETERMINED
Individual Development as a Self Directed Learner	**Extrospective** "The World Around Me" — I'm randomly discovering new things. I'm trying to find out who I am and how I learn. I'm looking at everyone to see what they're doing. I'm examining and thinking about myself and the world inside of me. **Introspective** "The World Inside Me" — I'm seeking to understand my current place in the world. I know that I am a part of a greater world outside of the things that are close to me. I know the impact people can have on me. I can sometimes see the impact I can have on others. I know that I don't know what I want, yet, and I'm OK with that	**Explorative** "The World Where I Belong" — I'm trying out select things that excite me in order to figure out what I really want to do. I no longer give up on things of the first sign of difficulty. I'm recognizing that I have personal strengths and challenges. I can identify some options I may like to consider for my future. I know that I don't know what I want, yet, but I want to find it.	**Constructive** "The World I Want For Me" — I now know how I learn best, when, where and how. I know what I would like to do and I'm working on building the essential skills I need to do that freely and with confidence. When I revisit familiar things I often find new details. I feel that I am on the way to establish myself in the world as an individual. I'm building on my personal strengths and passions to build more skills and overcome some of my challenges. I'm aware of the kind of impact I can have on others and others can have on me. I know what I want to do, but I also know I need to learn how to do it better.	**Emancipative** "My World" — I'm freely doing what I want to do and love to do. I know how to grow my skills. I'm ready to claim the piece of the world I have chosen to make my own. I confidently share with others my knowledge and skills. I make choices fully aware and consider the impact they will have on myself and others. I like to consider different perspectives or points of view. I'm excited about my future. I'm finding new things to discover.
Skills Needed	**Cognitive** — I'm going through the mental action/process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and my senses. I'm fine tuning my senses of perception, sensation, notion, and intuition. Exercising my reading, writing and discoursing will help me sharpen my cognitive skills. Number sense and numerology will also help me to the same. More importantly, working on my cognitive skills will help me solve problems without a guide, ask questions that challenge common assumptions, develop independence, learn to use and identify persuasion, gain confidence to express myself to others, re-organize or re-think things differently, find patterns, sort through information to find relevancy, and think dialectically, inductively and heuristically,I	**Associative** — I am working on associating ideas and things, particularly as they apply or may apply to me. I am setting goals, by assessing my own expectations, and using my personal experiences as a checkpoint for their practicality. I am becoming aware of how I can influence things and people, and how things and people can influence me. I'm honing my communication skills, particularly in listening to others more actively as I seek to respond accordingly within appropriate circumstances and within environments (i.e. negotiating, costumer service).	**Essential** — As I become more confident in my abilities I am building skills specific to my craft. My goal is to master it, and eventually make it my own. I'm also working on building a network of people that can help me acquire more skills and guide me as I need to look into the future. As I think of the things I am specializing in, I'm considering my impact in the world.	**Autonomous** — I am comfortably mastering my skills and I'm now focusing on innovation and originality, creating my own style for doing things. I am looking at expanding my skills to make money perhaps even start a business and make a living. I am working on becoming a professional. I am writing resumés and/or fine tuning my portfolio. I am learning about self promotion.
Mentor Roles	**Coach** — I can benefit from a coach who provides me with immediate constructive feedback, who offers me direction when I'm lost, and information and resources about things I'm becoming aware of. My coach will help me set realistic short term goals and help me remain accountable to myself, by prompting me, reminding me and encouraging me when I begin to lose sight of where I want to going and what I need to do to get there.	**Motivator/Guide** — As I become interested in things I may often get discouraged by their depth or scope. My mentor could help me by guiding through the scary and difficult moments, and motivating me when I encounter hurdles. My mentor can also help me by modeling and offering strategies, or by helping me find others who may have different experiences or expertise in the areas I'm exploring. My mentor can also help me set goals along the way, so that I may pace myself in line with my strengths and challenges.	**Facilitator** — My mentor is constantly looking to find me opportunities to fine tune my skills, network and continue to grow. My mentor and I have discussions about my experiences, the new skills I'm mastering and the people I am meeting. My mentor helps me navigate through the various situations I encounter along the way. I like my mentor participating as an equal, and helping me practice world skills by facilitating group projects and running small seminars.	**Consultant** — I meet with my mentor to share my experiences and bounce fresh ideas. I meet with many others to do the same. My mentor is there to give me tips and celebrate with me my new accomplishments. I am happily mentoring others.

EXPLORATION

DISCOVERY

FOCUS

EXPANDING
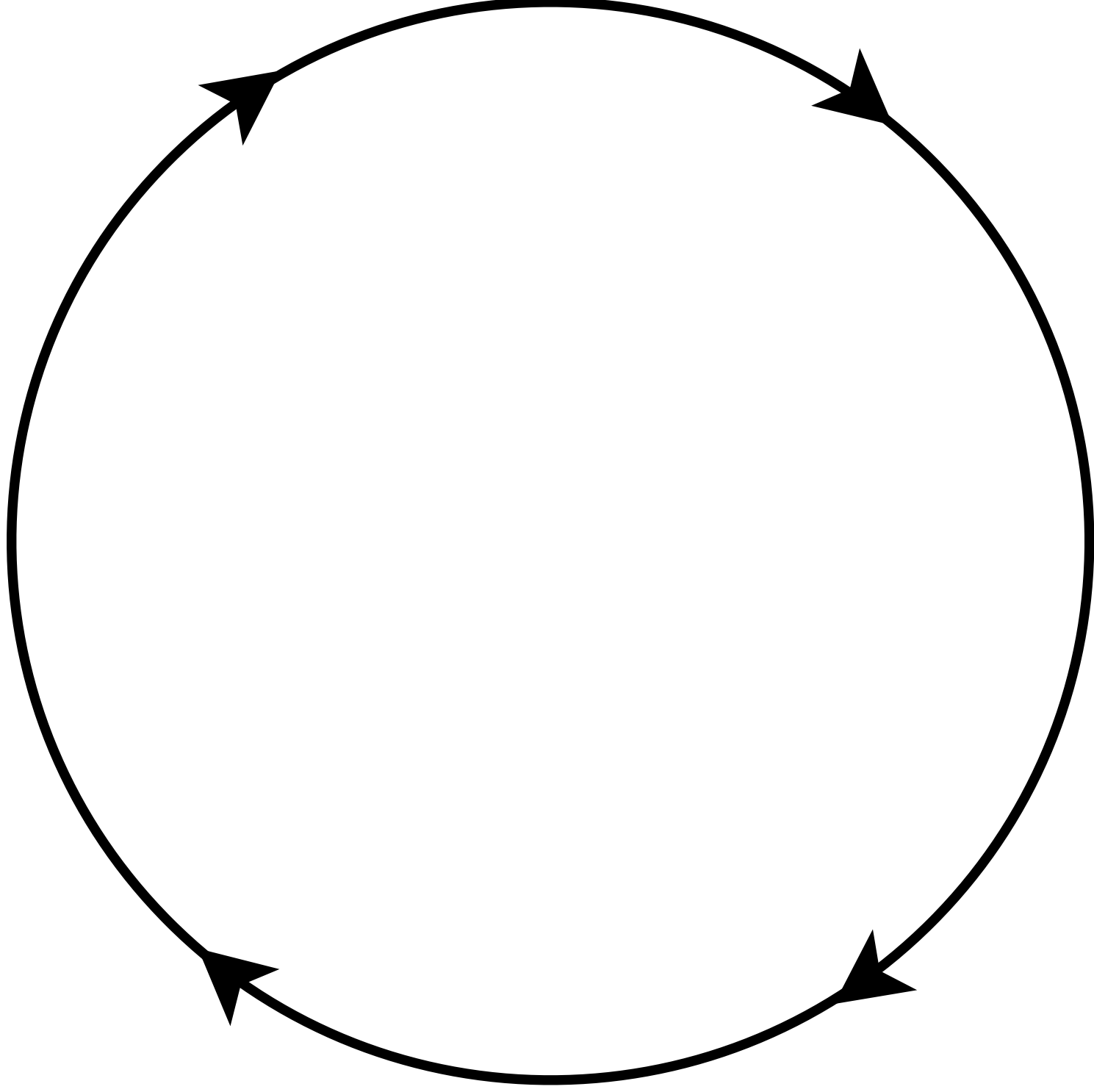
Core Values of the Alpha II Community
Alpha II's core pillars are Self-Direction and Community Based on Consensus.

Self-Direction

Learning is meaningful

Value: Students (mentees) learn best when what they are learning is meaningful to them and they have been centrally involved in deciding what and how to learn.

Practice: Students (mentees), in communication with teachers (mentors) determine what and how they would like to learn.

Freedom provided

Value: Alpha II provides freedom to choose by providing a rich range of learning opportunities for students (mentees) to engage them and enthusiastically supports students (mentees) in designing their own learning activities.

Practice: Students (mentees), in consultation with teachers (mentors), are encouraged to actively seek out materials, equipment, information and learning experiences to support their learning plans and goals as well as to expand their horizons.

Responsibility supported

Value: Students (mentees) are enthusiastically supported to be responsible for their learning within an atmosphere of non-coercion.

Practice: Teachers are mentors rather than directors. They support students (mentees) by encouraging them to take responsibility for pursuing a wide and deep exploration of their interests.

No standardized expectations

Value: Students (mentees) learn in unique ways; no predetermined or standardized expectations are placed on students (mentees).

Practice: Students (mentees) record their own learning when and how they deem appropriate in personal portfolios.

No predetermined schedules

Value: When and where the student (mentee) learns is determined by the student (mentee) based on their interests and resources available, not by a predetermined, standardized schedule.

Practice: Flexible attendance of students (mentees) participating in off-site learning and personal programs (such as Co-Op and Dual Credit, community support, and community involvement) means that consistent communication between parents and mentors is essential to maintain student (mentee) safety.

Feedback not evaluation

Value: Teachers (mentors) provide students (mentees) with feedback rather than evaluations.

Practice: Feedback happens at student (mentee)-parent/guardian-teacher (mentor) conferences where interests and personal goals are discussed. Notes taken at the conference are for the student (mentee) to add to their portfolio if they so choose. Grades, tests and report cards are not part of the Alpha II school culture or philosophy.

Community Based on Consensus

Inclusive of all

> **Value:** Alpha II strives to create a positive environment inclusive of all.

> **Practice:** Everyone at Alpha II is encouraged to listen carefully to others' points of view and, when making shared school-related decisions, find a time and place to do what each person values.

Voices added together

> **Value:** The school is run as a Community based on consensus where consensus mean each person's voice is added together in developing that consensus. Voting and majority rule are not featured. The aim of decision making and conflict resolution is finding win/win solutions for shared resources.

> **Practice:** Significant decisions about the school are decided by a consensus method permitting everyone to be heard on each issue at monthly Community Meetings. These meetings are attended by administrators, teachers (mentors), students (mentees) and parents/guardians. Local classroom decisions are made by a consensus of all points of view at weekly student (mentee)-teacher (mentor) meetings.

Respect for abilities

> **Value:** Respecting each person's ability to self-direct their learning and adding their point of view to the consensus are necessary in fostering a learning environment that permits students (mentees) to feel safe and encouraged to learn.

> **Practice:** Everyone involved in Alpha II (students (mentees), administrators, teachers (mentors), parents/guardians, volunteers) is encouraged to listen carefully, attentively and supportively to what others say. Disagreements are resolved through a conflict resolution process including teachers (mentors) but initiated by students (mentees).   This process engages each person involved in the conflict to provide their point of view and then, together, finding a time and place for all proposed outcomes to be realized.

History of Alpha II

Alpha II was created during the 2006-7 school year by a dedicated group of ALPHA Alternative Elementary School parents with the Toronto District School Board and approved unanimously by the Board's Trustees April 18, 2007.

In its submission for approval to the Board, the proposal to form Alpha II stated the following:

 "The school-community at ALPHA (a JK to Grade 6 alternative school) is seeking to create a pathway (ALPHA II) that continues their successful pedagogical philosophy for Grades 7 to 12, beginning with Grades 7 and 8 in September 2007. Key to the proposal is the intent to bring back students into the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) who may have turned to home schooling, private schooling, or separate schooling because they believed that an appropriate pathway wasn't available to them within the system." [1]

 Alpha II developed to be a grades 7-12 school where young people familiar with the ALPHA elementary model could continue their learning. ALPHA is an acronym for A Lot of People Hoping for an Alternative. Opened in 1972, ALPHA elementary is Toronto's original democratic school and the oldest elementary alternative public school in Toronto where "children choose what, how, and when they learn to the greatest extent possible."[2]

The history of this type of schooling dates back nearly 100 years to the formation of Summerhill School in the UK by A.S. Neill who stated:

"*The function of a child is to live his/her own life, not the life that his/her anxious parents think he/she should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educators who thinks they knows best.*"

"*We do not mould children in any way; we do not try to convert them to anything. If there is such a thing as sin it is the propensity of adults to tell the young how to live, a preposterous propensity seeing that adults do not know themselves how to live.*" [3]

Neill believed, as does his daughter Zoe who still runs the school today, that the model of education found in traditional schools was counter to the needs of young people. Made to sit most of the day and study subjects that were not of interest, children's growth was stifled in these schools and unhappiness developed. For Neill, that schools made young people unhappy was unacceptable. "*I would rather Summerhill produced a happy street cleaner than a neurotic scholar." "The difficult child is the child who is unhappy. He is at war with himself; and in consequence, he is at war with the world."* He argued further*: "No happy man ever disturbed a meeting, or preached a war"* and in fact *"All crimes, all hatreds, all wars can be reduced to unhappiness"*

In relation to crimes, it was in response to crimes against humanity committed in Word War II that the influential Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations in 1948.

Article 26 laid out what every human being should expect regarding education. It was this Article that informed all democratic developments in education after the War.

Article 26: Right to education
1.　　Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

2.　　Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

3.　　Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. [4]

In 1965, the government of Ontario created a committee to investigate what should be the type of education the province should adopt to be most compatible with Article 26. By 1968, the 24-member committee–chaired by Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada Emmett Hall, and school principal Dr. Lloyd Dennis—produced Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario (known as the Hall-Dennis Report), providing the most visionary education recommendations in Ontario's history.

In developing the recommendations for the Living and Learning report, committee members had similar concerns to those of Neill in creating Summerhill:

 "Today, on every side, however, there is heard a growing demand for a fresh look at education in Ontario. The Committee was told of inflexible programs, outdated curricula, unrealistic regulations, regimented organization, and mistaken aims of education. We heard from alienated students, frustrated teachers, irate parents, and concerned educators. Many public organizations and private individuals have told us of their growing discontent and lack of confidence in a school system which, in their opinion, has become outmoded and is failing those it exists to serve."[5]

Based on Article 26, Hall-Dennis supported a pluralistic, non-judgmental approach in which the "welfare of the individual child must be paramount in making decisions, and no stereotyped attitude, or condition of class, economic status, or environment should prejudice…" (Hall, Dennis et al., 1968, The Truth Shall Make You Free, para. 27). For each child, every gift was to have an opportunity for development and every disability was to be accommodated "in an atmosphere of self-respect and dignity, and without the stigma of failure" (para. 29).

To attain these goals, Hall-Dennis called for a rethinking of how to represent student progress. Recommendation 74 was: "Abandon the use of class standing, percentage marks, and letter grades in favor of parent and pupil counseling as a method of reporting individual progress". The Report recommended that there be no examinations except "where the experience would be of

value to students planning to attend universities where formal examinations may still be in use" (Hall, Dennis et al., 1968, Recommendations, No. 75). "[L]ock-step systems of organizing pupils, such as grades, streams, programs, etc" were to be eliminated (No. 3).

The Hall-Dennis Report took a fresh look at education. Its principles were based on human rights and democracy and its findings on broad research into educational needs, approaches, and possibilities. It offered opportunity to those willing to take up the work of moving Ontario's education system toward more effective and humane education methods and a more just and democratic social structure. This opportunity was embraced by many individual parents, teachers and schools, and soon inspired the creation of new models of Ontario public schools.

The Hall-Dennis Report was one of the main inspirations for the parents who created ALPHA Alternative Elementary School in 1972 and Alpha II in 2007 as community-operated schools where student-directed learning could be fostered. ALPHA and Alpha II had other influences as well as Hall-Dennis, but it can be seen as an authentic and lasting legacy of a document that still has much to offer public education.

Another influence on the founding of Alpha II was the first Sudbury Valley School founded in 1968 attended by children from the ages of 4 to 19 located in Framingham, Massachusetts, United States. There are now over 35 schools based on the Sudbury Model in the United States, Denmark, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. The model has three basic tenets: educational freedom, democratic governance and personal responsibility. Similar to Summerhill, but differing from Alpha II, it is a private school. [6]

As a result of the Hall-Dennis report and educational experiments like Summerhill and Sudbury Valley, a handful of democratic secondary alternative schools started up during the 1970's in the Toronto public system. With time and pressures each subsequently evolved to become closer to extensions of the standardized system by offering the same curriculum choices in an alternative setting. It can be said that assimilation back into the traditional system started to occur when credit courses were first offered.

Much has changed in education in Ontario since the Hall-Denis Report was adopted and first acted on in Toronto. Generally, the pendulum has swung away from concern for human rights towards valuing standardization in education. Still, the values expressed in the Universal Declarations of Human Rights remain those guiding progressive educators today as the foundation for educational change. Sir Ken Robinson comments in his book of 2009 and on the most watched TED talk to date filmed in 2006 that "Schools kill creativity... The fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed -- it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardize education, but to personalize it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions." "The future for education is not in standardizing but in customizing; not in promoting groupthink and "deindividuation" but in cultivating the real depth and dynamism of human abilities of every sort."[7]

All progressive change to meet these concerns is based on Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Article 1: Innate freedom and equality
All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

In meeting the demands of Article 1, Alpha II was founded on two pillars:

1. Young people self-direct based on a passion for learning in response to what they personally value in life.

2. At the same time, they must be willing and able to be part of a community based on consensus where each person's voice counts in developing that consensus.

The form of self-directed learning supported by Alpha II is referred to as free-schooling by some and unschooling by others. Alpha II is a school particularly attractive to homeschooling families who would like access to a public education based on the unschooling model. Unschooling is an educational method and philosophy that rejects compulsory school as a primary means for learning. Unschoolers learn through their natural life experiences including play, household responsibilities, personal interests and curiosity, internships and work experience, travel, books, elective classes, family, mentors, and social interaction. Unschooling encourages exploration of activities initiated by young people themselves, believing that the more personal learning is, the more meaningful, well-understood and therefore useful it is. [8] A fundamental premise of unschooling is that curiosity is innate and that children want to learn. From this an argument can be made that institutionalizing children in a so-called "one size fits all" or "factory model" school is an inefficient use of the children's time, because it requires each child to learn a specific subject matter in a particular manner, at a particular pace, and at a specific time regardless of that individual's present or future needs, interests, goals, or any pre-existing knowledge he or she might have about the topic. According to unschooling pioneer John Holt, "...the anxiety children feel at constantly being tested, their fear of failure, punishment, and disgrace, severely reduces their ability both to perceive and to remember, and drives them away from the material being studied into strategies for fooling teachers into thinking they know what they really don't know." [9] Proponents of unschooling assert that individualized, child-led learning is more efficient and respectful of children's time, takes advantage of their interests, and allows deeper exploration of subjects than what is possible in conventional education.

Deschooling, a philosophy of education introduced by philosopher and social activist Ivan Illich, refers to the belief that schools and other learning institutions are incapable of providing the best possible education for some or most individuals. Some extend this concept beyond the individual and call for an end to schools in general. This is based on the belief that most people learn better by themselves, outside of an institutional environment, at a self-determined pace. In a practical context, it refers to the mental process a person goes through after being removed from a formal schooling environment, when the "school mindset" is eroded over time. Deschooling may refer to the time period it takes for children removed from school to adjust to learning in an unstructured

environment. [10] This was similar to the breaking out described by A.S. Neill who "found it increasingly difficult to deal with…reported frequent breaking of rules including the most fundamental ones relating to behaviour in meetings."[11]

What is most salient about self-directed learning—whether it is free schooling, unschooling or deschooling, is that this model is based on what the individual personally values. And in refining and acting on their values young people move from the rawness of self-expression to the clarity of self-direction in learning.

Decision-making in a community based on consensus is the second pillar that founded Alpha II. It is of equal importance to self-direction in maintaining the values set out in Article 1 of the Declaration. In its concern that equality of the pillars defines the school, the understanding of consensus decision-making at Alpha II differs somewhat from that of ALPHA Elementary, Summerhill, or the Sudbury Valley model. Self-direction at Alpha II always remains an equal value to consensus. As such, all points of view are added together (rather than voted on or compromised) to generate consensus similar to the non-religious aspects of the Quaker Model introduced in the formative stages of New England.

Quaker-based consensus
The model used by the Quakers puts in place a simple structure that moves a group towards consensus. The Quaker model works well when employed in secular settings because it gives everyone a chance to speak while limiting potential disruptors (e.g., people who want unlimited airtime, or who have a particular axe to grind).

The following aspects of the Quaker model can be effectively applied in any consensus decision-making process:
  ● Multiple concerns and information are shared until the sense of the group is clear.
  ● Discussion involves active listening and sharing of information.
  ● Norms limit number of times one asks to speak to ensure that each speaker is fully heard.
  ● Ideas and solutions belong to the group; no names are recorded.
  ● Differences are resolved by discussion. The facilitator identifies areas of agreement and names disagreements to push discussion deeper.
  ● The facilitator articulates the sense of the discussion, asks if there are other concerns, and proposes a <u>minute</u> of the decision.
  ● The group as a whole is responsible for the decision, and the decision belongs to the group.
  ● The facilitator can discern if one who is not uniting with the decision is acting without concern for the group or in selfish interest.
  ● Dissenters' perspectives are embraced. [12]

To enact this method of consensus decision making, a weekly meeting of those at the school and a monthly meeting inviting the entire community uses the circle method to determine people's points of view. Each person is asked to contribute to the discussion going around the circle. Members of the circle can either state their point of view or pass—it is the decision of the

participant. In this way, through its own consensus-created core values, Alpha II is defined as a community for self-directed learners where everyone's voice is valued and incorporated.

Summary

Until the formation of Alpha II the 21st century TDSB was devoid of a place of learning for teenagers that followed the unschooling model first established at ALPHA elementary in 1972 in response to the Hall-Dennis Report. ALPHA elementary students who value the unschooling model have come to Alpha II and continue to do so. This model continues to attract homeschoolers to the Alpha II community who would not otherwise attend school. Although many of the Toronto homeschooling families meet regularly at community spaces around the city, parents and their young children generally populate these meetings. Before the creation of Alpha II older children did not have ready access to available public resources and a varied community of young people. Alpha II attracts many of these homeschoolers in their 12th to their 21st year as it gives them the option to learn among other young people with similar educational values in a resource rich environment with professional and skilled mentors who respond to their needs. For these young people it is an extension of their homeschooling experience; for them Alpha II is a 'homeschool away from home'.

There were calls for educational change by A.S. Neill nearly one hundred years ago; these were reiterated in the Hall-Dennis report of 1968 and reconfirmed by Sir Ken Robinson in his TED talks during the last decade. As a result of the voices of these dedicated educational thinkers innovative educational alternatives have been established and continue to flourish in response to the needs of families across the world.

Alpha II is the embodiment of these calls for reform. It is a start for a school of the future. It is happening now.

Most importantly, Alpha II is a public school.

And you, and anyone, can be a part of it.

1. TDSB PSS-3B Agenda Item 10 Report No. 04-07-1091 Start Date: 13 April 2007
2. Much of the wording of this section is taken verbatim from the Alpha II website which was principally authored by Carol Nash and reposted on the new Alpha II hosting platform by Gabz Gillespie http://schoolweb.tdsb.on.ca/alpha2/AboutUs/History.aspx accessed January 28, 2014
3. http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/
4. http://www.claiminghumanrights.org/udhr_article_26.html - at28
5. The full Dennis-Hall report is available at: http://www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs/CX5636-HallDennis.htm
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudbury_Valley_School and http://www.sudval.org/01_abou_02.html
7. The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything by Ken Robinson 2006 http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html
8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unschooling

9. http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Holt
10. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deschooling
11. http://books.google.ca/books?id=lRfExf67TmsC&pg=PA82&lpg=PA82&dq=a.s.Neill+breaking+out&source=bl&ots=jgNZHfSdHC&sig=bUHLFriuafYnbNiMnQaauZeqmp0&hl=en&sa=X&ei=jRbtUo_oG-LiyAH6noGwCQ&ved=0CCYQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=a.s.Neill%20breaking%20out&f=false
12. Adapted from *A Comparison of Quaker-based Consensus and Robert's Rules of Order*, Quaker Foundations of Leadership, 1999, Earlham College. http://www.earlham.edu/%7Econsense/rrocomp.shtml