

Free School Denver Handbook

For Anyone Organizing Free School Denver

Free Schools in History Around the World

In the last century, around the globe, Free Schools (sometimes spelled “Free Skools”) have emerged with the common value of being non-hierarchical sources for education, run through decentralized networks of skill and knowledge-sharing and usually free of charge. The history of Free Schools can be traced back to the Spanish “Modern Schools” started by anarchist Francisco Ferrer in the late 1800s. The Modern School sought for education free from the control of Church or State. Many efforts for freedom in education persist today, striving to provide free, independent sources for education.

The History of Free School Denver

Free School Denver was started in 2007 as a brainchild of Olive Wells and some other folk. Meetings started being held concerning Free School the summer of 2007. The first Free School calendar came out September 2007 and was a three month calendar. There were about fifteen classes on the calendar and about a dozen of them continued through the whole calendar duration. Since then many calendars have been published, ranging in duration from one month to three months. There have been a wide variety of classes: Gardening, French, Spanish, Capoeira, Figure-Drawing, Baking, Philosophy, Post-Petroleum Technology, Positive WoMenstruation, Meditation, and many, many others. Some classes have had up to twenty students, others have had two, and others none at all!

Free School Denver has been organized and maintained with the help of countless people over the first two years. *If it was not for those who have helped coordinate classes, design calendars, make flyers, signs, & food, table for events, and in other ways contribute, Free School Denver could not exist as it has!* For the first year of Free School Denver’s existence, the bulk of the administrative and organizing work for Free School (getting the class information together from the teachers, checking the e-mail, and so on) was done by one person. In 2008, after the first year, that person stepped out of that role and another individual took on most of the job with help from one other. In 2008 the Free School web site came out and a web-site manager began the role of posting information and maintaining the web site.

Free School Denver has brought about an exciting source of learning, a vibrant network of people, and opportunities for freedom of many kinds. It has had its ups and downs, like any organization, but all in all it has given much to those involved and awaits further expansion of its great potential to facilitate free education of all kinds.

Organization Structure

Free School Denver is maintained and organized without positional hierarchy (such as a president or boss). Though there has been one or two people who have done more of the work organizing Free School, that doesn't mean they have final authority over decisions regarding Free School. In theory decisions are made by all members of the Free School collective by consensus. This, however, requires that there exists such a thing as the Free School collective, which often there has not been. In the case of no real collective, important decisions are made by those involved through small scale consensus. For the most part, however, teachers and students are the ones making decisions about Free School as they choose what to teach and learn, how it's to be taught, and all other such details. The Free School organizers' collective does reserve the right to deny a class under circumstances of extreme disagreement, but for the most part the teachers and facilitators are free to do as they wish.

When it comes to the work of Free School Denver (keeping in touch with teachers, getting out calendars, gathering classes, spreading the word, and so on) anyone and everyone is welcome to be a part of this process. Those who do contribute to this process however must communicate with the others involved so that everyone is on the same page.

In light of our history, there remains the leadership hand-off dilemma of who will step up and take the initiative to keep free school going when current person(s) decide to do other things, move or travel. We have been lucky to have a few dedicated people, but a strong collective responsibility is surely needed. When this collective is working together to do the work of organizing Free School, any individuals' work becomes easier and the collaboration of ideas enhances the project greatly.

We're looking for others to take initiative at trying new things, broaden communications among other organizers, teachers, students, and the community... and allow themselves a sense of ownership in Free School Denver. That is really the only way for Free School to continue to morph and change into what the community needs. Try new things! Be creative!

Getting Teachers' Class Information Together

Getting teachers class information is one of the biggest jobs in organizing Free School. Usually it is good to get started reminding potential teachers of the next dead line for the paper calendar three or four weeks in advance. At about two weeks 'til the deadline, send out another call for teachers. The week or two before classes are due, one usually needs to e-mail, call, or talk to possible teachers in person multiple times until all the classes' details are figured out. (There will be a teachers' contact list up online which can be used to refer to past, present, or possible future teachers.) It can be useful to keep classes' information in our e-mail archives (even if it means e-mailing it to Free School yourself), so that it is all there when it comes time to collect it and send it to all the online sites. Once the deadline has come (which can often be a second- or third-revised deadline) all the classes' information is collected into one document, which can be e-mailed to the calendar designer, the web-site manager, and copied and pasted onto the my space and face book. There are often many changes in classes during the weeks approaching the due date. Because of this, it's important to make sure the final document is

double-checked (preferably by all those involved) with the latest information before e-mailing it on.

Calendar Design

The paper calendar design has mostly been done by one artist (Sally Barto) in the past. There are other artists now, however, who would like to do some of the calendar design. All those who have expressed interest in calendar design will be marked on the contacts list as artists. Any of these people can be contacted weeks prior to the paper calendar due date to see if they would like to design the calendar for the next session. It is important to make sure, whoever the artist is, they are free the few days after the info. due-date, so that the calendar can be completed in time for distribution well before classes start. When the classes' information is sent to the artist, this should be accompanied with anything else wanted on the calendar (such as our current Mission Statement, relevant contact info., news & updates, etc.), along with instructions to clarify details about the content or layout, and avoid confusion.

In the past there have been various layouts used for the calendar: we've done a month calendar, with each day squared-off and showing classes' names & times; and we've done weekly class listings on a front cover, listing only name, place, and time -- in both cases these timetables are accompanied elsewhere by detailed class descriptions. Usually the front cover (or whatever is most visible) has contained the name "Free School Denver" as well as our mission statement and contact information. The calendars are posted on billboards and posted at shops and houses, so it's important that the top page appear readable and appealing. Much effort has also been made to keep the calendars as condensed as possible (without hindering readability) so as to reduce copy costs and paper usage.

Making Copies

Making copies is one aspect of Free School that is not free (at least not yet). Free copy connections have been reported, but none have actually been used yet. Kinkos (there's one on 17th and Welton) is 24-hours, and close to the cheapest. The DU copy center (in the DU Campus library) is by far the cheapest but it is further away and only open during the day. Copies must be made far enough in advance to allow for distribution before the classes on the calendar actually begin. For the most part, the copies have been paid for by one person up front. That person, if possible, can then be paid back by money made in fundraisers or by whatever other means. This has not always happened but it is certainly preferable.

Calendar Distribution

Once the copies are made, they need to be distributed to people, coffee shops, campuses, houses, and so on. They can be distributed by as many people as possible, but it's important that whoever commits to distributing them actually does so! -- otherwise fewer people will be aware of our classes, and attendance will be lower. Getting calendars out to more and more places is, and has been, an excellent way of making Free School accessible to more people. *A list of places to distribute to will be published soon, and will be available in the Free School folder, as well as in the e-mail account and the website.*

Changes in Classes

Changes in classes after the paper calendar has been published are always a hard thing to deal with. Once the paper calendar is printed and distributed, it is impossible to go back and make changes. Small changes could be made using white-out, and writing over a calendar which is then re-copied and re-distributed, but this doesn't affect all the calendars that have already been sent out with outdated information! Changes are far easier to make on the web site or my space. If a teacher e-mails or tells an organizer that they need to change the day, time, place etc. of their class, that person can e-mail the changes to our web-site manager, who will then put them up, and they can change it on the my space themselves by going to blog, clicking edit, and making the changes. In the past we have not put very much emphasis on turning to the web site to see class information updates before going to a class, but now Free School has decided to put more emphasis on the web site and less on the paper calendar so that problems with changes in classes will not be as prevalent. The paper calendar is now a kind of attention-getting flyer that lists some classes, but does always provide as much vital information (such as place and time) so that people will be encouraged to check the web site before going to a class, and can thereby be informed of any changes or cancellations.

Keeping in touch with teachers, students, potential teachers, and other organizers

Communication with teachers, students, and those who are potentially any of these is one of the main jobs of a Free School organizer. A goal of Free School is to connect those who are skilled or knowledgeable in a particular area with others who are interested in learning about that topic. Accordingly, organizers are needed to make links between these people. By communicating with teachers and students about how to get involved or in touch with others, connections can be made and Free School thereby achieves its goal.

E-mail has been a useful mode of communication. Nonetheless, this means someone needs to check the account with some regularity and get back to people's questions and comments. This has often been done by one person, which makes it easier to keep track of ongoing conversations. However, it's often too much work for one person, especially at the time of a new calendar coming out. It's easy for one to wear out if they have this job alone. For this reason, it can be helpful to have more than one person on the task. The difficulty with this, however, is then that communication must be continuous between those organizers checking the e-mail in so that two or three people aren't working on the same conversation and thus creating

mass confusion and duplicating work. If one person responds to a questions from someone and then another person responds (possibly differently than the first), this can create confusion for all involved. In order to reduce this mess it may be best to have each organizer follow through on whatever conversations they began (unless they have a question or need a second opinion...). And in order to keep everyone on the same page as to is in communication with whom, e-mail checkers can search the "Sent" folder of the account to see who has been in contact with previous e-mailers.

In whatever ways possible, communication with others involved in Free School is key to maintaining and enhancing Free School.

Possible Structures for Classes

Free School classes have and can take on countless different forms: in some ways these structures exhibit the nature of the topic/skill; in others they are manifest of the effort to avoid authoritarian structures; and in other ways the structures will reflect the time constraints and situations of those involved. Some classes are structured in a teacher-student orientation, with a teacher who is more experienced in the field organizing plans for the classes and such. Other classes are structured as discussion groups or work groups. These classes don't necessarily have one teacher, but there is usually one or two who are facilitators that take on the role of communicating with other participants, and with Free School organizers about calendar updates and such.

Classes can be held as often or as seldom as works for those involved. Some are one-time classes or workshops; others convene only once a month; traditionally most are weekly; others have even met three times per week. Classes can be put on the calendar as one- or two-time classes, and adjustments made later depending on the interest level. Really, there are endless possible structures to the classes! It just needs to be clear what the structure is.

Outreach

Another important part of the Free School organizer's task is to get the word out about Free School to people who might benefit from, or give to, the project. Free School has often stayed within a particular community of people who share common values and ideas. This is not necessarily a bad thing but, until we can make our dream available to all communities who could benefit from and contribute to the project, our ideal of truly free education is limited. Accordingly, it is important for Free School to always be looking out for those who might like to be involved but perhaps aren't aware of Free School. Outreach can be made via countless means. Putting calendars out at public locations is one helpful way. Another can be to hold events in public places. The web-site reaches out to a large crowd. Using the connections we all have with groups, communities, and other individuals, we can help spread the word about Free School and get others involved.

The way Free School presents itself is super-important. And the more people there are to help organize, the better objective critique of our organization we can maintain, and the more sensitive & receptive we can be to those whom we want to attract. Let's be honest: if we present ourselves as astronauts, we are going to get astronauts in Free School.

Events

Events can be a good way to spread the word about Free School, bring new energy to it, and make some money to pay for copies and other costs. There have been a variety of events put on by/for Free School in the past: concerts, potlucks, kid's shows, dance parties... Events do take work to put together though, so there have to be organizers who are up for taking this on.

Money

Although Free School is free from many obligatory monetary costs there are some costs that are required to maintain Free School. Copies, for example, must be paid for by somebody. Also some classes use supplies (food, paper...) that cost money and must be paid for by someone. Often these costs end up getting paid for by a Free School organizer or the teacher of the class that requires the supplies. While this may work to some extent, ultimately, this is an unsustainable structure as those people are bound to run out of funds. For this reason it is reasonable for classes with monetary needs to ask for a donation of whatever is needed to pay for the supplies of the class. Furthermore, the need for fundraisers comes in here. If there is more money from a fundraiser than is needed to cover copy costs, it can be given to teachers who spend their own money on Free School classes. "Free School Denver" T-shirts have been made (there are a few left) in the past that have been used to make money for Free School. Also, silk-screens have been made to benefit Free School and to be used as posters about Free School events.

Web-Site, Myspace, Facebook

As stated before, more emphasis is going to be put on the web site (and other internet sources) in order to better accommodate the frequent changes to classes, to reduce the work of putting out the paper calendar, and to create a generally more fluid structure to the time flow of the calendars. If people check the web site before going to a class, that means new classes can start in the middle of what used to be a fixed calendar session. Our Myspace account is another online place where class listings are posted and updates & announcements can be made. Most of this is posted on the "blog" section of Myspace. Currently the Facebook group for Free School is opened up to Free School Facebook friends to make posts and such.

Concerning the e-mail, Myspace and Facebook accounts: anyone who considers themselves to be organizers or helpers of Free School should take initiative to update and check these accounts. This means, explicitly, deleting junk mail (or very old e-mails that are no longer needed), placing e-mails with information into appropriate folders (as well as updating, renaming and creating new folders as needed). Frankly, it gets hectic to check an e-mail account that looks like a pack-rat grandma's garage... so lets all do a little to keep it clean, please! And if you aren't sure about something, ask around! It pays off to be persistent in this effort.

Future Potential

The idea of a Free School has infinite potential and we here in Denver strive to fulfill that potential for Free School in the future. Long term dreams/possibilities for Free School have been, and can continue, to come true with years of community work. Someday we may have a permanent centralized space for Free School. There's a possibility for Free School to become a non-profit organization, and thus create a budget for spending on classes and such. There is a particular dream of networking Free School with more diverse communities here in Denver and people who may be of a lower income, such that Free School could almost stand in for paid college. There is the potential to expand Free School to kids' classes, and activities led by kids as well. There is the possibility of creating a Graduate School branch of Free School that would be self directed but community maintained. The possibilities are endless... Now let us work together to realize these hopes for freedom of education!