

Hayground School Seeks to Promote Independent Learning Via Forum

Publication: The Southampton Press

By Colleen Reynolds Mar 22, 2011 5:00 PM



Sam Levin, a high school senior from Massachusetts, will visit the Hayground School this week to help promote the idea of students taking charge of their own education.

Levin, a senior at Monument Mountain High School, said in a 15-minute YouTube documentary to be screened on Friday as part of the program, which is part of the Hayground Forum, a community initiative of the school. "And that just doesn't make any sense to me."

Mr. Levin was unavailable for comment this week because he was camping in the Caribbean.

With the encouragement of his mother, Susan Engel, a psychology professor at Williams College who grew up in Sagaponack, he seized the opportunity to start his own school, in a sense. Rather than pour over dry textbooks, unit by unit, in inflexible 40-minute

Almost like magic, a group of failing or at-risk students gains newfound motivation and powers on to reach Eureka! moments.

By turning the tables—or, perhaps, student desks—on traditional, teacher-led lessons and granting students free rein over their learning, students can, and have, achieved such personal breakthroughs, according to proponents of The Independent Project, a student-run "school-within-a-school" philosophy.

Further, it is an idea worthy of spreading to East End schools, they say.

The project's premise is to be shared locally this week, when the Hayground School, a progressive private school in Bridgehampton, hosts Sam Levin, a 17-year-old who founded the project at his public high school in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts this past fall.

"There was a breaking point for me where it seemed like everyone around me was unhappy and, you know, I realized that my friends were spending six hours a day, 180 days a year just not being happy," Mr.

blocks of time, he and a handful of his classmates began crafting their own curriculum and system of mutual accountability.

The results, he and other proponents said, are stunning.

In an op-ed piece published in *The New York Times* on March 14, Ms. Engel, the author of "Red Flags or Red Herrings: Predicting Who Your Child Will Become," wrote, "We want young people to become independent and capable, yet we structure their days to the minute and give them few opportunities to do anything but answer multiple-choice questions, follow instructions and memorize information. We cast social interaction as an impediment to learning, yet all evidence points to the huge role it plays in their psychological development. That's why we need to rethink the very nature of high school itself."

The professor went on to describe how a student in the project who had flunked all of his previous mathematics courses spent three weeks teaching other participants about probability and is now performing admirably back with the conventional curriculum. Another student, who once pondered dropping out of school, became fascinated by history questions and wanted to pursue more.

On the flip side, Francis Schrag of Madison, Wisconsin, questioned how the experiment could work on a large scale in a letter to the editor of *The Times* published on Friday, March 18, in response to Ms. Engel's piece. "We are often captivated by education programs that appear to work wonders for a small group of self-selected students. Though often inspiring, they are more of a tease than a solution to our education woes," Ms. Schrag wrote.

Hayground School officials are looking to plant the seed of such independent learning locally.

"This is a nascent, popular movement in education that is very powerful," said Jon Snow, a Hayground founder who wears many hats at the school, including as coordinator of such forums.

His daughter, Ella Engel-Snow, also a Hayground employee—and a niece of Ms. Engel and cousin of Mr. Levin—said the goal of hosting Mr. Levin and some of his friends this week is to help promote student activism and let students realize they can effectively seize control over their education.

"We're hoping that those students that have come from their schools and taken the time to do this will then go back to their schools and bring what they've learned and kind of spread it around, and talk to their friends about it and do what Sam has done, which is pass it on to the students below them, so that it can be a continuous cycle," Ms. Engel-Snow, 23, and a former Hayground student, said.

Hayground has invited several local students and educators to participate in Friday's forum, but a three-hour follow-up session beginning at 5 p.m. on Saturday at the school at 151 Mitchells Lane is open to the public. No reservations are necessary, but there is a suggested donation fee to get in.



- 27EAST.COM QUICK LINKS
- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Hamptons News | Hamptons Real Estate | Hamptons Classified |
| Southampton News | Property Sales | Help Wanted |
| East Hampton News | Rentals | Yard Sales |
| Schools | Search | |
| Politics | Market Trends | |
| Police Report | | |

©2012, 27east.com / The Press News Group - Ph: 631-283-4100 - mailbag@27east.com