

Summary in English

This book is written in the form of first person, with Barbara Bergstrom as the story teller. The same applies to the summary. In reality for the last 17 years, Hans and Barbara Bergstrom have worked closely together as a team. This book is our common story.

The chance came in 1992. I could start my own school, based on my own convictions. 25 years later, that creation has evolved into 36 schools in Sweden (school year 2018/19), with 26 000 students, 2 500 employees and close to three billion kronor in turnover (appr. 350 MUSD). Academic results, as measured by the national tests performed by all schools in Sweden each spring, are far above average for Swedish schools. As of January 2018, IES schools have over 160,000 additional registrations in their queues for enrollment for the coming years. We have also started a journey of expansion in Spain. And Internationella Engelska Skolan (IES) is a listed company on Nasdaq Stockholm, with the ticker "ENG". In retrospect, it is a success story. But at the beginning, and many times in-between, it has been a complex and difficult journey – filled with obstacles, disappointments, struggles and precarious choices.

This is a story about education. It is also a story about entrepreneurship. In both respects, I broke up without any safety net in 1992, for something I strongly believed in. I was prepared to give it everything I had of determination and energy.

The political decision which made it all possible was called "the free school reform". It was introduced in 1992 by the new non-socialist government, headed by Carl Bildt as prime minister.

The word "free" had four connotations:

1. As an educator, you were **free to start** your own school, after having shown to the National School Agency that you met certain requirements and were then given a permit.

2. As a parent, and student, you were **free to choose** a school. You did not have to go to the school assigned to you by public bureaucrats. You were instead allowed to select a school with the profile you preferred.
3. Furthermore, the school of choice was completely **free of fees**. Even when choosing a school offered by a cooperative, a trust or a company, you could do it without cost since the voucher payment would follow the choice of the student.
4. Schools started through private initiative, called "free schools", would have a certain degree of added **freedom in pedagogical ideas and in the daily running of the school**, including autonomy from municipal school boards.

These four freedoms interacted. The freedom to choose becomes a reality only when there is a freedom to offer alternatives. Equal freedom to choose is a reality only when education as such is free. And a degree of autonomy in running a school is necessary if you, as a Founder, shall be able to create a school in accordance with your own strong convictions.

I definitely had such convictions. They were basically these three:

1. **Children should learn to command the English language, not just know it, at an early age.** For youngsters in a small country, English is the key to the world. Fluency is best achieved through language immersion, instructed by native English speaking teachers in an international atmosphere.
2. **Discipline and a calm and safe environment in school are necessary prerequisites for learning.** School is a workplace. Strong principals must create an orderly environment in which teachers can teach and students learn. "Tough love" became the motto for a school which is strict in norms for behavior, but simultaneously conveys love for the students and a strong will to help each child succeed. Practicing good manners and proper behavior in a

workplace, combined with an appreciation of the positive results yielded from hard work and “grit”, also prepares students for success in adult life.

- 3. Students should be met by high academic expectations and aspirations.** The assumption must be that every child can achieve success, irrespective of social background. Also the most gifted learners should be challenged to reach for their full potential. Regular assessment forms the basis for correcting problems early. Mentor teachers, in charge of 15 students each, call home to parents every second week to report and receive feedback.

Excellent school lunches, in a restaurant type environment and with a choice of fish, meat and vegetarian dishes every day – as well as a salad bar and fresh bread – were also something I planned to introduce. Healthy eating habits are essential for learning. Good behavior in a restaurant is, furthermore, a lesson for life.

To achieve these goals, it was necessary to show strong and straightforward leadership. Based on my experience in public schools, I was determined to introduce a different type of leadership, with highly visible principals. We were also to recruit the best teachers, even if we had to find them in Canada, and to make it possible for those teachers to focus on teaching by securing an orderly environment with a minimum of distraction. We had and still have dress codes for both teachers and students, students call teachers “Mr.” and “Ms.”, lessons start in time, students assemble outside the classroom and enter in an orderly way, you raise your hand before you speak, disturbing elements like cell phones, music players and chewing gum are not allowed, etc. These rules are soon internalized and become a natural part of an orderly environment for focused learning.

Immediately after the Swedish parliament had decided upon the free school reform, I resigned as a teacher in order to start the first school. With my own experience of teaching in Middle School, I invited a teacher colleague who had worked in the lower grades –

Joan Wohlner, also with American background – to join in the project. We started a company, which we considered as the most effective form for handling and leading an organization. We found a building, not the best for a school but centrally located in Stockholm. We applied for a permit and received it after due scrutiny.

The alternative we presented from “Engelska Skolan” (English School), as it was named, proved to be successful from the start among parents. We were able to fill the school with students in no-time. A major reason was that our concept stood in direct contrast to the “feel good curriculum” and the “anything goes”, “no adult authority” attitudes dominant in the public schools at the time. Following the anti-authoritarian wave of 1968, Rousseau’s views about the good child who could only be hurt by adult intervention came to dominate teacher colleges, public schools and school authorities in Sweden. Most parents strongly disliked this development. Parents wanted to see discipline in a school. And students wanted to feel safe, without any bullying, and be met by a calm learning environment.

Even if we filled the school from start, with parents and students eagerly hoping for something different from the wishy-washy public schools they had previously experienced, our finances were shaky. I did not have any private money to put into the endeavor, nor did my colleague. To save money, I went to the school during weekends to do the cleaning myself – as principal and owner. This way, we avoided cleaning costs. Before we started, I called around to banks, post offices and other companies in Stockholm to ask if they had used furniture which they could donate to our school. When I spoke in Swedish, nothing happened. When I tried American English, results ensued. One bank even delivered the furniture to us. One company donated a truck. We were able to equip not only our offices and staff room but also classrooms with used furniture – of excellent quality for us, even if not exquisite enough for the companies that gave them to us. I also called US companies with a presence in Sweden. From Apple we were given 13 computers. I took out

very little salary during the first years, until we were on a more solid financial footing.

I am relating this not to portray myself as wonder woman, but as something that comes natural for real entrepreneurs. You focus on the essentials and minimize costs – including your own reimbursement – until you are certain, after several years, that you have secured the basis for success. And success, as I saw it, was to show that my ideas and effort would lead to a really great school. It was certainly not to make a lot of money.

My dream was to be able to create a school in the shape and form I strongly believed in. Could I not have stayed in the public school system and achieve the same result, by working for change there? Absolutely not! That would have been completely impossible. I could not ever have been appointed principal in a public school, not with my convictions. Even if, against all odds, I had become a principal, I would never have been allowed the freedom to implement my concept. This concept would, in an existing school with all its entrenched interests and attitudes, have been met with strong resistance. Opportunistic school administrators would very soon have fired me as a principal. Only by creating my own school, owned by me and my colleague with the freedom to act, could I achieve what I accomplished.

The rest of the story can be told with fewer words. In 1998, my colleague and I split up. Our partnership ended. I kept the original company, while moving to a school building in an immigrant area south of Stockholm. There, I also started a small upper secondary school in 1999. In 2002, I was contacted by the Municipality of Järfälla, north of Stockholm, which wanted me to take over and transform a failed public school, also in an immigrant area. I did so (it is now one of the best schools in the Stockholm region).

In 2003, after ten years, we decided to expand. It was financially risky. We set out to establish three new schools in cities about two hours drive from Stockholm, based only on the limited capital from the mother school. Fortunately, the basic concept showed to be

attractive – “English and Order”, as its short message – and we were able to fill the new schools with students. That was also a necessity. The financial basis of the company at the time could not have taken anything less than an overwhelming success.

Attack after attack from public school authorities

The reputation of Engelska Skolan spread and our expansion was noticed. With a growing sector of free schools followed an increased ambition from the government to restrict its degree of freedom. More aspects were to be regulated nationally, in order to make schools more alike in norms and operations. From now on, we are talking about the year 2000 and forward, I had constant encounters with the national system of school inspections. Engelska Skolan could show excellent academic results and strong parent support. But we did things our own way, and that was not appreciated by the authorities, still caught in the paradigm of Rousseau.

First came an attack on giving “grades” four times a year from grade 6 in my 6–9 school. I did this with the purpose to discover problems early on, so they could be corrected. But it was now declared illegal. Not until the end of grade 8 were formal grades allowed in Swedish schools at that time.

A second attack was directed toward our routine of arranging “introductory days” in the spring for students who were about to be admitted to our school. Students were given lectures in English, Math and Swedish, followed by simple tests. The purpose was not to deny entry but to give students a chance to experience how it would be to study at Engelska Skolan – and to give the school a chance to talk to parents about what we had observed about the child. For students weak in English, we could advise summer reading. This was deemed illegal by authorities, since it implied that we put demands on students before intake ...

A third attack concerned our teaching in English. Skolverket, the national school agency, claimed that we were not allowed to have all

of our teaching in English in certain subjects, since that was not permitted in public schools. This verdict was threatening the very core of the English School. We found ourselves in a stalemate with the authorities. I was not prepared to relinquish such a vital part of our core as the teaching in English. Skolverket did not budge either. But the relationship was not even. The authorities had the power to withdraw our permits and force us to close down.

We compromised by developing methods for “bilingual teaching”, English/Swedish, in all subjects. Skolverket accepted our guidelines for this in 2005, at least for the time being. They, too, were confronted with a dilemma – they realized that they would have a hard time defending the closing down of well-functioning schools, particularly since the specific case was about our school in Järfälla where we had just transformed a failing municipal school to become the best in the community.

In this and other encounters with school authorities through the years, it was crucial that we could show that our students achieved superior results in the subject of English, but also results above average in the subject of Math (mostly taught in English) and in the subject of Swedish (in spite of being “the English school”). With this we have succeeded, as measured by the national tests, every year!

A fourth attack was geared towards our rules for order, particularly the norms for dress-code for a workplace. We did not accept hats on indoors, nor cell phones during the school day. Lawyers and bureaucrats at Skolverket (the Swedish national school agency) claimed that our rules violated the personal integrity of students. They refused to understand the broken-windows theory behind what we did, how every aspect of a school must signal that this is to be an orderly place for serious work.

A fifth area of criticism has been about “student democracy”. Authorities have argued, with support from the school law, that we as an organization can not adopt a common “code of conduct”, nor that a principal can declare such a code without first having consulted the students. This caused particular problems for our new schools

under upstart, without students yet to consult. We had an absolute need to declare our norms to parents and students even before the school was opened, so they were aware of what kind of school the student entered. Even in regard to the subject content of teaching, the school law and the national schools inspectorate have claimed that students should have a real influence – all in the name of student democracy. Our counter-position has, of course, been that it must be up to teachers, with due consideration of the national curriculum, to decide the content of teaching in a subject. The very definition of content to be taught is facts and skills which the students have not acquired. How can students know what they need to know, when they not yet know it?

A sixth aspect has centered around the need for sanctions against students breaking rules and norms. It has not been allowed in the Swedish school system to even mention the word “sanction”. If a student is taken out of the classroom for an hour, it must always be presented as a matter of providing extra help to the student, and be organized that way. The need to protect a calm learning environment for the rest of the students has not been considered a valid argument. So, I had to invent my own sanctions, circumventing the law. One was for a culprit to have lunch with the principal every day during a week! Another one was to ask the student to grade himself in behavior after every lecture during the course of a week, and then compare with the teachers’ assessments. A method I also used was to ask parents to propose what we all knew were “sanctions”; parents most often at the time proposed harsher consequences than I would have considered.

A seventh point of dispute has been about hurdles in learning. We saw the ability to meet and overcome resistance as an unavoidable part of effective learning. This is what “grit” is all about. When young students went through their first term with half of the teaching in English, they could not grasp everything immediately. But by Christmas that first term, they had passed a language hurdle and conquered an ability of immense importance for future studies and

for life – to command the English language, the key to the world. The national school inspectors have refused to accept the existence of hurdles in learning. As soon as students were met by a challenge, we were – in their view – required to be there with extra support. Not only would that be costly, it went against our concept of learning, which we knew was effective. We also in fact offered one extra hour every day of teacher supported learning, after regular school hours. In this, as in so many other aspects, we were once again unique as a school organization.

An eighth point of contention has been our hiring of foreign teachers. These teachers have been invaluable. Not only do most of them come with a much better teacher education than the Swedish, as it has become. The very mixture of teachers from the US, Canada, England, Australia, South Africa, Spain, etc – added to the Swedes on the staff – created an international atmosphere, filled with energy and excitement. Our teaching staff has also been about ten years younger, on average, than in public schools in Sweden. With the new school law of 2010, we were finally given an exemption to permanently employ teachers with a foreign certification. But authorities have continued to raise issues with our use of foreign teachers. Constant vigilance has been needed on our part, to defend what we do.

In all of these issues, I have felt a strong support from our parents – and also from the general public opinion in Sweden. Thus, media coverage of disputes with the school authorities on the issues mentioned above has often turned out to become an effective marketing of our organization.

More than once, we have discovered that what we did early on, which was met by criticism from school authorities, has later turned into the law of the land. Examples of this is earlier introduction of grades and feedback to students and parents, no to the use of cell phone in classrooms and applying effective measures for discipline.

I have had to go on many balancing acts through the years: not to give up on our core convictions, while still making adjustments to

be able to survive for another day. On that other day, it has sometimes become clear that IES was the pioneer for reforms later made compulsory through the entire school system.

On one particular issue, I have instructed our principals to openly defy directives from the national school agencies. We need in a school to be able to see the faces of our students. Authorities have taken the opposite view, in relation to the use of “burkas” or “niqabs” among girls from some Muslim families. They see it as “religious discrimination” if a school does not allow Muslim girls to hide their faces. In my view, the school must stand up in defense of these girls and their right to education as well as their right to a normal life. There must be a limit to the Swedish permissiveness in relation to extreme immigrant views.

Organizing a systematic quality process

During 2006–2009 we launched a number of new ventures, with little success. We tried to start high schools in locations where we already had successful 6–9 schools. We tried to go into adult education. We opened up a school in the UK, in the hope that a conservative government there would copy a Swedish type national voucher system, which did not happen. We were close to starting a school in Spain, but ran into the effects of the financial unrest of 2008.

After these and other experiences, we made the decision to go back to our core. From 2009, we focused on establishing middle schools, extending what we covered from grades 6–9 to 4–9. This proved to be highly successful. By enrolling students at an earlier age, we could train their English language skills at an age when fluency was easily achieved. Students were also guided into good working habits of great help through their remaining school years.

The company reached one billion Swedish kronor in turnover during operational year 2012/13, two billion with operational year 2016/17.

With the increased number of schools, it became important to

introduce a systematic quality system. Hans developed such a system already in 2005/06. It was based on hard facts concerning results on the national tests and answers from questionnaires to parents, students and staff every spring. The main academic result variable we introduced was C+, a top result of A, B or C on a scale from A to F. The national system, in contrast, focused on just “passing”, with an E grade. We collected data before summer, ranked our schools on each variable as well as followed trends for each school over time.

In August/September, the board had quality results as the main topic on its agenda. Overall decisions were taken on focus areas, based on the data. A binder with around 60 pages of tables was produced for each school. Together with the CEO, I then visited each school in August/September. We brought with us a summary assessment:

- A. This is good.
- B. On these aspects, extra efforts have to be put in.
- C. This is the agreement between the central organization and the school leadership on what to focus on for the coming school year. The principal was to take those issues to his/her staff, and then report back.

We had as little of paper work as possible, beyond the data. It is often too easy to write documents with plenty of words, and start believing that this in itself forms a quality process. It doesn't. Analysis must be followed by action. That was our message. Action more than papers. Facts collected up till June a certain year were to be ready, analyzed and agreed upon for actions to be implemented by the school leadership already from the upcoming school year, starting at the end of August.

In a special study of quality processes, we were actually applauded by the National School Inspectorate in a report in 2015 for our way of organizing a meaningful quality process.

Hans also took the initiative to form an Academic Advisory

Board, with leading professors in the fields of the learning brain and bilingual education. This board became very valuable, and it enhanced the research authority with which we could speak on these matters.

In 2016, IES became the pioneering school organization in Sweden in measuring “value added”, what a school as such adds to academic achievement. We were able to find the exact same individuals in IES schools who had performed the national tests in English, Swedish and math in both grade 6 in the spring of 2013 and in grade 9 three years later. We could then compare their progress in achievement with the municipal schools in Sweden. It was a relief to find that IES students had a much higher progress in results on the national tests during the sensitive teenage years of grade 6 through grade 9 than students who had attended municipal schools in the country. Being the same individuals in our schools, followed during three years, we could prove a real school effect, independent of immigrant status and other social background factors.

Leadership is everything

To measure quality is one thing. To create a school of quality is something else, and much harder. A basic precondition is that you encompass the right paradigm for a learning environment as an organization. Given that, it is all about leadership.

Nothing has occupied me more than finding the right principals – and dismiss principals who have shown not to be up to the task. It is never easy to get rid of people. I have not done it with any joy, and I have tried to be direct, open and caring to the person who had to go. But it has been necessary to change leadership of schools many times, particularly during the earlier years. The interest of the students and their education must come first. When I left as principal for the “mother school” in Enskede in 2003, in order to focus on expansion, we had four different principals before we found Robert Clark, who restored the right direction of the school.

The best way to install the IES culture when starting a new school, is to appoint someone who has been assistant principal in a successful IES school to lead the new school. We have done so many times. But good people have also shown up from nowhere, like the French-Canadian Pascal Brisson in Sundsvall and the American Robin Kirk Johansson in Borås – already working in those towns and becoming superb principals with IES.

About ten years ago, we established a special internal IES leadership program, which at the time of my 70th birthday was renamed “The Barbara Bergstrom School Leadership Academy”. 27 aspiring school leaders participated in the course for 2017/18, nominated by their principals from around the country. They are mostly young. They are dedicated. They are eager to learn and to listen to experienced principals, even to me ...

I really like this group of aspiring leaders. It is so uplifting to meet all the new talent rising in the organization. As an organization, we are completely meritocratic. We can appoint even a young person as principal, if we strongly believe in him or her. This is in stark contrast to how it works in the UK and in the US, where you have to go through innumerable formal steps and advance only with age.

When speaking to this group about my best advice for school leaders, I have summarized my life's wisdom on the subject with the following eleven points.

Point 1. Be present! When the boss is gone, people lose anchor. There are many temptations to be absent from school – conferences, meetings, travels. Don't, without very strong reasons.

Point 2. Be visible! Everybody has to know who is in charge, and the leader must see things as well as add energy to the building. You cannot run a school via memos. Administrative matters should be handled when the school day is over, and on weekends. During the school day, the principal must be seen in the midst of life, not locked into an office.

Point 3. Stay stable! If the leader is erratic, everybody gets uncertain. Sometimes, you run into matters which disturb your equilibrium: a confrontation over the phone, a disappointing decision, family problems, a night of bad sleep. No matter what – when you walk out into the corridor at school, your face will shine with joy, complete interest in the people you meet, enthusiasm! This piece of advice is not easy to follow, but it must be followed. Even worse than showing that you are not in a good mood, is to express bad temper and have erratic outbursts. That is completely unacceptable. The leader must always remain stable, especially in times of crisis.

Point 4. See people, recognize people. Your success depends on how you can motivate others. As a leader, you must take a genuine interest in those working with you. Leadership is not about your own prestige. It is about stimulating others to fully embrace our common goals.

Point 5. Show the importance of attention to details. Talk is not everything. You carry an eraser in your pocket, to immediately take away marks on the lockers. You take the broom yourself, while asking for help from a student, when you discover trash on the floor. As the Founder, I could start cleaning the toilets when visiting a school, if need be. That way, people come to understand the importance of attention to details – and also that no task is below your dignity. A former CEO had as a test question to principals when visiting schools: “What would Barbara see?” This question gave a particular focus.

Point 6. Have your staff understand the importance of going in the same direction. Much of the difference between a good school and a school less good can be directly related to whether all adults apply the same norms. You cannot have one rule for the use of cell phones in one class, and a different rule in another class.

Point 7. **Be fair and merit based; no favoritism.** The focus must always be what's best for the results of the students. You might like certain people better than others. Still, you must maintain objectivity on matters like setting salaries.

Point 8. **Show your personality and a sense of humor; radiate a sound self-confidence in the way you dress and walk. Cheer up the building with your energy.** The principal plays a crucial role in setting the atmosphere for the school day. And as a woman, I have been able to tell our female principals to walk and dress with confidence.

Point 9. **Use every natural occasion to emphasize what we stand for, and the importance of education. Don't be sloppy or vague at events like graduation ceremonies.** As part of maintaining the culture and purpose of the school, the principal should express the same profound belief in education on all occasions. Graduation ceremonies must be meticulously planned for this purpose. Never, ever, express yourself in terms of summer vacation as a "relief" from school. Learning is not a burden, but a joy and a privilege to make the most out of!

Point 10. **Don't run away from tricky situations, but handle them quickly, without unwarranted delay. Teachers need to see that you give them security and protection, when motivated. Incidents not handled quickly can escalate if delayed and avoided.** Serious problems cannot, by a principal, be left to committees, slow in action.

Point 11. **Take responsibility for your school, even when you have expressed criticism or deviating views upwards in the organization. If you abrogate responsibility, by blaming others, people tend to lose respect for your authority and power.** This is an important message for leaders coming from the ranks of teachers.

Some tend to think that they can maintain the old collegial relationship with staff by blaming controversial decisions on "those higher up". The effect is the opposite; you lose respect.

Ronald Reagan once said: "There is nothing you cannot accomplish, if you are prepared to give credit to others." In this lies a deep truth for any leader. The task is not about yourself; it is about releasing the energy in everybody else, and leading it in a common, purposeful, direction.

Pisa shock, followed by political polarization

In December 2013, Sweden was hit by a "Pisa shock". Results from the 2012 international OECD/Pisa tests among students 15 years of age around the world were disastrous for Sweden, which fell below average in school results among similar types of countries. Politically, it hit the non-socialist government which had taken over in the fall of 2010, which had initiated an intense reform agenda for a school system directed towards learning and discipline, away from many years dominated by Rousseau and the "feel good curriculum". In the media and in public opinion, government policy was blamed – unfairly so, since the reforms had not yet taken effect. The left took the chance to describe the growing free school sector as a major cause of the problems. This was also completely unfair. 85 per cent of the students participating in Pisa 2012 were enrolled in municipal schools. The results of free school students were above average.

The Swedish government gave the assignment to OECD to analyze the causes behind the downturn of the Swedish school system and suggest changes. Three major factors on which Sweden deviated negatively from the rest of OECD were uncovered: a lack of order in the classroom, weak leadership in schools, and many years of recruiting teachers from the lower ranks of each age cohort. OECD also found that endurance among Swedish students was at the bottom of OECD nations. They gave up easily, showing a lack of "grit".

To these factors have been added the extreme level of migration to Sweden from Africa and the Middle East during the past several years, much higher per capita than even to Germany. It has placed a heavy extra burden on schools in Sweden.

In the public debate, though, ideological perspectives continued to dominate. The left saw the chance to blame a negative development over time on the expansion of free schools. It was said to cause "segregation". Free school companies, in particular, were blamed for letting "profits" hurt quality.

In our book, chapter 14, we thoroughly discuss these and other attacks on the free school system. When it comes to "segregation", Sweden is part of a Nordic cluster – consisting of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland – showing the least segregated school systems in the entire OECD, as measured by the degree of difference between schools in the socioeconomic composition of the student body. Segregation, with this normal definition of the concept, has furthermore not increased during the period of strong free school expansion since the year 2000.

As for Internationella Engelska Skolan, 36 percent of our students have an immigrant background, to be compared with 24 percent in the municipal schools in Sweden. A qualified econometric study from the Ministry of Finance furthermore shows that "for-profit" schools to a much higher degree than "non-profits" place their schools in low-status locations. Parent cooperatives and the like are to a much higher degree schools for the well established middle class.

When it comes to the argument that profits hurt quality, that is totally without evidence. The logic of a voucher system is that a financial surplus follows from the ability to fill classes. The marginal cost for the last student enrolled in a class is low compared to the voucher payment for that student. How do you then fill classes? By having such a good reputation among parents, and showing such excellent academic results, that each school can establish a waiting list of students. Financial surpluses, necessary in order to meet all obligations and to be able to expand, follows from quality. In an

essay, Hans formulated this as "The Swedish Law" for the education market in a voucher system:

School companies successfully aiming for quality in education will also achieve profits; companies primarily aiming for profits at the expense of quality will achieve neither.

It should also be noted, in the OECD context, that a high degree of segregation in a school system is strongly correlated to two types of conditions in a country: monopoly for public neighborhood schools in a society with strong housing segregation or a large sector of private schools with high fees. A free school system of the Swedish type counteracts both of these factors. You are not bound to the school of your neighborhood and everybody can choose among the best schools, in the judgment of families, irrespective of income and wealth. Free choice in a national voucher system is a true equalizer. I have seen so many talented immigrant children being able to get an excellent education in our schools, and thereby a kick-start for life, which would have been unattainable in any other school system.

The current strong political controversy in Sweden around school companies and the free school system has nothing to do with the facts. It is a purely ideological and political conflict. In order to be able to form a government after the election of 2014, the Social Democrats had to gain the support from the communist party (renamed "The Left Party"). Its main condition was that actions were taken against any private enterprise within the whole wide sector of education and health care. Thereof followed the government commissions appointed with the assignment to propose such actions. The election in September of 2018 will most likely break the Left's current hold on government policy, and hopefully contribute to a renewed focus on the factors which have really hurt Swedish education: a post-modernistic neglect of subject knowledge, a Rousseau-based refusal to acknowledge the need for discipline in schools and a teacher education neglecting both subject knowledge and classroom management.

Parents in Sweden are after a quarter century accustomed to the right to choose a school for their children, and want overwhelming-

ly to protect that right. They are certainly in favor, as I am, of a stronger, in-depth, scrutiny of those applying for school permits – that they are serious, honest and knowledgeable. Parents are very much against the alternatives to free choice: being forced by public bureaucrats to go to neighborhood schools, bussing of children long ways in order to equalize the social composition of schools or enrollment by lottery to oversubscribed schools.

We express in our book a certain pessimism about any basic correction in what has gone wrong in the Swedish school system. The ruling paradigms of Rousseau and postmodern French sociology are very strong among professors at teachers' colleges, as well as in elite circles at national school agencies and the department of education. It has also become supported by the teachers' unions. The "reform" direction from the current leftist government and of the ruling class in the field of education is to throw more money at the same badly managed public schools. But, as professor Martin Ingvar expressed it, if you drive in the wrong direction, it does not help to increase the speed!

Problems are always explained by external factors, not by the views, leadership and culture in the schools themselves. Free schools which provide alternatives for concerned parents are constantly attacked, instead of the concerns of parents being listened to.

I cannot see any national consensus regarding a turnaround of the basic views in Swedish school policy, of the kind that has contributed to a lift in school results in countries like Germany and Poland. A more limited conclusion from this pessimism is that IES will be needed as an alternative for families for many years to come ...

Some advice for young entrepreneurs

IES is also a story about entrepreneurship. We write about some of the basic conditions for a successful creation of a company: you must have an idea and a concept for something that is needed in society, and you must strongly believe in what you stand for. You start with

finding customers and revenues, not with fancy offices and practices. You shy away from banks and loans like the pest. You work really hard, seven days of the week. Your privilege is not material at this point, but the possibility and freedom to build what you believe in.

Be cautious with going into partnerships, is one advice I can give for the early stages. Next, when you have started to grow, comes the need to find managers – true leaders – who can work in your spirit. That is very hard, and many companies cannot pass that hurdle. For a school company this mainly means finding excellent principals, able to implement what you stand for even when you cannot be present yourself on a daily basis. Concepts and routines have to be documented at this point, but most important are the characteristics, honesty and determination of the people you hire.

At the next stage comes finding the right CEO and other managers. This stage is associated with two typical conflicts. One is between central management and principals (when we are talking schools) in a matrix type of organization. The relative autonomy of principals has to be protected, within the framework of the basic concept. A second typical conflict is between the CEO and the Founder. I can confirm this conflict from my four different CEO:s, so it must be of a more general nature. I do not fully understand why it has to occur, but CEO:s tend to have a strong need for complete control. A still active founder blurs the lines of authority, by owning much of the hearts and minds of the principals (and similar positions in other types of companies).

We were glad to come across a well studied book on "The Founder's Mentality", written by the experienced global consultants Chris Zook and James Allen. They show that a company in growth sooner or later will end up in a crisis, and that the way out of such a crisis nearly always is to return to the mentality of the original founder. That means going back to the fundamental purpose of the company, to focus on the needs of those you serve, to be obsessive on the details of what is happening at the front line and listening to the people working there, to abhor bureaucracy and unwarranted

delays in coming to decisions – and in finances to think more of securing cash flow than on the more complicated measures of result.

At this stage of my life as an entrepreneur, I am often invited to give speeches with advice to younger entrepreneurs. I hesitate, because life is much more complicated than what you can tell from standard phrases on leadership. What I emphasize, though, is to stay true to what you believe in and always be honest. There is so much of false pretense and fraud these days; we are all becoming suspicious. Having gained a reputation for honesty and for meeting your commitments is crucial for your ability to find partners, sign contracts and everything else. With honesty, coming from within as a norm for your behavior, you can also feel much better about yourself and what you stand for.

A second major part of my message is about the importance of people in the organization. It is crucial that you see people, talk to people, coach people, empower people, make sure that your people understand that you are sincere both in your convictions and in your belief in them – and that you are there when they need you.

A third message is to show perseverance. Grit! There will be ups and downs. Many obstacles and challenges will come your way as an entrepreneur. The boss must stay stable and plow on, get up every morning with new energy, through bad days as well as good days.

A fourth part of my message is about quality. There is no long-term success without quality. Nobody will, either, be interested in investing in your company if it does not have a strong reputation for quality. Do not fall for phraseology! You know what is real and concrete in delivering quality.

Finding the right owners for the coming 25 years

Why did we sell the majority of IES in 2012, and to the American global investment firm TA Associates? We did not have children prepared to take over, as Hans and I grow older. We knew that any buyer of a company which is so marked by its founder would

demand that we stayed on for a couple of years. So, at the age of 66, it was time to prepare for a responsible transfer. Given the Anglo-American character of IES, it was natural to find a serious partner with the same cultural background. TA Associates has close ties to leading American universities, like Harvard and Cornell, and its investors in the funds buying into IES was mainly a mixture of quality universities, research foundations and pension funds, among them for teachers.

TA has been an excellent partner. The people we have been working with have fully appreciated the importance of maintaining and promoting quality in our schools. But TA's time horizon as an owner is not eternal, either. In 2016, IES was listed on Nasdaq Stockholm, via an IPO. The processes for selling in 2012 and listing in 2016 have been taxing. The difference for the organization being on the stock market has not been that noticeable, though. We were very much used to being in the public eye, long before the listing.

At this stage of life, and without children to take over, it becomes a worry for a true entrepreneur to find the next long-term, strong owner prepared to carry the torch for the next 25 years. We are not there yet, but it is constantly on our minds. You never stop being concerned for your baby.

Our personal wealth will mainly go to our American foundation with the aim of supporting projects for enlightenment, education and medical research, based in Sweden: *The Hans and Barbara Bergstrom Foundation*.

For the company's ownership future, we do not yet have a permanent solution. We only know, that it has to be an owner prepared to take full ownership responsibility, not just "invest". Such an owner must also be convinced that the key to future success is to stick to the culture established in IES. An owner of this kind is not easy to find for an entrepreneur. The problem of transfer of ownership responsibility is underestimated in public discussion about entrepreneurship. Passive pension funds cannot provide the solution. There is an undersupply of active, personally engaged owners.

The true reward of 25 years of hard work

I have been met by a lot of recognition for what we have achieved with Internationella Engelska Skolan: *Entrepreneur of the year in Sweden 2009*, *EY female entrepreneur of the year 2013*, *Most powerful female entrepreneur in Sweden 2017* (by the business magazine Veckans Affärer). Given all the criticism from the left in the public debate, I have appreciated these and other awards. Most of all, it has been uplifting to be in the midst of the positive, “can do” vibrations from large gatherings of true entrepreneurs.

Still, the greatest rewards come from students and parents, with all their stories and affirmations of what our schools have meant for the inner peace of families and wider future for young individuals. Most students have lived up to our high expectations. They have also appreciated that adults in our schools stood up for them, not least when they needed boundaries and directives.

Schools form very strong bonds. When something dramatic happens to a student – an accident, a serious illness, a suicide – the whole school is struck by grief. So many stories of this sort have come my way. But even more of stories from students who have been bullied in their previous schools, because they were viewed as “different”, and have been saved from daily terror by coming to IES.

We end the book by such a moving story from a student with Asperger’s syndrome, written as a personal essay with the title “Flickan i glasbubblan” (the Girl in the Glass Bubble).

I know that the school organization I started and we developed has made a crucial difference to tens of thousands of students, by providing an environment for calm learning and safety. These students have attained knowledge and values, attitudes and norms for behavior which are serving them well in life. I know that the IES schools having this impact on so many young people would not have existed without a founder with grit. That certitude provides a strong sense of meaning, which is my true reward.

The book in Swedish consists of 17 chapters. The main theme of each chapter is as follows:

Chapter 1. The motive. What kind of school I wanted to create and based on what inspirations and previous experiences.

Chapter 2. Dominant views in the Swedish educational establishment at the time of the start, and to which I wanted to create an opposite type of school.

Chapter 3. The start.

Chapter 4. On the importance of attention to details.

Chapter 5. The difference. A tale of two schools, written down by a teacher.

Chapter 6. A pioneering project: Restaurant type school lunches.

Chapter 7. The crisis of 2000. “The English School is breaking the law”, by giving grades early.

Chapter 8. Expansion. Asked by a municipality to take over a failed school. From one school to several.

Chapter 9. Next threat from authorities: our use of foreign teachers, teaching in English.

Chapter 10. Fighting public school agencies, when they were trying to destroy our basic concepts.

Chapter 11. Years of side-tracking. Failing new projects before going back to the core in 2009.

Chapter 12. Working with quality – action more than documents.

Chapter 13. To lead a school. Leadership is everything.

Chapter 14. Political attacks on the free school system.

Chapter 15. The Swedish school system: engrained paradigms make it hard to change.

Chapter 16. Entrepreneurship and ownership. The problem of securing the future.

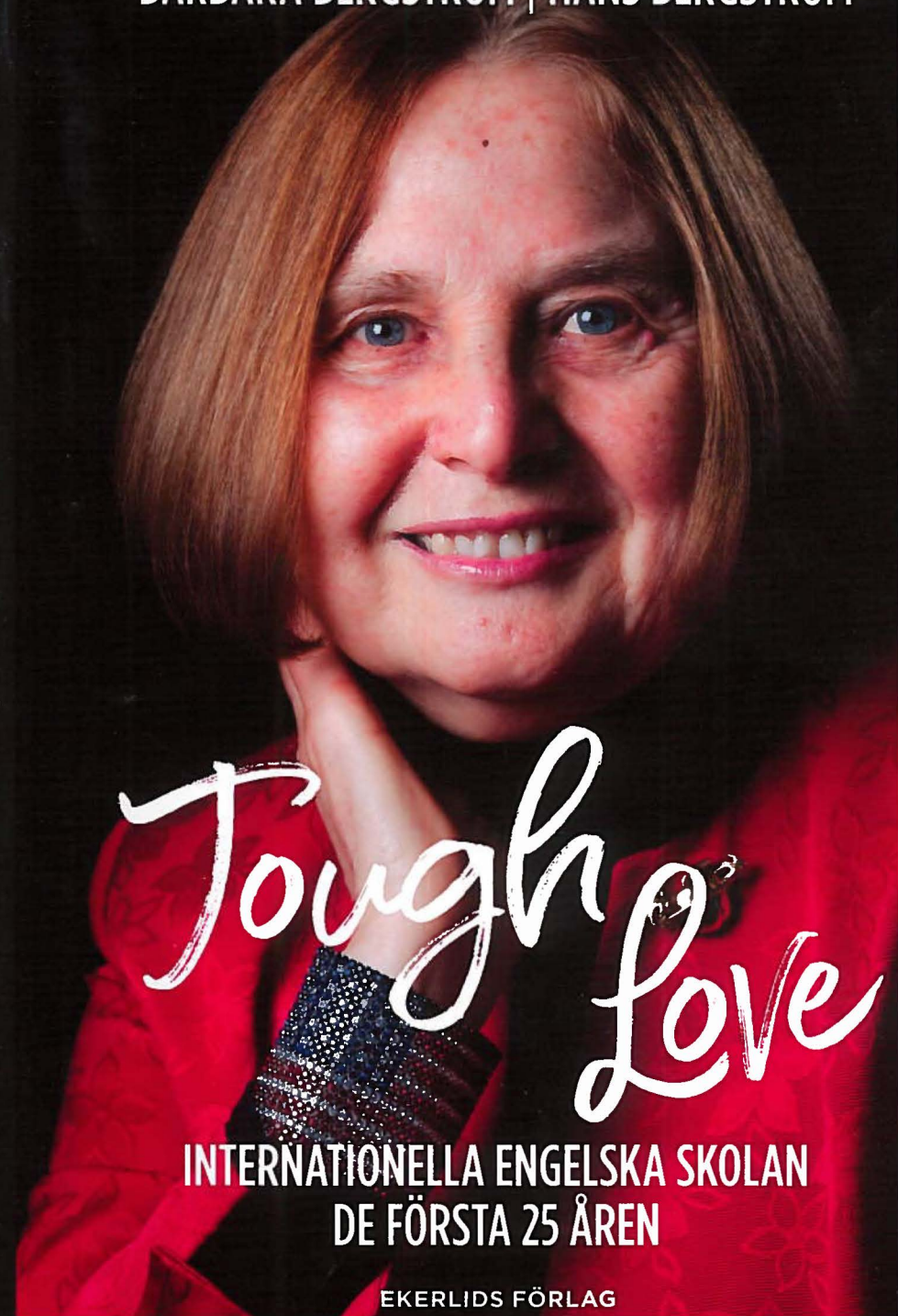
Chapter 17. The rewards. Results from a life with the International English School.

BARBARA BERGSTRÖM | HANS BERGSTRÖM

BARBARA BERGSTRÖM

Tough Love

HANS BERGSTRÖM



INTERNATIONELLA ENGELSKA SKOLAN
DE FÖRSTA 25 ÅREN

EKERLIDS FÖRLAG

Under ett kvarts sekel har Internationella Engelska Skolan (IES) erbjudit familjer ett tydligt alternativ för barnens utbildning. Detta är historien om hur Engelska Skolan startades och har växt, från en början där grundaren Barbara Bergström måste tigga ihop möbler och städa skolan själv på helgerna för att få ekonomin att gå ihop – till ett företag med 36 skolor, 26 000 elever och en omsättning på 2,5 miljarder kronor. Sedan 17 år har Barbara och Hans Bergström bildat ett team som drivit organisationen framåt.

Det är en historia om den svenska skolan, men också om ledarskap och uthålligt entreprenörskap. Engelska Skolan har växt under envis kamp mot myndigheter som haft motsatt syn på ordning i skolan, lärarnas auktoritet, betygsättning och mycket annat. Förbud från staten att verka har legat nära åtskilliga gånger. Kvaliteten på skolorna och föräldrarnas förtroende har varit avgörande.

Boken ger tuffa recept för den svenska skolan, byggda på gedigen erfarenhet. Den har också ett vidare intresse, för alla som funderar över villkoren för starkt ledarskap och utmaningarna när ett företag växer.

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