

# Alternative in Action 2014-2015

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This report illustrates some the ways that Churchill students, staff and families put our alternative education philosophy into practice in 2014-2015. Input for this report was provided by the Churchill community through an online form that was sent out using the weekly churchillschoolnews email newsletter, with additional information taken from our website (<http://www.churchillalternative.com/>) , Facebook, and Twitter account.

Many of the things that make Churchill an alternative school can also be found at non-alternative schools. What makes alternative schools like Churchill different is that these activities, practices, and events, are part of an overall intent to create and sustain a learning community based on a philosophy of how children learn. Although all good schools include some of what is described here, at alternative schools like Churchill there is a constant effort to embrace initiatives that reflect the alternative school philosophy, and an ongoing commitment to work together as a whole community to see that these initiatives succeed.

The 2014-2015 school year included many regular activities and events that have been a part of the Churchill experience for many years (e.g., the whole-school sharings, the Kindergarten Medieval Feast, the Winter Walk) and saw some new innovations, such as Tree families and Alternative Sports Days. 2014-15 was also the 10th anniversary of School of Rock. The regular activities and special events described in the report are organized around the seven core tenets of Churchill's philosophy, with each section describing some of the things that exemplified a particular tenet during the school year.

**Tenet #1: Cooperation and teamwork are emphasized instead of competition in all aspects of the school. The core belief is that children who are motivated from within, instead of by rewards will become lifelong learners, eager to take on challenges'**

Churchill Alternative is safe, inclusive, and welcoming. There is no competition for marks, for prizes, or for attention. Instead the emphasis is on cooperation, working together, and valuing everyone's contributions. Students are motivated by curiosity and the natural desire to learn.

*Examples of Tenet 1: Non-competition and Intrinsic Motivation*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• School of Rock – no tryouts, no solos</li><li>• No tryouts for athletics and clubs</li><li>• Few grades or marks</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Non-competitive Fundraisers</li><li>• Grades on report cards are optional</li><li>• Alternative Sports Days</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Whole-school sharings</li><li>• No awards or prizes</li><li>• School council run on consensus basis</li></ul> |
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*"I like School of Rock because anyone can join. It's really good because you get to sing songs that you really like, with your friends." - Student Kenny Hammond, quoted in Kitchissippi Times*



*Students gearing up for SOR 10 (photo: Kate Settle)*

In its 10th year, **Churchill School of Rock** (SOR) provides a striking example of the open and supportive environment at Churchill. For this school choir there are no tryouts and no solos – the senior choir works together with dedicated teachers and parents, and includes contributions from the Churchill Ukulele club and Strings club. SOR has become a major school and community event, with performances at Nepean High School and Westfest, with former students participating and attending. School of Rock exemplifies many aspects of the Churchill philosophy - cooperation among children of many ages, innovative and child-directed approaches to learning, and community involvement are all part of what SOR is all about.

Churchill students participate in many **community-oriented and global fundraising activities**, but these are all non-competitive. Activities in support of The Ottawa Food Bank, Churchill's sister school R. E. Wilson, the Terry Fox Run, the OCDSB Education Foundation, Nepalese earthquake victims, and many others were done without prizes, rankings, or scores, and are instead transformed into whole-school activities where the focus is on helping, rather than on competing.

A newly renewed and expanded innovative activity in 2014-2015 was the **Alternative Sports Days**, where Churchill students play cooperative and timed games with students from other alternative OCDSB schools.

*"From being involved in each of the Alternative Sports Days I can say that they were a huge success. Students learned sport skills and rules, and got experience playing, and got active. They went to multi school events, and participated in multi age groups, making new friends and having a fantastic time. Each time we returned the students were worn out from all the activity, but also energised from the experiences."*

*– Churchill Teacher, 2014-2015*



*Awesome day at the Alternative Borden Ball Tournament!*

As classes and as individuals, Churchill students often show their work at **whole-school sharings**. Achievement is recognized in these gatherings in a supportive way without prizes or certificates. At a classroom-level, students find motivation in receiving meaningful feedback on their work, without marks and without being ranked against their fellow students.

*"The sharings in the gym are great opportunities for music, singing, and art projects."*

*- Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

*"Our sharings are done in a circle so it is more inclusive, they are lead by students, and all grade levels participate. We had a supply teacher that day and she thought it was so different." – Churchill Teacher, 2014 -2015*

The many activities and events that bring all students and classes together help create an environment where all teachers know many students whom they have never directly

taught (and speak together on a first name basis), helping to create **a welcoming and caring whole-school environment**.

The school council, CASC, is run on a **consensus basis**, with no elections for council co-chairs or other positions.

**Tenet #2: A balance between student-directed and teacher directed learning: the teacher acts as a facilitator/mentor/guide of the child's learning; enhances self-concept, enthusiasm for learning and personal responsibility.**

Students' voices and interests are valued. Collaboration on meaningful projects among students, teachers, and community members of all ages is encouraged. Students help set their own learning goals, and help make decisions on school policies and projects.

*Examples of Tenet 2: Child-Centered and Directed Learning*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Student Council</li><li>• Class meetings</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Student-organized events: Pink T-Shirt Day, movie-nights, talent show...</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Student-led conferences</li><li>• Student goal-setting</li></ul> |
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*"I always see the teacher giving voice to the students in her class so they can share their reflections and thoughts. I always see the teacher providing the students with opportunities to challenge themselves in a non-threatening, supportive way." - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

With the emphasis on meaningful feedback on work, rather than marks and grades, students are empowered to think and talk about their progress with their teachers and with family in **student-led conferencing**.

**Tenet #3: Integrated curriculum: this provides a natural progression from whole to parts and stresses the interrelation of all learning and subjects**

Many Churchill classrooms include class meetings and **circle discussions** that help make decisions about projects and activities that will advance their learning goals.

*"The teacher had a 'Malala Day' with the class - she had done a small unit on Malala and as the students had so much interest they developed a whole day of programming around her and invited other students to participate and learn." - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

A strong emphasis is placed on meeting the emotional needs of the children and creating **a welcoming and safe environment**. For example, young students are prepared for their transition from Kindergarten to grade one through their frequent interactions with "buddies" and by having transition days where they visit their future classrooms.

*"Tree Families is new and exciting this year. It's highly creative and open ended and evolving as the year goes on." - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

**Tenet #4: Multi-aged groupings: interaction among children of different ages and at different stages of development provides an environment wherein students learn from each other as well as from the teacher.**

Older and younger children, teachers, staff, and families learn together in a variety of settings and groupings. Multi-aged groupings are planned with care, helping students to learn more effectively by nurturing positive learning communities

Examples of Tenet 3: Multi-age Groupings

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Multi-grade classrooms</li><li>• Reading buddies and other mentorship groupings</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Multi-age Weekly Tree Family</li><li>• Shared events: Chalkfest, tie-dye days, Morning Run, ...</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clubs (knitting, chess, Lego, electronics, ...)</li><li>• School sharings, open classes, class-partnerships,</li></ul>
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In 2014-2015 many Churchill classrooms were all organized to be **multi-grade**. In these multi-grade classrooms, older and younger students worked together on a daily basis.

*"I've seen the pros of having the Junior and Senior Kindergarten class together. In her first year she learned a lot and looked up to seniors, and this year she works very hard to set an example and help out juniors! It's lovely to see." - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

*"The multi-grade dynamic for sure is something that resonates with me - how it fosters leadership and team-work and pushes the younger children to strive harder in a safe space." - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

As in past years, older students shared their love of reading with their kindergarten **reading-buddies**, and also served as helpers in the kindergarten classes.

*"Reading buddies is so important to my child and being with the older children during tree family expands their circle of people they know on the school yard and in the community and increases their comfort zone on so many levels." - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

*"My daughter is a reading buddy with one of the kinders and enjoys working with them. When we walk past the kinder yard, the little ones always wave and greet her." - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

In the warmer weather, all students together participate in the twice-weekly **Morning Run**, and come together regularly for **Dance Mania**.

Students of all ages learned together in a variety of **clubs** (Lego, Back-to-Nature, Knitting, ...), in before-school sports groups, at weekly winter skating, and at many school events.

A new initiative this year was the Tree Families, in which groups of students from different ages and classes got together once a week to explore selected themes, with a different learning goal each month.

Tree family learning goals included:

- Responsibility – you are accountable for what you say and do
- Fairness – everyone should get what he or she needs
- Cooperation – roles and responsibilities in a community
- Optimism – looking at the glass as half full rather than half empty
- Gratitude – focus on the positives. Self Reliance – looking at what you can do independently

Tree Family gatherings also included workshops that were assisted by Churchill family members.

*“Participating in Tree Families was a great opportunity to meet students across the grades in a formal setting.... I liked getting to know really quiet students in younger grades, and then interact with them in the hall and on the yard. I think it must have made the experience of school much warmer.” – Churchill Teacher, 2014 - 2015*

*“Reading buddies is so important to my child and being with the older children during tree family expands their circle of people they know on the school yard and in the community and increases their comfort zone on so many levels.”- Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*





*Tree Families at the Winter Fun Day in March*

**Tenet #5: A commitment to innovative approaches to teaching and learning through a shared responsibility among staff, students, and parents.**

Students learn through activities and projects that touch on many aspects of the curriculum simultaneously, and that engage all learning styles.

*Examples of Tenet 4: Innovative and Differentiated Learning Environments*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible classrooms</li> <li>• Frequent field trips within the community and beyond</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Nook – ASD support room</li> <li>• “Back-to-Nature” outdoor classroom</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clubs</li> <li>• Weekly Tree Family</li> </ul> |
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The **Back-To-Nature Outdoor Classroom** is a special area of the school grounds – a small wooded area that is maintained particularly to give teachers and students a place to engage in activities outside of the standard classroom environment.



*The Back-To-Nature outdoor classroom is maintained by Students, Staff, and Family Volunteers.*

Classrooms at Churchill are flexible spaces where the environment can be adapted to meet a variety of needs and uses. Students are encouraged to engage in experiential learning in environments that can be changed to meet the needs of the task and of their learning style. The day at Churchill, which proceeds without interruption from bells, is similarly structured to be adaptive to different tasks and needs.

This year was the second year of “**Math Freaks Come Out**” night in October – a great costume party with a math theme where families and students explore the excitement of math, and it was a huge success. The activities this year were expanded to include the primary grades. At times it was overcrowded in some activities because so many families turned out.

*"We've had some amazing science buddies from Gowling PS this year. We've been sending mystery science boxes to each other throughout the year and then used skype to stay in touch." – Churchill Teacher, 2014 – 2015*

*"In the class they have a fully working aquaponics system that the students built to study this practice. They are growing lettuce and other vegetables in the class and are responsible for taking care of the fish that feed the plants." – Churchill Parent, 2014 – 2015*

Students at Churchill frequently go on field trips that are planned for specific learning goals and the neighbourhood is frequently used as a resource for providing environments where activities become meaningful and purposeful. Students go out into the community for activities across all subject areas.

The many different situations in which students can learn, and demonstrate their learning, encourage students who may not otherwise feel confidence. School of Rock, the many clubs, and lunchtime activities provide different venues for students to explore their interests and abilities. Students are encouraged to feel safe and welcome within these environments, and are given safe places that meet their needs, **the Nook**, for example, is a classroom set aside to provide a safe and welcoming environment for students who need a calm and low-stimulus environment, and is used particularly to support students with ASD needs.

**Tenet #6: A family & community-centered school environment wherein parental involvement is essential for the partnership between the home and school, which in turn fosters self-respect, respect for the ideas and the opinions of others, and an appreciation for people’s differences.**

Families participate in a variety of ways, including substantial classroom-volunteering, involvement in the school council, organizing events, running clubs, and in helping prepare classroom materials.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extensive classroom volunteering</li><li>• Special events: Welcome BBQ, Family Breakfast, Volunteer Tea, Kinder Coffee, Multicultural potluck, Staff Appreciation Lunch</li><li>• Active CASC committees, representation on ASAC and OCASC,...</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parent-run / supported clubs, electives, and morning sports</li><li>• Maintenance of “Back-to-Nature” outdoor classroom.</li><li>• Sharings and school events are open to families</li></ul> |
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*“The teachers and students all know each other. My son is known wherever he goes in the school and he is a part of that community. He also sees me as part of that community when I volunteer in the class. - I am welcome in my child’s class to assist the teacher and support the children under her direction - I have many opportunities to be a part of the learning...” - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

*“The level of effort of the parent council to coordinate with the volunteers and work with the administrators and teachers is amazing.” - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

*“Favorite events for our family are the welcome BBQ, the Craft Fair, School Dance and the Movie Nights. It’s so wonderful to see the kids grow and become friends and the relationships then that parents strike in building a vibrant school community.” - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

Family volunteers participate in classrooms everyday at Churchill, supporting both special events (such as the kindergarten Medieval Feast) and daily classroom activities such as helping students with their work, assisting with reading assessments, reading stories, leading activities, and supporting teachers by helping around the class. Family volunteers assist in the school library, with the safe-arrival line, and with maintaining the Back-to-Nature Outdoor Classroom and Playground.

CASC meetings and information nights provide an opportunity for parents and staff to come together to discuss school business and topics of interest. This year a workshop on Parenting in the Digital Age was presented by Natalia McPhedran.

**Tenet #7: Assessment and evaluation is on-going using multiple strategies which include student self-evaluations and student led conferences. The primary focus of this process is personal growth, as well as being used as a tool for program planning and assessment, student goal setting, growth & assessment.**

Churchill provides an environment that nurtures the whole child, and engages them in learning that is natural and individualized. Assessment of student learning reflects this approach – the primary purpose of assessment is to help students meet their learning goals.

*Examples of Tenet 6: Organic Learning and Assessment*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Written and direct feedback instead of grades</li><li>• Peer-learning and peer-evaluation</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Project based learning</li><li>• Many curriculum based field trips</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Optional reporting of grades on report cards</li><li>• Varied learning environments</li></ul> |
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Students learn in **authentic environments** – both within school and out in the community, and many community members come in to share. This year, classes dissected owl pellets, grew plants, took photos, wrote plays, created large art projects, planted trees, and communicated with students from around the world.



*Students planting in the outdoor garden*



*Taking pictures during a photography workshop at a bird sanctuary*

Written comments, rather than grades, provide a foundation for meaningful discussion and goal-setting during **student-led conferences**. This year, each class arranged its own approach to student led conferences, many of which included portfolio components.



*Some portfolios from student-led conferences*

### **The Alternative Program - Community and Global Outreach**

The community is welcomed into the school, and the school often goes out into the community, fostering a sense of involvement and belonging. Students are encouraged to have a sense of global citizenship and stewardship.

#### *Examples : Community and Global Outreach*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School of Rock at Westfest</li> <li>• Holiday Craft Fair, Family Dance, Welcome BBQ, ...</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing support for RE Wilson school and community</li> <li>• WE Day involvement</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guest presentations from community and arts groups</li> <li>• Senior buddies</li> </ul> |
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*"My daughter and I were quite excited with the school of rock concert at Nepean High School. We are already marking our calendars for the Westfest show. It's quite wonderful to see the kids proud and sharing with the entire community. Makes us feel a part of something bigger than just sending her to school!" - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*



*School of Rock 10 at Nepean High School*

*"I participated in the "senior buddies" program in my son's class. The class went over a couple of weeks to a local seniors' center where they worked on crafts, music and dance with a group of seniors. The seniors also came to the school to share stories with the student. It was amazing to see the relationships develop over the weeks." - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*



*Students at the Plant and Book Sale*



*The Kinders sold their Hallowe'en pumpkin seeds at the Plant Sale this year. They donated the proceeds, \$100, to the Unicef campaign working in Nepal in the wake of the recent earthquakes. – Churchill Parent, 2014 - 2015*

R. E. Wilson is Churchill's sister school, serving a diverse community that often needs support. The Churchill community raises funds to support R. E. Wilson school programs and families in need. Holiday hamper, direct appeals, clothing and household donations, and library donations are some of the ways that Churchill helps out. A permanent "Families helping Families" donation bin is a central fixture of the Churchill lobby.



*Food donations for R. E. Wilson*

*The support to R.E Wilson is amazing. Every time we fill a little bag to put in the bin it makes it feel like we are making a difference. Collectively the impact is huge.” - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

Locally, Churchill students are also involved with support for the Snowsuit fund, the Ottawa Food Bank, and some classes have participated in a "Senior Buddies" program

at the Senior Community Centre on Richmond Road, and have gone to the Good Companions' to make cards for patients at Elisabeth Bruyere long-term care facility. Churchill students have been planting trees at the Baxter Conservation area for twelve years.



*Students celebrating Earth Day*

### **The Alternative program and the “Learning Triad”**

*“I believe the most important aspect of the alternative program at Churchill is the triad relationship between teacher/staff, student and parents/family. This supportive relationship is extremely apparent in all Churchill programs. The alliance encourages connections, which lead to more understanding, empathy, cooperation, participation and happy children.” - Churchill Parent, 2014-2015*

The alternative education model at Churchill expressed through the core tenets described above is sustained by a “learning triad” encompassing the children, staff and families. Our shared goal is to work together to provide the best possible learning environment for the whole child.

