

THE LITTLE SCHOOL WITH LOFTY GOALS

- ▲ **Goals must be crystal clear and forward focused**
- ▲ **Good organizations plan and plan for contingencies as well**
- ▲ **Members continuously and naturally challenge the status quo, seeking improvement**



It only took five years to build a new school in one summer.

The building department approved our permit on a Friday before the Memorial Day weekend, and school was scheduled to start the Tuesday immediately following the Labor Day weekend. What happened during the five years running up to this summer is the main course for this factor of culture: Goals. What happened the last week before we opened is the dessert.

My childhood schooling consisted of a series of trips to the principal's office and after-school detentions. In middle school, I spent more time out in the hall than I did in the classroom. I was

bored, had read ahead in the books and was just too antsy for the traditional sit-in-your-seat and recite answers type of schooling that was in vogue then.

My wife and I were both products of the Catholic School system. (We went to that great institution, Our Lady of Perpetual Guilt.) Where we live, we were not excited about our boys' prospects in the public school system which suffered from poor funding and lower standardized test scores. We wanted something better and different than what we had experienced when we were growing up. So, when our elder son was ready for kindergarten, we needed to make some decisions.

On the recommendation of some friends with kids the same age, we enrolled the boys in a Montessori pre-school located in the basement of an Episcopal church downtown. We had a year to figure things out, why not give the school a try? There we became exposed to an entirely different approach to learning. Thank you, Maria Montessori.

We were delighted with the results we saw in both boys. **Every child had a unique learning path. Kids were encouraged to follow their interest in a particular area of study.** When a teacher saw sufficient progress in an area, the student would get the reward of a new lesson. They were encouraged to move throughout the classroom, trying new things, completing a comprehensive curriculum. As someone who had been chained to a desk and educated through death-by-testing, this struck me as a refreshingly original way of doing things.

As we spent more time with the Administrator, she shared a long-held vision of creating an elementary program to integrate with the preschool. **Her approach was simple: grow the school organically.** The preschool provided a willing cohort, starting with First Grade aged children in year one and new, younger kids each year. This made sense considering Montessori classes group children in Lower Primary (grades 1-3) and Upper Primary (grades 4-6), eliminating the need for large staff as in traditional elementary schools. In addition to the curriculum, kids learned leadership: older children were expected to help the younger children in each group.



There were challenges from the outset. Seven years earlier, a group of parents attempted to relocate the school from the church basement to the outskirts of town. That effort was summarily quashed by the church's Rector. We discovered that both the Administrator and Business Manager needed second jobs cleaning the church to make ends meet for the school and themselves. No one had healthcare benefits nor retirement plans.

Moving on several fronts, we formed a non-profit, a Board of Directors, created by-laws to ensure healthy governance, developed a business plan and set about helping the Rector discover that the growth of the school would eventually outstrip the church's footprint. With his reluctant blessing, we set about finding land that would suit our needs.

Our financial challenges were daunting. Lacking public authority to tax and float bonds, we had to finance the project privately. Despite the importance of fund-raising,

our parent base was too small to attract the level of capital we needed. Complicating matters, some parents were reluctant to move their school out of downtown.

We had three things going for us: a crystal clear vision, a committed group of board members and the performance of the kids. Every year, more people enrolled their children, having heard of the good work being done at the school.

Little by little, events propelled us forward. The river running through the center of town flooded on New Year's Eve, destroying the basement of the riverfront church that had been the school's home, forcing us to find temporary locations. At the same time, the Catholic Diocese had been looking for land to build a high school and a new parish and had closed on a large parcel outside of town. We persuaded them to part with a few acres that they found difficult to use.

We had our campus.

More opportunities fell into place. We discovered that the grandfather of one of the primary students was an architect and had built several schools. One of our board members was close friends with a general contractor. **Our enrollment growth and tuition projections enabled us to service a \$1 million loan. Unfortunately, our budget estimate for the entire project was \$1.5 million.**

Fortunately, our architect had designed the school in pods. We had options permitting us to approach the project in phases; if needed, we could build the main school, adding the middle school and second primary school pods when we could demonstrate our ability to service the debt.



A few months before we broke ground, we received a call from the Finance Committee Chair of the new parish. They were seeking a temporary location for Sunday masses while they raised money to build a permanent facility. It so happened that they had a half million dollars in their building fund. **They loaned it to us; we built the entire facility that year and leased space to the parish for four years. When they left, we repaid them and reaped the savings.**

Our team remained wholly committed to the Administrator's vision. We made hundreds of mid-course corrections. We didn't waste time with "should haves." We remained flexible and kept looking for alternative solutions. We remained connected to our goals.

And we opened on time.

The dessert? Next time we will talk about the last week before we opened.