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Unthinkable?

Statewide “safe places”
for distinctive schools

Should states consider creating
alternative districts?



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If We Love Our Children More Than We Love Our Schools, the System Must Change

*by Dennis Littky
with Samantha Grabelle*

If it can be done once, can it be done again? And again? *Can* it happen? Yes. The real question is, *will* it happen? If the powers that control our education system want it to happen, it will. If we can get to the moon, we can make good schools that meet the needs of all kids. But the problems and the solutions are bigger than simply duplicating a successful model. “Scaling up” must be first about *loving* our children more than we love our current education system and structures. Next, it must be about providing *choice* for families and students. Then we can change and improve the education system of a district, a city, a state, and the nation.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the Coalition of Essential Schools set the stage and developed the language for the next iteration of schools of choice. Ted Sizer worked tirelessly to spread the coalition’s nine (now ten) principles to inspire school communities to examine their priorities and create a vision of education “that sees students and teachers as active partners in creating meaningful learning” (Kathy Simon, “How We Are Different,” http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/about/phil/how_different.html). Sizer developed essential principles that encouraged people to talk about and change the way we educate. He emphasized knowing students well, depth over breadth, personalization, student-as-worker, multiple forms of assessment, and small schools—and people began to set up schools that followed those principles.

With the stage set, Elliot Washor and I created what we named “The Big Picture Company,” a nonprofit organization whose mission is to catalyze vital changes in American education by generating and sustaining innovative, personalized schools that work in tandem with the real world of their greater community. The company was set up to design breakthrough public schools, research and replicate new designs for education,

train educators to serve as leaders in their schools and communities, and engage the public as participants and decisionmakers in the education of our youth. Our philosophy is grounded in educating “one student at a time.” We promote and create a personalized education program for each student. We believe that true learning takes place when students are active participants in their education, when their course of study is personalized by teachers, parents, and mentors who know them well, and when school-based learning is blended with outside experiences that heighten student interest. In a country obsessed by “test-score accountability,” we promote “one-student-at-a-time accountability.”

We called ourselves “The Big Picture Company” because we knew that our work was not just about implementing our philosophy in one or two schools. The world is changing and schools are not. We wanted to change the entire conversation around education and use the schools we started to influence the schools, districts, and country surrounding them. Our company motto is “Education Is Everyone’s Business.” Who is “everyone”? The president, the secretary of education, state politicians, teacher-training institutions, policymakers, college presidents and admissions directors, the media, businesses, and community members, as well as principals, teachers, students, and parents.

A Successful Design and the Original Model

Elliot and I set out to see what we could do through our direct work in schools to change the bigger picture of education and get more people to see themselves as stakeholders in the success of our youth. Our first task was to design a school that turned the traditional arrangement on its head. We had an opportunity to start a school from scratch under the direction of Peter McWalters, a progressive state commissioner of education for Rhode Island. The resulting Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (“The Met”) is a state school set up as its own district with its own board that reports directly to the state’s board of regents. (Any state can do so.) This structure allowed us to act autonomously from the very beginning. We asked ourselves, “What’s best for *kids*?” We pretended we didn’t know about subjects, classes, lectures, and grades. If we could educate one child at a time, what would the educational environment look like and how would we create a structure around it?

The school’s design is based on ten distinguishers that reflect our unique priorities for our small schools. The elements that make up all ten distinguishers must be practiced at the same time and are all valued equally. The distinguishers are: 1) learning in the real world; 2) one student at a time/personalization; 3) authentic assessment; 4) school organization; 5) advisory structure; 6) school culture; 7) leadership; 8) parent and family engagement/adult support; 9) school-college partnership/college preparation; and 10) professional development.

In rethinking the structure of school, we attended no classes but instead full-time four-year advisories, and twice-weekly real-world internships. We completely dismantled the “subjects” and developed a set of five learning goals that we feel are most important for a student’s success: 1) quantitative reasoning (learning how to think like a mathematician); empirical reasoning (learning how to think like a scientist); communication (learning how to read, write, speak, and listen well); social reasoning (learning how to think like a historian or an anthropologist and see different perspectives); and personal qualities (learning to be the best you can be at everything, from respect to organization to leadership).

When we started the first Met school, we needed to prove fairly quickly that the design worked. It did. And with the success of the design (and our staff and students) we continued to expand, establishing five more small Met schools throughout Providence. Each of the six Met schools is now headed by a principal trained in the best possible way—by teaching at the school and then apprenticing with a mentor principal.

We have always sought to demonstrate our success with multiple measures: 98 percent college application rate; a 98 percent college acceptance rate; a 95 percent attendance rate; and a dropout rate of less than 3 percent. We look forward to the state measurements each year, including the SALT (School Accountability for Learning and Teaching) surveys distributed to our staff, students, and parents. As Rhode Island defines measures of school quality, the original Met school was number one in the state in 2002–03 in attendance, high-quality instruction, strong parent involvement, positive school climate, student-teacher academic relationships, student-teacher personal relationships, and school safety.

Networks and Scale-up as a Real Possibility

When we started our company, we were hoping to impact the entire state and beyond, not just start a school. We now know that the design can be scaled up in Rhode Island, where six schools are thriving with a mixture of students from all over the state. Rhode Island Director of Charter Schools Keith Oliveira has told us that after we began to prove ourselves, many charter schools began borrowing elements of our design. We have been told that our success as an “independent” school helped the state charter school laws pass. Most important, the Rhode Island Department of Education has just put together regulations and guidelines that the chair of the board of regents told us, “Basically, copy ‘The Met.’” They are now pushing for all schools to use the advisory structure, develop a personalized learning plan for each student, and use multiple measures of assessment including portfolios and exhibitions, which are all foundations of Met schools. Statewide scale-up of a suc-

successful design is possible if the original model thrives in the right environment and makes its move at the right time.

In 2000, representatives from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation visited our schools in Providence and asked us to start twelve more Met-inspired schools in other cities around the country. After we opened all of them, the foundation funded forty-four more—a gratifying but daunting challenge. As an organization, we are meeting that challenge. When we began, we knew we needed to start our schools in districts whose leaders liked the design and had a strong structure in place to support it—a structure that included not only the superintendent but the community members, parents, and kids. Without the support of the first Met parents, the school never would have opened its doors.

These “Big Picture Schools” demonstrate that other scale-ups are possible. Because of the success of our schools in Detroit, the governor of Michigan wants to start similar schools all over the state. Soon after we opened our school in Denver, the adjacent town, Mapleton, asked for one of our schools. The Big Picture Company is currently receiving so many requests to start schools in other cities and states that we have to turn some away so as not to grow our network too quickly. Our network is the “nongeographic” kind Ron Wolk discusses in his essay in this journal. By welcoming us into the community, a district creates a choice—a “parallel system.” We provide them with ongoing training and become major stakeholders in the success of the children in the community. It is a “win-win” situation. Each time a new model is added to a district’s choice of schools, a greater pool of expertise is created for that district.

What It Will Take

Many elements must be in place for significant change to happen. There must be a center of power that wants and promotes change. There must be a philosophy, a design, and a successful model. And there must be a plan for doing much more than simply duplicating the model. Ron Wolk’s “parallel system” is one such plan.

As we have expanded our network of schools based on the design of the original Met, we have learned to ensure that there is first a formal agreement with the district to implement and sustain our design in a new, small school. We have learned when to make it a charter school, a district school, or a contract school. We’ve developed screening criteria that help us determine whether a particular location is right for one of our schools, including per pupil funding, facilities funding, political climate, and strong superintendent and board understanding of the design, support, and commitment. The commitment of education officials is paramount, but we have learned (sometimes the hard way) that it does not guarantee success—superintendents retire, principals are not

rehired, board members change, and choice and small schools stop being priorities. Each of our new schools needs a solid base of support in the community among parents and business owners. In Indianapolis we are partnering with the Goodwill organization, which already has a stake and an investment in that community. In other places, such as Oakland, California, the community makes it all happen and fights for the school when the climate changes. In Detroit, we moved fast to become a charter school under the direction of Doug Ross, a former teacher and elected official who loved our design. He then built a strong culture among the first students, staff, and parents that became an inspiration to the power brokers to open more of our schools. The expansion possibilities in Michigan are now almost unlimited.

Once we form an agreement with a new district, Big Picture selects, hires, and trains the principal a year before opening. During that year the principal connects with others in the network; receives as much exposure as possible to the original Met model (even taking over as principal for a day); learns the ten distinguishers and all the other elements of our schools; finds a mentor among our more seasoned leaders; visits our newest schools; reads, writes, and reflects on leadership and the philosophy; and does whatever it takes to pull together a facility, students, staff, and funding to make the design work in the community. Almost all our TYBO principals (our name for those in training “The Year Before Opening”) have been able to garner the support they need and have worked hard enough to make it all come together. We are still learning what makes the schools “out there” different from our Met schools in Providence. Data collected from our principals outside Providence show that their top two priorities are funding and politics, which is what Elliot and I faced when we started our first school. It is not just the design that will promote or inhibit scaling up but also the political climate and the commitment of the new area to choice, innovation, and funding.

Change Is Possible

The biggest barrier to change seems to be the *unlearning* needed to let new ideas flourish—real, meaningful change that allows us to question everything about the structures and the entire system of schools as we have known them. That means new policies, new language, new structures, and new priorities. And most of all, it means a new commitment to educating *all* students to be successful. We must take a hard look and learn from the horrifying statistics that reflect the disparities in success in higher education, not only between white and nonwhite students but also between middle- or upper-class students and poor students.

We must realize that one size does not fit all and that school choice is a necessity and a right. There is no one way to teach every child and

there is no one set of standards by which all children can be measured. While wealthier families have always had a variety of choices (from private schools to raising their children in neighborhoods with the kind of schools they like), poorer families have been stuck with the same old factory model that has been in place for nearly a century. I believe the Big Picture design is the best choice because it takes the whole child (and his or her family) into consideration and uses everything we know about how people learn best (when they are interested and the work is real and meaningful to them). But many other designs out there are also very good and work for different kinds of kids. The point is that we must give parents more power to be involved in their children's education, and the most powerful way to do so is to give them choices. The Met has hundreds of students on its waiting list because we are a choice that many parents feel is right for their children. I would love to get them off the waiting list by starting even more Met schools in Rhode Island. Until then, let's at least give them more choices.

Finally, colleges must change. They are the gatekeepers to success, and they have a tremendous influence on what high schools look like. They must work toward more equity in their financial packages so that poor, middle-class, and wealthy students have equal opportunities to attend and stay in college. The college dropout rates among poor students and students of color tell us that money is not the only barrier—colleges must recognize that they are not meeting the needs of all of their students and change their structures and systems of support. If we are to create a “parallel system,” colleges must change their admissions criteria to reflect the variety of learning environments students are coming from. They cannot continue to rely on SAT scores and grades—numbers and letters that tell you nothing about who students really are and what they are capable of. Colleges must accept transcripts that contain alternative forms of assessment like portfolio reviews and narratives, as well as alternative learning programs like internships and deep, concentrated work on major projects. Finally, in the best of all possible worlds, we must work toward expanding our K–12 system of free and public education to K–16.

It is time to change the strategies. It is time to change the system of education. If need be, we'll do it one school at a time. But, as our story and those of other innovative school change movements have shown, ever more scaled-up change is possible and is happening *right now*.

Dennis Littky is the cofounder of The Big Picture Company and the director of the Met schools in Providence, Rhode Island. With Samantha Grabelle, he is the author of The Big Picture: Education Is Everyone's Business, scheduled for publication by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in fall 2004.