

The Little Falls Open School Experience: A 50-Year Retrospective Evaluation



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Introduction:

In the early 1970s, Little Falls, NY implemented an innovative approach to education in its public high school (grades 9-12) that we, the authors of this article, have entitled the “Open School Experience.” A written review of the Little Falls High School (“LFHS”) Open School Experience was published in the book *Unique Place Diverse People: The Social and Political Story of Little Falls, New York* by Richard Buckley (Little Falls Historical Society, 2008). The chapter entitled “School & Community Crisis (1969-1988)” addresses the Open School Experience period (when we were in high school) and is based only on newspaper articles available to the book’s author. Although well-written and factual, it focuses primarily on the political battles between a handful of community residents, the Board of Education (“BOE”), and school administrators.

Our impression is that many community members consider the Open School Experience approach to learning to have been a negative educational experiment in our town’s history. The key premise of this article is that students who participated in the Open School Experience should be considered the true experts regarding the impact of the Open School Experience on their careers and personal life choices. Therefore, we implemented qualitative research methodologies which included a Delphi survey of students in the LFHS Classes of 1972 and 1973, written narratives completed by the survey participants, and several full text personal vignettes written by students of the Open School Experience. The use of multiple qualitative sources strengthens the “trustworthiness” of the information and conclusions. We designed the Delphi Survey in particular to develop a consensus of “expert” opinions based on their self-assessed experience outcomes.

This article will first summarize the geopolitical context and the community environment during the relatively brief Open School Experience period, how it came to be, and some key attributes and implementation concepts of the Open School Experience. Next, it will describe the Delphi qualitative survey methodology used and the findings. We will use direct quotes from survey participants to support our analyses and will refer the reader to appendices containing the complete narratives submitted to us. After including several personal “vignettes” written by individuals who participated in the Open School Experience, we will

present our conclusions on the effectiveness (pros and cons) of this innovative educational experience.

It should be noted that there are limited historical artifacts to examine about the Open School because a fire destroyed a significant portion of the building and records on January 10, 1976. Although never prosecuted, it was believed that the likely cause of the fire was arson. In many ways, the destructive fire also represented the end of the Open School Experience, and a more traditional education model was then reinstated. The political fallout and trust between the BOE, school administrators, teachers, and the community remained toxic for many years due to infighting and legal haggling under several different Superintendents following Mr. Charles Ebetino's resignation in the summer of 1973.



The Geo/Political Context:

The early 1970's was a period of radical social change in the United States. Young adults were actively questioning many of the values and societal customs held by older citizens. The influence of the counterculture was strong with rock music, drug experimentation, and protests for individual anti-discrimination rights. The controversial Vietnam War was in full force. It was a challenging time to "parent" young adults who were greatly influenced by these socio-cultural events.

The Little Falls Community:

Established as a village in 1811 and incorporated as a city in 1895, Little Falls, NY straddles the Mohawk River and borders the Erie Canal in upstate New York. With dairy farms prevalent in the area, Little Falls became known as a major center for manufacturing cheese in the mid to late 1800s. Powered by the Mohawk River production of ample electricity, Little Falls attracted an ethnically diverse population in the 1900s of immigrants (largely from Germany, Poland, Italy and Ireland) for manufacturing jobs in factories (many of which are defunct today) such as those for Cheney hammers, shoes, knitting, gloves, textiles/dresses, Lundstrom bookcases and many other products.



A city like Little Falls (with a relatively "conservative" working-class population) was not an environment where one would expect an Open School to be constructed and/or progressive curriculum ideas to be implemented. The taxpayers of Little Falls were extremely focused on

keeping the rising costs of public education in check and many decisions were made with this primary consideration. Little Falls had a long-standing history of educational achievement, and one could reasonably argue that the Open School concept may have been considered by traditional taxpayers (without detailed knowledge about the innovations) to be an unnecessary educational risk for the school district.

The New High School:

In 1969, and largely to keep the costs of construction down, a new “no walls” high school was under construction in Little Falls, NY. The exterior of this high school, of course, had walls as did the auditorium, gymnasium, locker rooms, cafeteria, storage areas, industrial shop and home economics areas, rest rooms and similar spaces. However, the main instructional area was an open space divided into “no walls” classrooms by almost ceiling high partitions containing black boards and cork boards (for pinning up materials). The flooring was composed of sound-limiting carpet tiles that could be removed and replaced with small sections where wear and tear was excessive.



Before opening the new high school to students a year later, the BOE was tasked with finding a Superintendent that had vital ideas on how best to use the “no walls” progressive design. Charles A. Ebetino was ultimately selected based on his background as a math teacher and elementary school principal (where, among other innovations, he grouped students from different grades together for English and Mathematics studies based on their competence level rather than age). Mr. Ebetino also had recent experience working for the NYS Education Department helping schools develop creative approaches to education using the state’s Title I-III funding.



The Process of Building a Curriculum:

The main objective then was to design a curriculum that not only accommodated the Open School design but that really took advantage of innovative educational and learning theory. In addition, Mr. Ebetino began to hire new teachers with flexible ideas on education and would take steps to inspire and motivate existing teachers to adapt themselves to the new curriculum.

Rather than dictate a specific instructive approach, Mr. Ebetino brought together teams of the individual stakeholders in the educational process to provide input. For example, a weekend retreat held at Trinkaus Manor in Oriskany, New York was attended by a team of Little Falls students, teachers, administrators, BOE members, and parents to establish goals and objectives for the new curriculum. Both authors were attendees and represented student perspectives. This workshop provided these key players with “ownership” of the results using a bottoms-up development approach rather than a top-down strategy. Also, hosting the team

away from the normal pressures of their daily lives enabled the team to immerse themselves in this curriculum development workshop.

The team at Trinkaus Manor agreed, for example, that attributes like the following would be important for the Open School curriculum:

- School should be like a “community” (or “family”) with everyone working cooperatively together for the same goals rather than separate camps of students, teachers, administrators, and parents battling turf wars with each other.
- The length of class sessions and the frequency per week should be tailored to the educational needs, not fixed for all subjects and students.
- Although public school by necessity is a group experience, individualized instruction is required to maximize the educational value for all students... not just college bound students.
- The education process should be interesting/exciting for both students and teachers.
- Students should be given experience exercising guided personal autonomy to develop responsible actions and decision-making skills.

The Open School Experience:

Although we cannot detail all the advances of the Open School Experience in this article, it was firmly underway by 1970 and included the following innovations to address the key attributes:

Establishing a Community/Family Environment:

The “no walls” learning space itself required students and teachers to behave more cooperatively (rather than create a disturbance) because there were no walls to shield bullying, belittling or other disruptive behaviors of students and teachers from the rest of the students and teachers in the open space learning area.

Homerooms were eliminated. Students from all high school grades (9-12) attended the auditorium together for morning administrative announcements, attendance taking and open discussions of school related issues. No longer would the information flow to and from students be “translated” by individual teachers based on their perceptions. This morning “forum” on occasion discussed relevant social issues of the day and would last for an extended period of time well into the school day.



Teachers and administrators were assigned responsibility to mentor (socially and educationally) one or more students needing extra support and with whom they felt they had a strong and positive relationship. For instance, one student who operated his family farm investigated the history of his family’s land and co-authored a published article on the topic

with one of the administrators. (This program resulted in many students remaining in school who otherwise would have dropped out before graduation.)

Class Length and Frequency:

Each day, traditional schools have a fixed number (often 8) of class “periods” of about 40 minutes each. In between those periods, students change from room to room losing as much as 15 minutes of actual instruction time during each period change (due to the movement to the new room, class shuffle of seating and getting materials ready, new class attendance taking and the beginning of new class). Traditional school periods generally included home room, study hall, physical education, and classes of traditional subjects with most conducted every day of the week regardless of actual need for the subject matter. Traditional schools offered a “one-size fits all” approach for every student.

In the Open School Experience, courses that did not require 40 minutes a day all 5 days a week were customized by teachers into 20-, 40- or 60-minute modules for the number of days per week that were needed. By way of example, shop, art and home economic courses could be 60 minutes long but fewer times a week to take into account the longer set up and put away time associated with these disciplines. In total there were 20 “mods” per day of 20 minutes.

In addition, individual students could elect to be tested for competence in some disciplines (using, for example, NYS Regents Examination questions) at the beginning of the year. If they demonstrated a mastery of the subject matter, they were not required to attend class sessions covering the areas in which they demonstrated competence (provided, of course, that they continued to take and pass quizzes and tests). These students could double up on required courses and/or use the free time to take elective courses or pursue individual interests. (This flexibility led to a number of students graduating early from high school.)

The role of elective courses was greatly enhanced in the new curriculum. A student could choose up to 50% of their coursework as free electives and it would count towards their graduation requirements. The NYS Regents and non-Regents sequences were maintained as a requirement. A few examples of elective course offerings included Shakespeare, Creative Writing, Short Story, Psychology, Multi-Media, Foreign Cooking, and Independent Study with a Mentor.

Individualized Instruction in a Group Environment:

The following innovations of the Open School Experience (described in more detail above) resulted in greater individualized instruction for students:

- Mentoring individual students selected by teachers and administrators based on needs and relationships both inside and outside the classroom.
- Class size reductions caused by students who demonstrated subject matter competence attending classes less frequently.

Making Education Interesting for Teachers and Students:

All teachers were encouraged to design and conduct elective courses in which they had special expertise or were passionate about exploring with students. Students and teacher advisors took educational, cultural immersion trips to France, Russia, and New York City (United Nations; Broadway; Greenwich Village) based on shared cultural and educational interests. Teachers continued to serve as advisors to traditional student government, honor societies, and yearbook committees as well as less traditional sports/recreation clubs. A Creative Writing Journal containing students' poems, stories, and artwork was jointly published. The music, arts, and drama programs flourished and in Spring 1973, the home economics department even put on a public fashion show. *Students* could also teach approved elective courses in areas of their expertise and receive school credit.

Elective courses, as mentioned above, increased the total curricular offerings in the Open School. In addition, however, it gave teachers the freedom to teach and "own" educational offerings in areas that they personally enjoyed. This led to electives in more "real world" subjects (beyond those required for routine college preparation).

Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, students now were given the opportunity and responsibility to direct and manage at least part of their own learning experience. This concept was quite progressive for its time. Provided certain core (largely NYS Regents-based) courses were taken, students constructed their own schedules based on their personal interests from a menu of numerous elective course offerings.

The structure and method of teaching in the classroom changed dramatically. For instance, there was a shift away from predominately passive lecture style instruction with students sitting in rows. Learning activities emphasized student engagement with the subject material, small group discussions, and real-world applications.



In addition, there were several former special education students who were inclusively involved in the regular public-school environment and earned a valid high school diploma during this period. There was no clear social distinction between students planning on going to college and those pursuing other avenues after high school.

Guided Personal Autonomy:

In addition to managing their own course selections and daily schedule, students in the Open School Experience had significant freedom to manage their "free time" provided they were not disruptive to the educational process. They had full access to the classrooms and instructional areas when classes were not in session. They were not assigned "study halls" when they were not in a scheduled class and there were no "passes" needed to go to the

library, music, industrial shop, art rooms, bathrooms, gymnasium/showers, lunchrooms, or to visit teachers, etc. There was a lot of movement by individuals and small groups of students throughout the day.

Many students enjoyed sitting on the carpeted floors in the main halls engaged in conversations. During pleasant weather it was not uncommon to see students playing chess outdoors, working on art projects, or even going for a run. By and large, most students functioned very well in this less rigid “college campus-like” environment although the actions of a few students did create community concern with this level of personal autonomy. Students could also be approved to leave campus for part-time employment opportunities.

Evaluating the Open School Experience:

This section describes the specific design used to study the LFHS Open School Experience from the point of view of “student experts” (all of whom were taught during the Open School Experience). This section provides an overview of the Delphi survey methodology and includes how the survey participants were selected, various recruitment strategies, operational procedures, and analyses of the data. The results are supported by retrospective student narratives using participants’ direct quotes.

Delphi Method Overview

The Delphi method is a process used to arrive at a group opinion or decision by surveying a panel of experts. The experts respond to several rounds of questions, and the responses are aggregated and shared with the group after each round. The goal is to reach a consensus of what the group thinks (Clayton, 1996; Delbecq et al., 1986; Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Whitehead, 2020). The Delphi method is considered effective for obtaining information about an area of inquiry in which there is little evidence and people’s opinions matter (Powell, 2003). Delphi research participants are selected based on their expert knowledge and/or direct experience with the subject matter (Keeney et al., 2001; Landeta, 2006).

Our study’s convenience sample consisted of LFHS alumni from the Class of 1972 and Class of 1973 who served as the experts. The decision to elicit the students’ opinions from these classes was based on a suggestion by Hector Allen, a former, well-respected LFHS teacher who believed these classes derived the most value from the curriculum model known as the Open School. This qualitative research methodology was chosen for its authenticity, respect for social/cultural diversity, ease of implementation, trustworthiness of raw data (uses direct quotes), and its value as an addition to our Little Falls community of life stories.

Recruitment:

The Director of LFHS Alumni Communications sent our initial invitation to volunteer for our study to members of the Class of 1972 and Class of 1973 by private email. The survey invitation stated that participants would be asked these three questions:

Question #1: As a participant, we will ask you to list how the LFHS Open School Experience had a direct and positive impact on your career and/or personal life choices. (By way of example only, this may include attributes like improved sense of community, self-responsibility, exploration and creativity, life skills development, critical thinking, time management, self-learning and more.) We will also ask you to list the attributes of the LFHS Open School Experience that you feel were detrimental to your career and personal life choices.

Question #2: We will submit a master list of all the identified attributes to you and the other participants and request additions they may have been overlooked previously.

Question #3: We resend the complete list and will ask you to rank the importance of each attribute to you.

The invitation was sent directly by email to all registered LFHS Alumni of 1972 & 1973, was posted in a general Alumni Monthly Newsletter, and posted on the Little Falls Alumni Facebook page in both December 2023 and January 2024. Volunteers were asked to contact Carol Reinson via private email if they were interested in being involved in the project. A few classmates were contacted directly by Messenger and email based on recommendations by other participants. The invitation stated the identities of the participants would remain confidential in order to elicit robust and objective opinions.

While there is no consensus regarding the number of participants required for a Delphi study, literature advises the inclusion of between 3 and 80 (Bagenda, 2020; Ogbeifun, 2016). The table below summarizes the level of participation by “student experts” in our survey.

	Class of 1972	Class of 1973
Participant Made Initial Contact to Researcher	9	14
Completed Question #1 (Narrative)	7	11
Completed Question #3 (Rank Attributes)	3	9
Permission Granted to Publish Quotes/Narrative	7	11
Vignette Invitation Accepted & Permission Granted	2	2

The entire Delphi Survey was conducted over a 3-4-month period with numerous reminders sent to participants to complete the questions in a timely manner. There was a total of (18) personal narratives sent in by participants in response to Question #1. All participants granted us permission to publish their personal narratives. The full text of their input is included in Appendix 1.

Procedures:

As researchers, we used the “constant comparison method” a qualitative process developed by Glaser and Strauss (2000) to develop grounded theory, whereby the

researcher(s) sort and organize excerpts of narrative information concurrently according to common attributes or themes. We each separately completed a preliminary qualitative analysis of the student expert (participant) narratives by reading/rereading and coding the information to identify themes of positive and negative attributes of the Open School Experience for each individual participant. We then collaborated in real time to meld our findings into a single, formal list of positive attributes. (We decided to treat the positive and negative attributes separately because the vast majority of respondents stated there were no negatives in their own personal experience. We will present the relatively few negative attributes in a separate section.)

The formal list of positive attributes was sent back to the respondents via Question #2 to check if there were any attributes that might have been overlooked. The respondents did not add any new attributes to the list.

Positive Attribute Analysis

The formal list contained the following 18 positive attributes based on qualitative analyses:

- Students and teachers were learning and decision-making partners (e.g., mentoring relationships, morning forum for communication & issue resolution)
- Time management (e.g., create own schedule)
- Exploration and creativity opportunities (e.g., variety of electives, multiple pathways to graduate)
- Ability to hold part time jobs during otherwise unproductive school time
- Community building (negotiation, collaboration and communication skills) across students (of different age groups), teachers and administration (e.g., morning forum)
- Opportunities for leadership (e.g., morning forum, student organizations)
- Development of world/global view (electives, guest speakers, special programs, trips, concerts, etc.)
- Ability to graduate high school early
- Self-confidence and self-esteem to take on new challenges
- Ownership and responsibility of personal success
- Work/leisure balancing skills
- Freedom to relax or pursue individual interests and projects
- Joy and appreciation for life-long learning
- Increased independent thinking and openness to change
- Empathy and respect for diversity
- Increased understanding of non-traditional definitions of achievement
- Belief in personal ability to resolve issues and facilitate change
- School pride (e.g., exceptional facility and grounds, and educational experience)

The last step in the Delphi data collection was to send the final list of positive attributes back

to respondents and ask the participants (per Question #3) to place their top ten attributes in a ranked order (1-10) based on individual importance to them.

We aggregated the participant rankings we received and assigned a relative total score to each attribute. Attributes receiving a number 1 ranking from a participant received a score of 10, number 2 rankings received a score of 9, number 3 rankings received a score of 8 (and so on until number 10 rankings received a score of 1). The higher the resulting score, accordingly, the more group consensus there was that a particular attribute played a positive role in career or personal life decisions. The Total Positive Attribute Ranking Scores are set forth in Appendix 2.

Appendix 2 demonstrates that six attributes received a high total score of 50 or more. However, all attributes appearing in original list were included in the top 10 selections by one or more participants.

The researchers decided to investigate just the top three attribute rankings we received from each participant to see if any peculiar analysis points arose when we removed the attributes of lesser importance for most participants. The Top Three Attribute Ranking Results are set forth in Appendix 3.

The table below compares the top 5 attributes in Appendix 2 (total scoring of top 10 attributes by participants) with the top 5 attributes in Appendix 3 (top 3 rankings of attributes by each participant).

Total Scores (Appendix 2)	Top 5 Attributes (Comparison)	Top 3 Rankings (Appendix 3)
Exploration and creativity opportunities		Exploration and creativity opportunities
Time management		Time management
Ownership and responsibility of personal success		Students and teachers were learning and decision-making partners
Increased independent thinking and openness to change		Increased independent thinking and openness to change
Students and teachers were learning and decision-making partners		Ownership and responsibility of personal success

As you can see, the top 5 attributes are remarkably consistent. The “Exploration and

Creative Opportunities” and “Time Management” were the highest ranked attributes of the Open School Experience using either analysis approach. Although the order of importance slightly varied, the next three highest ranked attributes (out of 18 total attributes) were the same using either analysis approach as well.

It is important to document which direct quotes or “low inference descriptors” were used by the researchers to develop the original List of Attributes. Therefore, the following section includes a sample of direct quotes used in our analyses for the readers to review. Refer to Appendix 1 to examine the full text narratives.

Exploration and Creativity Opportunities:

- *“I enjoyed sunny days socializing on the school’s campus grounds but also found myself putting in extra time in the art room, music room and library expanding my interests beyond class-time.” P#3*
- *“Flexible scheduling and rooms allowed for my taking many electives and of subjects graduating with many credits – allowed for many more academic and artistic experiences.” P#6*
- *“Freedom to arrange my class schedule in a way that allowed for both the core courses necessary for a NYS Regents Diploma and the electives that exposed me to rewarding areas of exploration... Adding ‘electives’ exposed me to a suite of subjects that were outside the traditional curriculum and helped broaden my background.” P#8*
- *“I got to choose electives that I wanted that pushed me into a more creative side of myself.” P#16*

Time Management:

- *“The concept experience forced time management on me, after backing myself into a corner more than once, That also made me aware of the fact I could do good under that pressure instead of quitting.” P#5*
- *“I felt better prepared for college as a result of the open classroom experience, I learned time management through trial and error.” P#6*
- *“It gave me the opportunity to make decisions that I felt were right for me, like choosing some of my classes and deciding how to spend my free time.” P#9*
- *“As an individual, I was very shy and led a sheltered life. The open school system made me responsible for my schedule, my mandatory classes, my electives and my free time.” P#16*

Students and Teachers were Learning and Decision-Making Partners:

- *“My memory is that teachers were accessible individuals even beyond school class-time. Casual and friendly discussions with them broke down the*

older structural norms, and, in retrospect made them partners and advocates in my learning.” P#3

- *“Students and staff were in this brave new experiment together-partners not adversaries.” P#1*
- *“Morning forum taught us that, the administration did listen, sometime we were we successful and sometimes we were not but we knew we could affect change and were not defeated when we failed. Powerful lessons from a high school.” P#13*
- *“I enjoyed having access to the teacher’s office and felt that they were more partners in my education than Divine beings imparting their vast knowledge down from Olympus.” P#20*

Increased Independent Thinking and Openness to Change:

- *“Teachers challenged students with different teaching styles stressing more independence.” P#6*
- *“I cannot think of a single negative impact on my career or personal life choices, unless you call being a bit of a free spirit, progressive-minded individual a negative, which I don’t.” P#9*
- *“We learned how to be independent thinkers and to feel that we had the power to change things with our voice.” P#13*

Ownership and Responsibility of Personal Success:

- *“Being responsible in large part for my educational success helped me understand I was personally responsible for attaining success in my career and life.” P#15*
- *“This experience allowed me to pursue things that I enjoyed and made me even more responsible for my actions.” P#9*
- *“There was a certain amount of responsibility and maturity that was conferred upon us that allowed us to move about the halls and grounds freely. Some students treated this freedom as an easy-going time for relaxation while others developed their interest in ways that walled schools couldn’t offer. Admittedly, I was a bit in both camps.” P#3.*

The descriptions of how and why certain attributes were placed at the top of participants’ lists clearly evidence the student experts’ value they personally obtained from the LFHS Open School Experience. Only samples could be included here. We strongly recommend that the reader spend time reviewing the materials in the Appendixes for more detail.

Negative Attribute Analysis

Only 4 categories of negative attributes were identified by the survey participants in their personal narrative responses to Question #1.

Because of the classroom areas contained no walls or doors, and because students without class at the time could walk through the classroom area, noise and visual distractions during class sessions were identified as a problem by 4 participants:

- *“The downside of an open class is distraction. Loud noises -- maintenance, shuffling from class changes, talking among students -- was often distracting. In the structured classroom with walls and rows of desks, these noises would have been less intrusive. On many days, friends would pass by an open classroom in session and wave, point, make faces, or literally shout hello.” P#23*
- *“There were ongoing distractions including the opportunity to look out windows, noises from various areas, and people passing by.” P#27*
- *“Additionally, the distraction of noise pollution made it hard to stay on task oftentimes.” P#20*
- *“Noise from other classes was distracting.” P#6*

Insufficient self-motivation was somewhat of a problem for 2 participants and two others indicated they did not have that problem but knew others in the school did:

- *“Intrinsic motivation was critical to a student’s success. I found that by the second half of my senior year that my academic motivation was not as strong (that could be senioritis and not attributed to the open classroom).” P#6*
- *“The problem with open concept occurs when the student involved doesn't have the self-discipline to take advantage of the myriad opportunities presented and instead abuses the freedom to slack off.” P#20*
- *“I know that some students had difficulty with the experience but that was not the case with me.” P#1*
- *“I do not believe that the open school system had any negative impact on me personally. I do however, believe it did not suit everyone’s needs in terms of academics or development. [By] that I mean - some students didn’t handle that sense of “freedom in the same way.” P#7*

And 2 participants indicated they felt that they did not receive sufficient instruction on written composition (e.g., how to write a paper):

- *“The negative impact I experienced with the open system is this: Somehow I missed out on a course, if one existed in our open system, of traditional learning how to write a good paper, composition, essay, etc.” P#2*
- *“Negative Attributes: ...Written Composition-Maybe” P#26*

Finally, 1 participant felt the Guidance Department was not strong enough to handle the great flexibility created for students by the Open School Experience:

“Course changes were easy, what I felt was the Guidance Department wasn’t prepared to handle all of this to our best interest.” P#17

Personal Vignettes

Before presenting our conclusions, we have included the personal vignettes of several students who were part of the Open School Experience. This material provides the reader with a more in-depth “free form” account of their personal story.

Vignette #1

by Kris Balderston (Class of ‘73)

Growing up in Little Falls, I always had an interest in politics and public service, which would later become the foundation for my career. That interest was driven by my parents’ interest in the world around them, the daily debates that would take place in my father’s bar, and the opportunities that were given to me by the “Open School Experience” at LFHS. The Open School “experiment” and its focus on innovation, community, and a customized learning experience provided me with the skills and mindset that would later prove invaluable during a five decade career in politics and government.

It’s important to remember the tumultuous times when the open school was started. The country was amid the Vietnam War, Kent State, Watergate, the emergence of the environmental movement, and the beginning of the transition from a manufacturing to information economy. Little Falls and all Upstate New York was changing in a massive way. In reality you could argue that the school was ahead of the curve in encouraging its students to learn to adapt to the changes that would be coming at even greater speed down the road.

For me, the school built on, what I later realized, was Little Falls’ greatest asset – it’s sense of community. This was accentuated by the simple but important act of getting everyone in our academic community together in the morning Forum where students met with each other to hear announcements, start our day, and be given the opportunity to debate the issues of the day.

The Forum was the basis of one of the biggest lessons in my career – building trust, listening to other people’s opinions with respect, and understanding the importance of the “power to convene.” I remember after one forum debate, working with a professor and other students to start the Ecology Club, which created the Mohawk Valley’s first recycling program and initiated the state’s first municipal environmental advisory council (with student representation). Debate resulting in action.

Under the open concept, the notion of community was directly linked to customizing the curriculum to the student within the parameters of the State educational requirements to receive a local or regent’s diploma. This allowed the student to start working with the faculty

to design a curriculum aligned to their interests and career paths. The wide array of elective coursework provided opportunities to spark different student interests.

This emphasis on community and an interdisciplinary approach to learning and problem solving was critical to my future career in politics and public service. I used these concepts as essential tools for my career of working on multiple presidential campaigns and with a wide array of government leaders including two Senators, a Governor, two Cabinet Secretaries, and a President of the United States.

For me, I feel fortunate and grateful for the foundation that Little Falls and the open school concept provided me during my career in politics and public service. Hardly a day goes by without me thinking about the lessons learned with my classmates during the early seventies. In later years, I would often tell some of my bosses that some of the most critical lessons I learned were at an early age in my father's bar or being politically active in Little Falls High School:

- we have learned that education systems have to be customized to the individual needs of the students especially in this day and age. This is particularly difficult in public schools where there are many political philosophies and limited resources.
- LFHS provided its students with a unique opportunity to gain independence and responsibility and a targeted curriculum based on your interests while also maintaining the core curriculum.
- Important times – Vietnam was ending, Watergate was brewing, Kent State. It was a tumultuous time that affected the very age group that was in high school.
- Don't underestimate the uniqueness of the open school with the symbolism of the library in the middle surrounded by class rooms. The Forum in the morning. You saw each other every morning - every student, every class, it was a race to learn with faculty that seemed happy and wanted to be there. All types of teaching fit in. We were there in its prime.
- Impact. Speak up. Activate. Sense of community. Empathy. Contrarian. Different teaching styles worked.
- Helped in a career of politics- clubs, the relevance of literature to social issues. Taught you how to learn. An interdisciplinary approach to life.

Vignette #2

by Mike Evans (Class of '73)

When I first began thinking about this project that Carol and Jim had embarked upon, I thought that the open school system had been an asset for good students but not so much for the kids who struggled with their education. I soon changed my opinion. Since I had spent three years in standard high school environment with grades 7-9 and then moved to the open concept I could compare the two.

I was what they called a "Gifted Student." This was helpful in some ways but not in others because it meant I didn't have to work as hard to get by. As a result I pretty much coasted

through school. I was shy and I definitely was not a leader. I played sports but didn't put in the effort to become a star, again just getting by. I excelled in math but never knew what to do with it. Guidance kept saying "You could teach." There was no way I was going to stand in front of a classroom and teach others how to learn something that was of no use other than to teach others. At no time was the word engineering brought to my attention. I didn't learn about mechanical engineering until many years later. I didn't learn how to use a computer until twenty years after high school.

While reading the draft for this project I learned much about the "Open School" concept, how it came to be and what it really was all about. I also realize how much I missed out on. The opportunity was there to learn anything I wanted, I just didn't know what I wanted other than to party and have a good time. I didn't realize what I needed to do in life other than to have a job and make a living. I never equated a better education to making more money. Pretty sad for a so-called gifted student. I had a Regents Scholarship but after a year at HCCC I stopped going.

Without a life plan I just kind of fell into fixing cars which I was always intrigued by. Eventually I owned my own garage in central Florida fixing high end German and Italian cars. After eleven years I got fed up with it, sold it to my employees and took a year off, not knowing what to do next. I landed at a professional race team and felt I had found my calling. We were racing Porsches in the IMSA series. This team had never won before but that soon changed as we won our first championship in 1999. I was named "Mechanic of the Year" by the International Motorsports Association. I received my award from Bob Varsha on the stage at the Paris Hotel in Las Vegas. I even gave a speech.

Porsche soon recognized our abilities. We became the factory Porsche team racing throughout North America and Europe. We won four more championships and 49 races including the 24 Hours of Daytona, the 24 Hours of LeMans, twice, and the 12 Hours of Sebring 7 times. It was widely understood that we were the best GT race team in the world. I left Alex Job Racing after the Daytona race in 2008. I wanted to go to Penske Racing. They offered me a job caring for Roger's personal car collection but did not have a spot for me on the race teams at that time. I thanked them but turned it down and went to Brumos Racing instead.

I soon learned about mechanical engineering. They had real school-taught engineers who could put all of what I was doing to numbers. When I made a change to the racecar, I would fly by the seat of my pants but the team engineer, Joe LaJoie, actually put numbers to everything. When I moved the wing adjustment one hole he could tell me how much more downforce that change made and what it did to the center of pressure etc. The light bulb went on. This is what I could have done with all the math that I had yet to learn. Damn!

In summation it's obvious that I missed a great opportunity offered by the "Open School System." Everything I needed was there, but I didn't have the guidance or kick in the ass to see it and take advantage of it. I did okay in life, but it could have been so much more. A big regret is that I have allowed my son to fall into the same trap. He is doing well as the car chief

for the factory Aston Martin team. The cars he is responsible for have won many races over the last few years. But he could do so much more if I had only shown him the way.

Vignette #3

by Rose Marie Cannarro Battisti (Class of '72)

Note: This vignette was provided in response to Question #1 of the Delphi survey.

Wow! What a question! Since I am Carol's classmate, I just celebrated being out of school for 50 years and in fact for me it has been 51 as I graduated at the end of my junior year. That is a lot of years to have the Open School Experience impact my life!

I am sure that every generation feels like the old Chinese curse of "may you live in interesting times" impacts them and it was certainly true for those of us who went to school during the Open School experience.

I do not know anything about the actual planning that made the experiment come about but I think I can safely say that it was a time in our country when change was afoot. Those planners must have been forward thinkers and those of us who were lucky enough to have the opportunities for personal growth it provided by opening our minds to so many possibilities benefited. In my opinion I had the best of both worlds,

I grew up in a small town where there was a safety net and a cocoon of love and protection that gave me a sense of security and an idea that most people were good, so I wasn't fearful of the bigger world and the people in it. My life was grounded in my Catholic faith and my strong identity as a great grandchild and grandchild of Italian immigrants (today is actually the 100th anniversary of my great grandparents being one of the first Italian immigrants to purchase their house on the North side of the city, a home that my brother owns today) I was educated at St. Mary's Academy until the high school closed at the end of my freshman year and I transferred to the then new high school.

All this is why I think I was ready to embrace what the Open School concept had to offer. As students we had so much more control over what we could study with the modular system. I remember I was able to take mini courses in sociology and was exposed to how my own society worked and how to celebrate other societies and how we are more alike than different but also celebrating the differences. We learned how to be independent thinkers and to feel that we had the power to change things with our voice. Morning forum taught us that the administration did listen, sometimes we were successful and sometimes we were not but we knew we could affect change and were not defeated when we failed. Powerful lessons from a high school.

I graduated in three years instead of four because of the modular system and followed a very traditional path for the first ten years out of high school as a fulltime wife and mother. I married right out of high school because my high school boyfriend was in the military and

scheduled to leave for Viet Nam. Due to that year being a huge military draw down we only spent a year as a military family then it was back home to Little Falls. During that time, I had three children and adopted one from Korea. I feel that the wider world view I developed at LFHS led us to the decision to adopt internationally.

As much as I loved being a stay-at-home mom, I really wanted to continue my education and after a failed start went on to slowly, step by step finish my associate degree at HCCC in Human Services. As my final internship I applied for a position at Mohawk Valley Resources for Refugees for 90 hours. I stayed for ten years, eight as executive director. During that time, led by world events we went from the tail end of resettling Eastern European refugees right into the waves of refugees from Southeast Asia with a concentration on Amerasian refugees who had Vietnamese mothers and American military fathers. When that was winding down the first Russian Pentecostal refugees started arriving.

Personally, during those years, I adopted three more children from Korea, had another baby, was divorced and completed my Bachelor's degree from Empire State College. I resigned in spring of 1993 and in July of 1993 moved with six of my children (two were in college here) to Hanoi, Viet Nam to facilitate adoptions of Vietnamese children by American families. From then until the end of 2008, I worked in Viet Nam doing adoptions and humanitarian aid projects. We always kept our home in Little Falls and during those years we went between Hanoi, Bangkok for a short period for the children's schooling and Little Falls with all eight of my children graduating from LFHS. I did a limited number of adoptions in Guatemala but never lived there. In 2008 the international agreement between the US and Vietnam for adoptions expired so all 22 American agencies working there had to stop and it would be years before things opened again and by then the needs of the country had changed as economic conditions improved and the number of orphans decreased.

So, at 55 having lost the work that I loved and thought I would retire from I had to choose a new path so in Jan of 2009 I enrolled at Southern Connecticut State University to pursue a clinical Masters as a Marriage and Family Therapist. At that time my husband was working as the compliance officer at the West Haven VA hospital and already had an apartment there so again we were both living between Little Falls and someplace else!

I became licensed in NYS as an LMFT in 2013 and began working that year as a Military Family and Life Counselor at Ft Drum. Since then, I have had several assignments there and in the Southern US before doing two 90 days tour in Norway, one six-month tour in northern Japan and am currently on my third assignment in Italy, this time in Naples. Every time I accept a new assignment, I am both excited and apprehensive. I have been so blessed in my life to have only had three careers but in each one I have felt like it was a calling not just a job. Just before leaving for Naples I had taken two and a half years off to help take care of who will probably be the last of my 15 grandchildren, have both knees replaced and cared for my Mom who passed away at 91 in November. This may be my last assignment but I never say never.

All of what I have accomplished in my life has been because of where I was raised, the values I learned at home and at school. My children are all hard working and productive in their own fields and products of St Mary's Academy and Benton Hall and Little Falls High School. I am not sure that the freedom to be a globalist that I experienced in the Open Concept High School of the early 70's is still there but I know that service and empathy and pride in country without nationalism is still taught in the elementary school. I see in the leadership of Joe Long at Benton Hall, and I am grateful that he is the principle for my granddaughter there.

My hope is that Little Falls will continue to be a city that raises its children to have the kind of experience we had and that wonderful feeling when you see a school mate after many years and there is a comfort level that is instantaneous and finally that they are sure enough of who they are to be brave and always take that chance!

So grateful to live in interesting times! Nothing negative, few regrets.

Vignette #4

by David Liscio (Class of '72)

It's difficult to say just how participation in an experimental open high school program influenced my future.

I know with certainty that my teaching style as a college adjunct professor in Massachusetts from 2001 to 2015 leaned heavily on an open classroom atmosphere. My students were encouraged to interact with each other while seated in a semi-circle rather than in rows. The seating arrangement fostered eye contact and made clear who was paying attention and who was less invested in the subject.

Students seated in rows are often divided into those at the front — aka the good students — and those at the back — the slackers.

How could it be otherwise?

Such a seating arrangement leaves each student with a less-than-inspirational view of the back side of the head of the student immediately seated in front of them. A student with hand raised in response to a teacher's question might add valuable comments or perspective, but only the student's voice is heard, their facial expressions hidden from the vantage point of most classmates.

The first three of my four high school years were spent in a traditional setting in the old red brick Benton Hall building near the city center. In the classroom we sat in inflexible rows. Perhaps it helped the teacher identify our faces on a seating chart. The teacher typically was at the front of the room, separate from the students.

All that changed in my senior year with entrance to the newly built high school on the outskirts of town and a different way of viewing education.

In a circle setting, eye contact was inevitable. The open classroom allowed the teacher to blend with the students by being physically closer versus behind a podium, and as a result seem somehow more human, less officious. Many lively discussions were held in this less formal setting.

I think the overriding message to students in the new high school was simple: Learn everything you can. See how subjects are often interrelated. Discover what you enjoy learning and pursue it.

This learning philosophy also allowed students to flex their academic schedules to accommodate home or work situations — like having to milk cows before coming to school or getting released early to stock shelves or bag groceries at the local supermarket. I was hired as a stock boy and bagger at Loblaws market the day I turned 16 and held this job throughout my high school years, often starting a work shift at noon on Fridays.

One of the English teachers at LFHS read several of my homework essays and pulled me aside to offer praise and encouragement. He had especially enjoyed one about mistreated grocery store products staging a revolt — think Capt. Crunch, Count Chocula, Mr. Clean, Betty Crocker, etc. Keep writing, the teacher advised, and don't stop.

A social studies teacher fed my interest in learning about different cultures, starting with the Mohawks who lived in Little Falls long before the first white settlers arrived. He introduced me to the rich history of Mexico, the Aztecs, the Olmecs and the Maya.

Another civics teacher sensed from classroom discussion that analyzing daily TV and newspaper stories grabbed my attention. She'd bring up these stories in class and occasionally hand me news clippings with a knowing smile as I left the room.

Part of the collective message by faculty who embraced the new method of teaching emphasized the opportunity each student was being given to follow many roads after graduation, not a single prescribed path perhaps resembling their parents toil in farm or factory.

You can do it all, the teachers said. Take a chance. This is your time to fly.

With a bachelor's degree in hand, I returned home from college, not sure where my life was headed.

My mother's childhood friend was an editor at the Little Falls Evening Times daily newspaper. I was hired on as a reporter and photographer. Fortunately, I had taken a photography course my junior year at the old high school and knew how to handle a camera and run a darkroom.

The local newspaper experience led to other reporting jobs in nearby Syracuse, and later in Boston, Massachusetts.

Career journalism opened up world travel opportunities, mostly through magazine assignments. I was sent to Japan, Saipan, and several Pacific islands to investigate the Yakuza heroin trade that was flooding America with drugs. I also traveled to the Caribbean, Australia, Belize, Mexico, Croatia, Italy, and many other countries for cultural or travel assignments. As I matured in the role of photojournalist, I was able to bring my wife and two children along on many adventures. It helped that I had learned to sail in Massachusetts, since many assignments involved sailing in destinations throughout the world.

Both my parents were factory workers who sacrificed plenty to help pay my college tuition and, in the ensuing years, keep me under a roof with food in the fridge. Neither had attended high school, so they were proud when I earned a master's degree in, not surprisingly, integrative education and ecological literacy.

My dad was a Little Falls call firefighter for over 45 years, so it seemed inevitable that I'd gravitate to that kind of work. I became a call firefighter in Massachusetts in 1994, serving 25 years on the fire department and 20 years as a member of my town's Ocean Rescue team. I enjoyed every minute of it.

Looking back since my graduation from Little Falls High School, I have worked as an investigative reporter, photographer, magazine editor, photojournalist, college adjunct professor, firefighter, ocean rescue specialist, emergency medical technician, and most recently a private investigator. In each of these professions, I considered how it related to the others, which is exactly how I was taught to think at the new open high school.

My writing has continued with three crime fiction novels published respectively in 2016, 2018 and 2020. I'm hoping to write a few more.

Conclusions

The authors acknowledge that, because participants were volunteers, it is possible that results were skewed toward participants sharing positive and successful experiences. However, because the vast majority of responses were overwhelmingly positive with no negative attributes identified, the results and conclusions of this study remain persuasive.

It also should have been expected that there would have been some dissatisfaction with the Open School Experience among a minority of the student body, especially those students needing increased structure and guidance. In any given high school, it is not uncommon for teenagers to test boundaries and to lack the emotional maturity to understand long-term consequences of their behavior. The LFHS Open School Experience was only in operation for a total of three years when the Class of 1973 graduated. Given on-going formative and summative program evaluation measures and ample time to make curricular adjustments, the Open School Experience may have reached even higher levels of success for all students.

Although noteworthy, the Open School Experience remains a very limited experiment in our shared Little Falls history. The historical outcomes definitely depend on whose perspective is being considered.

A long-term commitment to the Open School Experience did not occur because highly vocal groups in the community of Little Falls were expressing rumors that the students were "out of control" and the education process at LFHS was broken. But, as the participant narratives and personal vignettes demonstrate, those rumors were by and large not true. As Participant 5 aptly stated: "Another, I will call a virtue, and not that I claim fame to many, [I] let rumors go in one ear and out the other. I would hear things from my parents about the school that were said absolutely untrue. Some of them were coming from a couple teachers." Moreover, the student experts in our study were extremely complimentary on the wonderful educational opportunity they had been involved in. Participant #1 said, "The LFHS Open School was one of the best experiences of my life." That is certainly high praise 50+ years in the making.

The career paths of Open School Experience students resemble that of any traditional school...if not more robust. For example, the Class of 1973 published at their 20th class reunion that their graduating class included students who went on to have the following careers: Teachers (PreK, Elementary, High School, Alternative and Special Education, Corrections; Higher Education); Nursing; Occupational Therapy; Hospital Administration; Social Work and Counseling; Dentistry; Optometry; Geology; Medical Technology and Radiology; Banking; Small Business Owners; Entrepreneurs and Venture Capitalist; Electrical and Plumbing Services; Public Service and Politics; First Responders (Sheriff; Police, Firefighters, EMT); Business Management; Secretarial Services and Accounting; Insurance Agents; Real-estate Agents; Systems Analyst; Restaurants/Chef; Scientists; Musician/Choral Singers; Corporate Statistician; Editor/Journalist; Novelists; Computer Engineering; Farming; Community Service; Coaching; and not the least Mothers, Fathers, Grandparents, and Aunts/Uncles. Other graduating classes of the Open School Experience undoubtedly had similar career paths (including lawyers).

The use of a Delphi survey with LFHS Alumni provided concrete data (direct quotes) to support the existence of significant Positive Attributes of high importance in the Open School Experience. Perhaps more importantly, the fact that all 18 identified positive attributes were selected in the top ten by at least one or more participants indicates the breadth and depth of potential value for Open School Experience students. There was something for almost everyone. One respondent believed all (18) attributes should receive the highest score, as the total educational program was superior.

Our study demonstrates that the Open School Experience challenged students to become self-directed active learners (rather than passive learners). Moreover, the personal narratives are confirmations that students exposed to this "educational experiment" went on to become various "change agents" in their own careers and the world at large. Students felt "empowered" to use independent thinking skills and they carried that forward with them in their careers and life. Flexibility to adapt to change and find one's "purpose in life" was a consistent strength especially demonstrated in the personal narratives and vignettes.

Accordingly, we conclude that the Open School Experience was not only a success for students, but it was ahead of its time in the field of education. This study provides strong empirical evidence that the structural, social, and curricular innovations implemented at LFHS during the Open School Experience provided an educational approach and a positive learning and social environment that allowed students the opportunity to find individualized value (beyond just book knowledge) in their schooling. The LFHS Open School Experience, and this study of it, has past, present, and future relevance for public education in both the Little Falls community and elsewhere.

Appendix 1

Participant Responses to Question # 1

Participant #1

Question #1A:

The LFHS Open School Experience was one of the best experiences of my life. The learning opportunities that I was afforded by the variety of courses that were offered and the willingness of the teaching staff to embrace this new concept were extraordinary. It made learning fun. Students and staff were in this brave new experiment together- partners, not adversaries. The ability to choose your courses and schedules allowed me to explore subjects that I would never have had the chance to do in a traditional setting. The ability to manage my schedule and the ability to spend my “free time” as I chose instead of being stuck in a traditional study hall allowed me to self-learn and manage my time however I wished. Getting homework done at school in the Resource Center, listening to music in the Resource Center or in one of the music areas and leaving school when my classes were over for the day to work at a job was life transforming.

The experience prepared me for college in ways I didn't know until I went to college. Learning how to pick out my own schedule, choose the required subjects and explore the myriad of electives offered all groomed me for a smooth transition when it came time to go to college. The teaching staff that were assembled to lead us through this new experiment were among the nicest people that I have met in my life. As you know, the times were certainly changing when we were in High School, and the flexibility provided by the Open School concept allowed us to change with the times while still learning core values. The absence of walls and traditional classrooms as well as the morning assembly in lieu of traditional homerooms allowed for both staff and students to share ideas and information without strict time limits. I can remember the morning assembly lasting for hours when the situation arose to discuss, learn and listen to ideas or problems that needed to be addressed. It was truly a democracy.

Question #1B:

I really cannot think of any experiences that had any negative impact on my career or personal life choices. I know that some students had difficulty with the experience but that was not the case with me.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #2

1a: My 10-12 grade high school experience and my 5-year college experience actually had more in common than my 38 year 'teaching' high school experience.

How we registered for our courses each semester, how we managed our free time between classes, how we were mixed with various aged classmates, how we were able to interact with all aged students including the teachers throughout the day, how we were able to select nontraditional core courses and electives, how we attracted guest speakers, programs, concerts from around the country, how we held a forum every morning to start the day (that sometimes kept us there for half of the morning), are only some of the ways that our high school experience was much like college, and how we were prepared for college. The camaraderie that we had as a school community was second to none. That was the only style of education I knew, other than our traditional K-9th grade, which was forgotten after experiencing our open system at LFHS. When I started teaching high school both in a Rochester area school and the LFHS, it was then that I had to return to the traditional way of education this time on the other side of the desk. I can't really say what it would be like to teach in an open system, I probably wouldn't do well because I'm rather OCD and very structured, but I would have least enjoyed testing it out because I loved my own experience as a student in the open system. I must say you definitely need to be a flexible person to teach in an open system and I'd like to think I could be that person. In any case, I feel very lucky to have experienced the open system for the 3 years that I did.

[1b]. The negative impact I experienced with the open system is this: Somehow, I missed out on a course, if one existed in our open system, of traditional learning how to write a good paper, composition, essay, etc. Perhaps I squirmed my way out of one. That would have been a huge disadvantage for me in undergrad college, but because I was a science major most of my writing was Lab reports which are not papers. When I reached grad school it caused me a lot of stress but somehow, I managed. To this day I regret my weakness. I feel I somehow got through the cracks in my high school open system experience, and I wish I had learned to write.

I'm not sure if any of this is helpful but it's my story as a student and educator.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #3

Here is my reply to the questions you sent.

The Little Falls High Open School concept had a profound impact on me in the way I approached my education and interaction with the faculty members who taught in that system. My memory is that the teachers were accessible individuals even beyond school class-time. Casual and friendly discussions with them broke down the older structural norms and, in retrospect, made them partners and advocates in my learning. The barrier between "teacher" and "pupil" was not an impenetrable wall but seemed to mirror the open school concept that made our experience as students during those years so unique.

There was a certain amount of responsibility and maturity that was conferred upon us that allowed us to move about the halls and grounds freely. Some students treated this freedom as an easy-going time for relaxation while others developed their interests in ways that walled schools couldn't offer. Admittedly, I was a bit in both camps. I enjoyed sunny days socializing on the school's campus grounds but also found myself putting in extra time in the art room, music room and library expanding my interests beyond class-time.

The ability I learned in the Little Falls High open school system to manage my education served me well post-high school and made the transition easy when I went to college. I felt prepared and confident to explore the learning options available to me, having had the opportunity to make such choices before embarking onto higher education.

I continued being a student of not just formal schooling but of life as well, and Little Falls High School set me on that path. I personally cannot find criticism with the experience and hold only fond memories of it.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #5

1a. The concept experience forced time management on me, after backing myself into a corner more than once, that also made me aware of the fact I could do good under that pressure, instead of quitting. That also helped when taking some night courses while working. Working in management taught me NOT to make rules for everyone because of a problem with a few (easy management). This only causes more resentment, at the very least make an attempt to handle things on a singular basis not with a blanket. Another, I will call a virtue, and not that I claim fame to many, let rumors go in one ear and out the other. I would hear things from my parents about the school that were absolutely untrue. Some of them were coming from a couple teachers. The open concept I would say expanded thought and expression, which could go both ways, instead of the ho-hum desk duty.

1b. I can't think of any negative experiences that have lasted with me that I haven't turned into a positive learning tool for me. The way they handled problems starting day 1 year 2, if I remember right, just reinforced my thinking on what not to do.

In closing I hope this helped your project a bit, I do think that concept could have worked with some tweaking or at least try to study the pros and cons. Maybe if it was worked in at a slower pace say for a little more open on as you progress through the grades, I don't know, My daughter is the psychologist not me. Have a good evening and please extend a hello to Jim.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #6

Question #1 A:

Positives

- Flexible scheduling and rooms allowed for my taking many electives and graduating with many credits - allowed for many more academic and artistic experiences.
- Teachers challenged students with different teaching styles stressing more independence. This readied me for college courses.
- Students were able to find their niche - students tended to gravitate toward classrooms of their interest to “hang out” and to finish projects and network together.
- I felt better prepared for college as a result of the open classroom experience. I learned time management through trial and error. I think the teachers were learning as they went along as well.
- Teachers had more time to take students under their wing. This was a positive because it took away some of the authoritarian aura and made it easier to approach college professors because it was more natural and comfortable.
- As an aside: One of my undergraduate classes (interior design) gave us a project in which we had to design an open space classroom. It was fun - we were given catalogs of furniture and portable walls and were to design a booklet to showcase open classrooms. The class was in a lab setting at Plattsburgh State (1973) and collaborating with other students was required. I felt prepared!

Question #1 B:

Negatives

- Noise from other classroom areas was distracting.
- Intrinsic motivation was critical to a student’s success. I found that by the second half of my senior year that my academic motivation was not as strong (that could be senioritis and not attributed to the open classroom)

Looking back and looking ahead, I think that the open space school would work so well with STEM, don’t you? The combination of the new STEM style classrooms and the open space concept with teachers as mentors, guides, and as traditional teachers would be a great combination for education.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #7

Question #1 A: First and foremost, the open school experiment-as I look back on it gave a great sense of freedom. Freedom to choose what I wanted to learn and more importantly from whom. Because the academic curriculum was also structured to offer more variety of subjects in much different setting than ever before.

For example- we started each day in a forum with the entire student body and anyone could speak freely to anyone about whatever was a concern. This put all students, not just upper-class students, on the same level. So right from the start you had a better sense of community and felt included.

Also, given the right circumstances, you could leave the building to go outside to the ecology "area" or go to a different work location for a job as you got older. The system was designed to mimic what college environment might look like in my opinion IF that would be your path.

For me, because I loved athletics and science, it was a great opportunity to pursue those things. I also felt the teachers who were there enjoyed the experience of teaching in that environment as well.

Coming in as a freshman- the timing for me was perfect. I truly believe that it gave me the confidence to succeed later in college and professional school and in business especially with regards to personal relationships.

I still have fond memories with regards to the teachers I had and fellow students. For better or worse, I believe I am a better person because of the things I went through in my time there.

Question #1 B: I do not believe that the open school system had any negative impact on me personally. I do, however, believe it did not suit everyone's needs in terms of academics or development. But that I mean - some students didn't handle that sense of "freedom" in the same way. Either they felt they needed traditional structure or guidance. Perhaps they felt that the courses offered didn't fit their needs. Just like in the real world, there is no safety net- so the responsibility to their success lies within themselves and either they weren't ready to accept that or not mature enough to handle it.

The open school system put the "sink or swim" way of thinking to the test in my opinion. So perhaps for some it was a failure. But for me, it prepared me for life after school in a very positive way. I often tell my co-workers and my sons and daughters how fortunate I was to have had that experience of the open school.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #8

Question #1 A:

LFHS open school experience has had a positive impact on my life and career choices in the following ways:

- Freedom to arrange my class schedule in a way that allowed for both the core courses necessary for a NYS Regents diploma and the electives that exposed me to rewarding areas of exploration. I learned and practiced time management.
- Adding “electives” exposed me to a suite of subjects that were outside the traditional curriculum and helped to broaden my background.
- The “Open School” concept also facilitated collaboration. Conversing, listening to others’ opinions and respecting others are important skills to practice that are required throughout life. We were encouraged to learn from each other, not just the teacher.
- Choosing my courses so early in my high school years gave me the courage/ability/initiative to continue to move forward without hesitation even if it meant transferring in my junior year of college to another institution. It built self-esteem and instilled a confidence that education is a steppingstone, and the choices you must make to chart your own path.
- I was also fortunate to have parents who always encouraged me to follow a career path and pursue the foundational educational opportunities necessary to advance along that path. They were always behind me 100 % and understood how LFHS open school could prepare me for my future.

Question #1 B:

The LFHS open school concept had only positive impacts on my career and personal life choices.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #9

I think this is a great project, thanks for taking the time to pursue it.

Question 1A:

I believe that the Open School Experience was a definite positive in my life. It gave me the opportunity to make decisions that I felt were right for me, like choosing some of my classes and deciding how to spend my free time. This experience allowed me to pursue things that I enjoyed and made me even more responsible for my actions. In my junior and senior years, I had a part time job at Little Falls Hospital that had flexible hours, so I was able to finish my homework and sometimes leave early to get to work rather than sit around and not accomplish anything. I was always a student who did the homework and studied for tests, but here I developed even more self-discipline and time management skills. As a student headed to college, the program and education I received prepared me for choosing my elective courses in college, enhanced my independent spirit, and gave me the confidence I needed to pursue a degree in Medical Technology. My eyes were opened to many of the choices and decisions I would make in my adult life. I think it also led to me being an inquisitive person with a willingness and desire to tackle tasks and projects that have required me to learn new things.

Question 1B:

I cannot think of a single negative impact on my career or personal life choices, unless you call being a bit of a free spirit, progressive-minded individual a negative, which I don't.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #12

Question #1 A:

The open school experience gave me the opportunity to take classes I wouldn't have been able to fit into my schedule otherwise. The "traditional" school day was divided into 8 periods. I was on the college entrance path which meant my course options were pretty much predetermined. At most I might have been able to take one "elective" per year if it fit into one of my study hall periods. The open school day was divided into 20 modules of 20 minutes each. Classes were anywhere from 20 to 60 minutes in length and scheduling options were much more flexible. In my junior and senior years, I was able to take shorthand and typing classes as well as other business courses. After graduation I used these skills to earn spending money in college. Being able to do that gave me an increased sense of independence. I remember that when building my schedule for senior year there was an overlap between a shorthand course I wanted to take and my physics lab. In order to fit them both in I had to "negotiate" with my business teacher so she would allow me to come to her class 20 minutes late one day a week. Negotiating is a skill I've needed throughout my adult life in both work and personal matters. On a personal note... During my high school graduation ceremony, I was awarded the business prize for non-business students. I don't remember a lot of specifics about that day, but I do still remember the pride and excitement I felt when that award was announced. In my senior year I was able to take a studio art class. At a time when I was struggling with self-esteem issues, being able to tap into this creative outlet was a huge boost to my self-confidence and willingness to take chances and try new things. In all of these non-college entrance path classes I got to know and interact with many students and teachers I wouldn't have known otherwise. I believe this is where I first learned to be open to new ideas and opinions.

Question #1 B:

Hard as I try, I honestly cannot think of one negative impact the open school experience had on my career or personal life choices.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #13

Note: The response of Participant #13 is included as Vignette #3 in the body of the article.

Participant #15

I had a very positive experience. Having the relative freedom in the Open School to manage my time taught me how to create a healthy balance between work and leisure in my later life. Being responsible in large part for my educational success helped me understand I was personally responsible for attaining success in my career and life. And, the group setting in the auditorium for “homeroom” helped me understand that resolving community issues is important (leading me to actively participate in homeowner association work).

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #16

Part 1

As an individual, I was very shy and led a sheltered life. The open school system made (in) been so unprepared otherwise for the scheduling alone.

Figuring out my own schedule again made me responsible for when I was coming and going, what worked best for me and allowed me to choose what electives and requirements and went to fit them into my schedule. I had to actually be responsible for choosing the right classes so I could graduate. I really had not been responsible for anything in my life. It made me step up. I got to choose electives that I wanted that pushed me into a more creative side of myself.

Honestly, I didn't see in my experience anything detrimental to me (in) any way.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #17

Question #1

Going from a traditional High School program to the Open School program had a definite positive impact on my professional and personal choices in my life. The option to fulfill graduation requirements and electives prepared me for my college experiences. The “Mod” system was an easy switch to college courses. This system gave us the opportunity to graduate early by half a year to a whole year. I chose to graduate in January. I was involved in a peer mentoring program in High School and was a class officer. Our Principal at the time even talked me into being the “student” a video crew was documenting about the “Open School Program.” I always hoped most of it ended up on the cutting room floor.

After two years of college my focus was teaching Pre-K, eventually marriage, family, and community involvement. As my family grew, I was involved in several organizations: Parent Groups, Girl Scouts, Hospital Guild, President of Slovenian Home, American Legion, and class advisor. These all involved fundraising, various committees, and presentations.

Professionally I worked with low-income families, I taught parenting classes at the six Pre-K sites, taught in the classroom and in the Home-based program. Several years into the program I decided to go back to college to finish my Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees. Upon graduation my professional course changed a bit. I started teaching English in the BOCES Alternative High School program. This program was one of my favorites in my career. You were not only a teacher but a mentor, confidant, counselor, and friend. Seeing the success of these students made it worth all the agonizing times. Unfortunately, funding was cut for this program and another change professionally. I finished the last several years of my career teaching Remedial Reading 4-6 grade.

The Open School experience prepared me to be flexible personally and professionally through many twists and turns in life. Having the choices and experiences the last two years in High School taught me to provide choices to my children, my students, and my colleagues: Empathy.

Part #2

The only negative of the Open School experience at the time was the lack of a prepared Guidance Department to handle all the course choices for every student. I never felt they had the time to really handle all the students’ needs. Course changes were easy, what I felt was the Guidance Department wasn’t prepared to handle all of this to our best interest.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #20:

The open concept school generated a sense of excitement in my education experience. The flexibility of spaces and module time units made for a tailor made fit for the various classes needs. To this day, I have fond memories of morning auditorium announcements. I think this engendered a sense of community and was vastly superior to garbled mumbles from a classroom speaker! It also provided immediate feedback and the occasional moment of drama. I enjoyed having access to the teacher's office and felt that they were more partners in my education than Divine beings imparting their vast knowledge down from Olympus. The huge number of classes offered also made me feel like a more active participant in my education.

The problem with open concept occurs when the student involved doesn't have the self-discipline to take advantage of the myriad opportunities presented and instead abuses the freedom to slack off. Additionally, the distraction of noise pollution made it hard to stay on task oftentimes. The system provided what was equivalent to a college level experience before I was mature enough to get the full benefit. In fairness, I did poorly in actual college, so perhaps the fault was more my own.

The 1970s were such a time of political and societal upheaval that any educational institution would have had huge challenges.

Thanks for taking the time to do this study.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #23

What I vividly recall upon entering an open-space classroom is seeing the faces of my classmates instead of their backs or sides, which would have been the case with a formally structured classroom designed as rows.

I think it helped communication between the teacher and students, particularly when the movable chair/desks were arranged in a circle. There was no back row. Everyone got to see everyone else --- so it was more difficult to just slack off and not pay attention, as was the preference for some students.

The downside of an open class is distraction. Loud noises -- maintenance, shuffling from class changes, talking among students -- were often distracting. In the structured classroom with walls and rows of desks, these noises would have been less intrusive. On many days, friends would pass by an open classroom in session and wave, point, make faces, or literally shout hello. That was far less likely to happen in the closed classroom since most teachers kept the door closed.

For the teachers who embraced the change to open classrooms, it was probably a fantastic tool in which to establish a rich learning environment. For teachers mired in the past, it was probably a nightmare.

I certainly understand the concept of an open classroom and the flexibility it lends to interior architecture. Perhaps a hybrid might better suit the majority of students.

Good luck with your research.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #24

Attributes:

Self-discipline

Creativity

Confidence

Sense of community

Ability to design and pursue advanced specific studies

Joy in learning

Pride in our school

Leadership

Respect for all others in the learning community

Lifelong devotion to education

Learning to work successfully as a team member

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #25

My general comment: Open plan to me was basically a school without physical walls. I think its success, or failure, depended on the individual and his/her interests, talents, capabilities and motivation AND how teachers and the curriculum addressed those. This should be able to be accomplished with or without walls - the ultimate challenge for educators - either way.

Appendix 1 (Continued)

Participant #26

Positive Attributes:

Engaged in Relationship-based Learning/Mentoring

Diverse Opportunities to Enhance Creativity (Cooking, Poetry)

Encouraged Student Initiative

Promoted a Sense of Community

Reduced Student Stress – Comfortable Learning Environment

Flexible Schedules

10 cent Breakfast Program

Private Gym Showers

Great Assemblies and Cultural Experiences (Trips)

Less Emphasis on Grades and Traditional Achievements

Negative Attributes

Overwhelmingly Positive

Written Composition-Maybe

Appendix 2
Total Positive Attribute Ranking Scores

SCORE	ATTRIBUTE
71	Exploration and creativity opportunities (e.g., variety of electives, multiple pathways to graduate)
6ti	Time management (e.g., create own schedule)
62	Ownership and responsibility of personal success
62	Increased independent thinking and openness to change
57	Students and teachers were learning and decision-making partners (e.g, mentoring relationships, morning forum for communication & issue resolution)
56	Freedom to relax or pursue individual interests and projects
44	Development of world/global view (electives, guest speakers, special programs, trips, concerts, etc.)
37	Self-confidence and self-esteem to take on new challenges
32	Work/leisure balancing skills
31	Joy and appreciation for life-long learning
30	Community building (negotiation, collaboration and communication skills) across students (of different age groups), teachers and administration (e.g., morning forum)
27	Belief in personal ability to resolve issues and facilitate change
26	Increased understanding of non-traditional definitions of achievement
18	Opportunities for leadership (e.g., morning forum, student organizations)
16	School pride (e.g., exceptional facility and grounds, and educational experience)
15	Ability to hold part time jobs during otherwise unproductive school time
14	Empathy and respect for diversity
6	Ability to graduate high school early

Appendix 3

Top Three Attribute Ranking Results

POSITIVE ATTRIBUTE	Ranking of top three in importance (by number of participants selecting it)		
	#1*	#2	#3
Exploration and creativity opportunities (e.g., variety of electives, multiple pathways to graduate)	3	1	2
Time management (e.g., create own schedule)	3	1	1
Students and teachers were learning and decision-making partners (e.g, mentoring relationships, morning forum for communication & issue resolution)	3	-	-
Increased independent thinking and openness to change	-	4	-
Ownership and responsibility of personal success	1	1	1
Freedom to relax or pursue individual interests and projects	-	1	2
Self-confidence and self-esteem to take on new challenges	-	1	1
Increased understanding of non-traditional definitions of achievement	-	-	2
Ability to hold part time jobs during otherwise unproductive school time	1	-	-
Community building (negotiation, collaboration and communication skills) across students (of different age groups), teachers and administration (e.g., morning forum)	-	1	-
Belief in personal ability to resolve issues and facilitate change	-	1	-
Opportunities for leadership (e.g., morning forum, student organizations)	-	-	1
Joy and appreciation for life-long learning	-	-	1

* Note: One participant gave all attributes the highest (10) positive attribute ranking so their responses to Question #3 were not tallied in this table because we were unable to determine their top 3 selections..

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About The Authors

Carol Thomas Reinson:

Carol Thomas Reinson was born and raised in Little Falls, NY. She was educated in K-12th grade in the Little Falls Central School District. After high school graduation she took off 2 years to travel and earn money. Carol received degrees from Herkimer County Community College (AAS in Human Services), Utica College of Syracuse University (BS in Occupational Therapy), SUNY at New Paltz (MS in Special Education), and Syracuse University (PhD in Special Education). She was also a registered, licensed Occupational Therapist and a permanently certified Special Education Teacher (Birth-21 yrs).

Carol worked at the Utica United Cerebral Palsy Association and in several Mohawk Valley school districts and education programs including Little Falls, Dolgeville, and the Learning Ladder early in her career. She joined the faculty at The University of Scranton (A Jesuit University) and served as a tenured Associate Professor, Program Director, and Department Chair of Occupational Therapy (OT) for 25 years. Her areas of professional specialization are in early intervention and school-based practice, play-based assessment, sensory processing disorders, autism, and qualitative research methodologies as evidenced by a solid record of publications. While at the University of Scranton she had primary responsibility for national accreditation requirements including program evaluation, curriculum design, and mentorship of student research. Professor Reinson was involved in several international faculty exchange grant opportunities.

Carol and Kurt Reinson (Little Falls Class of 1968) will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary in January 2025. Her personal interests include travel, nature, gardening, swimming, poetry/storytelling, and advocating for issues of social justice. Carol was inspired to construct an historical account of the Little Falls Open School for the public record while getting ready to attend her 50th High School Reunion in Summer 2023. It occurred to her that many of her classmates had excelled throughout their lives in a variety of unusual ways. She contacted Jim Ebetino whom she had recently reconnected with on social media to see if he would like to collaborate with her on a piece about the Open School Experience in Little Falls, NY. They decided to document the Open School Experience from the perspective of the students who were educated within that framework and to ascertain if their unique high school experience had any impact on their professional and/or personal lives.

James M. Ebetino:

Born in Oswego, NY in 1954, James (Jim) Ebetino moved to Little Falls in 8th grade and attended Benton Hall. Prior to that he lived in Schenectady NY, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (where his dad taught on the military base), Kinderhook, NY and Altamont, NY.

After graduating a year early from the Little Falls High School "Open School Experience", Jim majored in Political Science and minored in Spanish at Siena College in Loudonville, NY. (He left Siena briefly mid-term to work as a Machinist Apprentice at General Electric in Schenectady NY.)

Jim received his Master's Degree in Education at Columbia University (with a specialty in Reading Learning Disabilities) and taught K-3 at the Caedmon School, a Montessori grade school, in Manhattan. He then attended St. Johns Law School where he graduated 5th in his class and became the Research Editor of the St. John's Law Review publication. Jim began working for IBM Corporation after his second year of Law School and worked for them throughout his third year (in addition to privately tutoring gymnastics, reading, and math).

Jim retired in 2018 as IBM Associate General Counsel after 37 years with IBM and he, and his wife Karen, now live outside Atlanta, Georgia. Among his accomplishments at IBM, Jim provided primary legal support for the launch the IBM personal computer and its associated software, was Division Counsel of the Consumer Division, led a large number of corporate level acquisitions and divestitures (including IBM's sale of its PC and printer businesses), served as lead lawyer in IBM's worldwide relationship with SAP Germany, and counseled IBM on cybersecurity matters.

Jim's hobbies include travel, swimming, gardening, line dancing, chess and "dabbling" in the financial markets.