

# **URBAN DREAMCATCHERS: LAUNCHING AND LEADING NEW SMALL SCHOOLS1**

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The Ojibway People, a Native American tribe of the Great Lakes, wove webs called dreamcatchers to protect their infants from harm. They hung these dreamcatchers over the infant's cradle to ensnare bad dreams but let through good ones which were believed to be the source of wisdom and possibility (Osofsky, 1992). As the dreamcatchers safeguarding the promise and possibilities of the American dream, public schools, especially those in urban areas, have come under increasing attack. Tangled in their own net, they have become renown for their high rates of violence and low rates of graduation and contributed to a crisis in the nation's confidence in public education. The bad dreams have found their way through the safety net, leaving our youngsters in harms' way.

In response to the debacle of urban school failures, newly woven dreamcatchers are appearing in several cities across the nation as diverse stakeholders in public education come together in a broad effort of new, small school creation. By being small, these new schools hope to create the humane environment that has eluded their larger counterparts. Their founders hope that small size will enable them to get to know their students well. As Deborah Meier has pointed out, "Adults work better and students learn better when they know one another." However, if all these new schools are is small and humane, that will not be enough. And if the opportunity to develop close relationships with students and know them well is not leveraged on behalf of improving opportunities for their intellectual development, achievement, and success, the promise of these new, small schools will be squandered. The choices they provide must be better than schools that treat and educate students badly and schools that treat students nicely but don't educate them particularly well. These new schools must embrace a more bold and ambitious dream: they must strive for excellence and equity. Through a strategy of small size, they must aim to become humane learning communities in which teachers use relationships to deepen their knowledge of students in order to engage all of them in an intellectually challenging education based on powerful ideas, help them toward social maturity, and prepare them for a life of meaningful possibilities and active participation in the American democracy.

What does it take to successfully launch this new breed of school? What do such schools need to survive? What are reasonable short-term expectations for them? What kind of leadership best supports their development and success? Over the last 20 years creators of small, innovative schools have asked and sought answers to these questions as they struggled to nurture their schools from infancy into maturity. These individuals have hewed their own paths as must the latest crop of dreamcatchers who have embarked on more recent journeys. This monograph aims to support those journeys by sharing lessons from the past and by offering strategies to guide school creation and

development.

## **WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO SUCCESSFULLY LAUNCH A SMALL SCHOOL?**

Whether a small school is defined by the number of students-- 100 or 500, or as Ann Cook has explained, by the number of staff who can sit at one table and have a conversation, or by the way students define it -- as a feeling of family, or by the opportunities available for all students to make the kinds of attachments to caring adults that enable them to mature and succeed, five elements help in launching a school. They are:

- a vision,
- the organizational structures and the perseverance to implement the vision,
- a committed constituency of staff, students, and parents,
- a sophisticated understanding of the local education bureaucracy and the know-how to negotiate it, and
- the financial resources and support, that depending on the level and immediate ambition of the school, can range from \$50,000 to \$150,000, exclusive of salaries.

### **The Vision**

Much has been made about *the vision thing* and for good reason. Launching a school is a statement of belief in the possibilities of education -- the belief that education can make a difference in the lives of individuals and in the life of our democracy. The vision is a statement that embodies and unfolds the school's beliefs about teaching and learning and how they occur. The vision is the architecture of ideas that guides the design and development of the school. It articulates what the school values and believes is important. It states how those values and beliefs will be enacted. It communicates the expectations for the school to members of the school community and to the outside world. The vision tells parents and students what they will be getting and where they will be going when students attend the school. Consider Urban Academy's vision:

[The Urban Academy] is a people-centered educational community [in which students] seek understanding in the same way as inquiring minds have done over the centuries. They ask questions and examine the variety of ways they can be answered. . . . The Urban Academy is committed to help students become good citizens who value civil debate and can and will engage in making informed choices for our nation (*Why?*, 1991).

When the turbulence inherent in school development erupts, the vision anchors the school community, enabling it to stay its course. David Hirschy, International High School physics teacher explains how in times of conflict, the staff turns to the vision for direction. The vision frames discussions on the business of school-keeping and is the foundation on which members of the school community construct common ground and the school culture. Urban Academy teacher, Gail Lemelbaum explained how she and her colleagues use the school's vision to reinforce their culture and mission: "There's constant discussion about what kind of school we want to be, what kind of school we are, what sorts of things we think we need to work on. I find that very, very helpful."

At International High School, humanities teacher Dina Heisler explained that "the curriculum flows out of our vision." In order to be true to their mission, International's faculty align and assess their policies and practices against the set of beliefs expressed in the school vision. The vision guides faculty to develop images of practice that embody and become emblematic of it. These images of practice are one way the school knows who it is.

Some schools build their vision around a theme such as community service or environmental studies. Other schools build their vision around principles of education such as the Coalition of Essential Schools or educators such as Maria Montessori. Other schools draw from diverse sources to construct their vision. The basis of the vision is not as important as its capacity to coalesce the members of the school community so that they work coherently and collaboratively on behalf of the students toward the achievement of agreed upon goals. So long as the school exists, as Lemelbaum's comment indicates, the school community needs to regularly revisit their vision to assess and renew their commitment to it, their common understanding of it, and how effectively they are achieving it.

Several questions that can help schools unfold and revisit their vision are:

- ! What is our definition of an educated person?
- ! What do we want our students to have achieved, to know, and be able to do by the time they graduate?
- ! How are we going to get them there?
- ! What and where is the correspondence between our vision of an educated person, our vision of a graduate, and our practices? What changes do we have to make to achieve a closer correspondence?

### **Implementing the Vision**

Creating the vision -- imagining the school of one's dreams -- is easy. On the landscape of the imagination where all is possible, obstacles dissolve. Problem-free schools with unlimited resources reside comfortably in a cocooned universe where everyone and everything cascade into place through a flawless flow of logic that is unimpeded by the constraints, contradictions, and unpredictably of the real world. So compelling is the power of an imagined school -- the vision of a better set of possibilities for our children -- that so many individuals come to believe that anyone can start a school and that starting a school is a rather easy enterprise. However, when reality intrudes, the complexity and difficulty of implementing a vision -- of launching a real rather than virtual school -- becomes apparent. School founders learn quickly that implementing the vision is hard and implementing it well, harder. The following decisions can help a new, small school survive its founding years:

- ! Designing an implementation plan
- ! Starting small
- ! Growing slow while pushing the boundaries
- ! Focusing on :
  - Community
  - Credibility

Culture  
Concreteness  
Celebration.

They will be discussed in the following sections.

### Designing an Implementation Plan

Implementing a school involves a dialectic between intention and discovery. By intention, I mean the implementation of what has been preplanned and consciously intended. For example the course offerings and curriculum, the schedule, the student class assignments, advisories, the administrative procedures, or the mechanisms for professional development. These constitute a skeletal structure for safety, stability, order, and teaching and learning.

By discovery I mean those opportunities through which the school community uncovers and pursues unimagined meanings and possibilities and unanticipated directions and opportunities for school and student development. For example, in an effort to assess the depth of their students' understanding, teachers in one of the clusters at International High School asked one group to develop an instructional activity that would demonstrate the application of the scientific principles they were studying. So successful was this activity that they began to regularly offer it to others. These opportunities emerge only over the course of implementing the vision. An implementation plan that stabilizes a new school can free the faculty to be responsive to discovery because stability provides time and emotional space for reflection, risk-taking, and adventure.

When staff use the implementation plan as a compass or a guide rather than dogma, they are more likely to hear, be in touch with, and responsive to the school's developmental needs. Mistakes can become opportunities for collaborative self-correction, reorganization, and redirection rather than cause for panic or forbidding obstacles. Everyone can increase his/her stake in the school's successful unfolding. It is important to remember that the implementation plan is an important tool, but nonetheless a tool. The idea is to use the plan to help implement the school, not use the school to help implement the plan.

A useful plan for implementing a school needs to include a vision statement and a description of the following components:

- the proposed student population and the recruitment, admission, and acceptance/rejection process,
- the projected school organization when it is complete,
- administrative procedures,
- the instructional program,
- student and school assessment plans,
- staffing categories, roles, level of experience, and hiring procedures,
- governance structure,
- parent involvement,
- mechanisms for professional development,

- mechanisms for internal and external communication,
- methods for assessing how well the strategies for implementing the vision are likely to achieve it,
- a student program for the first term,
- sample student and teacher schedules for one week,
- a budget for the first year
- space needs for the first year and a projection for the complete school, and
- a detailed plan for the first day, first week, and the first term. (A guide for planning used by several small school founders in New York City is in the appendix.)

### Start Small

It's smart to start small. Starting small affords school-founders the advantage of paying careful attention to setting a clear and strong foundation for school and professional development. Starting small enables staff to get to know one another well around the issues of learning and teaching a group of students small enough for all of them to know well. It can be easier for a small rather than large group of people to talk to one another frequently and informally as issues and problems arise. This informal talk along with formal conversations possible among a small group of individuals can build common ground for the community to grow on. Faculty members learn what and how one another thinks in the context of real-life rather than imagined dilemmas. They can learn how to struggle with closing the inevitable gaps between their beliefs, rhetoric, and practice. Although staff members may use a common language and subscribe to a common set of beliefs about teaching and learning, they do not know the degree to which their rhetoric reflects a shared understanding until they put their beliefs into practice. It is not uncommon for individuals to think they are in agreement because they use the same language but find they mean different things when they implement their ideas. Rather than cause for alarm, these inevitable disparities are a forum for discourse and debate that can challenge staff members to sharpen their meanings and construct their common ground. This discourse can be the substance for building the intellectual culture of the school, for establishing norms that promote equity, for supporting interdependency, for developing a shared understanding of standards of professional practice and student achievement, and for defining the boundaries on tolerating differences. Starting these conversations early in the life of the school informally and formally at staff meetings establishes a tradition of discourse, reflection, and professional development that can keep the school "responsive and responsible" (Darling-Hammond and Snyder, 1990) and anchored in its vision. As more faculty join the school staff, these early professional development traditions socialize them into the school culture and at the same time strengthen it.

### Growing Slow while Pushing the Boundaries

New schools tend to develop unevenly, and they develop in substance and sophistication **only** over and through time. The rhythm of growth is often fits and starts, pushes and pulls until enough time has passed so that the school learns how it grows. Much like tending to a new born baby, growing a new school requires feeding on demand and watching to learn how to respond to its needs and guide its growth. Such tending can help a new school develop momentum and a life of its own. This usually occurs only after 2 graduating classes when the school has come to completion,

has proof of its capacity for survival, and has a history, traditions, rituals, and a culture that tell community members who they are and how business -- from admission to graduation -- is done.

During the start-up period, school founders often find themselves overwhelmed because the task of starting a school, under any conditions, is overwhelming. The capacity and will of the faculty and school community to implement their vision establish the boundaries for school development. The members of the school community need to be respectful of their own limits and strengths. Yet they need to push themselves to their limits in order to transcend them, move ahead, and fuel the momentum of new school-building. The tension of growing slow and pushing the boundaries can help a school develop thoughtfully while expanding its potential -- to become more than anyone might have imagined. Attention to 3 major directions of growth can help schools survive and develop: growing up, growing deep, and growing special.

### Growing Up

Most schools begin with one grade and grow up one grade a year. However, a school can start at almost any one or several grades and grow up and down simultaneously. Olivia Lynch, for example, began the Partnership School with grades 3 and 4 because there was a critical need to serve students in those grades. The Partnership School then grew up and down each subsequent year until it was a K through 6th grade school. Starting with multiple grades and growing up and down simultaneously, it is important to mention, intensifies the school's challenge to achieve organizational, curricular, and staffing coherence.

Elementary schools sometimes begin with grades K and 1. Some middle schools begin with grades 6 and 7. Oftentimes schools begin with multiple grades in order to enroll enough students to be able to hire enough teachers to ensure integrity and variety in the instructional program. Sometimes they begin with multiple grades because they are committed to multi-age grouping.

Growing up sequentially is the most simple and least taxing expansion plan for a school. Growing up sequentially provides a school with greater control, especially over its development of a coherent intellectual culture that builds new experiences on the learnings of past ones. The staff can assess the effectiveness of the instructional program by assessing the progress and achievement of students over time against the school's agreed upon goals.

It is useful to keep in mind that the process of growing up wears on the first class of parents and students who, each year, are the test case for the school's program. However, when parents are satisfied with the quality of their children's experience, that tension can be offset by the excitement of pioneering in the invention and creation of the school.

### Growing Deep Slowly

A school community with an ambitious vision will not achieve it on the first day or in the first year. New school starters need to remind themselves that until they have a graduating class, each day is the first day in the life of the school. What can't be achieved in the first year can be

attempted in the second or third years as the school community develops the resiliency to absorb the new ways of doing business. There are but so many innovations a new community can assimilate and the staff and leadership need to be sensitive to their threshold. Doing just a bit less than will overwhelm and over-exhaust the faculty can promote a feeling of accomplishment and prevent faculty burn-out.

The depth and sophistication required to achieve the vision will occur only over time. The innovative visions undergirding many new schools require teachers to adapt new practices with which they and their students may have varying degrees of experience. These new practices, whether interdisciplinary curriculum, block scheduling, advisories, or performance assessments, are neither magical nor virtues in themselves. When used appropriately and effectively, they can powerfully access learning. But when they mistakenly are transformed from strategies into goals, the reform can become procedural rather than substantive. As Fred Newmann has pointed out, people can become more concerned about the tools of reform -- for example, doing portfolios -- rather than the reform's effect on the quality of students' intellectual development (AERA, 1995). Oftentimes, new practices are complex and subtly nuanced. They require teaching skills more akin to jazz improvisation than recipe following. Expertise will require time, support, revision, and perseverance, especially if the school intends to ensure equal learning opportunities for diverse learners.

Growing deep slowly can support the development of an inquiry-based and reflective school culture in which the school community continuously assess teaching, learning, and student progress and achievement. A reflective school culture can encourage teachers to thoughtfully introduce new practices so that they can be implemented effectively enough not to compromise the quality of students' education. International High School, for example, took several years to develop and implement a school-wide performance assessment system in order to ensure that the practices embodied their concerns about student learning.

Growing deep slowly can permit teachers and students to be socialized -- and in many cases re-socialized -- into the constellation of new expectations undergirding new schools. Where students have developed strategies for coping with impersonal and unresponsive schools, when they attend one that aims to be personal and responsive, they need instruction to learn new strategies and time to learn to trust. A strategy of advisories designed to encourage a personal and responsive education may require specific activities so that students can use the advisory for those purposes. A school that embraces conflict resolution must be organized to implement it. Project learning may require teachers to provide varying degrees of mediation and coaching if diverse students are to have access to success. Where teachers have developed effective pedagogical strategies for 45 minute periods, they find them ineffective for 70 minute periods that have been established for the purpose of deeper learning. Teachers need time and support to learn and implement classroom management, instructional, and curricular practices that productively engage students for longer blocks of time so that student achievement is substantively better than what the rejected practices produced. The understanding that innovative practice requires re-socialization and needs to be connected to student learning may lead a school community to adopt reforms more slowly than it had imagined. Instead of viewing this as a setback, the school community need merely adjust their expectations and their course as they journey toward the achievement of their goals.

## Growing Special

Being special is the fun of new school development. Being special has enabled new school starters to break from the deadening uniformity and anonymity of bureaucracy and invigorate the process of schooling. For too long, sameness masqueraded as equality for students and special meant elite. In fact, when unmasked, bureaucratic uniformity has often provided too many students with equal access to poor quality education and protected the moribund schools that deliver it with a cloak of invisibility. Being special need not mean being elite unless we are talking about elitism for everyone. Being special can mean being committed to a specific identity. It may be a validation of difference rather than a denial or fear of it. Being special can be a way new schools distinguish themselves and try to provide an education of distinction for their students. It can be a way of saying to the world, "Here I am!" It can be how a school becomes visible, knowable, and accountable.

New schools that aim to be special need to identify those features that make them special. By immediately implementing some of the distinctive features that define the school and that demonstrate its vision, school founders can begin to carve out their unique identity. The Community Service Academy in New York City's District 6 immediately instituted community service internships for their students. Middle College High School and LaGuardia Community College initiated their collaboration by making college resources immediately accessible to high school students. The Legacy School, culminated their first year with student exhibitions that they intended to be the signature of their instructional program. Legacy students researched an essential question and made oral presentations and defenses of their findings to their peers and teachers. As these defining activities become rooted in the school's culture, they strengthen its identity by demonstrating "who we are" and "how we are special" to the members of the school community as well as the outside world.

Growing special pushes a school to its boundaries because the unique events and new rituals and traditions shift the school landscape by demanding time, space, and the disruption of routine. As the school landscape shifts, the school community can learn how to struggle with the tension between their need for routine and predictability and their need for excitement and invigoration. If they learn to tolerate and negotiate this struggle, they can sharpen their identity, deepen their culture, and develop their capacity for self-renewal. They can "choose to resist the thoughtlessness, banality, technical rationality, [and] carelessness . . . that now undermine public education at every turn" (Greene, 1995, p. 2).

### **Five Factors for Launching a Healthy, New School**

Five factors that contribute to the launching of a healthy school include:

- community building,
- credibility,
- culture,
- concreteness, and

- celebration.

The development of community, credibility, and culture, the attention to concreteness, and the opportunity and insistence on celebration must be concurrent from the inception of the school. Their synergy and how they proceed make the school's developmental journey smoother or rougher and affect its chances of achieving excellence.

### Building Community

Since this new breed of school is built on relationships and trust rather than regulations, building community is the most important and difficult work of a school's first year. At a school's inception, everyone and everything is new. There are no precedents to point the way. There are no mechanisms in place to ensure access to information and effective communication, which are the cornerstones of community-building and community-keeping. Even when a school begins with parents, students, a staff, and other collaborators who are committed to its vision -- which is an advantage in community-building -- these individuals, nonetheless, come to the school with their own understanding of the vision, their own images of how it will be implemented, and their own expectations for outcomes. And they come with an investment in their imagined school. In order for this collection of individuals to transform themselves into a cohesive educational community, they have to begin to come to terms with the disparities between their imagined and the actual enactment of the school. They have to work at building common ground. They must develop mechanisms and processes for effective and timely communication and action. In other words, they must have regular, formal and informal opportunities to talk, talk, talk, do, do, do, redo, redo, redo, cry, cry, cry, and laugh, laugh, laugh. Building the internal community helps new schools develop a strong inner core. Building an extended community and networking with like-minded schools provides external support. All three activities increase schools' chances of survival.

#### Internal community building

Although the demands, urgency, and excitement of beginning a new school are reason enough to consolidate the energy of students, staff, and parents as they implement it, the conditions for community-building must be deliberately established for the school to actually become a community. Opportunities need to be structured for students, staff, and parents to make attachments to one another and for the faculty to develop a professional community so that the school can become a cohesive, caring, educational community. Small size proves an advantage because it is easier to structure opportunities for attachments and professional development when people can know one another and when huge schedule changes are not required.

Since students need and want to develop close relationships with adults and peers in their school, opportunities for them to have easy access to teachers and to socialize increase the possibility that those relationships will occur. Access to teachers can be made easy through arrangements such as low student/teacher ratios as suggested in the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, through mechanisms such as advisories and tutorials, and through shared student and teacher space as at the Urban Academy. More than anything, students need to make friends and

to find a place for themselves, where they are accepted, valued, and validated, and where they can find comfort. Opportunities for students to interact in intellectual, social, and extra curricular contexts help them make friends, socialize one another to the culture of the school, build school spirit, and create a sense of family. Teenage students, especially, can be keen on experiencing the kinds of traditions and rituals experienced by older siblings or popularized in the media: sports teams, proms, seasonal social events, socio-political activism, and even weekly spelling tests. A new school offers students the excitement of initiating traditions and rituals and establishing a legacy for those who will follow.

Parents of new schools have the exciting challenge of establishing the parents association, writing its constitution, creating its committees, and the cutting the path for parent involvement in the school. They set the precedent for parents' role in school decision-making. The integral involvement of parents in the formation of a new school can have a powerful impact on parents personally and on conditions at the school. In the first year of Manhattan East when the district office was slow to repair the school's leaking roof and crumbling plaster walls, the vigilant parents met regularly with the superintendent and got the job done quickly. Fifteen years after Manhattan East began, the "pioneer parents," as they called themselves, still comment on how "starting a school was one of the highlights of our lives."

The first faculty have the challenge of developing the foundation for a professional community which is seeded as staff members must get to know each other, learn to get along with each other, and develop strategies to tolerate each other's differences. Even people who have worked together previously or been friends may have to reconfigure their relationship so that it is appropriate to the demands of the new school. Staff are challenged to develop an allegiance to a new, unfolding and unproven organization. Often, they must relinquish the habits of their former school cultures and learn new ones at the very same time they, themselves, are creating them. As the school's identity is clarified and staff seek a closer fit with the school's enacted vision, some individuals remain while others leave.

Structures and traditions for professional development establish the foundation for a professional community that has the capacity to work cohesively on behalf of the intellectual and social development of students. From the beginning, time must be set aside for faculty to meet regularly, converse about students and inquire, problem solve, learn, and grow their pedagogy thoughtfully and critically together. If there is smart staffing, where a core of experienced teachers can mentor and socialize new or inexperienced teachers, a school can conduct much of its own professional development reinforcing interdependency and staff expertise.

### Building the extended community

Building an extended community means making connections and developing relationships with other stake-holders in public education. Neighborhood organizations, businesses, social agencies, local colleges and universities, and the central/district office are among those that constitute the extended community. When the new school reaches out to forge alliances and establish relationships, it can generate good will, confidence, local support, and resources, all of

which contribute to its development.

Building an alliance with the central office, helping them to have a role and a stake in the success of the school can be very important, especially since they control resources. By offering members of the central office a stake in the school, by including them as members of the school community, school founders can build the political and social capital necessary to sustain their support and to weather the inevitable conflicts and competing priorities that arise between schools and their regulating bureaucracies.

### Networking

Networks that connect new schools to other like-minded schools mitigate against the pain and vulnerability of isolation inherent in school-starting and school-keeping. There can be both political and educational safety and freedom in numbers. Membership in the network can give a school the legitimacy and freedom to pursue an innovative course. It can broaden the new school's learning context by providing it with access to experienced schools as well as other new schools. Networks such as the Center for Collaborative Education and New Visions in New York City, the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative, and the national Coalition of Essential Schools offer members of new schools a forum for problem-solving, knowledge building, knowledge sharing, technical assistance, and political and financial support, all helpful to school development.

### Establishing Credibility

New schools start on a promise, with everyone -- faculty, parents, students, and local stakeholders -- wondering whether they will deliver on it. Often silently, new school stakeholders ask: Will the school work? Will it survive? Will it have been a good investment? Will parents want to send their children, meaning will it be worthy of public trust? With no history, no reputation, no track-record everyone hopes but no one knows. As the deeds of school begin to provide answers to these questions, credibility is established. When a school delivers on its promises, when it has its first graduating class and everyone involved sees what percent graduate and where graduates have gone on to, a school solidifies its credibility.

Although the percentage of graduates and the list of schools to which graduates are accepted are two of the most powerful credibility tests, other indicators develop a school's credibility prior to its delivering a graduating class. These include: a safe and orderly environment; accessible, responsive, and caring leaders and teachers; good teaching; delivery on critical aspects of the vision; instruction that is interesting, exciting, demanding, and supports students' success; and a steady stream of evidence attesting to student learning, progress, and achievement. Nothing achieves credibility like success and nothing succeeds like evidence of student learning, progress, and achievement.

Events such as regular exhibitions of students' work -- art shows, written reports, math and science projects, mock trials, video-taped discussions -- and learning -- portfolios of student work that concretely show their progress over time -- can be powerful evidence of growth and delivery on

the educational promises of a new school. Delivery on the unique elements of a school is also important. The School for Academic and Athletic Excellence immediately instituted the impressive athletics program they promised including gymnastics and track and field training. Students at the Museum School began with projects at a variety of museums. Such activities enable the watching world to say about the school, "They said they would and they did."

School-to-parent communication is another activity that builds new school credibility. Some schools send parents packets that include the mission statement, the curriculum framework, descriptions of courses students will study, and expectations for student performance. Some schools host a curriculum night during which parents go to their child's classroom to see their child's teacher present the curriculum. During the presentation, parents have an opportunity to ask questions and engage the teacher in discussion. This type of event can clarify parents and teachers' expectations.

The flow of school-to-parent communication needs to be sustained for credibility to develop. Some schools send parents regular (weekly or monthly) newsletters informing them of students' activities, class projects, school-wide achievements, and up-coming events. Some communiqués include samples of student work such as poetry or individual student accounts of trips. Some schools send home the copies of the student newspaper. The more communication publicly documents the school's activity the more parents have an account of what is happening the more they are able to assess how the school is delivering on its promises. As school credibility develops, parent confidence builds, and the school begins to develop a reputation, and a following. In such a fashion it can become worthy of public trust.

All of these activities develop internal as well as external credibility, strengthening the school as a community. Faculty and students become confident in one another, in their judgements, and in the capacity of their policies and practices to achieve the school's goals. They begin to feel that the school is good and that they are good. Opportunities and processes for rigorous school self-review in which the school community can assess their progress and achievement and self-correct help sustain internal credibility.

### Building the Culture

As a school community articulates and operationalizes the values and assumptions embedded in its vision, its culture begins to take shape. Members of the school community learn what those values mean by the ways in which they are enacted in the school. For example, if a school community values caring, it learns what that means by examining what its members imagine caring to look like, what evidence there is of these or other images of caring in the school, how the school is organized to be a caring community, and what mechanisms exist that provide opportunities for caring. Similarly, if a school community values equity, personalization, and intellectual development, how those values are put into operation demonstrates what the school means by them. This argues for mechanisms that enable the school community to critically reflect on how close their implementation of the school is to their values.

The school culture lets the members of the school community know what is normative --

"how we do and do not do business here" what is acceptable and what is not. At the Urban Academy, students quickly learn the "No personal attacks" rule, meaning that individuals are free to attack one another's ideas, but not one another. Students and staff are highly attuned to the differences between the two and quick to take action when transgressions occur. An understanding of how business is conducted reinforces the school's identity -- at the Urban Academy, the enactment of the "no personal attacks" rule reaffirms the school's identity as a community committed to intellectual inquiry.

Traditions, rituals, consistent norms, and the allocation of resources in support of what the school community values, in support of what the school is trying to become, help build and reinforce a school culture that embodies its vision. The culture is more likely to reflect the vision when the school community has opportunities to develop a shared understanding of the school values and the range of practices that reflect and can operationalize them.

### Getting Concrete

Getting concrete means attending to details. It means setting clear expectations for all members of the school community. In fact, tenacious attention to details, respect for exactness, insistence on clarity, and the struggle for precision distinguish the desultory from the expert execution of a new school. Teachers at Manhattan East for example, needed to understand clearly and agree that each would have to assume administrative responsibilities since the school had a limited budget for administration and since it was to be a teacher-run school. They had to develop courses and curriculum to enact the school's commitment to arts and academics through a program of elective courses. They had to decide on how to assign students required courses and electives to ensure equal access to knowledge and opportunities to learn. We had to obtain student information in advance of school's opening so that the course schedule would be ready for us to begin the first day.

Attending to details is grueling, focused work devoid of the glamour that draws many into school founding. But clear, concrete, and detailed underpinnings and procedures are behind every powerful idea that schools faithfully implement. These develop over time through trial, error, self-scrutiny, and relentless revision by those individuals responsible for their implementation. Careful attention to fine-tuning the details of school organization, pedagogy, and student performance help the school community increase and sustain high expectations -- standards -- for faculty and student achievement.

Clear, concrete, detailed underpinnings and procedures are also behind every smoothly operating school and need to be a top priority if new schools are to immediately establish safety and order so that education can assume front stage. When the school has sensible administrative policies and procedures on issues such as school starting and dismissal times, rules of behavior, absence and lateness, dress codes, security, health, family contact instructions and when they are clearly articulated, understood, and consistently executed faculty, students, and parents can feel confidence in the safe, orderly, operation of their school. The policies and procedures comprising the administrative organization must be in place and understood by the faculty prior to school opening if

it is to start off smoothly. At Manhattan East, since we wanted to send out the message that we knew what we were doing and that we were serious, each year we mapped out the opening of schools so that teachers and students knew where they would be when doing what. Teachers guided students through an orientation tour of the building, took them to the school cafeteria where they would have lunch each day, reviewed their programs and schedules with them, conducted discussions of school-wide expectations including safety, interpersonal relations and conflicts, lateness, homework, textbooks, grading, and school rules. Students attended shortened classes so that they could meet their teachers and received their first homework assignments.

Rather than inventing administrative procedures from scratch, as Cecilia Cunningham (principal of Middle College High School and sponsor of the new Robert Wagner, Jr. High School for Arts and Technology) points out, new school communities can adapt the administrative procedures from experienced, like-minded schools. Manhattan East adopted the rules of District 4's Environmental Science school. As the new school develops, the staff will need to revisit and revise these practices.

### Celebration

Despite the pain and hard work, launching a new school is a celebratory event, not only because it is new, but because the act of creating it reaffirms the promise of education in our society as the gateway to "the good life and the good society" for all (Gutmann, 1987, p. 14). The opportunity for closeness, attachment, and community-creation and the challenge of embarking on a new beginning, a new set of possibilities inherent in new, small school-founding merit special recognition. Celebratory activities in which school stakeholders formally recognize their survival and display their accomplishments inspire optimism, validate our faith in human possibility, support the school's spiritual development, and deepen the bonds of the school community.

Through the creation of meaningful rituals and traditions that give voice to all individuals and to the community by acknowledging individual and collective achievements, triumphs, trials, and disappointments new schools can develop and celebrate their spiritual core. At Manhattan East, parents, students, and staff celebrated their commitment to one another, solidified the bonds of community and affirmed themselves through traditions such as the Family Dinner and Talent Show, the Renaissance Fair, the Beatnik Cafe, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemoration. At these family events students exhibited their work and achievements for the entire community. The Urban Academy reaffirms itself as a community at celebrations such as the communal Thanksgiving dinner and presentations that recognize students' achievements. On a more regular basis students exhibit their achievements to the school community. They report on their college courses, present their projects, and perform Shakespearean monologues and chamber music.

### **Knowing the Local Bureaucracy**

Public education institutions in our nation exist within the context of large and small, state and local bureaucracies which, although often perceived as obstacles instead of the supports they were intended to be, cannot be escaped. They are crucial to the survival of new schools because they control information and access to resources. Since access to information and the acquisition of

resources are critical to new school development, new school founders who develop a sophisticated knowledge and understanding of their bureaucracy and learn how business gets done, who is who, and how to network and negotiate put their school at a clear advantage. The knowledge and skill of working the bureaucracy is especially important for dealing with the regulations that bureaucracies are charged with enforcing. Although the common wisdom that it is better to apologize than to ask for permission holds, it is even better to learn how to interpret regulations to the advantage of the school and make them work for you. Since bureaucracies are not monolithic, there are always bureaucrats who will help schools and educators locate resources and interpret regulations so they work on their behalf. These individuals are worth seeking out and befriending for information and networking.

It is also extremely important to have a good working relationship with unions as well as a sophisticated understanding of the contracts guiding the working conditions of teachers and other members of the school community. The importance of seeking out the support and cooperation of teachers unions cannot be overemphasized. In New York City for example, leaders in the new schools' initiatives and the United Federation of Teachers collaborated to revise teacher hiring and transfer policies so that *non-traditional schools* could waive seniority rules to employ teachers whose pedagogical commitments were compatible with their mission.

### **LEADERSHIP FOR LAUNCHING A NEW SMALL SCHOOL**

The beginning years of a school are enormously demanding on founding leaders. Instead of the imagined glamour of the position, new school leadership more often resembles a struggle to survive. The tasks are uniquely taxing because founding leaders guide the transformation of the school from idea to reality by rooting it in the *terre firma* of administrative order while they simultaneously aim for the flexibility necessary for creative development. At an often dizzying pace, they shift their stance and rotate their perspective. Founding leaders are sometimes charismatics marching ahead with the community following in their path. Sometimes they walk behind their community to gently but firmly push them forward. Other times they run alongside the community, shepherding them in the path of the vision. And sometimes they lead from the cues of others -- staff, students, and parents. With a wide embrace, they bring the community closer in order for it to move ahead together. Sometimes founding leaders are in the thick of the school, sometimes they oversee it, and sometimes they step back to look in. Often times they seem to be whirling dervishes doing this all at once. Effective leaders feel the pulse, sing the song, and beat the rhythm of their school. They get to know it inside-out so that they can negotiate the competing priorities of the different stake- holders and mediate the inevitable tensions. They do what is necessary to make the center cohere.

Leadership that can make the center cohere is characterized by accessibility, communication, trust, perseverance, tenacity, fortitude, stamina, confidence, a sense of humor, an unyielding optimism, generosity, entrepreneurialism, decisiveness, good judgment, political savvy, boldness, inter-personal skills, a relentlessly passionate and brutal commitment to the vision and task of mounting the school, and the willingness and know-how necessary to make the school happen and keep it happening until members of the community find their place and until the school finds itself

and takes on a life of its own. Some new school leaders give more so that they can demand more. They are expansive rather than controlling. They nurture the excitement and possibility of realizing the dream. But, because school starting can be exhausting as well as exhilarating and terrible as well as wonderful, effective leaders must safeguard against their own as well as their staff's burn-out. They accept and respect individual limits. They are undaunted and resilient in the face of disappointment. They figure out quickly what is and is not important, what to fight for and what to let pass. They understand that ambitious dreams will take years to unfold.

New schools that aim to be democratic educational communities require leaders who embody the democratic, communitarian spirit as well as the skills necessary for democratic leadership and management. They strive for equity and diversity. Yet they do not surrender their high ideals to romanticism by failing to distinguish between diverse perspectives and incompatible ones. They strive for the authority of competence and commitment rather than hierarchical status. They seek respect rather than fear. They are secure enough to know when to push and when to retreat. They guard the right of all community members to have a voice and a role in shaping the school. They encourage debate and open communication. Yet, they understand that diverse perspectives are useful when they are directed toward the effective enactment of the school's vision and they have the skills to drive them there. They seek involvement and feedback. Yet they are not afraid to assert their strength.

New School leadership is most effective when it functions as a tool to achieve the vision and to support the growing school's organizational, administrative, and educational needs. Since few if any leaders can be all things to all of their constituents, despite the expectation that they will be, shared leadership can diffuse what often feels like an overwhelming job for one person. Shared leadership, in which staff agree to take on responsibilities for making the school work, encourages interdependency and ownership among members of the school community. It allows the developing school to profit from the diverse skills, interests, and talents of its constituents.

If teaching and learning are to be at the heart of the school, then new school leaders must understand and focus on the dialectic between the whole school and classroom perspectives and in that context, how to support teaching and learning. They must empathize with the sometimes competing perspectives of parents, students, and faculty whose collaborative achievements will ultimately determine the fate of the school and the quality of students' achievement. Nothing as much as classroom teaching helps a school leader to understand those different perspectives. Leaders who also teach can have direct access to the pedagogical challenges and dilemmas that confront the staff on a daily basis. They can stay in close touch with the classroom. They can understand intimately the working conditions teachers need in order to be effective. They can use their first hand experiences and knowledge of the school's learners to participate with the faculty in fashioning solutions. When new school directors can do the thing they are asking others to do, when they can be instructional as well as administrative leaders, they enjoy greater credibility with their staff and so does the pedagogy they want staff to implement.

## **EARLY EXPECTATIONS FOR NEW SCHOOLS**

Sometimes new schools are subjected to a level of scrutiny that is not applied to established schools with a long track of failure. Where often the response to such schools is to revitalize them by pouring in money and promising program packages, there is sometimes talk about closing new schools that are struggling to stand up. As new schools struggle to survive and find themselves, education officials need to understand that set backs are inevitable, especially when an ambitious reform is coupled with an idealistic but insufficiently skilled staff. Turbulence is predictable. Staff may regress to practice they disavowed until they learn how to implement the practice they believe in. Staff and students may leave. Although such setbacks are discouraging, they can be used to unify and strengthen the school community around collective problem-solving and professional development. It's worth noting that Central Park East Secondary School lost nearly half of its staff in the middle of its first year, yet transcended its initial difficulties to receive national acclaim.

We need to look at new schools from the perspective of how what is going on in the school's present is moving toward the realization of its vision. Lookers, be they visitors or evaluators, need to find the sense that connects the present condition of the school to its vision for itself. Sometimes those connections are apparent. Other times the connections can become apparent through conversations with the staff, students, and parents and through an assessment of students' progress. In assessing new schools, lookers need to resist comparisons with an idealized fantasy of a perfect school on the landscape of their personal imagination or with schools that have established track records of astounding success, especially when the new schools are taking risks to respond where other schools have failed. Rather, if comparisons must be made, they should be made with the reality of the kind of school and education the students would be receiving elsewhere, were it not for the new school. New school creation has been a response to failure in the public school system. It is an Herculean task that deserves respect and support. It needs to be looked at in the context of real not fantasized alternatives.

Although looking too closely too soon can undermine new schools, which develop capacity, complexity and sophistication in layers that accumulate over time, no school is ever unaccountable for basic achievements, even in its first year. These include the foundation for a tone of respect, an intellectual community, and a commitment to the future. New schools can assess their achievement of a tone of respect by asking these and other questions: Is student and staff attendance high? Is there order? Do students feel physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe? Do students feel valued by faculty and their peers? Do faculty feel valued? Are students optimistic about their future? Do students feel they are learning? Is there a supportive rapport between faculty and students? Are parents satisfied with their role? These questions are important because small schools aim to be communities, not simply efficient institutions that deliver information.

To assess the degree to which the school is building an intellectual community, one might ask: What is the evidence that faculty and students explore ideas? What is the evidence of student learning and progress? Is the foundation for professional development in place? To explore the school's commitment to the future, one might look at parental investment in the school, faculty and student ownership, the presence of rituals and traditions, the sense of direction, clarity about priorities, and a follow-up plan for year two.

As new schools assess themselves in these areas it is realistic to expect their achievement to be uneven. They will have work to do because starting a school is a daunting, formidable, and very difficult endeavor. And, starting a good school -- one with the capacity to provide excellence and equity, one in which the educational and social experiences that enable students to re-imaging themselves and their possibilities -- is even more difficult and rare. The creation of schools as educational communities that consciously intend to provide all students with the kind of rigorous, intellectually challenging education that used to be restricted to an elite is no mere downsizing of big bad institutions. It is a radical notion and an even more radical endeavor. No blueprints for it exist-- they are being created and recreated by the current crop of new school starters whose work across the country is attempting to chart a new course despite the myriad of obstacles. But what other alternatives are there for public education? And what other dreamcatchers? And what other dreams?

## Appendix

### **Planning Guide for Launching a New School**

This planning guide was developed from my experiences as the founding director of Manhattan East Junior High School, as director of alternative schools and educational options in Districts 2 and 3 in New York City, and from work supporting secondary school restructuring in New York City and State. The set of questions and tasks guided educators in restructuring and designing new schools. It is by no means exhaustive. The tasks focus on major issues for launching a small school in an urban bureaucracy. Some tasks are simple and are undertaken prior to the opening of the school. Others will need regular revisiting over the life of the school. Some tasks confront school founders with what appear to be obstacles. Treat obstacles as opportunities for playing with the confounding constraints that are inherent in school-starting and school-keeping. Such play helps school founders develop the creativity, ingenuity, and strategy skills that are often invaluable for school founding and development. Working with constraints can build perseverance, tenacity, and a deeper understanding and appreciation of the nuances required for making good small schools in the rough and tumble world of public education.

1. Describe the vision/concept for the school (See questions raised under the vision section)
2. What ages/grades will the school encompass? What is the growth plan (i.e., how many students in how many grades will be admitted over what period of time?)
3. Describe the population the school intends to serve? How will the school identify potential students? Describe the student recruitment plan? What are the provisions to ensure equity?
4. Describe the organization structure envisioned for the school (e.g., student grouping, class/grade organization, length of school day, periods, etc.).
5. Outline the administrative procedures.
6. Describe the instructional component (subjects, courses, pedagogical commitments, etc.). What will students learn? How will they learn it? Write out the student program for the first term (e.g., what subjects/courses students will take how many periods/times a week). Describe any relationships with external organizations.
7. Describe the assessment practices the school will use. How will the school assess both student and school progress and achievement?
8. List the categories of staffing needed to implement the program for the first year (e.g., a half-time music teacher, a physics/math teacher, an environmental scientist). What will the

process be for hiring teachers? Will teachers be expected to take on non-traditional roles (e.g., all teachers will be expected to lead advisories). If so, what will these roles be? How does the teachers' contract affect the school's plans for teachers' roles and responsibilities? What professional development will be provided so that teachers are prepared for these roles?

9. Describe the governance structure. Describe the role and function of leadership. How will decisions be made? Who will be entitled to participate in making what decisions?

10. Describe the parent involvement component.

11. Describe mechanisms for professional development (e.g., grade level meetings, departmental meetings, teacher study groups; teacher support, review, and evaluation processes; team planning time, etc.)

12. Describe internal and external communication mechanisms (newsletters, regularized meetings). How often and in what format(s) will the school report on student progress and achievement to parents?

13. Write out a sample student program for a week.

14. Write out a sample teacher program for a week.

15. How well are your strategies likely to get you to your goals?

a. Match your responses to items 4, 6, and 7, against your response to item 1. In what ways does there seem to be a match? A mismatch? Does it seem like your instructional component, your organizational structure, and your assessment practices will get you to the outcomes you have stated in item 1? How do you know? What's the logic?

b. Match 13 against 1, 4, 6, and 7. Are students getting what you want them to?

c. Match 14 against 1, 4, 6, 7, and 8. Do your staffing categories enable you to achieve what you intend? Are teachers' working conditions reasonable?

16. Draw up a year 1 budget for the following categories (Ask for the purchase orders from another school to save time on administrative supplies):

furniture

equipment (including computers and media)

books

instructional materials

experiences (e.g., trips, professional development, collaborations with CBO's)

supplies (instructional and administrative)

17. List your space needs for the first year (number of classrooms, number of specialty rooms -- e.g., art, gym; to be used how many periods a week).

18. Before opening, design a concrete plan for the first day, the first week, and the first term. How does it implement the school vision?

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