

Season 2, Episode 2: “School is Optional”.

Podcast Link: <https://exploring-the-core-podcast.simplecast.com/episodes/s2e2>

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GREG MULLEN: Welcome to the Exploring the Core Podcast. I’m your host, Greg Mullen. In the last episode, I shared conversations with two amazing educators who are taking two different approaches toward balancing conventional schooling and self-directed learning, which I describe at the start of that episode as being two sides of the same coin. Well today I’d like to share conversations with two other amazing educators whose beliefs lean more heavily toward the self-directed learning side of that coin. And it’s that word “belief” that I want to explore a bit first because I think it’s a really important word when it comes to education.

A belief - at its core - is a statement; an idea that is accepted as true. The statement could be a fact like how a molecule is made of two or more atoms, in which case it really wouldn’t matter if we accepted the statement as true - that’s what makes a fact a fact, that’s how we know two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom create the molecule we call ‘water’. But we can just as easily accept a statement like rock music is the best, or bacon ice cream is the worst, which is where the idea of a belief becomes much more interesting. That’s because the *strength* of a belief might be different from one person to the next, and from one idea to another. But how do we know how strongly a person holds a particular belief?

The strength of a belief lies in the decisions we’re willing to make based on that belief statement. So now we have two pieces to this: a statement we accept as true, and the decisions we make based on that statement. In education, we might meet a person who says they believe in a particular pedagogy or specific teaching practice. This means that they might accept that a statement about the effectiveness of a pedagogy or practice is true, yet still be unwilling to make decisions that reflect that effectiveness - meaning, they say think it’s a good teaching practice, but are unwilling to use that practice. In this case, it might be a belief, just not a very strong one. If, instead, this person not only accepts that a teaching practice is effective and bases much of their daily teaching routine on it, the person clearly values it enough to create a learning environment based on it, and so clearly the person holds a much stronger belief in that teaching practice.

But there’s one more aspect about beliefs that we want to consider, and it’s where we get into the most interesting part about beliefs, and that’s Exceptions and Boundaries. Now I’m purposefully going to avoid using examples that are *so* specific that it becomes difficult to see the transferability of this idea. The example I’ll be using isn’t terribly divisive, it’s actually a natural phenomenon, and is a statement I think most people have not only heard, but generally accept as true. The statement is:

“What goes up, must come down.”

We know if we toss an object in the air, it will come back down to the ground, and we see this happen in a lot different ways: we throw a ball to a friend knowing it won't fly off forever into the sky; we crack an egg knowing it will drop into our frying pan; we'll even board an airplane knowing that when its flying 10,000 feet in the sky, it will return safely, back to the ground; so whether we decide to play catch with a friend, or fly on a plane, we can be pretty confident in our belief that “what goes up, must come down”.

And this belief has been pretty much indisputable for the entirety of human history - until that is we figured out how to travel beyond Earth's atmosphere. Being able to propel objects like rockets, satellites, and even things like the Mars Rover into outer space never to return again, is an example of Exceptions and Boundaries to a belief statement.

And that's a point I'd like to highlight here as I shift back to the topic of education, that even as beliefs are challenged with new ideas and new information, it isn't that the belief goes away, it just becomes a statement in which we not only agree with the statement itself, but also its Exceptions and Boundaries.

And it's the same in education, even when you've spent a lifetime making decisions around certain beliefs, there may be exceptions and boundaries that are introduced which you might want to consider, because this idea is not about proving or disproving a statement wholesale as true or not true, it's about accepting that a statement can be true *including* its exceptions and boundaries.

So with that in mind, I invite you now to think about the following statement that builds on an idea from the last episode, exploring our belief about what school and learning are. The statement is, "school is optional, learning is natural". I like it because, one, it's a fascinating coupling of school and learning as two separate things; but it also happens to be the title of a book by Ken Danford, who was nice enough to speak with me about his book and his thoughts on school and self-directed learning.

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Ken Danford is the co-founder of North Star: Self Directed Learning for Teens, in Sunderland, Massachusetts. North Star has been around since 1996, helping teenagers find ways to learn and excel outside of traditional middle school and high school. I was fun to chat with Ken about his book, “School is optional, Learning is natural”. He published this book just two years ago in 2019, and highlights his journey and insights from his twenty-plus years leading North Star. I ask Ken about a few of my own

takeaways from his book, one being about the data he had collected on those who had chosen to opt out of school and attend North Star.

KEN DANFORD: to the extent that my book is funny, which it's not, it's like, the punchline is, 'what's the first thing they do when they leave North Star, 80% of them choose a schooling setting when they're done with us. Far from coaching kids to never go to school again, like I'm the pied-piper of doom, I'm getting kids an out until they're ready for it and 80% of them do choose to either return to junior high or high school, or community college or four year university, or two-year formal training program or some official organized thing, and only 20% go off to either work for other people at ordinary jobs or entrepreneurial things or travel the world loose as nomads, or whatever they do. At most, 20% of my kids are falling into that zone, and 80% of my kids who I've coached to opt out of school are like, 'ya, well, that was good for a while, thanks Mister.'

GREG MULLEN: The impact Ken describes having is important because it speaks to the value of this statement that School is Optional, Learning is Natural, especially in the way school might benefit some but not others. Since Ken's been running North Star for more than twenty years now, he's had a lot of experience with parents of kids who want to opt-out of school, and we talked about the kinds of families who find themselves reaching out to North Star.

KEN DANFORD: I think kids who are thriving in school might consider opting-out of school if they're bored, and I think kids who are struggling and starting to fall off the track can also consider opting out, and the concern that most parents have whose kids [...] are falling off that track, parents' first normal response is 'how do we help get you back on track?' 'What can the school do, what can we change, to make school bearable for you?' 'Can we get a different teacher, class, schedule, school?' But the first response is always how do we get you to stay on the track because we have mythologized leaving the track as ruining your life, as dropping out, as becoming a ditch digger who's worthless, and we don't associate leaving school with a head start on life. Any normal, reasonable parents' response to their kids saying they hate school is to try to help them to figure out how to make school more bearable. Then, also, I think there's another fear that parents have of allowing their kids to quit, that when the going gets rough, you quit, and obviously I don't see it that way, there's a common objection, so parents in their good intentions often want to make their kids stick it out because 'you got to learn some grit, kid!'

GREG MULLEN: As I think about Ken's perspective on how opting out of school can benefit some, not all, it makes me think about how the value we place in different kinds of schools can have different purposes that benefit people who have different goals, but that we often don't realize how many different types of schools there are. I ask Ken about the kind of impact a place like North Star can have for someone who is coming to

realize that the traditional school path is just not working for them and might actually be working against them in the long run.

KEN DANFORD: Most private schools are very traditional in their approaches, they're just glorified, they're like public schooling with [subjects], four years to get good grades and get into college. Most elite private schools, most religious catholic schools or whatever, charter schools (they're not private, they're public) but they're all of the same ilk. So what you're talking about, I believe, is there are some project-based schools or fairly conventional schools but are still outside of that realm that are a little more creative; then there's a whole little wing that I'm involved in that isn't homeschooling but it's more like democratic free schools, and sudbury schools, summerhills of the world; there aren't that many of these schools, there are a tiny handful and I'm friends with these people, we're in the same universe; we're even outside the realm of what we'd call Montessori or Waldorf or Project-Based schools. Then we're dealing with the same kinds of parents, but the parents who go to these places, for the most part, have a child who is unhappy and the parents can't live with it. If you can live with public school - the big yellow bus comes and drives you away, and it's free, and you have your friends and neighbors and sports and clubs and you just go do it even though it's kind of stupid - that's the American way, that's like 80-90% of America. Then there's some percentage of kids who like the public schools or really enjoy their private schools, too, so you get some percentage of kids who really like school, look forward to it, it's good, and you get a bunch of people who just put up with it like they're supposed to; and then we get the people who are falling through the cracks and making a mess. Now some of the people, while they hate it, are still doing it well - they still go every day, they're passing, they may even be getting As and Bs, the desperate poets of the world who are getting As in school and they're kind of introverts or whatever, but they're going through the motion but they really hate it; and they make enough noise at home to force their parents [asking] how many more years of this do I have to go. I really want to be outdoors, I really want to make my art, school's not helping me, do I really have to do this, and they say it more than once and force the issue, even when their brothers and sisters might still be doing okay, right? Or even when their parents work in the school, these kids are noisy enough about it, or worse, they're harming themselves, they're anxious, they're depressed, they're losing it, or they just absolutely refuse to go to school and say you can't make me, I'm going to get an 'F' just to see what happens to me because this is so stupid. So I think the first thing that you get that brings parents along is, you do get some proactive parents who, from the beginning of age four, five, are happy with their little children and don't want to send them off to school and they investigate homeschooling and pursue it as far and as long as they can, as best they can with little homeschooling co-ops and groups, until they can't or until the kids want to go to school for junior high or high school, that's pretty common, too. But sustaining it through the high school years, or getting people to consider an alternative for those who have been in school, I think it mostly has to start with some need of 'this is really not working', and then we want to make it less scary. 'Ya, it's not working, it's not supposed to work, it's no

big deal it's not working, everybody lighten up over there'. That's what we're trying to do and then people have to be open to hearing that."

GREG MULLEN: When I think of this idea of school not working for someone, and then I think about the statement, School is optional, learning is natural, it makes me think of a common people have about what happens if a person doesn't attend *school*, how will they *learn*? It also makes me think about what happens when a student goes *from* a conventional school structure to a more self-directed one. I mean, thinking back to my own education in public schools, and I think about myself as a teenager in high school, if I were introduced to this idea that school is optional, I don't think I'd place much value in the statement, I don't imagine I would drop out of school, because, I think, at that stage of my academic career, I wouldn't know the first thing about how I would want to spend my time, or know what or how I wanted to learn, because I'd never been expected to think about learning separate from school.

So I asked Ken about the families who end up placing value in this statement that "School is optional, Learning is natural", and how the process of "unschooling a child" fits into this process of opting out of school.

KEN DANFORD: I think it's so common, right, and the key thing is, and I'd use the word, you said if you unschool a kid, and I don't think it's a transitive verb that you do to somebody else, unschooling is something the kid does or maybe the family does together, it's not something you do to somebody else - you don't unschool somebody, and so you're offering them a chance to unschool, and the kid says, 'yes, I'd like to be an unschooler', right? Then you say, well, what does that mean to you, and it means the elimination of arbitrary assignments for the most part, and to come up with things you want to do authentically, and the kid says, 'I don't know where to start', right? I just did a consultation with a kid who is being allowed to unschool, doesn't know what she really wants to do, and when she gets bored, she gets mad at her mom for being a lousy mother, and it's her mom's fault that she's bored, and I was like, 'would you stop it, you're giving unschoolers a bad name'. It's fine to not know what you want to do, it's fine to be bored, and it's fine to be frustrated, but don't get mad at your mom, or ask your mom to give you something to do and then shut up and do it. If you're going to yell at her, then do what she says, and give her the authority to help you move from your boredom, but you don't get to yell at her because she's giving you freedom and you don't know what to do with it. Ask for suggestions and take them seriously. It's two sides to the responsibility here, is what I'm getting at, right? There can be safety limits, you can't be in your room with the door shut all day, you have to get out of the house at least once a day, interact or talk with some humans every day, it may or may not be read a book every week, or have an instrument in your life, or have some creative art in your life, or nature in your life - I don't know, families have different priorities to say, 'I'm all good with getting you out of this school, but for me to sleep at night can we have a few things that are agreements so that while I ignore you I don't have to worry; and the kids

more or less agree. Now I've seen kids who won't agree and think that's just the first step of a slippery slope to being controlled by their parents, and they'd rather just go back to school if they're going to be controlled by their parents. But for the most part, you can come to - I encourage people to come to some mutual agreement for what seems safe and reasonable. And the parents can't be arbitrary, either. The parents have to be able to explain in real words what it is they're afraid of, what they need, why they need it, and even if it's a little bit irrational the kid gets to hear it and maybe once in a while indulge their parents irrationality. By the same token, the kid doesn't get to wish for everything and anything and be a spoiled brat whose parents are supposed to fund every last dream they have or leave them loose to do whatever. There's a middle-ground that's pretty wide, most people can fall into this pretty naturally of, like, how do you work out a relationship in a family situation with a fourteen or twelve year old kid who's now given the freedom to not go to school."

GREG MULLEN: I did know what Ken was getting at, and it's important as we continue exploring this idea of beliefs, the value we place in them, and the decisions we make because of them, that we think about the kinds of exceptions and boundaries that might apply to different families in different ways. It's a difficult conversation for families who have only known the conventional schooling option, and that shifting a bit of value toward this statement that School is Optional, Learning is Natural, might only result in the conversation taking place at all, and that bigger decisions - like opting out of school - will reflect a higher value and a stronger belief. This might require that their conversation approach issues of trust, authority, and responsibility for how time is spent, and how expectations might need to shift, which Ken brings up in our conversation as we got into what it means to learn how to learn, and to give students the freedom to explore interests they might not have ever realized they even had in the first place.

KEN DANFORD: Before you even start working on the relationship, for me, it's why I wrote the book, but it's the perspective that everything doesn't matter as much as we think it does, and let's focus on the right things. I'm basically saying, in a nutshell, schooling, academic learning, is irrelevant in the long term. I mean, it's interesting, everyone should want to learn and read and count - the world's a curious place and we need scientists and we need people who speak multiple languages, and I like having musicians and artists around to entertain me - we need people to be good at things and I want people to be good at things, but what we learn in school and from school, the narrow set of skill we work on incessantly in school are pretty trivial and pretty irrelevant. So let's focus not on keeping up on grade levels and focus on what's going to happen to you if you don't write book reports this year - it's letting go of all the fear and all that external stuff to be able to start with the premise that we need to have some things we care about that you want to know. We need to get some curiosity going, we need to have some reason to get up in the morning, and some things to do, people to see, places to go. What's going to float your boat and can we do that in a way that I can say yes as a parent and not feel rotten and that I'm not being dangerous or bad. So, say

yes as much as possible but it has to, it's much easier to do the unschooling thing if you absorb the confidence that when your kid is 16, 17, 18, whatever they did when they were 12 to 17, if they haven't harmed themselves irrevocably, the world's wide open to them, no one cares. It's really hard to beat this into people - no one really cares what you did in 8th and 9th grade, or 7th or 4th, or whatever. We don't really care what you did in school. Even the Harvard admissions office hardly cares what you did, let alone anybody else. Should you ever go to college... I mean, we have kids who get expelled from school with all Fs - well, not tons but on occasion - I've seen kids come through our door and within a month go to community college and get an A in economics after being expelled from school with a bad record. It may take some gumption and some self-confidence, right, or people who have really been making a mess of school and otherwise they start becoming videographers or other clever things that they do. There has to be, for the parent, some belief system, some understanding that if we chill, if my kid does nothing when they're 13 or 14 (and there's no such thing as nothing, you know what I mean by nothing), if the kid has no tangible outcomes for a while but is safe and healthy and not complaining and not feeling bad about themselves, and is enjoying their emptiness and is making some sense of it, and they're not endangering the family or the house or the dog or anybody around us, and they're not sloppy or annoying and just respectful people, then we can wait around a while to see where the inspiration comes from, and if that's not true, I think there's a role for parents to be active - I'm not talking about hands-off ignorant parenting and ignore your kid and hope they turn out okay. So there are concerns, and I think parents can do what I'm saying much less than non-parental adults. That's why North Star exists and every kid has an adviser here.

GREG MULLEN: In thinking about this phrase that also happens to be the title of Ken's book, "School is optional, learning is natural", I started to understand how this statement can be generally true for all people, and that choosing school doesn't necessarily mean you'll learn, and that opting out of school doesn't necessarily mean you won't learn. The exceptions and boundaries for this phrase are a lot more subtle than the statement 'What goes up, must come down'; so the examples won't be as contrasting as tossing your keys to a friend versus boarding an airplane or sending a satellite into space, but that the decisions you do make, based on this belief that school is optional, learning is natural, might just strengthen how you feel about the school you are already attending, or the homeschooling group you're a part of, or the unschooling environment you're choosing to explore each day; and for those that do choose school, how it might not be the school that's responsible for your learning as much as your desire, your drive, your interest in the subjects you've been offered to learn about, or whether its a school that you're attending because you don't believe school's optional, and it's the only path that will lead you to what you believe will eventually make you happy.

It's with this in mind that I'd like to re-introduce Alexis Burgess, who I mention in the previous episode, and the conversation I have with Alexis about Alcove Self-Directed

Learning Cooperative, and his experience working with students in a self-directed learning environment.

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GREG MULLEN: Alexis Burgess is the co-founder of Alcove, a Self-Directed Learning cooperative in Los Angeles, California. He had taught philosophy at Stanford for eight years before founding this cooperative in 2019. Our conversation touched on this idea that School is optional, learning is natural, particularly because the cooperative he founded did find inspiration in the work of Ken Danford and the North Star model, as well as from books like Creative Schools, by Sir Ken Robinson, and he really gets at the whole idea behind why he believes school is optional and what it was that led him to starting Alcove in the first place.

ALEXIS BURGESS: I remember reading Creative Schools, and I remember thinking, one of the things he was advocating if you recall was like having a bottom-up approach to education reform and the way that change is going to happen is just by a lot of people planting a lot of different seeds and momentum growing that way. Reading that and hearing his arguments really persuaded me that I shouldn't try to get into education reform at the government level. I should just create a small version of the thing that I like and hope that everyone else is doing the same.

GREG MULLEN: Alcove is located in Downtown L.A., with dozens of alternative public schools, charter schools, private schools, continuation schools, but few non-schooling options by comparison, and as we talked about both our experience with conventional schooling, he had some kind words for educators still teaching in the larger school system.

ALEXIS BURGESS: They get it. They kind of know implicitly what's best for the kids, but they're part of this machine and in many cases it's comforting because it's familiar but it's not as though there's this whole population of professional teachers who are deeply skeptical about the wisdom of trying to foster a sense of autonomy in our children. It's just, structures and institutions are powerful, and shape the way we live and think and everything and they're hard to change.

GREG MULLEN: I wanted to tap into the belief, the value placed in this idea that school is optional, so I asked him about his thoughts on the philosophy of Self-Directed Learning, especially given his background and education in conventional schooling and the field of Philosophy.

ALEXIS BURGESS: Well, SDL is a practice that we can help kids and families achieve or approximate. I think there's an associated philosophy to the effect that more kids than you think will thrive in this kind of practice. So there's the practice, then there's the

theory that the practice is a good idea. This reminds me, often times, when I talk to people who don't know anything about the SDL movement, and it understandably strikes them as radical, there's a confusion that happens, there's some sort of quantifier confusion, they think I'm saying that this is the way things should be for all kids - I just have no stand on that, but what seems obvious to me is that this is the way things should be for some kids and it should be available. Though, of course, when you start talking about having more options available to kids, you're immediately, you find yourself in the deep waters of the public versus charter versus private debate wars or whatever. That's delicate territory and I actually haven't thought through to the bottom of it myself to my own satisfaction. When we set up Alcove, we decided early on that we wanted to try to not have to take a stand on that controversy, the charter school controversy, by deciding not to serve as vendors for online charter schools. It put us at a disadvantage because the boutique operations like ours in the L.A. area and further afield definitely make their bread and butter that way, so we'd be asking families already enrolled in online charters to give Alcove a try on top of that; but it felt pretty clear to me in talking with friends and philosophers and other people that the charter versus public issue was really deep and really hard and if we could avoid it - fantastic. So, I think SDL is a practice, it's an activity, it's a thing you engage in but obviously there's an associated philosophy that could be put as simply as: 'this practice is better than certain alternatives for some people' and that's enough, I think that's obviously true, but I think that's enough motivation to get a project like Alcove up and running.

GREG MULLEN: What this conversation brought to mind, for me, was what happens when a family does place enough value on this statement that school is optional, learning is natural, enough to begin making decisions based on this statement, and strengthening it as a belief, so I asked Alexis about the kinds of experiences he's had with students from conventional schools who have come to Alcove when school just wasn't working for them.

ALEXIS BURGESS: We do have some cases of that, there are kids from public school or from charter schools who aren't thriving, are getting bullied, or dealing with anxiety or depression, in a way that's starting to feel unmanageable and seems to be pretty context specific to the educational environment that they're in, but we've got some, we've got a really diverse group of kids and a lot of our kids are stunningly smart. As you know, I used to teach college and interacted with a lot of bright kids from 18-22, but we've got kids at Alcove who are intellectually competitive with the best of them at ages 12 and 14. I'm constantly impressed how powerful and raw their intelligence is, at this age, especially if they've been unschooling for a while, but I think one thing we can do well is take kids who are super bright and are kind of bored in school, because there just isn't the flexibility in the system that they're in to cater to their individual strengths and interests, and provide a course in number theory for them, or a course in cyber security, or paleontology - whatever it is that really lights them up, we have the flexibility and agility to make that happen. I think we do attract kids from the public/charter space

in that situation specifically where their intellect is massive and the infrastructure isn't there to serve them adequately. I've been happy to help those kids out, but as you can imagine, there are other stories involving kids coming from the public/charter space that have more to do with anxiety and depression and I'm equally happy to serve those kids.

GREG MULLEN: As we talked about the kinds of learners that come through Alcove, one story highlights an early experience he had working with a teen that had come from a conventional schooling environment. What happened definitely involved tapping into not just the learner's interests and motivation to learn, but also really exemplified how the parent and Alexis himself as a mentor build the kind of environment that's a big part of what a self-directed learning environment provides as an alternative option from the conventional schooling model.

ALEXIS BURGESS: I had a student I was working with who's a mentee or advisee I work with and talk about their academic goals and interests, artistic projects and whatnot, whatever's on their minds, and they were taking a logic class of mine, we were three or four weeks in, and the kid was capable of getting it but something wasn't clicking. It was disappointing because I was working really hard as a teacher, mom and I knew he could get this stuff if he wanted to, we couldn't quite figure out what the disconnect was, but it was clear to us that he just wanted to stop, and we knew there was a risk involved because in a logic class like that when you're working through a textbook you can't just jump back in later and have everything be fine. If he was leaving next week he was leaving probably for good. So, we stuck to the script, this is your decision, and he stopped coming. I think it was only then when I and his mother let him know through our actions that this was really up to him that he believed it, finally, that we were serious that we were putting the control in his hands and it wasn't too long after that, he started lighting up and letting his personality show and reaching out to me for help about other stuff and guess what, two months later, suddenly he's in logic class again, no one told him to be there, no one asked him to be there, no one nudged him, we had given up, and we had some catch up to do behind the scenes but he's taking the class and he's participating which he never did before and he's getting it. So that's a mini-example, a kind of microcosm of the leap of faith that we're trying to take with these kids to see what happens. And even if he didn't come back to logic class, that would have been totally fine, too. Already, in those early weeks, there was a tangible payoff that we could see in the way he was engaging with me and with mom around taking control of his own education because he saw the proof in the pudding that we were serious about the philosophy; we weren't just talking the talk, we were letting him and us walk the walk.

GREG MULLEN: After speaking with Ken and Alexis, I can't help but wonder what other options for Self-Directed Learning are available, and perhaps more importantly, can what these other options are offering be incorporated into the more conventional schooling environment? In the next episode, I speak to a few traditional school

educators who became leaders of their own Self-Directed Learning environments, and I dig into what makes their environments so unique, especially given that they're focused on primary or elementary age learners. Tune in to the next episode for those conversations.

You can learn more about Ken Danford and North Star through their website, [North Star Teens DOT ORG](http://NorthStarTeens.DOT.ORG). Alexis Burgess at Alcove can also be reached through their own website at [Alcove Learning DOT ORG](http://AlcoveLearning.DOT.ORG).

Now as I bring this second episode to a close, I want to bring back a visual from this second season's introduction episode, where I talk about capturing a rainbow. As I continue exploring the core of who we are and how we learn, keep in mind that all of the topics and all of the people throughout this second season are all part of the environment responsible for creating that rainbow, but are not the rainbow itself. The question to ask is not how this episode provides you the complete picture, but how the ideas presented connect with the ideas in the other episodes for you to come to a conclusion that's meaningful for you and your community. I hope you're enjoying this second season and I thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.

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