

**Foreword to *Freedom and Beyond* by John Holt  
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Does freedom in education work?

The question comes from all sides. It comes from people who want to believe the answer is yes and from people who are convinced the answer is no. A mother asked me a version of it recently, as she remembered her own sons' very traditional education and admitted to curiosity about her neighbors' children, who had gone to a progressive school where, she said, "the kids never seemed to do much but lie around and stare at the walls." It comes up when people talk about getting more discipline into the schools, or when a teacher says ruefully, "I tried letting the kids choose what to do, but it didn't work – kids really need structure." It arises whether you think too much freedom is the problem in education or whether you think more freedom would be the solution.

*Freedom and Beyond* is a book for two groups: people who are trying to create a freer educational system and keep running into problems, and people who dismiss freedom as impossible or impractical and even dangerous. To both groups, John Holt is trying to say: Let's look more closely at what freedom really means and at what causes the problems that arise when we try to establish it. Let's not say, "Kids need more discipline," or "Teachers should have authority" without thinking carefully about the full possibilities of those words. Let's not say that giving kids choices doesn't work or that a particular classroom is a free classroom without looking much more closely at the situation.

*Freedom and Beyond* is a book very much of its time and, at the same time, one that resonates almost twenty-five years after its original publication. On the one hand, it is a book to be read for historical understanding, for the way it captures the central issues of the free school movement of the 1960s and 1970s and preserves them in all their complexity. Readers of this book cannot so easily dismiss the "failure" of this movement, for part of the meaning of the "beyond" in the title is about going beyond glib characterizations and explanations. On the other hand, this is a book to be read for its continued relevance. People who are trying to make changes in education are still wondering, "Why is it so difficult? Why do we so often feel frustrated when we try to make things more open, more flexible, better suited to the needs of each child?" Discussions of structure, authority, discipline, and choice are still going on, with new wrinkles, perhaps, or with new problems or issues as their impetus, but with the same basic roots. Bringing this book back into print is a way of bringing Holt's voice into today's discussions.

*Freedom and Beyond* represents a significant turning point in Holt's work. This is the first book in which he looked beyond schooling as the sole problem of education *or* as the sole solution. NO longer would Holt argue that if we could only make schools better, the problems that he and other critics had outlined would be solved. "It no longer seems to me," he writes in the introduction, "that any imaginable sum of school reforms would be enough to provide good education for everyone or even for all children. People, even

children, are educated much more by the whole society around them and the general quality of life in it than they are by what happens in schools.” And because bad schools were no longer the only problem, better schools were no longer a sufficient solution, and for the first time Holt argued that “we must look beyond the question of reforming schools and at the larger question of schools and schooling itself. Can they do all the things we ask them to do? Are they the best means of doing it? What might be other or better ways?”

All of Holt’s subsequent writing is rooted in the ideas in *Freedom and Beyond*. The vision described in the “Beyond Schooling” chapter became the axis around which his later work revolved, and his analysis in the “Schools Against Themselves” chapter of the true functions and purposes of schools foreshadows his book *Instead of Education*, which came out four years later and was a fuller treatment of this issue. The “Reading Without Schooling” chapter details how people *could* learn to read without traditional school instruction; five years later Holt founded a magazine called *Growing Without Schooling*, and began to publish stories about how children actually were learning to read outside of school. The whole notion of reading without schooling is no longer hypothetical, and in light of these stories, which could fill a book of their own, Holt’s chapter seems very prescient.

Holt did not stop at the question, “Does freedom work?” but went on to ask the even more probing question, “Does schooling work?” and specifically, does it work to help poor kids, to lessen inequality? The chapters “Schooling and Poverty” and “Deschooling and the Poor” answer with a compelling and controversial *no*. As Holt wrote to a colleague in the free school movement six years after this book was first published, “*Freedom and Beyond* is an intensively political book. I tried to make clear in the latter half of it why schooling, and things done in schools, could not alleviate or change, much less do away with, poverty, and indeed only reinforced poverty in a country.”\* With some exceptions, people in the 1990s still cling to the notion that schooling and school’s credentials are what will make a difference to poor kids. “Stay in school,” proclaim the ads, the messages, the speeches to young people whose experiences and gut feelings are telling them something else. Holt offers another perspective, and it is a perspective we need to consider.

The purpose of the *Innovators in Education* series is to bring back books that need to be brought back, books whose ideas, whose perspectives, we cannot afford to forget. Having *Freedom and Beyond* in print is not just a luxury but a necessity. As we consider the current crop of school reform proposals or think about individual children in individual classrooms, we cannot afford *not* to learn from the people who thought and experimented and wrote years ago. For those trying to make things better for children, a book that originally came out in 1972 is not just a relic of another era. It is a badly needed reminder, a lens that enables us to see where we have been. May we then use it to get where we need to go.

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\* In *A Life Worth Living: Selected Letters of John Holt*, Susannah Sheffer, ed., Ohio State University Press, 1990, p. 221.