**Business prodigy brings US-style schools to Czech Republic**

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**At the age of just 23, Ondřej Kania has already established a successful agency that sends Czechs students to prestigious boarding schools in the United States and Canada and opened a private high-school in Prague. The young entrepreneur, who himself studied in the United States because he was dissatisfied with the Czech education system, has other plans in the works. In September, he is set to open the very first American high-school in central Europe. When I met with Ondřej Kania, I asked him how he came to set up a school at an age when most of his peers are still studying themselves:**

“We meet literally hundreds and hundreds of families from all around the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary and they basically have a similar problem with the Czech education system. One thing is the structure, where the system gives students no choice what they want to study.

“The second thing is the way of teaching, which is very old-fashioned. In the digital age, where every four-year old kid can use an i-pad better than his or her parents, most schools teachers still stand in front of the blackboard with children writing down what they are saying.

“Most of the people we were meeting did not have the money to afford boarding schools, which is the type of schools that we work with in our agency.

“So we decided to establish a school and bring the educational methods from the United States and Canada to the Czech Republic and it doesn’t have to cost 30 or 40,000 dollars. So this is what happened and are already at the end of the first semester.”

**What was your own experience with Czech schools? How did you do at school as a child?**

“I was a problematic kid. I did what I wanted to do. I used to play this video game called World of Warcraft, which you play with people from all around the world. I started my own guild and had some 120 people in the team, so it was my first role as a manager, in a way. So this is what I did before and after school.

“And then I went to school and I didn’t like math, physics or chemistry. I needed special attention which I never received and I had to have after-school lessons. In the eighth grade I was failing in physics and math and though I was stupid so it was like a vicious circle.”

**So this was the moment when you decided you wanted to study in the United States.**

“Basically I was trying to find a way to get out of the Czech Republic. Ever since I was eleven or twelve I used to watch David Letterman and other talk shows and I simply fell in love with the United States.

“My family couldn’t even afford a flight ticket, but I believed there was a way to get there. So I had that incredible American positivity in myself even though I had never been to the United States before.”

**So how did you eventually manage to get to the US?**

“Well I read a blog post on the internet from a girl who received a partial scholarship at some boarding school in California. So I found a list of some 400 boarding schools in the US and Canada and sent an e-mail to every single one of them. I basically wrote: Here I am, I have no money, can you take me for free?

“The funny thing is that I was accepted to a school in Vermont called Linden Institute and all I had to pay was 4,000 dollars. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the money. And now, we are actually opening a sister school of Linden Institute in Prague as their partner.

“In the end I found a small private Christian boarding school in upstate of New York, close to Albany. I sent them an email and they decided they would give me a chance. I received a full scholarship which usually means you don’t have to study and don’t have to worry about anything.

I found eventually that I had to do some work aside. I was selling cookies all around the state of New York, which was an incredible school in terms of business skills and salesmanship.

“I finished the eleventh and twelfth grade there and have a high school diploma from there and it was the last school I ever attended and will ever attend, I think.”

**Did the American school meet your expectations?**

“I had no expectations at all, to be honest with you. I just wanted to get out. I didn’t really know where I was going. It wasn’t a prestigious school. It was a school run which was run for about 50 years by a couple of people who tried to provide high-quality education even for students who couldn’t afford to pay 40 or 50 thousand dollars a year.

“We were a small school so we didn’t have that many subjects to choose from but we worked with technology a lot. I had regular subjects divided in different levels, so in maths I was in a lower level, because I never liked math, but with history and civics I had a higher level. It was great that I could on things I enjoyed and I could spend time studying them.”

**You have already said this was the last school you ever planned to attend, but have you actually considered staying in the US after you finished high school?**

“I did. The high-school I attended had a great basketball team and I got some offers to play at some pretty good schools, but I started to read a lot about business and economy and through our founder I had an opportunity to spend a week with a rich and successful entrepreneur who had a chain of thirty or forty charter high school in the US.

“We agreed that I would try to come there for the summer and be his assistant, so with that in mind, I declined offers from universities. But I later found out that I won’t be able to work in Atlanta, because I didn’t get a work permit.

“So what I was left with was to wait for a year before going to a university. But in the meantime, we started our business in the Czech Republic and there was no reason to come back.”

**And that business was a company organizing exchange programmes for Czech and Slovak students in the United States.**

“We started only with Czech students. We send them to the best boarding schools across the United States. The concept of boarding schools is to have an environment which would find interest and passion of students and take it to the levels they couldn’t ever achieve by themselves and to be accepted by the best universities.

“It was a very specific segment which no-one ever offered on our market. I also had the advantage of going to the boarding school myself so I knew a lot of people there.

“No, after four years of existence, we have placed there more than a hundred students from our region. They pay on average about 35,000 to 40, 000 dollars for their annual tuition fee, so we make pretty good business out of it.

“We are also the only company in Central Europe which organizes boarding school fairs. So from these activities, which grow every year by 100 or 200 percent in terms of revenue and profits, we are able to invest in other activities - our schools.”

**So can you tell me a little bit about the school that you have already established, in terms of its educational principles.**

“What we want to do, and it will take a few years before the teachers master it, is to provide the students with the same amount of information and knowledge, but through different processes. Through process which would not require just reading and memorizing, but which would require increase ability to work within a team, to solve problems, to be creative, to research.

“This approach is called project based learning and that’s what we are trying to introduce here. So that’s what we are trying to do but it is a long-term process, considering the fact that school is one of the most conservative environments in the world.”

**Homeschooling Pros and Cons**

**Introduction**   
[Homeschooling](https://www.familyeducation.com/school-learning/homeschooling) is becoming more popular every day, with a growth rate of 7 to 15 percent per year. There are about two million children currently learning at home. Homeschooled kids do well on standardized tests, are [welcome at colleges and universities](https://www.familyeducation.com/school/college-prep-homeschoolers/higher-ed-homeschoolers), and as adults, have a reputation for being self-directed learners and reliable employees.

Almost ten years ago, when I was [making the decision](https://www.familyeducation.com/search/Why+Choose+Homeschooling%3F) to homeschool, I wrote up a list of [pros and cons](https://www.familyeducation.com/school/benefits-homeschooling/pros-cons-homeschooling). The pros won me over, but since then, I've discovered there were many more pros and cons that I couldn't possibly have anticipated!

To help other parents who are considering homeschooling, here is a new list of pros and cons. This list is based on both my experience and the experiences of dozens of families who've shared with me the ups and downs of their day-to-day homeschooling.

**The Pros**  
**Educational Freedom.** Most homeschooled students have the choice to study and learn what they want, when they want, for as long as they want. This is not to say that all the basics (and more!) aren't covered. But those basics may be covered at age six for one child, and at age ten for another, depending on ability, maturity, and interest levels. (Unfortunately, a few states do have unnecessarily restrictive legal requirements; in those states, educational freedom may be limited.)   
  
**Physical Freedom.** After the initial shock of leaving the school system has passed, parents who homeschool say they experience a real sense of freedom. With their lives no longer revolving around school hours, homework, and the school calendar, these families plan off-season vacations, visit parks and museums during the week, and live their lives according to what works for *them*.   
  
**Emotional Freedom.** Sadly, peer pressure, competition, boredom, and bullies  are all part of a typical school day. This can be a particular problem for girls. According to studies, self-esteem plummets in middle-school girls. However, similar studies of homeschooled girls have shown that self-esteem remains intact and that these girls continue to thrive. (Read *A Sense of Self: Listening to Homeschooled Adolescent Girls* by Susannah Sheffer.) Homeschooled kids can dress and act and think the way they want, without fear of ridicule or a need to "fit in." They live in the real world, where lives aren't dictated by adolescent trends and dangerous experimentation.   
  
**Religious Freedom.** Many families feel their religious and spiritual beliefs are an important part of who they are. Homeschooling provides the opportunity for parents to incorporate their beliefs into their daily lives.   
  
**Closer Family Relationships.** Just about every family stressed the important role that homeschooling played in helping them find time to foster loving ties between all family members. Teens seem to benefit enormously from this interaction, and rebellious, destructive behavior often begins to diminish soon after homeschooling begins.   
  
**Stability During Difficult Times.** Whether there's a new baby, an illness, a death in the family, or another obstacle or transition, homeschooling helps families cope during challenging periods. Dauri, who homeschools her three boys, described how homeschooling helped her family adjust to a move from Europe back to the US, followed by another move across the country: "It was a great comfort that we homeschooled throughout the moves. It was a stabilizing factor in our otherwise mixed-up lives."   
  
**Well-Rested Kids.** As more and more studies are illustrating, sleep is vital to the emotional and physical well-being of kids, [especially teens and preteens](https://www.familyeducation.com/search/Adolescent+Sleeping+Patterns). The effects of early morning classes can be devastating to many children, especially those who are not morning people. After realizing that lack of sleep and hours of busywork often left her boy in a zombie-like stupor, Haya has decided to try homeschooling: "My oldest (age 13), is up at 6:30 in order to catch the bus at 7:15 and start school at 7:30. He comes home at 3:00 and does homework  sometimes until midnight. He's often exhausted. I'm hoping that when we homeschool next year, the dark circles under his eyes will disappear and his real personality will emerge again."   
  
**No Busywork.** Homeschooled children can accomplish in a few hours what takes a typical classroom a week or more to cover. In a recent interview, John Taylor Gatto, New York City Teacher of the Year and a 26-year teaching veteran, said that in many classrooms less than one hour out of each school day is spent on "on task" learning. No wonder these kids have so much homework. And that brings us to a major "pro" of homeschooling: No more homework!

**The Cons**  
**Time Restraints.** There's no way around it: learning outside of a school environment can consume *a lot* of mom or dad's time. Most folks visualize that time being spent at the kitchen table with textbooks and worksheets, but for most families, that's not the case. My family has never gone that route, choosing hands-on experiences and interesting activities as learning tools, instead. However, planning, driving to, and participating in those activities (or waiting for them to be over) constitute the bulk of my day. And *that* can be very draining.   
  
As a single homeschooling mom, Mickey wrote to say that single parents who homeschool their kids face even greater time restraints: "We have to be very creative in our timing because I work and homeschool. Luckily, I work close to home and have a lot of time off, but it's still a challenge."   
  
**Financial Restraints.** For married parents, one partner often foregoes full-time employment out of the home in order to homeschool. This can be a big sacrifice for families who are struggling to balance their budget. Surprisingly, most homeschooling families believe that the brief loss of income is well worth the satisfaction of watching their kids grow and learn in freedom.   
  
**Being with Your Kids 24/7.** There's no denying it  if you choose to homeschool, you're going to be with your kids most of the time. If you don't enjoy being together, then homeschooling is not for you. While it can sometimes be difficult, most homeschool parents view their daily interactions with their kids  the ups as well as the downs  as opportunities for personal and familial growth.   
  
**Limited Team Sports.** While community sports activities fill the void for younger kids, teens often find limited opportunities to join sports teams, especially competitive ones. Depending on where you live, homeschoolers may or may not be welcome to [participate on teams](https://www.familyeducation.com/school/homeschooling-socialization/sports-participation-homeschoolers) with their public-schooled peers. Several parents did mention that a few families overcame this problem by creating their own teams.   
  
**Living Outside the Norm.** Like any activity that challenges mainstream thinking, homeschooling may be seen as an oddity at best, or even as a threat to those who are unable to accept ordinary parents succeeding where trained professionals often fail. My family has developed a bit of a tough exterior over the years, but negative comments and criticisms still filter in occasionally. If you are unable to live "outside of the box," then homeschooling is not for you.

**One Last Pro**  
Although this list is by no means comprehensive, it does provide an accurate overview of the pros and cons of the homeschooling lifestyle. But I did save one of the best "pros" (from Bev) for last: "When you need a hug, there's always one to be found!"

# Prague elementary school principal says uniforms have been a success

[Jan Velinger](http://www.radio.cz/en/who-is-who/jan-velinger)

The first public elementary school in the Czech Republic to introduce school uniforms has said, eight months on, the project has been a success. The principal of Zš Františky Plamínkové in Prague 7, Josef Koudela, expressed the conviction that the uniforms (worn by the first-years) had helped the children better identify with their school. A recent poll by SANEP suggests that 40 percent of Czech parents support the idea of school uniforms; some psychologists are opposed, however, questioning their usefulness. The Education Ministry has stayed on the sidelines on the issue, leaving the decision up to individual schools.

The elementary school has decided it wants to minimize the visible signs of economic differences between students, and maybe even help some parents save a bit of money, by introducing school uniforms. The school’s principal, Jindřich Koudela, explained why the administration felt this was the right move to make:

“We’ve seen that children have a tendency to compare each other not only according to the clothes they wear, but primarily with that in mind. And richer kids can sometime say very ugly things to their less well off classmates. That’s why we decided we will try the uniforms, to try to give all of them the same opportunities.”

The local municipal administration paid around 100,000 crowns so that the school can provide four short-sleeve, two long-sleeve polo shirts and a sweatshirt to each first-grade student for free. The girls’ shirts will be raspberry pink and boys will have royal blue shirts with the school’s insignia embroidered on the front.

Some have doubts about how much it will actually level the playing field and not simply raise the profile of the school in the current competitive education environment.