

Case Study: Monday Homeschool Co-operative

This case study is based on a telephone interview with Andrew who with his two children is part of the Monday Homeschool Co-operative, an eclectic group of secular homeschoolers who have come together to create a vibrant, non-coercive learning community and to share skills and resources. The group does not seek to cover specific academic skills but rather offer electives that can't easily be done at home as individual families.



The cooperative began approximately a decade ago as a writing group involving 5 or 6 homeschool families. Over the time it has grown in size and complexity, gradually including more families and adding, for example, Spanish language instruction. Today the co-op rents a Quaker meetinghouse every Monday throughout the year to accommodate its 25 families and offer instructional activities including 40 classes each week for ages 1 to 17 ranging from Constructing Miniature Treehouses, Religion, Hand Quilting, Art & Poetry, Computer Science, Capitalism, Weather, Small Business, Ichthyology, Teen Topics, Storytime, and more.

The co-op has a minimal web presence, one public page that is hard to find and a private intranet for co-op members. In reality, the co-op does no active publicity. Through a network of friends and acquaintances, people are drawn together for a variety of reasons including the diverse opportunities for the kids and the support of a community of homeschoolers. Families contribute \$20 per week to cover the costs of space rental, insurance, a shared snack, and some supplies.

Originally, the co-op was comprised of families that knew each other, so decisions were made informally by mutual agreement. Eventually, the idea of working by consensus came into play. As recently as 2 years ago a committee structure was put in place to divide the workload, with major decisions being brought back to the whole group for consensus or, on occasion, a vote. However, these approaches were felt to be unsatisfactory. People were getting burned out with the process.

Someone in the group had experience with using sociocracy in a cohousing group and suggested it as a model for self-governance and decision making. This gained interest and 4-5 people went

through the *Sociocracy for All* (SoFA) training offered by Jerry Koch-Gonzalez and hosted by the Pioneer Valley Cohousing Community.

Immediately, the co-op members appreciated the “lower bar” of making decisions by consent rather than consensus. Consent tests people’s tolerance for a proposal while consensus seemed to require that everyone agree that it was a good idea before going ahead. Sociocracy felt like a better fit but still had the value of making sure every voice is heard and every person has a part in the decision.

One of the first implications of going with sociocracy was to rename the committees as “circles” and to empower the circles to make decisions within their domain.

The co-op is still early in its application of sociocracy. The all co-op monthly meetings have turned to information sharing and community building activities instead of decisions by the whole. They recently did their first sociocratic rounds during an asynchronous meeting on Slack (the online collaboration tool) and Andrew reports that it was great fun. However, using Slack for circle meetings is mixed, with one circle doing well but others feeling challenged by the technology. The group is also trying to work out how to log decisions and communicate these to the whole co-op. As a sign of their transitional state, there is a call for an appeal process for decisions made in the circles to be overridden by the body as a whole. How this will be resolved is not yet clear.

Participants are finding some early benefits. While they are learning “to dance a new dance” and there is some confusion about the mechanics, people in the circles feel more clear in their roles and responsibilities. There is also relief that “they don’t have to worry about that decision.” Not everyone has to decide when to have the potluck dinner.

The folks in the Monday Homeschool Co-operative appear to be on their way to a full implementation of sociocracy. They are aware of the need for guidance and for more practice with the method, to build muscle memory. Andrew reports that this year has been “super smooth.” He anticipates that the model will be tested as challenges come up and things are more difficult.

In general, Andrew is confident that they are on a good path. For him, sociocracy is a most effective means for people to have an equal voice in an organization; in a way that provides an efficient structure for decision-making. He is sure that this approach is compatible with homeschooling in general. In his experience, homegrown collaboratives tend to be run by one or two highly focused people, a model that is efficient but ultimately unstable since these people are not always the easiest to get along with. He feels that sociocracy releases much of the same energy but within a more sustainable and reasonably efficient structure.