

Hello and welcome to the Alpine Valley School podcast. I'm your host. Marc Gallivan, staff member and graduate of alpine Valley School. This is the 60th episode of our podcast, and you can find show notes for this episode, including links and other details at www.alpinevalley.school.com/podcast/ep,

60 for episode 60,

before we dive into this episode, let me tell you a little bit more about our school. Alpine Valley School is a private K through 12 school located in Denver, Colorado that follows a self directed democratic education model, also known as the Sudbury model. On this podcast, we discuss our model of education, share stories from day to day life at school, and interview families involved in our program about their experiences. Today's episode is the first in a special five part series featuring talks from our recent visionaries and voices event, which was part of the global self directed democratic school conference. This conference brought together leaders from self directed democratic schools across the world to share their journeys and insights into alternative education. It was a magical four days, and we were so honored to be hosting it here at Alpine Valley School. In this episode, I'm excited to share a powerful talk by Larry Welsh on the founder of alpine Valley School, Larry has been part of our school for its entire 28 year history, and has seen two of his own children, now adults, graduate from the program before founding Alpine Valley School, Larry was a history and math teacher in public schools with a degree in administration. Larry's talk focuses on a fundamental aspect of our education model, trust. He explores

how trust shapes the learning environment empowering students and creates a foundation for personal growth and responsibility, whether you're a parent considering alternative education options, an educator interested in other innovative approaches, or simply curious about self directed learning, Larry's insights offer a compelling perspective on the transformative power of trust, so without further ado, let's listen to Larry welch on as he shares his experiences and reflections on building a culture of trust at Alpine Valley School. You

all right. My name is Larry Welshman, and I am a staff member at Alpine Valley School. Can you hear me reasonably well? Is there any other reason I should have it on Mark? Okay, make sure there might be a reason. All right, so I have been a staff member at Alpine Valley since the beginning. I have some thoughts to share with you. So my late wife, Tammy, and I were both public school teachers

before we started Alpine Valley School 27 years ago.

Tammy taught youth who were from a higher socioeconomic level, and I taught youth lower down on the ladder. We worked with students who, despite being bright and creative, did not fit into the public education system, one of Tam's gifts was that she fostered and promoted trust with everyone she encountered, but especially her students. She did this by simply being present for them. This meant that she listened to them uncritically and with great empathy. This was a long time ago before the current obsession with data driven instruction and teacher evaluation through data derived from Student Assessment. Back then, both Tam and I had the freedom to be real people with our students. We had the time to listen to them and to be available to them. Tam would often say, I believe in you, and this simple phrase somehow instilled in her students, the beginnings of a trusting relationship with an adult from the system. We both stayed in the system for a long time and reflected frequently on what we were seeing in our professional lives as teachers. Back then, we were beginning to understand that the

students we taught were lacking in the area of trust. Although bright, personable, creative, they didn't trust the school system, and that colored their entire experience. So when we discovered that we are to be parents. We became rather interested in finding a school for who would become our son 30 years he's now 30 years old. So we eventually came across the Sudbury Valley School System, Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts. And I met Mimsy Sadowsky, several of you know her staff member at Sudbury Valley School, and what she said in about five minutes of talking with her hit me like a ton of bricks, and I thought that is what I'm looking for, both as an educator and as a parent, to be I sensed that her school was answering the need for young people to become autonomous and trusted with their education. When we started what would become Alpine Valley, we studied the Sudbury Valley School, and they had just written a book called The legacy of trust, and although it has been a long time since I read that book, the title is an accurate reflection of what we can create for young people in our self directed schools. Tonight, I want to examine this core idea of trust. Trust is best understood as a psychological state, a state of mind that include that includes the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations regarding the intentions or behavior of someone else. When you are in a position to trust someone or some institution, you are placing yourself in a vulnerable position of facing the risk of some kind of loss. You're facing a situation that is ambiguous. You don't know how the system or the person will react. You don't know if you will get what you need. You don't know if you might be hurt. Trust exists only when there's a positive expectation that you will get what you need or hope for whatever it is, whether it's to learn to be cared for, to be listened to, to be appreciated for your gifts, or just to be seen as a human being. Trust in oneself allows the individual to come into their own and live a life full of meaning. Trust is what holds two individuals together, friends, colleagues, and trust is what holds society, what Tam and I experienced as young teachers, way back in the late 1900s were students who had lost their trust in that system. Those children came to a place called school, naturally trusting and frankly vulnerable without laying the blame on individual teachers, who, for the most part are loving and caring. The children quickly discovered that trusting system would lead to disappointment. This loss of trust made them feel bad about themselves and caused them to fail, at least in the eyes of the system. How then does Alpine Valley promote trust? Here's an anecdote. Recently, parents have been asking us, how does the school deal with children with big emotions? And at first, I really didn't understand this question, because after being in education for 35 years, I've seen plenty of kids with big emotions over those 35 years. So I'm thinking, What is going on with this interesting question? And I think the answer will come to you as I speak further on it, on how the school handles it. When young people have big emotion at upland Valley school, they get to experience the emotion, Shocking, I know, but they get to experience it instead have to hide it, and unless the big emotions have a violent expression, they get to just sit with those emotions. They could go to part of the campus that has no people and they could be alone, or they could seek out the camaraderie of a friend or a staff member. But the question, of course, from the parent was, how does the school handle it? And ultimately, we handle it by holding space for people. I have watched each one of my staff, staff members, colleagues, take the time that was needed to just sit with kids who are experiencing those big emotions they need to know, and they do know in our school that they are not alone. We trust that the student will be okay, and the

student learns that an adult. Will stand by them, and they will thereby learn to trust themselves that it will be okay.

Early in the school's history,

I learned this lesson. This is a long time ago in the old building. I learned a lesson from my colleague, Janet, her youngest daughter, was experiencing a significant emotion, so I went over to Lisa. She ran away from me, so I follow, and she ran away from me. And this kept going on. I'm like, perplexed, and Janet finally grabs me by the arm and says, Larry, she needs to be alone right now. And she's like, Jenna says, when she needs you, she needs you, she will come to you and she will find you. And Janet was right in that moment. Janet reminded me and taught me that I needed to trust Lisa in that moment. What does this point to regarding big emotions and trust in a trust based school, first of all, in many other kinds of schools, emotions get in the way of the school's educational process.

It takes the other children off task,

causes them to stop learning, I suppose, and then the teachers have to stop teaching to deal with it. In our schools, we can take the time that's needed, and the student can have the time that is needed. Sometimes that means that my administrative duties that I'm constantly doing have to go to the back burner while I deal with, you know, and sit with a kid who's having an existential crisis, building trust takes time and effort and significant exposure to situations where situations like this will come up, Alpine Valley School and other like minded schools foster trust in other ways too young people, young people build trust by testing the environment. If a student is enrolled long enough in a school like ours, they will test the environment. They will push the limits. Sometimes these limits are their own self made limits, and sometimes they're limits imposed by the school. Meeting Law book. Young people who attend Alpine Valley school may follow their interests and do the things that they want to do. That's pretty much what our school is about. Nearly all at some point, probably unconsciously wonder, if I try to do x, will I succeed? Take throwing pottery at our school, the pottery wheel is out in the open. This means that if you're pushing yourself to do something very hard in public, and for some people, that's enough of a challenge just to do it in public and have somebody possibly see you. For others, it's just the challenge of taking a lump of clay and trying to make a dish.

Where does the trust enter in?

Where's the vulnerability? You might fail,

you might end up with a huge, watery mess, Clay all over the place, but you've learned to trust yourself. And in schools like ours, we all learn how to trust ourselves by succeeding and by failing. When children are developing, they must test limits. This is one way to learn how to trust yourself and others. As you might guess, a school full of young people from time to time, experience law breaking. Sometimes it's inadvertent. Sometimes it's calculated. The issue of food, what it is, where it can be consumed, has been a constant source of risk taking at Alpine Valley School, one time, a young man named Keenan decided to test how far he could push the rule that prohibited eating food outside the main room, so he ate easy cheese outside the main room and was written up and appeared before the Judicial Committee, Keenan admitted free to the action, and JC found guilty.

He went to trial, maintained his innocence, still he was found guilty, but Keenan tested a limit. He knew that he'd be safe in doing so because he had watched many JC cases and he knew

that he could trust the system his peers and the staff. On a day to day basis, young people are constantly faced with questions of trust between themselves and others. Let's look at an interpersonal relationships between younger children, beginning at a young age, they are working out the questions of trust between themselves. If John asks Frank to go play, and they do, John begins to learn that Frank is trustworthy. Sometimes things don't work out, though, and Frank. Blows John off and goes to play with somebody else. And as hard as that is to watch, John is now learning to look for the subtle signs that will help him know in the future whether Frank is trusted. Learning how to determine when to trust is obviously a critical skill to learn. What did Franklin Well, eventually he may learn that to be trusted requires consistent follow through. You might see at this point, yeah, well, Larry, whatever you could learn, all of this stuff in any school, can't you? And I'd say yes, but learning about trust, learning to trust, learning to be trustworthy all take years and years, and I think are best achieved with a stable group of fellows of all ages, with caring adults who are not so distracted with teaching and measuring that they can't be of service when needed. Staff at schools like ours spend a lot of time talking about friendships and issues like that with students. The personal responsibility that is the hallmark of our model requires people to engage with trust much more intensely here than in any other form of schooling. I've mentioned in passing judicial committee and school meeting, and I'd like to conclude my talk about trust this evening by focusing on the processes that contribute to the formation of trust in our school. The development of trust between people and between people and institutions is obviously heavily influenced by experience. Trusting. Being hurt, trusting again, etc. It takes time to develop trust, and it is not always simple or an easy thing to do. There are many psychological and sociological factors that influence a healthy relationship of trust. Early childhood experiences before they enter school play a huge influence in trust. Development, an overarching facet of trust building is reliability and consistency in young people's environment at schools like ours, the laws and rules are made in the school meeting a deliberative body. Every law in our law book is out in the open, out in the public. There's nothing secret about it. Every law is subject to change. From the youngest member of the community to the oldest. We all have a say in the law. A lot of the laws are about procedures. That is how the school takes official action. And for most people, this is boring, not for me, I like it,

but it's a fact fundamental to establishing institutional trust. There are no hidden power structures here. Over time, young people come to realize that they can be who they really want to be and they're not going to get in trouble for trying to do something they want to do. I'd like to think again about food. Even though we've all eaten for dozens of years, eating was restricted to the main room this school, this school had reasons for to keep the ants away, to keep mice away, keep all the food eating in one confined area. It seemed to make sense to us. About 10 years after Tina was found guilty of eating easy cheese outside the main room, Carlos, who a lot of you know this evening, Carlos was Carlos in here. Carlos. Carlos, yes, Carlos and his friend Kenzie, both alumni, decided to test the law about eating outside the main room with some amount of public fanfare. As I recall, they decided to eat cornstarch packing peanuts in the art room with ketchup. They each had their reasons for testing the law. Both felt comfortable doing it, and both were found they and a few others decided to take responsibility, to come up with a solution, though, to this age old problem. Now just so happened that at the same time we'd sent a staff member to the Circle School. Jim, you

remember this? I

suspect, yeah. Well, that staff member came back and made a full report of what she saw. And I would mention in passing, we've talked about this earlier in today's sessions, that cross pollination between our schools is very important to our practice, but to my horror, the staff member brought back the concept of free eater status. Carlos and others were intrigued. Connie and I were horrified. I. I don't know. Nonetheless, in the face of the two old staff members and the most experienced staff members at Alpine Valley, years and years of tradition codified in law, Carlos and others brought forward the idea to the school meeting. And I think it took a matter of the whole year, many meetings of esthetics and use trials and attempts, bringing it back to school, meeting and it fails and going back and forth. But eventually, they did pass this law to allow certain people with a proven track record of zero messes of any kind to eat where they please. Carlos and his fellow community members trusted in the process of the school to get what they wanted. They persevered and were tenacious during the many meetings. We all trusted one another to deliberate issues as they came up with a procedure that would balance the needs of the school and the individual. Needless to say, we've not sent any more staff members. I know

you were wondering why, over years, over the years of experience in schools like ours, students learn to trust the system. They learn to work within it to get what they need. They learn that capriciousness is not one of our fundamental values. No one can make up a wall on the spot, not even the adults, which happens so often in other school systems, capriciousness erodes trust because people feel powerless, vulnerable and not in control of their environment. Yet, even in schools that hold trust so highly, stuff happens. Last year, a younger member new to our school told another young member new to our school that is against the rules, referring to something that the other didn't want the other one to do. And I happened to be sitting in the office, and I overheard this exchange, and I inquired about it, and I said, what's going on?

So we consulted the law book and found that there was no such rule forbidding this action that the other one was quite sure could not happen. And it was eye opening. It was eye opening for both of them, both for the one just making up rules on the spot without knowing the truth, and for the other, realizing that if it isn't prohibited in the law book, it's okay to do sometimes the same kind of thing can happen to people long established in the community. I happened to notice one day that a young person was crawling through a window, and I said with great indignation, what are you doing? I'm going to write you up. Well, it turned out that even though all of us as staff were pretty sure it was a rule that you couldn't go through a window, it wasn't there's a great reminder to us all that rules have to be a bicycle meeting written down in the law, not just uttered when alleged violations do occur, the Judicial Committee processes follow, and even in this fundamental part of alpine Valley, School Trust can be fostered, stated briefly when young people participate in a rational process of seeking the truth of a situation and then following the same procedure of adjudication over and over, year after year, they learn the process can be trusted. They learn that telling the truth in a situation while difficult, is always the right thing to do, because they've been on the other side of the situation. They've served on JC, they've seen what happens with people who tell the truth, they see that they are trustworthy. When young people learn to trust others and themselves early in life, they are more likely to be trustworthy in adulthood. Imagine how different the world would be today if we all focus on trust, one, trust

between neighbors, trust between elected officials and citizens, between people of different beliefs and between world leaders. One type of schooling. Our type of schooling is a model that has shown for more than 50 years that trusting young people early in their lives, to be free and part of a self governing community fosters great trust and also a high degree of personal responsibility. Trust is not simple and it is not easy to cultivate, but it is one of the greatest gifts that we can give to each other, and doing so fosters loving and meaningful human relations. Thank you very much.

You. Thank you for listening to this powerful talk on trust in education. We hope that you found Larry's insights as inspiring and thought provoking as we did. If you'd like to learn more about our self directed democratic education model, or get in touch with Alpine Valley School, please visit our website, which is alpinevalleyschool.com There, you'll find resources, blog posts and information about our admissions process. Don't forget to subscribe to our podcast to catch all future episodes. We have more talks from the visionaries and voices event coming up in this special series, so stay tuned for those. If you have any questions or comments about the show or our school, please feel free to reach out to us at podcast@alpinevalleyschool.com or connect with us on social media, as always. Thank you for joining us. I'm Marc Gallivan. This is the Alpine Valley School podcast, and we'll be back again soon With more stories of real learning for real life. Bye!.