

A Second Chance School in Hungary

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Hungary's Belvárosi Tanoda Secondary School offers an informal, flexible environment and alternative teaching methods for students who have had problems in other schools.

The *Belvárosi Tanoda* (which translates as downtown school) is a second chance school for students who have dropped out of upper secondary education. It has been providing alternative education for 16- to 25-year-olds since 1990. While most Hungarian schools are run by their local government, *Belvárosi Tanoda* is maintained by a private foundation, with the state covering about half of its operating costs. The school charges no tuition fees since most of its students are in financial need.



Belvárosi Tanoda Secondary School in Budapest



Through individual care and teaching adapted to the students' personalities, the *Belvárosi Tanoda* Secondary School helps those who have had problems at other schools finish secondary education and pass their final exams. The staff believe the students "have the ability to learn, but for some reason their ability is blocked since they could not get along in another school. Our main principle is that it is not the student intending to learn who should fit the school, but it is we who should try to fit the institutional framework to his or her needs within state regulations".

In 2007, the school had 146 students and 37 staff members. These included 100 full-time and 35 part-time students in general upper secondary education and 11 students in vocational (art and culture) post-secondary education. The school employed 18 full-time and 13 part-time teachers and 6 additional staff members.

Since 2002, this alternative school has been situated on part the ground floor of a building in downtown Budapest (it was previously in a youth cultural centre also in the city centre). The location offers the advantages of being accessible to a large population and being close to many cultural and other metropolitan attractions.



Entrance

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An informal, flexible environment

Seen from the street, the school – with its one door and two windows – looks more like a store than an educational institution. The entrance leads down a hallway with a reception desk and a small rest area. Giving onto the hallway are 3 small and 2 large classrooms, a bigger room for events, an office, a staff room, a computer room and communal rooms. Unfortunately, with 300 m², space is lacking, and lighting and ventilation are poor.

Hallway doubled by a mirror



Rest area





Large classroom

The *Belvárosi Tanoda* uses its spaces in a flexible way, echoing the flexibility of its teaching methods. Every classroom is specialised, providing the equipment necessary for the specific subject. However, outside of teaching time, several types of leisure, cultural and sport activities, as well as personal and team discussions, take place in the classrooms.

The school is open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on working days and is intended to be a pleasant space that is worth coming to as part of one's daily life. This is particularly important as the students come from difficult backgrounds. The school operates in a family atmosphere, ensuring a safe and accepting environment for the youth, and serves as a kind of home for many. Every room is accessible to everyone; even the staff room is used by both teachers and students and has become the heart of community life. One special contribution to the informal environment is that there is no organised school meal; students eat in the rest area or the staff room.

Various activities in the school's biggest room





Staff room

Teaching methods

Teaching methods are centred around the personality of each student, who learns at his or her own pace. Every student pairs with a teacher of his or her choice for help both in learning and in other aspects of life. The student signs a study contract with personal objectives for the school year and learns according to a personal timetable. The school offers no full-year classes but organises small study groups by subject. One-on-one teaching is used when necessary and possible.

The staff recognise the effects of spending quality time with the students every day: “Individual attention and care come spontaneously in a natural school setting where students and their teachers/helpers meet outside as well inside classes, and engage and co-operate in many different situations, e.g. having personal discussions, chatting during the breaks or over a coffee or tea, participating in free-time activities such as sports or field trips.” One of the main objectives of the school is to create a rich social climate with various opportunities to learn appropriate social roles and develop self-esteem. This objective is met by the staff and students sharing living spaces during the day. The staff can thus “demonstrate their views on life, serving as models for relating and communicating with others, for dealing with various experiences in life, for recognising and expressing emotions, and for managing and solving daily problems and conflicts”.

Conclusion

The alternative pedagogy at the *Belvárosi Tanoda* is remarkable despite the building, which was not designed to house a school. However, its users recognise certain advantages to not having a large school building: *Belvárosi Tanoda* “feels friendly, cosy and more intimate”. And in spite of its imperfections, the physical environment has proven effective in providing a real living space, a home, for youth in need.

For more information, visit www.beltanoda.hu/eng/index.html or contact:

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