

## CA US UY Sam, Leona, & Chris: Founding Innovative, Human-Centred Schools

### Ultra-Short Summary

Sam Irving and Leona Dauphin (The Garzón School, Uruguay) and Chris Bezsylko (Imagination Lab School, Palo Alto) discuss what it takes to found and run innovative, human-centred schools. The conversation covers attracting and "educating" families, maintaining authenticity while preparing for university, how teachers can innovate inside traditional systems, and using AI to amplify human relationships and critical thinking.

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### What Each School Is Doing

#### The Garzón School (Uruguay – Sam & Leona)

- An intentionally small, deeply community-based school in rural Garzón / Punta del Este, Uruguay.
- It focuses on authenticity, purpose, and meaningful relationships.
- Opened in 2022 in a **very** modest setting (a former small hotel with almost no sports space).
- This setting forced them to sharpen pedagogy and values instead of “selling” facilities.
- Early families were true early adopters who chose the school **despite** limited infrastructure because they resonated with the mission.
- Those “founders” are still with them and are the strongest ambassadors.

#### Imagination Lab School (Palo Alto – Chris)

- A progressive K–8 school in Silicon Valley, founded after Chris’ experience with AltSchool.
- It has a strong focus on honoring childhood, personalizing learning, and treating adults as learners too.
- Opened with 12 students and 7 educators in one of the most saturated school markets in the US.
- Parents had many “top” options, but chose ILS because of culture and community, not campus or rankings.

- They observe a **big tension** in parents:
    - **Heart:** “I want something different, authentic, student-centred.”
    - **Head:** “Grades, SATs, brand-name universities worked for me; maybe we shouldn’t risk it.”
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## 💡 Key Ideas from the Conversation

### A. Building a School that “Defies Conventional Wisdom”

- Both schools are deliberately **not trying to be everything to everyone**.
- If a family is obsessed with letter grades, class rank, and heaps of homework, they are honest: “We’re probably not the right school for you.”
- They look for families who care more about:
  - Their child’s **love of learning**
  - Sense of purpose and impact
  - Emotional wellbeing and relationships

### B. How They Persuade Parents This Is Quality Education

- **Show real impact quickly.** Garzón parents report that within **two weeks** their children “fall in love with learning again” and come home different – more engaged, happier, more curious. Those stories spread far more powerfully than any brochure.
- **Bridge idealism and realism.** They dislike an exam-driven culture, but they won’t deny a kid access to university if that’s their chosen path. So they **intentionally** teach the “game of school” in later years: working with tests, academic formats, etc., **without** letting that define the whole experience.
- **Make the purpose of education explicit in admissions.** In interviews, they push parents to think beyond grades:
  - What kind of human do you want your child to become?
  - How should they find purpose and contribute to the world?
  - For many families, the real priority is: “I want them to know who they are and how to add value,” and the schools keep circling back to that.

### C. Pathways: Transcripts, Diplomas, and Life After School

- Garzón is implementing:
  - **Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC):** a competency-based transcript that showcases skills, evidence, and projects instead of a list of grades.
  - **Global Impact Diploma:** a project- and impact-based high-school diploma focusing on internships, leadership, and real-world change.
- The idea: graduating students don't just have marks; they carry a **portfolio of who they are** – research, critical thinking, collaboration, impact in the community.
- Chris adds that universities are increasingly looking for **“value add”** – not just perfect scores but evidence of initiative, projects, and community involvement.

#### D. Advice for Teachers in Traditional Schools

For the 95% of educators who **aren't** in an experimental school:

- **Do something different on Monday.**
  - Add a mindful minute before a test.
  - Start each lesson with a 5-minute student-chosen current-events discussion.
  - Turn one textbook exercise into a mini-project or real-life problem.
- **Use the national curriculum, not the textbook, as your anchor.** Textbooks are just one publisher's interpretation of the standards.
  - Keep the learning goals, but redesign the activity: take it outside, connect it to students' context, let them investigate rather than only copy answers.
- **Find allies.** Even in rigid systems, there's almost always a 5–10% of colleagues who want to innovate.
  - Form a micro-team to try things together, support each other, and speak with a louder voice.
- **Be radically authentic.** Students need to see adults who show up as real people, with humour, doubts, passions, and values. If we want them to bring their whole selves, we have to model that, regardless of system constraints.

#### E. AI and the Future of Learning

All three are cautiously optimistic and very human-centred:

- **AI as amplifier, not replacement.** Leona’s example: students doing a 360° review of themselves as learners (surveys sent to peers, parents, teachers). AI can help **analyse the huge qualitative dataset**, but the questions, relationships, and interpretation stay profoundly human.
  - **Learn from the smartphone/social-media mistake.** Sam warns: with phones and social media, we let the tech spread first and asked critical questions later. With AI, we need to build **critical, participatory use from the start**, not passive consumption.
  - **Many AIs, many uses.** Chris stresses there isn’t “one AI”; there are many tools, just like we say “language arts” or “maths”.
    - **Good uses:** Drafting and then **editing** narrative reports to save teachers dozens of hours while keeping human judgment and voice. Helping students handle large datasets, brainstorm, or explore ideas faster.
    - **Bad use:** outsourcing the thinking and creativity entirely to the tool. If AI is used to **finish** the work for you, the human learning disappears.
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## Main Entities and Useful URLs

### Schools & Organisations

- **The Garzón School** – innovative, human-centred school near Garzón / Punta del Este, Uruguay.
  - <https://thegarzonschool.edu.uy>
- **Imagination Lab School** – progressive K–8 school in Palo Alto, California, focusing on personalized, project-based learning.
  - <https://imaginationlabschool.org>
- **AltSchool** – former network of US micro-schools whose platform evolved into Altitude Learning.
  - <https://www.altschool.com>
- **Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC)** – mastery-based, competency-focused high-school transcript model.
  - <https://mastery.org>

- **Global Impact Diploma (example description)** – impact-focused diploma pathway integrating projects, leadership, and community work.
  - Example overview: see Global Impact Diploma guide used by the International School of Havana

### **Referenced Book**

- **Julie Lythcott-Haims – *How to Raise an Adult*** (often recommended to parents in this context).
  - Publisher page:  
<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250075662/howtoraiseanadult>