

## **Barker School Grants Children Full Freedom**

### **They Don't Even Have to Go To Class In Rockland Version Of British Plan**

*By Scott Webber, Staff Writer*

There's a school in Rockland County where children don't have to go to classes if they don't want to. In fact, they can do anything they want as long as they wish.

This place is called the Barker School, patterned after A.S. Neill's Summerhill School in Suffolk, England. Here matters of discipline and policy are determined in weekly school meetings where pupils, regardless of age, and teachers each have one vote.

"I'm only one vote around here," explained Headmaster Robert Barker as he swept up crumbs from a child's lunch.

#### **FIRST-NAME BASIS**

Bob, as he is called by everyone in the school community, founded the school in the fall of 1961, closely following Neill's precept, "The one commandment that every parent and teacher must obey is this: Thou shalt be on the child's side."

The Barker School, like its famed English model, is designed to make the school fit the child. Methods are unimportant, for long division is of no importance except to those who want to learn it. The theory is that the child who wants to learn long division will learn it, no matter how it is taught.

"Mabel is having a reading and writing class," Bob told a group of children who were playing one morning this week, "Anyone who wants to go is welcome to attend."

Mabel is Miss Mabel Chrystie, teacher for Kindergarten through third grade, who has a bachelor's degree from Radcliffe College, and a master's degree from Teachers College, Columbia University. Mabel is a trustee of the school which has a 5-year provisional charter from the New York State Department of Education.

#### **FAVORS CHILD'S PACE**

"A child learns better at his own pace," Barker said. "Our aim is to try to get him interested in something. Once he has discovered this interest, he can learn a lot."

For children entering the school who have had time in a public school, there is a period where they live it up, he says, "They play and do as they please, staying clear of classes."

The time they stay away from classes depends upon the amount of hostility that has accumulated against the conventional type of schooling where they are bossed by a teacher.

"We are willing to wait a long time for them," he added

Neill, in his book, "Summerhill, A Radical Approach to Child Rearing", writes: "This notion that unless a child is learning something the child is wasting time is nothing less than a curse, a curse that blinds thousands of teachers and most school inspectors."

Neill continues, "Books are the least important apparatus in the school. All that any child needs is the 3 R; the rest should be tools and clay and sports and theater and paint and freedom."

Neill's formula for success is the ability to work joyfully and to live positively, to find that role in life for which one is best suited.

"Ellen, what's the matter with you? Were you born in a barn? Close that door," shouted a 5-year old as cold crisp air greeted her.

Ellen is Mrs. Ellen Rockwell of New City, kindergarten teacher with a bachelor of science degree from Pennsylvania State Teachers College.

Ellen did as she was told and closed the door, without a word.

## **NO AUTHORITY TO FEAR**

There is no adult authority to be feared at the Barker School., no one screams when a \$25 blackboard is knocked over and smashes to pieces with a bang that shakes the house.

“It was an accident,” explained Bob when he learned what has happened.

“The function of the child is to live his own life, not the life that his anxious parent thinks he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows what is best. All this interference and guidance on the part of the adults only produces a generation of robots, a society that is carried on shabby shoulders of the scared little man., the scared-to-death conformist,” writes Neill.

Barker said suggestions he makes at weekly Friday afternoon school meetings often are voted down.

“In all matters outside if health, safely and teaching, the school is a working democracy where each child and each adult has one vote,” Barker said.

“This is the heart of the school. I taught at Summerhill and saw how beautifully real self-government, not token student councils, can work. Reason usually prevails, and it by no means always comes from the lips of adults and older children.”

This year a seventh grade was added to the kindergarten-to-sixth grade program instituted last year. Next year Bob hopes to start an eight grade program and to provide overnight sleeping facilities for children who want to stay over.



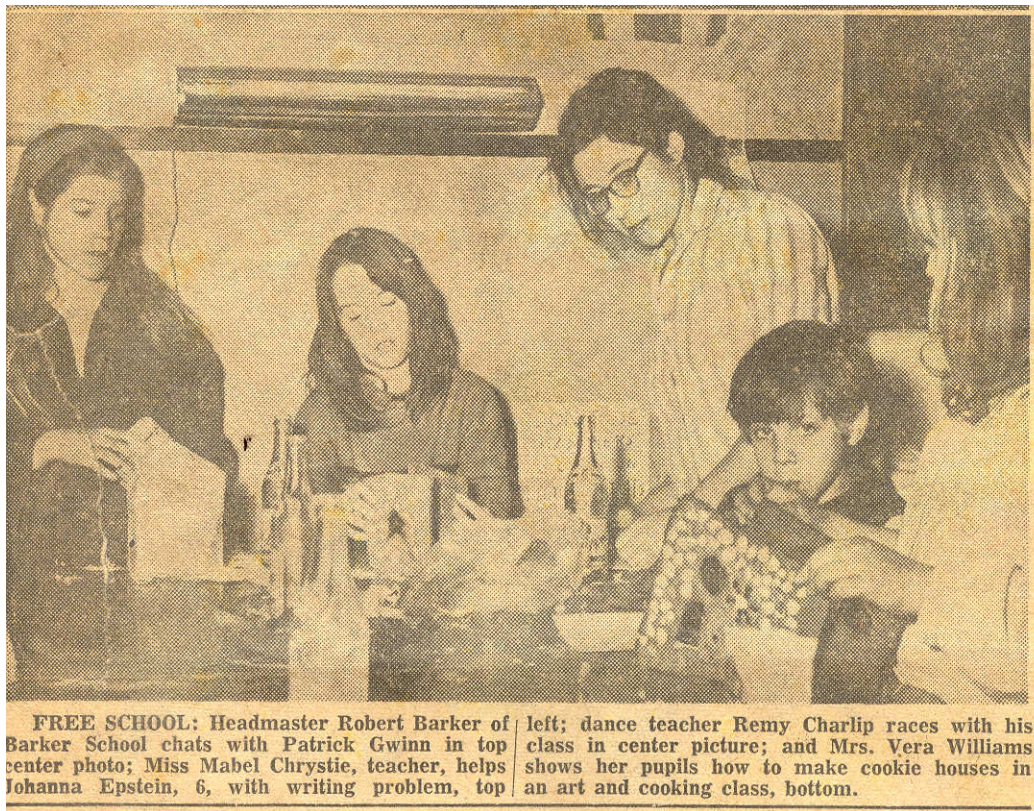
**Miss Mabel Chrystie, teacher, helps Johanna Epstein, 6, with a writing problem**



**Headmaster Robert Barker of Barker School chats with Patrick Gwinn**



**Remy Charlip races with his class**



**FREE SCHOOL:** Headmaster Robert Barker of Barker School chats with Patrick Gwinn in top center photo; Miss Mabel Chrystie, teacher, helps Johanna Epstein, 6, with writing problem, top left; dance teacher Remy Charlip races with his class in center picture; and Mrs. Vera Williams shows her pupils how to make cookie houses in an art and cooing class, bottom.

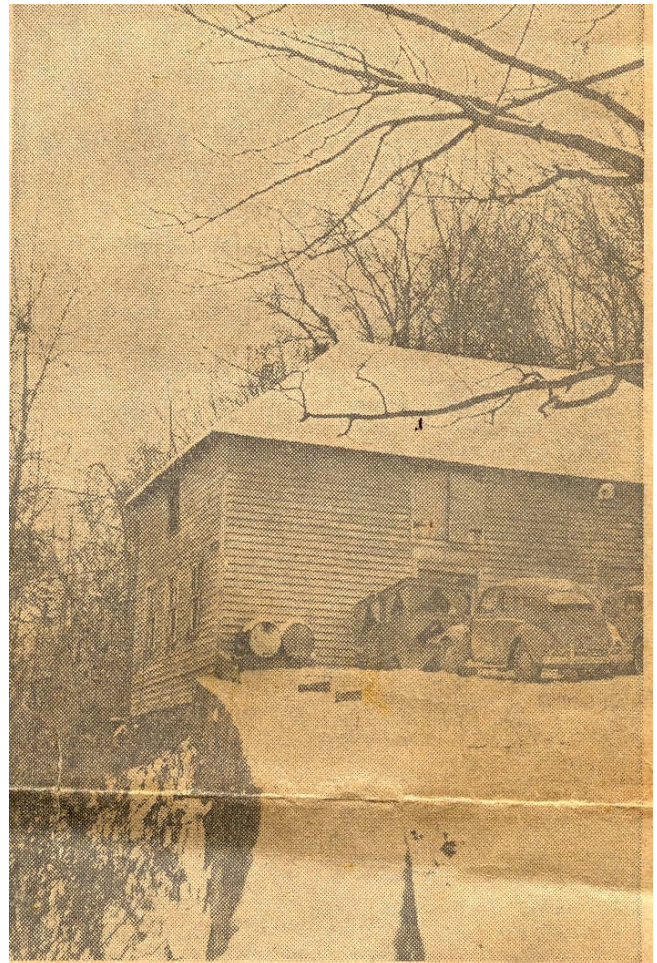
**Mrs. Vera Williams shows her pupils how to make cookie houses in an art and cooing class.**

Photo caption:

FREE SCHOOL: Headmaster Robert Barker of Barker School chats with Patrick Gwinn in top center photo; Miss Mabel Chrystie, teacher, helps Johanna Epstein, 6, with a writing problem, top left; dance teacher Remy Charlip races with his class in center picture; and Mrs. Vera Williams shows her pupils how to make cookie houses in an art and cooing class.



**Main School Building**



**HAPPY HOME:** This house, at top, and the barn, below, are on the campus of the Barker School, Stony Point. The house is used for classes, the barn for dancing lessons. (The Record photographs by Scott Webber.)

**The Barn**