



ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021



NORTHWEST DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL
REGISTERED CHARITY # 20200314
CHARITY TAX EXEMPTION # CHY22181
COMPANY # 614393

LEGAL & ADMINISTRATION

DIRECTORS & CONSULTANTS

Company Name: North West Democratic School (t/a Sligo Sudbury School)

Company registered number: 614393

Charity tax exemption number: CHY22181

Charity Regulatory Authority number: 20200314

Registered office: Milkwood Farm, Tawley, Castlegal, Co. Sligo

Board of Trustees

Gayle Nagle, Chair

Maura Duignan, Company Secretary

Nigel Coen, Treasurer

Alannah Dawson

Eve MacSearraigh, Recording Secretary

Cath Stanley, HR

Peter Symonds

Board Committees

Finance Committee: Nigel Coen, Gayle Nagle, Maura Duignan

HR Committee: Cath Stanley, Gayle Nagle, Maura Duignan

Accountant:

Burke & Associates Chartered Accountants and Registered Auditors,
45 Wine Street, Sligo F91 XV4X

Principal Bankers: AIB, Stephen St, Sligo

Solicitors: O'Hare O' Dwyer Solicitors, Greenfield Road, Sutton, D13



CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

I am grateful to our school community and to all of our individual students for another successful and enlightening year at Sligo Sudbury School. Despite the challenges of the Covid pandemic we have managed to achieve our stated aims and our school continues to grow, develop and thrive. We have continued to further establish our school as a living democratic environment where individual members pursue learning and personal development in the way that best meets their needs while participating in a community of self-governance and justice where each member's voice is equally valued and heard.

Over the past year, through our respectful conversations and interactions with each other and through delivery of workshops on consent, freedom & responsibility and empathy, we have continued to nurture a school culture of respect and responsibility. We have increased our admissions in line with projections and have balanced our student numbers across the age ranges. The resulting increase in the students in the older age ranges has provided an all-important supportive and engaging group of peers for our teenage students. We have maintained a stable, rewarding and fulfilling place of employment for our staff. We have continued to improve the quality of our conditions for staff members through increasing rates of pay and collegiate support. Our commitment to accessibility has continued with 20% of our families this year in receipt of the reduced membership rate.

We are continuing in our mission to increase our impact through the promotion of democratic education nationwide. Our first Founders Week was a great success with two democratic school start-up groups attending our school for one week to learn about what it takes to get a school off the ground and to sustain it in its formative years. The attendees were from schools in Leitrim and Dublin and both reported huge benefits from the experience.

CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

Our growing school has benefited greatly from the addition of an all weather multi-sports playing pitch this year. This space is a huge asset and is used from open to close on a daily basis for a wide variety of physical activities and ball games. We are very grateful again to our students, our wider community and our sponsors for helping us to raise the €15,000 we needed to see this dream become a reality. In addition, we are very lucky to have had a team of willing and competent parents who worked tirelessly over the summer to build a warm, bright and enticing space for Art activities at school.

We look forward to settling into the coming year at school and putting the months of “zoom school” behind us. While this was an interesting learning experience for all of us, it could not compare to the richness and diversity of our “in person” interactions at school.

We have an exciting few years ahead of us as we continue to increase our impact and upscale our project. We have acquired a parcel of land to our rear and intend to acquire another piece of land with a dwelling on an adjacent site. We are working on school extension plans and overall site development plans so that we can grow our school. Our new larger premises will enable us to meet the ever increasing demand for democratic school places for children and young people living both locally and further afield. We look forward, with great hope and confidence, to continuing our important work and to fulfil our mission of building a landmark, pioneering institute of self-directed, democratic education on Ireland's North-West coast.

Gayle Nagle

ABOUT US

MISSION

Sligo Sudbury School's mission is to provide children with rich learning opportunities in an environment of trust and reciprocal respect which enables them to find meaning, purpose and passion in their authentic learning path.

VISION

Our vision is a world where all children have access to a self-directed model of education that values the voice and choice of each individual, empowering them to be agents in their own lives.



FREEDOM

TRUST

RESPECT

RESPONSIBILITY

ABOUT US

PURPOSE

The main object for which North West Democratic School was established is the provision of Democratic Education in the North West of Ireland, particularly Sligo and West Leitrim, for the benefit of young people, their families and the wider community.

Specifically, our goal is to establish and maintain a living democratic environment where individual members pursue learning and personal development in the way that best meets their needs while participating in a community of self-governance and justice where each member's voice is equally valued and heard.

KEY GOALS 2020-2021

- Maintain community wellbeing through the pandemic
- Nurture a culture of respect, trust, & responsibility
- Increase admissions sustainably
- Provide stable employment for existing staff
- Hire additional staff as admissions grow to maintain a student:staff ratio of 1:15
- Increase size of site to plan for growth
- Provide 20% of membership at reduced rate
- Fundraising Goal 15,000 euro

ABOUT US

ORIGINS

North West Democratic School was founded in 2017 by a small group of committed parents and educators who perceived a real need for viable alternatives to the mainstream model of education in our society. The motivating factors that brought us to this conclusion went beyond reservations about rigid curricula, lack of non-secular options, and overcrowded classrooms. Rather, through our experiences as mainstream educators, homeschool educators and parents, we saw a need to return to more genuinely child-centred approaches to learning, to a model of education where children could learn to become responsible adults by experiencing from their earliest years the consideration and expectation of equal membership in society, with a right to an opinion and a right to be heard.

A standardised model can not meet the learning, social and emotional needs of all children, nor their need for agency in their lives. It can not adequately cater for all types of learners and diversity of learner needs. Instead it creates a tiered system where some children succeed while others fail. This “failure” conditions children into a self-perception that is not based on their ability but rather on how they measure against an arbitrary standard. The effects of this conditioning are long-lasting and can be devastating to a child’s wellbeing, mental health, confidence, and intellectual development.

We aim to provide an educational culture which gives equal status to all pursuits, and tailors learning and personal development to individual needs. We wish to foster students’ innate capacity to direct their own learning, and support them with the resources necessary to meet their self-expressed needs and personal academic goals.



OUR ACTIVITIES

OPERATING CONTEXT

We are registered with the Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS) of TUSLA, Child and Family Agency - our school is a registered Independent school through this government agency. There is currently no government funding available to our school.

It is our express policy to facilitate integration with the wider community through co-operation in teaching, learning, modelling, and other experiences as may be required. We are committed to providing equality of access to education through recognizing the different needs, abilities and choices in education, fostering self-confidence in young people, and nurturing an attitude to learning that is life-long and self-motivated. We have developed collaborative relationships with Third Level Institutions of Education, local cultural institutions and local businesses.

We are founding members of the national Umbrella group, Democratic Education Ireland. Through this group we intend to effect national change, educate educators, policy makers and others on democratic education principles and the benefits to this model of education on our young people and society as a whole.

OUR ACTIVITIES

WHO BENEFITS?

The primary beneficiaries of our organisation are:

1. **The children and families** from the Sligo Leitrim area (and those who move here) who value the self-directed model of education and the culture of personal autonomy, personal responsibility, and agency that it provides. Families make this choice for a variety of reasons, some as a philosophical choice, and others because they are seeking an alternative to a system that does not meet their child's needs. The students that attend our school come from a wide range of backgrounds and geographical areas.
2. The **staff members** who work at our school, have the opportunity to do meaningful work and have the freedom to use their skills to enhance and individualise children's educational experience.
3. **Students of early years education**, primary teaching, and secondary teaching who carry out internships at our school to learn about democracy in education, child-led learning, and self-directed education.
4. **Mainstream schools and Dept of Education** directly benefit from the relief we provide to children whose needs are not met by mainstream educational settings. The cost of educating these children is borne directly by their families and our school, relieving the exchequer of this cost.
5. **Fledgling Democratic schools and start-up groups** in Ireland benefit from our experience through our *Founders Week programme* where members of other schools spend a week with us to understand how the theory works in practise. We also provide ongoing practical support to new schools thus increasing our impact and effecting change on a national level.

OUR ACTIVITIES

WHAT DO WE DO?

North West Democratic School (Sligo Sudbury School) provides a democratically governed educational environment which is child-led and self-directed. We provide children with an environment that is conducive to gaining knowledge, skills and experience, together with the autonomy and support to decide how to engage with this environment in the best way for them.

We provide children with the opportunity to be active citizens in their own lives from an early age, and to deeply understand the freedoms that come with responsibility, self-awareness and equanimity.

We encourage co-operation, empathy, dialogue, diversity, creativity and change rather than competition, one-upmanship, obedience, monoculture, formulaic approaches and the safety of routine.

We show children that ultimately their lives are their own.





GOVERNANCE

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

North West Democratic School is a Company Limited by Guarantee and a Registered Charity.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

There are 7 members on the Board of Trustees (BOT). Voting takes place annually and additional members can be nominated by an existing Trustee, with 30% of current members obliged to resign. These members may re-propose themselves and be re-appointed by majority vote. There is no term limit for Trustees at this time.

The Board of Trustees is legally responsible for the oversight of the school's financial and employment practices. It plays an important role in holding the vision and ethos of the School, staff review, fundraising, accounts, sustaining the business into the future and adhering to laws relating to Charitable Trusts.

Internally, the Board of Trustees ensures that Sligo Sudbury School practices and policies are in-line with the bylaws, mission, and core principles of the school and are up to date with government guidelines and the general laws of the land. It consults external advisors as necessary. The Board of Trustees makes decisions by consensus.

GOVERNANCE

FUNDRAISING

Our Fundraising activities this year have been limited to some extent by the covid-19 pandemic restrictions in place. Despite these limitations we have been able to raise additional funds through summer camps, and online fundraising campaigns through Global Giving and GoFundMe.

GOVERNANCE STANDARDS

North West Democratic School is in compliance with the Charities Governance Code and reviews this compliance annually.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE Accomplishments

Some of the goals we achieved this year

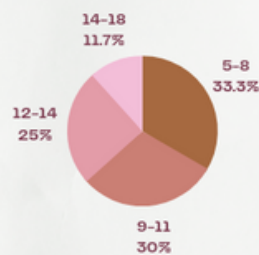
SIXTY ONE

The number of students enrolled at Sligo Sudbury School at 31/8/2021. This is a 400% increase since 2018.



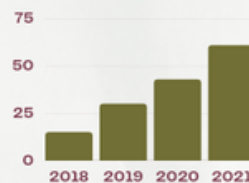
INCLUSION

We ensure accessibility to all families, offering subsidised membership through our social inclusion policy.



Age Ranges

Our students range in age from 5-16 years balanced across all age ranges



Enrolment Trends

We have maintained steady sustainable growth in admissions

Mental Health & Wellbeing

We support emotional development through giving children the language and opportunity to discuss themes such as Consent, Empathy, and Freedom & Responsibility openly in a safe environment.

15:1

Our student to staff ratio is much lower than mainstream environments, allowing for deeper relationships that have time to develop and mature as children grow.

Growth & Development

Expanding our site will be key to our growth into the future.



400%

GROWTH IN ADMISSIONS

Our enrolments have increased steadily year on year, growing from 15 students in 2018 to 61 students in 2021.

>30%

2022 PROJECTED ADMISSIONS

Interest in the self-directed model and applications for enrolment continue to increase. 2022 projections see school numbers rising to 85 students next year.

GOALS & ASPIRATIONS

ACHIEVEMENTS

Like all other schools, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the operations of the school during the year. We offered online classes and activity groups via Zoom, and while screen-based interactions are no substitute for the enriching personal interactions that play such a huge role in our community, it was important to keep that community together as much as possible, and feedback from students and parents alike was positive on this. We worked together with staff and families to overcome the various challenges, achieving our main objectives for the year, and ensuring continuity and viability of the school.

Objective 1: Admissions

- Our aim was to grow admissions to 60 students by September 2021.
- Applications for admission exceeded this number and 61 students were successfully enrolled for September 2021.
- This is on par with previous years and in keeping with our goal of sustainable, careful growth.
- A major challenge has been the covid pandemic and its financial impact on families and possibility of relocation.
- The school community benefitted from the growth of our school population, adding variety and energy while managing a stable culture.

GOALS & ASPIRATIONS

ACHIEVEMENTS

Objective 2: Fundraising

- Our aim was to raise 15,000 euro in additional funds to support specific activities.
- We achieved approximately 50% of this amount in online donations.
- The major challenge in completing this objective was the covid restrictions as many fundraising activities were not possible.
- The students, staff, and parents of the school community benefitted.

Objective 3: Raise awareness and promote democratic education

- Our aim was to raise awareness of democratic education and to promote its understanding and development locally and nationally.
- We achieved success in this area through developing collaborative relationships with educational institutions for purposes of research in education, through supporting new startup groups by hosting Founder's Week and through maintaining an active communication with supporters and the public through newsletter, social media, and traditional media.
- We are more established locally and have noted that we are approached by media and other collaborators more frequently.
- Challenges in completing this objective included challenging the status quo and mainstream narratives.
- The general public, researchers and students of education, start-up groups, and our own community benefitted.

GOALS & ASPIRATIONS

ACHIEVEMENTS

Objective 4: Develop school facilities and resources

- Our aim was to improve school facilities particularly in the area of sports, and to make provision for further expansion in the future.
- We achieved the addition of a Multi-Use Astropitch and a dedicated space for Art.
- This is the first major addition to the school since opening
- Funding was a challenge.
- The students and staff benefitted through increased opportunities for all-weather sports.

Objective 5: Community Wellbeing

- Our aim was to maintain a strong sense of community and continuity through the pandemic.
- We successfully transitioned to an online platform and maintained strong connections via e-learning, interactive chat sessions. Staff upskilled in empathy training with Narrative 4 Story Exchange.
- School closures represented a major setback to our community as we rely on peer-to-peer connection, a sense of community, and a dynamic learning environment that is not contrived.
- Technology presented a significant challenge. Staff drew considerably on personal resources to ensure continuity of connection.
- The students and staff benefitted from our successful efforts.



OUR STORIES

STUDENTS, STAFF, & TRUSTEES

Since first conceiving the idea of starting a democratic school in the West of Ireland, our focus has always been to put learning back into the hands of the learners, to make education meaningful and relevant to the lives of each learner and educator.

At Sligo Sudbury School we are a team. Every individual - whether student, staff, volunteer, or family member - plays an important role. We believe that the family, peers, and the wider community all contribute in support of a child's learning and development. Collaboration and mutual support helps everybody succeed.

The following stories provide a glimpse into some of the lives that have been transformed by democratic education.

VASILISA

STUDENT

Vasilisa joined Sligo Sudbury in March 2021. "We moved to Sligo from Dublin to join Sligo Sudbury School. We believe self-directed learning is much better suited for the needs of today's world when all possible knowledge is easily accessible online. And we're very happy with how it's going so far – our daughter (14 y.o.) is the happiest she has ever been (and we were going to very good traditional schools before). At first she wasn't keen on moving from Dublin and leaving her friends but agreed to try the new school for 6 months. But in just a few weeks she asked to drop her off earlier in the morning and pick up later in the afternoon and we have never talked about changing the school again. The community is vibrant and we're looking forward to the next months and years in Sligo Sudbury."

Kostantin and Katarina Gorsky



CLARIANA

STUDENT

Clariana was among our very first students, joining Sligo Sudbury in September 2018. Now a seasoned expert in self direction, Clari says she loves Sudbury because: " students have the freedom to choose what, how and when they want to learn. Also the JC (Justice Committee) system where students and staff resolve problems together is a much fairer way to deal with things. It's really good."



ISABEL

STAFF

Izzy joined Sligo Sudbury in 2018 on the Tus job scheme and was employed directly from 2019. She is an invaluable member of our community as she brings direct experience of Democratic Schooling in her native Germany. Izzy has an MA in Sociology and a keen interest in beekeeping, sustainable horticulture and permaculture. On her decision to join Sligo Sudbury she says: "After seeing the struggles that children have within the school system in Ireland, suffering from anxiety and decreasing mental health, with very limited alternatives to education being available, I am delighted to have joined Sligo Sudbury School. I am looking forward to being part of a team to create a respectful environment for children to thrive, direct their own learning and hopefully reach their full potential. Democratic education has always been something that I was intrigued by and after seeing the dedication, passion and commitment of the founders of Sligo Sudbury School, I am certain that it will have an important role to play in the future of education in Ireland."



JACK, TOM, SEAN & OSCAR

STUDENTS

2 of these students were in our first cohort and 2 have joined our school since then. They have come from a variety of educational experiences including homeschool, gaelscoil, primary and secondary school and all are thriving now in the democratic, self-directed learning environment. The freedom and respect afforded to teenagers impacts positively on their mental health, their sense of self-worth, and their ability to develop autonomy, mastery and purpose.

Oscar: "It's a nicer atmosphere and a much smaller community of people."

Sean: "It's incredible! It allows me to explore the things I enjoy doing."

Jack: "Before, I didn't really enjoy school but when I came here I felt accepted and my mental health in general really improved."



KIM

STAFF MEMBER

Kim joined Sligo Sudbury initially on the Tus job scheme in September 2018. In 2019 Kim was employed on a part time contract and has continued to develop her role as staff member since. Kim is very interested in environmental and social activism, and founded and lived in intentional communities. In 2014 she founded an independent publishing library dedicated to anti-racist, feminist and LGBTQI+ themes which is a community-minded and educational project.

Kim graduated with a BA in Philosophy and Linguistics from Manchester University and studied Spanish language at the Autonomous University of Mexico. Kim is a self-taught illustrator and photographer and believes strongly in self-directed learning and horizontal organizing structures - values that make Sudbury an obvious choice!

Of her experience as staff member Kim says: "It is a privilege to be helping students find out who they truly are and not imposing expectations of what they should become. My experiences working with teenagers here compared to other environments is vastly different. Here it is possible to actually connect with them."







FUTURE PLANS

OUR VISION

Our organisation is in a growth phase and we have identified a need to expand our site and facilities to meet our current and future growth, and to deliver our vision of increasing awareness and practical knowledge of this model of education locally, nationally and globally.

We aim to develop the whole site by working with relevant local government officers and architects to create an innovative, functional, creative and aesthetic space which will maximise the potential for the wide range of learning experiences of our school members.

We will establish an international centre of learning to benefit young people and their families now and into the future and also be a pioneering institute for self-directed learning and its application. Parents, educators, researchers, policy makers and other interested parties can visit us to gain experience and knowledge of this model of education to enable future generations and societies to thrive.

Our project will give more children the opportunity to enjoy a non-coercive educational environment that is flexible and adaptable enough to accommodate each learner's needs in the way that is most suitable for them, where children can learn and be respected in their choices in order to develop organically and coherently without internal or external conflict.

FUTURE PLANS

RISKS

We perceive the risks to delivering the project and our provision for these as follows:

- **Obstacles to fundraising**
 - The commitment of our current member families is very strong and we have been able to raise a significant amount of funds in a relatively short space of time. Our support base has grown and we anticipate our success to date will inspire confidence in new investors.
- **Attrition, either due to external or internal circumstances**
 - Growth over these first 3 years of operations has been consistent and projections for the future confirm this pattern. We are confident that there is increasing demand for this service.
- **Mainstream education adapting to such an extent that our market no longer exists**
 - We continue to receive an increasing amount of correspondence from people working in education who are dissatisfied with the mainstream system and are seeking out alternatives and wish to come to our school to learn about the model.
- **Difficulties or delays with school development plans.**
 - The commitment of our staff and Board of Trustees is very strong. We adapted well to the recent disruptions in the economy and school schedule, and have proven ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances. We have planned the expansion on a phased basis to minimise the risk of disruption to operations.



HUMAN RESOURCES

VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF

Average number of volunteers: 2

We have occasional parent volunteers delivering courses

Average number of full-time employees: 0

Average number of part-time employees: 9

To maximise the variety of staff members and a broad skillbase all staff are hired on part-time contracts of 20-28 hours weekly.

Staff Members during 2020-2021:

Gayle Nagle

Maura Duignan

Isabel Kuroczka

Ciara Barrett

Kim Kennedy

Krzysiek Dabek

Conall O Fiannachta

Helena Devanney

Caroline Jepson



DONORS AND BENEFACTORS

THANK YOU

None of the work we do would be possible without the help and support of private donors, benefactors and philanthropists. This generosity has enabled us to build an all-weather Multi-Use Games Area, a dedicated Art Space, and to purchase additional land to expand the school next year.

Our thanks to all of our financial contributors, in particular to Beconsfield Properties, and the Nagle Family Foundation for their support and encouragement, and to the many other generous donors who wish to remain anonymous.

Thanks also to the many private individuals and small businesses who have supported our raffles and fundraisers with donations and contributions, and to the loyal subscribers who have maintained monthly donations throughout the year. We salute you! Your support means more to us than you know.

TREASURER'S STATEMENT

GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT

2020-2021 was another successful year financially for Sligo Sudbury School, despite the obvious challenges of Covid-19 and in recognition of the difficulties it posed to our community, we were in a position to provide modest financial assistance to families where this was needed during the year. Our financial performance, as indicated by the Financial Summary over, continues to improve from year to year, supported by a growing public interest in self-directed learning. As ever, we are heavily reliant on our fee income, fundraising and philanthropy to keep the school running, and the amazing support of our families, donors and benefactors throughout the 2020-2021 school year has been invaluable. The Board of Trustees is committed to safe and prudent management of the school's finances and to growing the school safely, and the acquisition of additional land to support that growth is a welcome development for the future. With a consistent growth in student numbers since opening in 2018 which is expected to continue upward, the school will need greater space and facilities for the growing student body, and our fundraising capability will be a fundamental measure of our success in the years to come.

FINANCIAL SUMMARY

2020 - 2021

INCOME	EUROS
Income from Memberships:	86,889.00
Income from Fundraising:	7,868.00
Income from Donations:	151,985.00
Income from other sources:	2,798.00
Government Grants	27,278.00
TOTAL INCOME	276,818.00
EXPENDITURE	
Expenditure on Salaries and Wages:	75,364.00
Other expenditure	41,433.00
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	116,797.00
INTEREST	
Interest Payable	1,229.00
Surplus / Deficit for the period:	158,792.00
ASSETS & LIABILITIES	
Cash at Hand	115,193.00
Other Assets	123,757.00
TOTAL ASSETS	238,950.00
TOTAL LIABILITIES	32,860.00
Capital Items purchased in current period:	123,757.00

Accounts prepared by:

Burke & Associates Chartered Accountants and Registered Auditors
45 Wine Street, Sligo F91 XV4X

Chairperson:

Date:

Treasurer:

Date:

