

Scaling Up the Big Picture

essay number 4

August 2004

principal investigator

Joseph P. McDonald, New York University

associate investigators

Emily Klein, New York University

Megan Riordan, New York University

1.

Big Picture, Local Story

How does a successful designer of high schools for one place take the design to other places? Consider the case of the Big Picture Company (BP), a non-profit educational innovator. It designed a different kind of vocational high school for the State of Rhode Island. Later, as the result of the design's success there, BP received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to install it in places far from Rhode Island. As of September 2004, there will be 21 Big Picture schools in 7 states, located in nearly every region of the country.

The first Big Picture School is called the Met – short for the Metropolitan Career and Technical Academy. It is a tightly networked collection of six campuses, each located minutes from the BP offices in downtown Providence. The first campus opened in 1995 in a corridor of the Rhode Island Department of Education, where it still resides. BP hired the architect who designed the other five campuses, and it oversaw the construction of these campuses on behalf of the state. BP staff, in collaboration with Met teachers and principals, and under the leadership of BP founders and Co-directors Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor (functioning also as the Met “superintendents”) designed a unique curriculum for these unique spaces. It is one focused on the cultivation of interest, the support of exploration, the development of responsibility, and the affirmation of family and community. Its major features are *Learning Through Internship* (LTI) – in which a student works closely two full days a week with a mentor in a workplace setting - and *Advisory* - in which an advisor oversees the student's pursuit of an *Individualized Learning Plan*, and within which a group of 14 peers work to establish a supportive learning community. Deborah Meier has written approvingly that what may seem radical about this Big Picture school design is actually “the oldest and most traditional idea around: Let kids learn mostly in the settings in which real people do interesting work,” then add a part-time community of peers to help them make sense of what they experience (Littky, 2004, p. vii).

Whether one sees the Big Picture school design as radical or profoundly traditional, it is undeniably different from the ordinary American high school. In the first of our four essays on “scaling up” the Big Picture school design, we wrote about the difference that this difference makes. One consequence of the Met's being so different from other high schools in Rhode Island is that BP has had to work hard on the politics of its development, expansion, and longevity. Today, the fact of its difference seems “forgiven” there, and the Met is widely regarded as an educational asset of greater Providence. But what happens when the design travels elsewhere? This is the question we take up in the following essay. One answer we offer is that “forgiveness” of difference does not travel nearly so well as the design itself, even with good strategy at work - materials, training, coaching, and so on. That is because the politics of adopting a design is fundamentally a local politics, and has to be played out as such. Other communities' endorsements go only so far. Elliot Washor framed the challenge well by comparing it wistfully to – of all things – building abbeys in ancient Ireland. They

needed to be “off the beaten path,” he explained, to survive the wars and the looting, and to protect their books and inventions for longevity. The problem, as he knows, is that contemporary school designers generally need to stay *on* the beaten path for the sake of seeming relevant and for building influence. One cannot blame them, though, for feeling occasionally that they would rather tend their books and inventions undisturbed.

Challenges of Scaling Up New School Designs

In our first two essays, we named what we take to be the seven challenges of scaling up new school designs, and illustrated five of them with data gathered from our study of the BP experience and from our reading in the literature of scaling up educational and other innovations. Our third essay explored the 6th challenge, what we term the challenge of obtaining and managing resources sufficient to scale. Now in this final essay, we explore the seventh challenge – and one of the most difficult: negotiating the politics of local adoption.

Seven Challenges

1. Balancing fidelity and adaptation
2. Teaching and learning the design
3. Instilling shared ownership of the design
4. Communicating effectively across contexts
5. Using experience in new settings to improve the design
6. Obtaining and managing the resources sufficient to scale
7. Negotiating the politics of local adoption

It is important to acknowledge that this enumeration of challenges separates phenomena that the school designer experiences in sometimes dizzying multiplicity. It takes an act of theorizing to distinguish in a particular instance any one of the challenges we name from most of the rest. The business of our essays is to engage in such theorizing so as to assist practice. One can think of these challenges as a set of lenses. Faced with an impending case of “implementation failure,” a designer or an intermediary or a school leader might ask, for example, whether the problem involves a failure to teach and learn the design, a gap in resources, a political issue, or some particular combination of these. Asking this question early enough may enable him or her to devise a rescue strategy well targeted to the actual dimensions of the problem. The lens metaphor is appropriate because our work means to encourage reformers to notice phenomena they might otherwise not notice.

In practice, there is no order to the challenges. Politics comes first as well as last. So does the challenge of teaching and learning the design, and of communications, and so on. But we put politics last in our list in order to emphasize a fact about scaling up new

school designs that is often overlooked. This is because it seems at the outset so threatening. The fact is there are limits to the reach of rational planning, thoughtful designing, and careful resourcing. Again, Elliot Washor captures it well in an ironic observation. “When I go to the schools, I’m shocked by how good they are. If we didn’t have the system stuff to deal with, we’d be fine.” This is the understandable longing for an apolitical context. On top of having to find resources, develop materials, train people, create a coaching model, network schools, and contract with local entities, you mean I have to put up with politics too?

Despite their occasional exasperation with the fate of having to deal with more politics than expected, however, Littky and Washor along with many other new school designers at work today ultimately come to regard local politics as a source of hope rather than of cynicism or despair. That is because local politics are the signs of their ideas being taken seriously, the signs of a real school being born. We suggested in our first essay that scaling *up* new school designs ultimately comes to scaling them *down* – that is, getting the details right in a particular place. Because schooling is one of society’s most fundamentally political acts, negotiating successfully among stakeholders’ diverse interests requires patient and messy work on the ground.

What follows are four stories *from* the ground, stories of real schools being born. Each documents different political tensions arisen from the particularities of local circumstances. Though the stories are unique, the tensions are typical of those that arise in many other local circumstances – as we know from our reading in the school reform literature. They include the following:

- The political burdens of being different
- The burden that reform histories impose on newcomers
- The complications that ensue from different interpretations of the design on the part of people operating at different levels of implementation
- The suspicions that system insiders tend to have about outsiders’ motives and theories
- The difficulties outsiders encounter when they try to understand inside culture.
- The problems of reconciling a new school design with state and local policy dictates
- The conflicts likely to arise between designers and intermediaries

The stories are not cases in the ordinary sense – meant to capture a wide range of complexity. Instead they zoom in to particular complexities. Thus they deliberately ignore much else happening at the time. And speaking of time, these stories are snapshots in past time. They do not portray the schools as they are today. Their usefulness is merely in their portrayal of some of the ordinary tensions of being born, and in the ideas they may spark of how to deal with these tensions. Anyone tempted to infer the identity of the schools should beware that we have taken pains to disguise these identities by changing what we take to be superficial details.

We punctuate the four stories with observations of what we call *challenges within* the overall challenge of negotiating the politics of local adoption – two to four per story. Arguably these *challenges within* are applicable beyond the four stories. We imagine, for example, that with the help of some re-phrasing and a few more story details drawn from our data, we might have associated any of the *challenges within* to any of the four stories. Indeed, as the reader will doubtlessly notice, these *challenges within* tend to repeat certain themes. In any case, we believe that the strategies we advocate for dealing with them are useful across a wide array of political circumstance. We derive them from an analysis of our data overall, and from our reading in the literature on scaling up innovation within and beyond the field of education.

We present these strategies in two formats. First, we end each story with what we call a commentary, and we embed the strategies there. In the commentaries, we climb out of the flow of the narrative onto a theoretical platform built just above the fray – one based on a conception of organizational change proposed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1996). Their conception has guided our entire inquiry – as we claimed it would in the introduction to our first essay. On the platform they supply, we make observations concerning what the stories’ key political actors seem to need strategically and what those supporting them should be prepared to offer.

Then, in a brief concluding section of the essay, we reprise these observations in the form of strategic precepts. We keep the precepts direct, simple, un-freighted by narrative detail, and - we hope - useful across a wide array of political circumstances.

2.

Negotiating the Politics of Local Adoption: Four Stories with Commentary

1. **The Politics of Difference**

Context

This mid-size, mid-continent city has an ambitious reform agenda. At the top of it is an externally funded initiative to replace a number of failing high schools with what the superintendent calls “condo schools,” or independently functioning small high schools. As he puts it, “Building size should not dictate size of schools, which is an educational question.” The initiative, launched in 2003, was crafted to respond to a concerted effort by leaders of the city’s Black and Latino communities to gain better educational opportunities for their youth, in high schools located within their own neighborhoods. Absent the opportunity to apply for Gates funding, the initiative might have taken some other form, but the city’s Mayor (who appoints the Superintendent) especially found political resonance in the “condo” idea. “Common sense tells you,” she said at a press conference announcing the initiative, “that a small high school will foster stronger relationships between students and faculty.” Based on this “common sense,” she committed the city to move fast.

This meant dealing fast with a set of difficult tasks. For example, the failing schools had to be closed in ways that minimized disruption in the education of students attending them, and helped the affected families feel hopeful rather than demoralized. Also appropriate designs had to be chosen for the condo schools, and the students from the closed schools and their families had to be helped to choose wisely among the alternatives. This is a city used to neighborhood high schools, and unused to an educational “marketplace.” However, the Superintendent promised “a variety of models and strategies,” and the Mayor promised that “the specialized focus of a small high school will better engage young teenagers.” They explicitly said they wanted difference. They said they wanted to do more than distribute the students and teachers from the failing schools into a set of identical “houses.” That had been tried in this city at least once before, without much benefit.

To undertake these difficult tasks, the district opened an Office of Small High Schools. The office was charged with investigating design options, with inviting selected designers to bring their designs to the city on a five-year contract. The charge was a huge departure from ordinary business here. This was a city used to designing its own reforms, and used to exercising tight and continuous central control. The Office of Small High Schools was also charged with supporting the designers in their efforts to fit the designs to the city, and to the large school buildings they would share with others.

challenge within

Some cities today seem to be undergoing a “constitutional” change in how they define public schooling – offering charters and contracts to designers, inviting students and parents to participate in an educational “marketplace,” even distinguishing between a school and a school *building*. The people most affected by such changes, however – including administrators, teachers, parents, and students themselves – may not behave as higher-ups intend that they should.

Met at the Buckeye

When Janelle Greene began laying the groundwork for her Big Picture “condo” school within the former Buckeye High School building, her mind was focused especially on staff and student recruitment, on LTI prospects in the city generally and the neighborhood in particular, and on figuring out how to operate on the city’s relatively low per-pupil expenditure. This was during what BP calls the TYBO year (for The Year Before Opening), when a new principal’s salary is paid partly by BP. At the end of her first year as principal, however, Greene told us that she wished that during TYBO she had placed more emphasis on “building relationships.” To us, her phrase signifies the set of unanticipated political negotiations she faced over the course of her school’s first year. All of them were consequences of the Mayor’s promise to move fast.

Greene’s school, called the Buckeye Met, shares the four-story Buckeye Multiplex (including its cafeteria, library, gym, and other common spaces) with two other schools – a K-5, and a middle school. Politically, Greene told us, the neighborhood surrounding Buckeye is “in the throes of gentrification,” and she believes that the designs for the three schools were chosen with this in mind – to appeal to different social class interests.

Of course, negotiating social class differences among neighbors within a single educational building can be as difficult as doing the same within a single residential community (Gootman, 2004). For example, the Met’s middle-school neighbor is a school that emphasizes a highly structured curriculum and strict behavioral guidelines. The contrast with the Met’s emphasis on individualized programs and projects, and learning in the community often seems stark within what Greene calls the “crunch of shared space.” This other school’s principal asked Greene to maintain “greater control” over the Met students within the common space. For example, she objected to their “clustered way of walking to the cafeteria.” Greene countered with an explanation that while the Big Picture philosophy urges student to adapt their behaviors to the different demands of different environments, it also respects them as individuals learning to function as adults in the world. “They can’t learn how to interact in a mixed environment if we structure it so much that they have no practice.” Greene’s account of

the conversation acknowledges her neighbor's interest, even as she assertively explains her own.

Meanwhile, difference has required political negotiation with parties outside the building too. The local City Council Member, Greene told us, "is very leery of the Buckeye Met, because she doesn't want a bunch of European people, as she would say, coming in and practicing their new-wave ideas on poor African-American students." And this councilwoman is very important in the neighborhood: "like your mini-president, your area president for several neighborhoods."

The fact that Greene is herself African-American has likely sensitized her to the councilwoman's challenge, and may also have caused this potentially powerful critic to speak privately before going public with her criticism. "She jumped on me," Greene explained, "when I said kids needed to do projects that help the community. She said, 'How are they going to help the community? They can't help the community, they have enough problems. There is too much on a child to think they are carrying the community on their shoulders.'"

"But I didn't mean it in that way at all," Greene told us, "so I had to quickly try to help her understand. It is a give-back to the community. I just don't take from my community, but I take and I have something to give, and it doesn't have to be in a big way."

Did she understand? we asked. "No," Greene answered. "She left not understanding, even though I explained it at least two different ways." But Greene resolved to follow up, to invite the woman to student exhibitions and other school events as the Buckeye Met evolves. "You have to kind of watch her," Greene said – letting the councilwoman stand in for a large variety of stakeholders. "You have to keep explaining."

Nor did the local councilwoman prove to be the only person outside the building to whom Greene needed continually to explain her school, and with whom she needed to negotiate a welcome for the school's differences. Despite the Superintendent's invitation of difference, and the Mayor's espoused confidence in the educational power of difference, Greene found herself during the school's first year continually negotiating difference with many school district officials. These included some assigned to the Office of Small High School Development.

One point of contention with the district involved its commitment to a literacy curriculum for all high school students, emphasizing mastery of different genres of text. This curriculum pre-dated the small high schools initiative by about six months – both pitched as efforts to improve high schools. The district imported the curriculum from another city where it had reportedly been effective in boosting adolescents' reading and writing skills, and in improving their reading and other test scores.

“I thought BP had made it clear,” Greene told us, “that this is not the kind of school that has content specialty. But now the system is saying, ‘Oh my God, these kids haven’t been given the opportunity to develop their literacy. They need the Genres Course.’ Where is the word *course* even coming from? The Big Picture design doesn’t include courses.”

challenge within

When an innovation is introduced into any complex system of practice – for example, an urban school district – its new designs and practices are typically layered upon the designs and practices of earlier generations of innovations. The result is that the latest innovation may have to jostle for room among incongruent predecessors.

Greene felt that the district had exceeded the bounds of what she took to be its agreement with BP when it appointed a literacy teacher for Met Buckeye. But she decided to yield on the point.

“The literacy teacher is working out,” she told us later. “The good news is that she is flexible.” Once hired, the teacher sensibly accepted Greene as her principal, and the two negotiated an understanding. On the one hand, they decided, the district needs a certain level of curricular compliance on literacy – and the literacy teacher has to satisfy her district supervisor that she is indeed a literacy teacher. On the other hand, Greene needs to stay faithful to Big Picture principles – not least because visitors from Providence will expect as much.

“But the literacy teacher is doing *that* part,” Green told us, referring to several elements of the Genres Curriculum, “and then afterwards she is connecting with the project work that the students are doing. So that’s not a bad thing.”

What Greene feels *is* a bad thing, however, is the attention that the district tends to pay to only certain content areas, especially literacy and math. “I know where the push is,” she says, referring to federal and state testing requirements. Yet in the year-end review of the school’s outcomes, “they didn’t even raise an eyebrow about social studies. It never came up. People will say to you that they don’t just care about only reading and math, but if that is all you ever talk about, then I know that is all you care about.”

For Greene, “social studies” seems much more than a traditional content area in the high school curriculum. It refers to a relationship between her students and the larger social environment that is at the heart of the Big Picture curriculum. This is the difference that her school is all about, as far as Greene is concerned, and what disturbs her is the fact that it is not among the differences that the district seems to take note of. Meanwhile, her larger concern is that this district that seems to invite difference may have little real appreciation of it. One small school here may be equivalent to every other small school here. Smallness may matter, but not the ideas that invest *this* way of being

small as distinct from *that* way of being small. In such circumstances, Green wonders, can she find sufficient support for the school to continue its political negotiations?

“The system really doesn’t know what to do with us,” Greene told us, “They really don’t. They don’t understand what type of supports we need, what type of leadership we need, what type of time line we need. They don’t know.”

Commentary

There is a difference between how change really works within a complex system like an urban school district, and how many people think that it works. Many people think that intention, commitment, and planning can more or less easily overcome confusion, ambivalence, and resistance. Indeed, the emphasis on a linear conception of change among school reformers – a clean cycle of *design-test-market-and scale up* - has perhaps never been more pronounced than it is today. This is partly the result of the urgency that many Americans feel about the need for school reform, especially in cities.

However, urgency about changing and underestimating what change entails is a bad combination. “The politics of adoption” - a phrase we use throughout this essay - is not a contradiction in terms. A generation of research suggests that educational change is actually and necessarily messy, non-linear, recursive, adaptive, and – yes – political (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Fullan, 1991, 2001; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996; Bryk, et al., 1998; Hatch, 2000; Argyris, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). And the deeper the change adopted, the more politics involved

Some cities today seem to be undergoing a “constitutional” change in how they define public schooling – offering charters and contracts to designers, inviting students and parents to participate in an educational “marketplace,” even distinguishing between a school and a school building. The people most affected by such changes, however – including administrators, teachers, parents, and students themselves – may not behave as higher-ups intend that they should.

Anyone who finds herself on the political frontlines of a Buckeye project should expect some degree of disconnect between the superintendent’s intentions and ideas about how a complex of school “condos” will function, and the actual reactions and practices of people in and among the condos – even if the superintendent and other higher-ups do not. Knowing what to expect gives a person in this situation a great conceptual and emotional advantage. The first helps her understand the need to act, and the second gives her courage to act.

How can she learn what to expect? Well, those preparing her for the work might engage her in an analysis and reading of case histories of school reform – ones that especially highlight the politics involved. There are many to choose from – for example, Muncey and McQuillan, 1996; Merseth, 1997; Lusi, 1997; Barnes, 2002. Moreover, beyond those already written down, there are the oral accounts that veteran reformers might provide. An organization like BP – with its connections to generations of reformers, and its communications capacities (video-conferencing, on-line chat rooms,

and annual face-to-face meetings) - is well equipped to provide such opportunities. And, indeed, on many occasions it has. In general, however – as is true of many contemporary reform organizations – it tends to think of itself as participating in a different category of reform from reform programs that have preceded it.

The purpose of such storytelling is, of course, not to discourage political actors but to fortify them. So the storytelling needs to be mixed with well facilitated conversation about the stories. What might the political actor in this story have done differently at this juncture or that? In other words, those “reading” the story need to assist each other in making inferences. Nor are stories and inferences enough. In order to apply the inferences to their own unique circumstances and to use them as a basis for action, the readers need a theory of how to account for what happens in the story. By the light of a theory, readers with their own political work to do can make a reasonable transfer of insight from another person’s story about similar political work (Scholes, 1985; Schon and Rein, 1994).

One powerful theory comes from the organizational analysis of Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978, 1996). In an effort to inform the work of the Annenberg Challenge, a late 1990s large-scale school reform effort, Schon and McDonald (1998) explained the Argyris and Schon conception of reform as follows. Every reform has three facets, associated respectively with espousal, design, and use. Together, they constitute its *theory of action*. The first involves the reform’s intention “as revealed or implied in speeches, press releases, interviews of key actors, program documents, and the like.” The second involves the reform’s intention as implied by program structures and strategies. And the third involves the reform’s intention as evident in what its participants actually do within these structures using these strategies.

Each of these facets of an overall theory of action may lack coherence. For a variety of reasons, an initiative may espouse disconnected or even contradictory theories, or it may embed them in designs or in use. Or even where each facet seems coherent taken by itself, all three facets may not line up with each other. . . . [Meanwhile] when an initiative is up and running, the facets of its theory of action co-exist. . . but the parties to the initiative may not be aware of the presence and influence of all three facets, or of the differences among them and what the differences signify (Schon and McDonald, p. 12).

Among the variety of reasons that may cause a reform to espouse, design for, or do incoherent and disconnected things is the history of reforms that have preceded it locally. This is well expressed in this story’s second *challenge within*:

When an innovation is introduced into any complex system of practice – for example, an urban school district – its new designs and practices are typically layered upon the designs and practices of earlier generations of innovations. The result is that the latest innovation may have to jostle for room among its predecessors, including ones that seem incongruent.

Jostling well means acting wherever and whenever possible to create coherence and connection in the face of incoherence and disconnection. This requires in turn a toolkit of political tools. For example, to take advantage of her first precious months as outsider on the inside – before she fully gels into insider pure and simple – Greene needs to be able to engage in what Hall and Hord (1987) call “one-legged” conferencing. The phrase suggests casualness, but the casual conferencing one-on-one has serious intentions: to gauge concerns, to test out an idea, to assess where things stand, to move a process forward (McDonald, 1989).

Then, when she becomes insider, she needs to know how to negotiate. Negotiation is perhaps the most valuable tool in the toolkit of someone hoping to create coherence and connection. So Greene ought to have been explicitly taught and coached to ferret out another party’s basic interests in a tense conflict, and in the process to acknowledge her own basic interests in an assertive but non-confrontational way. She ought to have been coached also in the facilitation of other people’s negotiations, and advised to use her negotiation skills to gain political leverage. Janelle Greene could become the “go to” person at the Buckeye Multiplex for anyone who needs help in defusing tensions. If this were to happen, Buckeye Met would likely benefit, because Greene’s skills would attach themselves to the school in the minds of her condo neighbors and district colleagues. “There’s a school,” people would come to say, “where kids learn how to resolve disputes.”

The story tells us nothing about Greene’s mastery of one-legged conferencing – though we can aver that her Big Picture TYBO training taught the technique by other names, and gave her practice through her shadowing experiences at the Met. The story does hint, however, at Greene’s capacity to undertake negotiation - in the account of her dispute with the principal of the “highly structured” middle school neighbor at Buckeye. And in its account of her interactions with the local councilwoman, it suggests her facility with yet another crucial tool – the one that she terms watchful explanation. “You have to keep explaining,” Greene says – again and again – to everyone with an interest at stake, to everyone who will listen. Explanation offers the best chance of helping others perceive incongruence among historical layers of innovation. Once perceived, this incongruence can be addressed.

Near the end of the story, Greene complains, “The system really doesn’t know what to do with us. They really don’t. They don’t understand what type of supports we need, what type of leadership we need, what type of time line we need. They don’t know.”

So, we would suggest, she should keep explaining it to them, again and again.

2. Caught in the Middle

Context

The Delmanto School District serves 50,000 students, K-12, who live in a sprawling city of a western state. Despite low per-pupil expenditures in Delmanto – lower than BP regards as the necessary threshold for proper funding of a Big Picture school – the district was one of the first sites that BP “prospected.” One reason was that Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor had a relationship with then-Superintendent of Schools Willy Grant, who told them that he wanted to “shake up” the city’s high schools. Another reason was that Grant had secured external funding to do the shaking. Without knowing much about the design itself – but trusting the designers, and attracted to their idea about student passion as the driver of secondary education, Grant committed to opening a Big Picture school as a district-operated charter school.

Meanwhile, Grant also committed to turning the city’s most notoriously failing high school – Delmanto Central High School - into six new schools-within-a-school. Here too he planned to use a charter design, though not a district-operated one. He planned to grant the charter to a not-for-profit and faith-based youth development effort called Hope Risen. The founder and funder of Hope Risen, George Moffat, is a charismatic graduate of Central, who went on to make a fortune in the entertainment industry, then moved back to his old neighborhood to help others gain choices. Hope Risen sponsors many activities for youth, including sports clubs, summer camps, and neighborhood after-school centers.

The use of charters as a major reform tool was among the practices that continually put Superintendent Grant at odds with the city’s teachers union, and the ensuing labor problems were among the reasons that he and the School Board decided to part ways with an early retirement agreement. This happened at about the same time that the first Big Picture school opened in the district.

Jane Houseman was chosen to be the principal of the Delmanto Big Picture High School. The district had initially put forward another candidate for the job, but BP found him unsuitable. It offered to recruit a substitute, and found Houseman in Chicago. She was teaching in a successful charter high school there, eager to help start a new one, and willing to relocate a thousand miles to a very different place.

By the time Houseman arrived in Delmanto for her TYBO work of scouting locations, wooing parents and students, and negotiating a strange new politics, Houseman found Grant gone and the new Superintendent, Grace Smith, just getting acquainted with the district’s high school reform plan. Houseman also found herself working with two men whose view of her school-to-be differed considerably. Scott Prendergast, Director of Small Schools, viewed all the schools in his charge as unique environments in need of development assistance. Gerry Rigby, Deputy Superintendent and administrator of small-high-school development grants from both the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

and the Carnegie Corporation, saw these small schools as odd if nonetheless interesting members of a larger class of district secondary schools.

Houseman learned quickly that more than personality was involved in this difference – that the pinch she felt and had to deal with derived from her school’s ambiguous status. Of course, during her first year, the school was no more than a concept. But even as a concept, it was neither “regular,” nor wholly irregular. It was a district charter, and both words of the phrase counted – or otherwise seemed to cancel each other out.

Being a District Charter

When we spoke with Houseman near the end of the Delmanto Big Picture School’s first year of operation, she reflected on its beginnings through the prism of what might be called its status ambiguity. Being a district charter, she said, means functioning within two systems of oversight – one concerned with charter policies, the other with district policies, each generating paperwork and management meetings. “It means,” she added, “that negotiation happens every day, every hour. It means constant attempts to build good relationships.” And these relationships must be built in the face of the fact that “the district hasn’t figured out what to do with us.”

Early on, Houseman decided to rely on Prendergast as the school’s “ombudsman” – though his somewhat contentious relationship with Rigby ensured that some number of his interventions would prove inconclusive at best. The choice signified identification with the “charter” side of the “district charter” label. Still, Houseman played up the “district” side of her school’s status on occasion too. For example, she relished a good visit from Superintendent Smith. “The new superintendent loves us now,” Houseman told us following the visit. “She did a walk-through and was pleased. There is a sense of welcome here, and the Superintendent got that when she came in the door.”

There is another Big Picture school within driving distance of Houseman’s that dealt with the same ambiguity by effectively denying its charter status in any practical sense. It opted, wisely it seems in its particular circumstances, to regard itself as a small, alternative district school, with no particular expectation of relief from district policies and regulations, though with full expectation of equitable district support. Houseman went the other way for reasons that include the history of her school’s development, the size and culture of her district, the political dynamics of the city as a whole, and probably her personality.

challenge within

New schools inherit the confusions of the place where they are located, which derive in part from the contradictions embedded in local reform history, and between one person’s interpretation of this history and another’s.

Charter Politics

One of the first things that Houseman had to do upon her arrival in Delmanto was to find a building to house her planned school. She found herself attracted to the Rocky Mount neighborhood of the city. It is a tough and gritty place, beset by gangs and drugs, but it is also spirited, multiracial and multi-ethnic, and in Houseman's judgment, hopeful. Moreover, it has relatively good public transportation lines – an important asset in a Big Picture school site. Rocky Mount also happens to be the neighborhood where George Moffat lives, where most of his Hope Risen youth programs are based, and where he and his colleagues are busy transforming the failing Delmanto Central High School into a charter school of six schools-within-a-school.

At first it looked as if the new Big Picture school would occupy space on the campus of Rocky Mount Community College. Indeed, Deputy Superintendent Rigby had made a "hand-shake deal" with the College President to house the new school there at a nominal rent. But the deal unraveled when the College's Faculty Senate balked at giving up the space. Houseman sensed that something was up when her Community College connections simply stopped communicating with her – just while she was in the middle of trying to recruit the new school's first students, and of course answering parents' and students' questions about where the new school would be located.

By then, Houseman had done a lot of networking in the city, following Dennis Littky's advice to affiliate for the unforeseen benefit that affiliations can bring. She had met Moffat early on, and cultivated a relationship. She knew that he was influential at City Hall, connected with the city's business community and the corporate community beyond, well regarded by the city's African-American community, and also by faith-based and other community activists.

Houseman also knew that she and he would inevitably come to be associated in people's minds just because they were both involved in high school development and charter schooling. Thus she needed to have a good sense of the man and his plans. This sense might prove helpful if she found herself having to head off a perception by the teachers union, for example, that her school – like his - was planning to open as a non-union charter school. She also thought that his perspective on what it means to be a charter school might be helpful to her as she began the task of negotiating her own school's charter status. She had heard that his negotiations with the district had been contentious and protracted.

challenge within

New schools develop within a thicket of possible political affiliations. Some are potentially advantageous, others potentially dangerous. However, it is difficult to distinguish one from the other in advance.

By *affiliation*, we mean a consciously political association – one intended to add power through a relationship. Doug Ross (2004) usefully points out that good will is the weakest form of political power. What is wanted is the other’s genuine investment – in this case, in the fate of a Big Picture school. This makes for affiliation.

For his part, Moffat also sensed a possible advantage of affiliation with his lesser-known colleague in new school design. When he heard that she had lost her school site at the Community College, he offered an alternative site. He owned a small building that Hope Risen had been using for an after-school program. But it was vacant now – the program having recently relocated to the elementary school that most of its participants attended. Would Houseman be interested in taking over the vacant site? He could give the district a free lease on the building for two years. By the end of the lease, her school would likely have grown out of the space, but she would have had the two years to search for a permanent home. For Houseman, the deal seemed irresistible, but the district took a long time to come around. At the time it was negotiating with Moffat on the details of his charter at Delmanto Central, and the negotiations were difficult. Indeed, Moffat’s offer of the lease may well have been a negotiating tactic.

When we first visited Houseman’s school in its first year of operation, we had difficulty figuring out where to go. The only name on the building at the address we were given said “Hope Risen.”

Later, we learned, however, that the lease on the building had not after all gone to the district free of charge, but at what seemed to Houseman a hefty \$80,000 a year. By the time the district responded to Moffat’s original offer, he had changed his mind. But by then it was too late to find another site.

Playing the Charter Card

When Houseman began to negotiate the terms of her own school’s charter, she felt in an odd position. Here she was a new district administrator, hired by the suddenly retired Superintendent, Willy Grant. Her job was to start a school that Grant had hoped would “shake up” the City’s other schools. Now there was a new Superintendent, Grace Smith, and Houseman was expected to negotiate with her the terms by which all of this might unfold – or not. What if Smith did not choose to start her term by trying to “shake up” other schools? This might be a sensible political move given her predecessor’s fate. Of course, there were the foundation grants to consider. These had been given to the district to support charter conversion, and they obviously required follow-through. But Smith might be able to follow through in a different way than her predecessor would have. Indeed, she showed some early signs of taking such an approach. For example, Grant had planned four stand-alone new district charters, but had arranged for only three school designs by the time he left. He decided one would be a Big Picture school, the second a Genesis school (a military-focused high school), and the third a New Tech High (a technology-infused design). Smith got to choose the fourth design, and opted for the America’s Choice design with its heavy emphasis on the district’s role.

Still, Houseman continued to turn the dial deliberately toward the charter side of her school's identity. Drawing on her experience teaching in a charter school, she embraced the task of negotiating her new school's charter by accounting for the "freedoms" that she felt made her former school successful. Then she developed a strategy with one of the other district charter principals to persuade the district and the teachers union to grant these "freedoms." The strategy involved making serious plans to become independent charter schools – with a 501(c) 3 organization as fiscal agent. They assumed that both the district and the union wanted them to stay district schools, but would not cede much regulatory authority without their strong threat to walk. At the 11th hour, they got most of what they wanted: (1) freedom to diverge from the district's scheduling system and calendar – though the schools are still constrained by state policies with respect to instructional days; (2) budgeting and spending freedom – within the fixed state allotment for charter schools; (3) freedom from the "bumping" provision of the district's collective bargaining agreement, protecting the district charter teachers from senior teachers elsewhere in the district who might choose to transfer in; (4) curriculum and instructional freedom – as consistent with the schools' designs; and (5) freedom to appoint their own Advisory Boards.

challenge within

Politics is always about leverage, and new schools negotiating the politics of local adoption have to figure out where they can gain some.

Houseman made sure that her Advisory Board was loaded with community clout. She wanted to ensure that it functioned as a de facto Board of Directors. Its members include a policy analyst at an important nearby educational think tank, who brings fiscal skills to the Board; the CEO of LEAD Delmanto (Linking Education and Academic Development), who happens to be a major connector in the city; a former Delmanto principal and Director of Personnel, whom Houseman calls "my principal coach"; the head of a law firm who practices education law and "does a lot of union grievance stuff," as Houseman put it; the associate editor of a business journal, who has been helpful in grant writing; the development officer of a social service not-for-profit who Houseman said "helps me think about how to use my Board members well"; and the former provost of a state college who has encouraged Houseman to "figure out how to translate what you do into the [state college] admissions system."

Now Houseman is looking for space again. The Hope Risen building is inadequate in certain respects – particularly relative to its cost. In advance of Houseman's first meeting on the subject with Superintendent Smith, her Board told her, "Say these words: 'The Advisory Board believes that Delmanto Big Picture School needs a permanent home – whether in an elementary school, or on its own.'" Indeed, Houseman said exactly these words, "and when she did," by Houseman's own account, "the Superintendent went to her computer and e-mailed the district CFO – 'Why does Houseman not have a site yet?'"

Commentary

Here we start with history again:

New schools inherit the confusions of the place where they are located, which derive in part from the contradictions embedded in local reform history, and between one person's interpretation of this history and another's.

And again, Argyris and Schon's conception of a theory of action applies. Over time, someone in Houseman's role – caught in the middle of an institutional ambiguity that is an artifact of local reform history – must act to reduce the ambiguity, or else risk a deep threat to her school's identity and survival. Again, she must do what she can to make the theory of action guiding her situation as coherent as possible – even against the tug of historical contradiction.

How does a political actor – particularly one operating at a middle level – do this? Houseman's story illustrates one possible move. It involves perceiving opportunity rather than threat in the next *challenge within*:

New schools develop within a thicket of possible political affiliations. Some are potentially advantageous, others potentially dangerous. However, it is difficult to distinguish one from the other in advance.

With a new superintendent showing early signs that she thinks the *district* side of the title “district charter” weighs more heavily than the other side in the local political calculus – Houseman might well have been inclined to dodge one of the affiliations she ends up embracing. But she seems to know that nearly all affiliations can be manipulated to advantage, given the right awareness, attention, and moves. And she seems drawn – for reasons we disclose below - to the affiliations that will highlight her school's difference.

One cannot tell from this story alone whether the affiliation Houseman cultivated with Moffat, the high-profile charter school developer, turned out finally to be a favorable or unfavorable one with respect to the development of the Delmanto Big Picture High School. In this respect, the reader is in the same position as Houseman was at the time. No one can foretell the future. However, the political actor is in the job of trying to make the future. Although the deal Moffat initially offers Houseman's school turned out not to be so good financially as it first seemed, Houseman's strong and conscious affiliation with Hope Risen – resulting even in the ambiguous signage that caused some people to wonder whether Houseman's school was actually Moffat's – seems in retrospect to have been the right move. As the story puts it, she deliberately decided to turn the dial toward charter even as her superintendent seemed to be suggesting that she might better turn it the other way. In the process, she gained leverage and used the leverage.

Politics is always about leverage, and new schools negotiating the politics of local adoption have to figure out where they can gain some.

Why did she think to do it? One answer is that her Big Picture TYBO training and coaching prepared her to do it. It emphasized the need for a Big Picture school to embrace its difference, and to cultivate powerful allies in the community who are attracted to the difference, and whose support might protect the school against inevitable efforts from people like Superintendent Smith to wear down its difference. A second answer, as the story reveals, is that Houseman had another network besides the Big Picture network to draw support from, and this one also told her to go the way she did, and advised her on some concrete steps to take. She had worked in a charter school. She was in touch with its founder and director who helped her understand the fundamental “freedoms” – as she put it – of charter schooling, and the value of a powerful (even if – in her case - merely advisory) board.

Willy Grant’s and Jane Houseman’s commitments make the “constitutional” implications of this story pronounced. Of course, Janelle Greene had to deal with the consequences of “constitutional” change also, but she did not have to make a choice as Jane Houseman does between one constitution and another. Houseman offers a good model for the circumstances: by all means choose. The Argyris and Schon conception of what is at stake requires the action of people like Houseman who are willing to define the theory of action – even when that seems risky. My school is different, she says, and this requires an organizational status that respects difference.

3. False Moves

Context

The prospects seemed good for a Big Picture start-up in this mid-Atlantic city. The city's reform history had prepared the way, as James Hutton put it, a scholar who has long tracked school reform here. First there is a long-standing acknowledgment here of the value of individual school difference, counteracting the urban norm of regarding individual schools as mere outposts of a district bureaucracy or of a mayoral reform strategy. Encouragement of school difference is a sine qua non for Big Picture schooling. Since the 1990's too, the city has dedicated many resources to building "civic capacity" for school reform, launching many partnerships between individual schools and non-profit organizations. Some of these partnerships have involved new designs for schooling – a tendency that became pervasive toward the end of the 1990's when federal legislation and several foundations explicitly encouraged schools to adopt new school designs fashioned by independent school designers. Along the way, parents, the teachers' union, and district officials became used to the idea that system outsiders can be a source of good ideas and support for schools.

However, the city's reform history contains contradictions – as reform histories usually do. The focus on school difference and design partnerships has contended over time with an emphasis on central control. The latter takes two forms. First there is the long tradition here of accountability-focused school reform, involving the use of high-stakes testing, school report cards, reconstitution of failing schools, strict grade retention policies, and citywide curricula. And there is also the recent use of centrally driven instructional capacity-building efforts, and leadership development initiatives. As Hutton put it, "You still have all these local initiatives and charters and small schools, and all of the accountability. . . . [Then] layered on top of that, is a set of new system-wide initiatives on curriculum development, instructional improvement, and human resource development. You might argue that somewhere along the line that's going to rub up against [innovative designers] who have really great ideas."

challenge within

Local political environments for new school design are composed partly of the different theories of reform their histories have layered on. To the outsider's eye, local accommodations of history may seem incongruous and counterproductive. Yet they are inescapably part of the environment.

Enter the Big Picture

The Year Before Opening – or TYBO – is a crucial period in Big Picture school development and in BP scale-up theory. It is when a new principal is recruited and trained, a facility secured, advisors and other staff hired, parents and students recruited and prepared. It is when the principal learns the design and is initiated into the network of other Big Picture school leaders. A key element of TYBO also is the time the principal spends in Providence, shadowing a Met principal, observing the design in action, and talking with students, advisors, mentors, and parents. Much political work back home has been done by then. For example, BP leaders have met city and school system leaders, public presentations have been made, expectations expressed, memoranda of agreement devised and signed. However much political work remains.

Start-up is messy. Contact, conversation, and agreement are complicated by efforts to articulate and understand difference. In this case, there is the difference between a Big Picture school and other local high schools – big or small. Even in a city tolerant of school difference, difficulties in understanding the Big Picture design difference can be considerable. Next is the difference between how the new locale operates – product of policies, procedures, cultures, politics, tacit assumptions, and history - and how Rhode Island operates (which remains BP’s principal frame of reference, given the Providence Met’s status as a state-operated school).

It is not that Rhode Island is inherently a more hospitable environment for Big Picture schooling than most others. The year before its opening, the Met had easily as many challenges as the school we are discussing here, and the politics of managing them was the same in a general sense – demanding, for example, an intense amount of local networking, the cultivation of powerful friends, the excavation of relevant histories, and so on. But difference matters too: city and state politics; personalities; management-labor histories; and customs of negotiation (for example, spelling things out versus taking things for granted).

challenge within

The complications of difference are compounded in many places – particularly in cities used to dealing nearly exclusively with home-grown professionals - by a tendency to take tacit local knowledge for granted. “You mean you didn’t know that’s how we do things? Well, why didn’t you ask?” In such circumstances, it can take a long time to figure out local politics, and new school designers and start-up principals tend not to have lots of time available.

BP’s entree into this particular city involved meetings between BP’s co-founders and officials of the school district including the superintendent. It also involved negotiations concerning a memorandum of understanding with the district (MOU), and it

involved several unexpected political issues. One concerned where the school should be located.

Principal Louise Ortiz anticipated opening her new school in the Silver Lake neighborhood on the city's northwest side. This is where she herself grew up, and where she taught for seven years in the bilingual Ciudad Elementary School, dedicated to integrating academics with Spanish Caribbean art and culture. Ortiz's attraction to BP was tied from the beginning to a sense of the contribution she might make as a Big Picture school principal to this specific neighborhood, given her extensive knowledge of the place. Indeed, she had come to BP's attention based on the reputation she had gained among certain of the city's reform activists as a deeply community-minded Ciudad teacher. She imagined locating her high school near the Ciudad School, and forming a feeder pattern with it. To this end, she spent months talking about Big Picture schooling with the neighborhood block club presidents, officials of the local community development corporation, and with owners and workers of local shops. She assumed reasonably that her knowledge of place – plus her ability to teach local people about Big Picture schooling - would be critical to creating a successful neighborhood school which was different from the norm of American high schooling, and dependent on parents and workplace mentors. Moreover, she imagined that both the district's and BP's interest in her as a principal-in-waiting was based especially on her capacity for pulling this off, and not just on more general qualifications – such as her being a talented, bilingual educator of Spanish Caribbean ancestry.

But the politics of place are often thicker than they seem. After months of political work in Silver Lake, Louise Ortiz discovered a politics beyond the interests of the parents, shopkeepers, and politicians she had been addressing. Within the context of this other politics, it did not matter that her school was to be a Big Picture school, or that she was perfect for Silver Lake. The other politics was insistent: her school could not be located in Silver Lake because Silver Lake had already been given another new high school by the Mayor. This was in response to a major protest on the part of some parents. They had protested the lack of good high school options in the Silver Lake community, and the fact that two previous high school building projects in the city had gone to white middle-class neighborhoods. The Mayor had dealt with this political threat. He had delivered. Now it was another community's turn to get a new high school. Indeed, the Superintendent had already promised Ortiz's school to the Councilman representing a predominantly Mexican-American community on the other side of town. The fact that the school would come with a Latino principal – even if she knew nothing about the community – seemed a plus within this other politics.

The shift of political level and place caught Ortiz by surprise. Partly, as she acknowledged to us, this was because she was out of touch with the politics of the larger city and school district. BP had hired a local consultant well versed in the politics of the city's school reform to help her and BP in their negotiations, but his help seemed distant from her political concerns. These were focused on Silver Lake. Indeed, Ortiz had invested so much in Silver Lake that it was difficult to give it up readily. Her resistance

came to the attention of the Superintendent, who expressed his annoyance directly to BP's leaders.

Urban school systems can be unforgiving of those they perceive as politically naïve or difficult. Deputy Superintendent Susan Jameson told us later, "The system is a big business. You need to spend time in the system, know people. It's a question of who's got the power and how to negotiate it." Assistant Superintendent for Operations Nancy Thomas put more blame on BP than on Ortiz: "They should have spent more time penetrating. There wasn't enough 'pre' and they wound up short on intelligent, intense local support."

Meanwhile, Elliot Washor complained to us that even presumably powerful insiders in this city often have a hard time getting things done. A "bureaucracy thick with people and process" is how he describes the district, and full also of adverse reactions to the very new schools that its leadership is promoting.

challenge within

The local political terrain is thick. Still, the school designer must be prepared to penetrate it. This takes time, skills on the ground, and multiple levels of local knowledge.

Status Negotiations

The new Big Picture School opened the following year in the neighborhood the Mayor and Superintendent had chosen, with Louise Ortiz as principal. It opened as a regular district high school. Susan Jameson had urged BP to make it a charter school instead. The city had several charters to award at the time the school opened. Jameson told us that she knew the school would need a higher than ordinary level of autonomy to get established well, and that only charter status could provide this. But going charter would have meant receiving fewer operating dollars, and having to raise private funds to cover capital costs. Ortiz had no expertise in this area – and in any case, was quite busy with the other demands of starting up. Nor was BP in a position to devote central staff resources to local fundraising. Moreover, it had long been ambivalent about charter status, fearing that it might limit the design's influence. Meanwhile, the local political consultant whom BP engaged fed this concern. "Most of the charter schools here are for white kids and rich kids," he told us later. "But we wanted the Big Picture school to be more than a boutique school. It's completely re-thinking high school – if it can't be part of the system as it's doing that, what's the point?"

Caught between conflicting advice, BP and Ortiz chose regular status. Still, reflecting the city's long experience with school difference, the new school opened with a relatively elaborate memorandum of agreement in place. For example, the MOU

specified outcomes: “BP’s services shall result in high-performing, small high schools with high graduation rates, high college attendance rates, high [test] scores, high [test] growth, high student attendance, low dropout rates, and low mobility rates as defined in the agreement.” It also specified some inputs, including the number of staff positions in each of a school’s first four years, and an “estimated” operating budget for years 1 and 4. Finally, elements of the MOU promised a level of operational authority consistent with Big Picture difference – for example, with respect to curriculum and professional development activities.

Nancy Thomas told us that the MOU was “a Board report, not a real contract.” She acknowledged, however, that BP might have considered it more binding than she or other district insiders had. “I think Elliot Washor thought he could set up and be left alone. We could have done that, but it’s too late now.” Indeed, the City does have a number of what it calls contract schools – where it foregoes ordinary oversight in exchange for an elaborate specification of inputs and outcomes (Hill, Campbell & Harvey, 2000). But just as the political consultant had discouraged BP from going for charter status, he had discouraged contract status too. “A contract school? Nobody knows what those are. It’s bad news when nobody knows what you are.”

Misunderstanding

Shortly after Ortiz opened her Big Picture school, the district launched a citywide initiative to improve math and science instruction. By the light of this initiative, the new school seemed wanting. “She hasn’t hired a math and science teacher yet,” Susan Jameson complained to us. “In order for the kids to receive credit for the school year, they need to have math and science.” Meanwhile, the district had failed to notice the problem until January, and took still longer to post the vacancies. For Ortiz, this January crisis seemed emblematic of the city’s failure to understand the Big Picture school design. What a Big Picture school needs, in her view, are good generalists to serve as advisors, not subject matter specialists.

But Jameson disagreed. Yes, the MOU grants certain opportunities for curricular difference to the Big Picture school, but it also clearly specifies that the district’s goals must be met. “It’s a question of where Ortiz’s allegiance is,” Jameson told us. “To Big Picture or to the public school system?” In fact, by then Ortiz had begun to explore yet another allegiance. “Now, I stay hidden,” she told us. “I’ve retreated into the school - which [politically] might be the wrong thing to do.”

challenge within

A school’s status is a local construction resting on political understanding. Charters, contracts, and memoranda of agreement mean different things in different places, and cannot substitute for political understanding.

Commentary

The protagonist and chief political actor in this story is again the principal, and the principal must again confront a complex and historically conditioned theory of action.

Local political environments for new school design are composed partly of the different theories of reform their histories have layered on. To the outsider's eye, local accommodations of history may seem incongruous and counterproductive. Yet they are inescapably part of the environment.

As the story suggests, the principal, Louise Ortiz, is not operating completely on her own. BP Co-Director Elliot Washor is also deeply involved, flying into the city on numerous occasions to explain the Big Picture vision and difference, and to negotiate the MOU. And both he and Ortiz also have the benefit of the local and part-time consultant's advice. On the other hand, BP does not have an advance team of start-up specialists, and has tended to focus its coaches' work on the design implementation issues of starting up rather than on the political ones. Moreover, it has tended to scale up its design in places far from its original political base in Rhode Island, which means that the political work of its otherwise skillful political actors – people like Washor – is inevitably vulnerable to the miscues central to this story. It is also vulnerable to a habit of big-city districts to deflect criticism by saying that “outsiders don't understand us.”

The complications of difference are compounded in many places – particularly in cities used to dealing nearly exclusively with home-grown professionals - by a tendency to take tacit local knowledge for granted. “You mean you didn't know that's how we do things? Well, why didn't you ask?” In such circumstances, it can take a long time to figure out local politics, and new school designers and start-up principals tend not to have lots of time available.

Meanwhile, BP's theory of action puts great emphasis on the principal's role – not just as school leader, but also as school developer and political advance operator. In Rhode Island, the first principals of the Met were the BP Co-Directors, Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor, and they did all the considerable advance work of establishing this different school in a relatively conservative educational environment – and where they were newcomers. At the same time, however, they had the advantage of being resident fellows of the Annenberg Institute at Brown University under the directorship of Ted Sizer – he well connected to the Commissioner of Education and other important state officials. They still had to do lots of political connecting, but they did not have to do it cold. Moreover, these connections helped them secure state financial support for the development of the Met, which enabled them in turn to hire a staff to design it and get it off the ground.

Louise Ortiz is in so many ways differently situated, yet every bit as much on the spot. This is one of the ironies of the story. Another is that she is well prepared and

willing to negotiate the politics of adoption in Silver Lake, yet forced to operate within a larger political frame.

The local political terrain can be thick. Still, the school designer must be prepared to penetrate it. This takes time, skills on the ground, and multiple levels of local knowledge.

Ortiz cannot stretch herself quite far enough to manage this *challenge within*, and at the time this story took place, BP had too few resources on the ground to supplement her efforts. The result is a gap in political engagement.

A school's status is a local construction resting on political understanding. Charters, contracts, and memoranda of agreement mean different things in different places, and cannot substitute for political understanding.

Political understanding depends in turn on political engagement – at different levels, and among different players, all focused on making the theory of action coherent.

4. Intermediary Politics

Context

The southwest city we call Merton has a large Hispanic population that experiences a 70% high school drop-out rate. This statistic is an important background factor in the story that follows. Another is the state's participation in a private-public partnership for school reform – called Partners for Change, or just “Partners” for short. This late 1980's effort invested heavily in the professional development of teachers, relying for the most part on what experts today would call weak models of professional development – for example, after-school or day-long workshops taught by outside consultants, focused on topics not tightly tied to curriculum or instructional priorities. The apparent failure of Partners to make much difference – especially in reducing the achievement gap between White and Hispanic students – has assumed the status of an object lesson in the local political psyche. This is partly because Partners had a high profile – with the Governor visibly involved, many dollars spent, and many teachers counted as participants. It is also because Partners and its sponsors invested little in evaluation, and was therefore hard put to argue its own case. Finally, it is also partly because the decline of Partners coincided so neatly with the rise of a competing approach to school reform – one that eventually gained a lot of traction nationally, but got a head start here. By the mid-1990's, a policy consensus had emerged in this state concerning the value of integrating three strategies: the use of high-stakes assessments keyed to standards and curriculum frameworks; the encouragement of charter schooling and new school designs within the context of an “educational marketplace”; and outcomes-focused evaluation of schools, including measures disaggregated by race. A decade later, the wisdom of this approach seems a given to many reformers here - to an extent that is rarer elsewhere.

challenge within

Local environments vary in terms of whether they have a prevalent and coherent theory of action for school reform. To the extent that they do, new school designers must expect that their work will be evaluated by its lights.

BP was attracted here because of one of the state's three strategic emphases – namely the one concerned with chartering new school designs. In Jordan Nagle's view, however, BP overlooked the entanglement of this strategic emphasis with the other two. Nagle is the Director of the Small Schools Initiative (SSI). Funded by grants from local as well as national foundations, SSI supports charter schools throughout the state. The support includes start-up assistance in the areas of charter application, fundraising, hiring, and budgeting; and it also includes ongoing technical support in the form of leadership coaching, curriculum and instructional development, and evaluation.

Ironically, BP Co-Directors Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor had been introduced to Nagle years before by the Executive Director of Partners for Change. None of the three men were then enthusiasts of the Partners for Change approach. This does not mean, however, that they are in full agreement today on an alternative approach.

When Littky and Washor heard that Nagle was searching for good school designs to implement here – ones that particularly targeted students at risk of dropping out of high school, they got in touch. The result was that Nagle served as broker in BP's effort to get the Merton Public Schools to grant a charter to Desert Met, the state's first Big Picture school, and now one of SSI's client schools.

Both Nagle and the man hired to be the Desert Met's first principal, George Rhodes, recounted for us the details of Big Picture's local political debut. Nagle told us that "the School Board did not really want to deal with this – whether a Big Picture school should come to Merton. Basically their attitude was that we have our own problems and we're not into what you're into. In fact, the new superintendent's mandate was to be very streamlined in terms of curriculum, policy, etc. The last thing he wanted was some weird little school. But Merton was still willing to be charter-friendly – has to be, because charters are popular politically. So it wouldn't sabotage, it just wouldn't be supportive. But Big Picture didn't know much about all this."

For his part, Rhodes recalled the tough questions the Board put to him. This was his first principalship, and he was new to school board politics. Meanwhile, he was also still getting used to the Big Picture design. Board members asked him how the school's curriculum would connect to the state's standards and curriculum frameworks. "The Met collides head on with standards," one member said, offering his interpretation of Eliot Levine's (2002) book on the first Big Picture school. "In what way do you collide?" he asked Rhodes. For his part, Rhodes felt that some of the pressure might have been directed more at Nagle than at himself or Big Picture. Still, he felt grateful for the presence of Elliot Washor - who had flown in from Providence as a kind of expert witness.

But to Nagle's ears, the expert's testimony spelled trouble. In an extended discussion of graduation rates, for example, both Washor and Rhodes spoke at length about the Met's success with students going to college. "Outsiders like Elliot would have no way to know this," Nagle told us, "but SSI had been hammering this city about the numbers, and people have become savvy and conscientious about the language they use in talking about school effects. If you say that 100% of the kids stay in and go to college – and that's what Elliot implied - then people around here are going to be skeptical – "Really?" they'll say, "100%?"

challenge within

Local politics have nuances that can easily elude an outside designer.

In his SSI role, Nagle supports charter schools with many different school designs. All of them propose alternatives to mainstream public schools, he told us, but “some are like Starbucks – more easily inserted than others.” Big Picture is not among these. But this is not a fault, he added. Big Picture is a fine design, but it needs more on-the-ground help to grow in the local political context of Merton. One of the things that SSI does – as an intermediary organization – is what Nagle calls “*translation* - for school board members, funders, and others.” Over time, he said, SSI can assuage the kind of concerns about Big Picture differences that a single School Board meeting cannot possibly manage to do.

In fact, SSI does more than translate, and this *more* is at the heart of the story here. Its work in general derives from the consensus we mentioned above concerning strategies for school reform. Like many others who have practiced school reform in this state over the course of the last decade, Nagle is convinced of the utility of a three-pronged approach: standards and curriculum, marketplace, and evaluation. The approach has a strong rational appeal in this state and elsewhere. Set strong expectations; provide flexibility for inventive schools to meet these expectations; then ensure that they do. The problem, others would argue – and the BP co-founders are among these others – is that this approach is *too* rational, that it ignores the indeterminacy of good school development. As Dennis Littky (2004) puts it in his book about the beliefs underlying the Big Picture design, it is crucial in school development to ask, “What will it look like when the school has been functioning for years?” (p.188). His question presumes patience. It also recalls his partner Washor’s longing for an apolitical context: What if *they* would just leave new schools alone? Just leave them for awhile to the organic unfolding; suspend rational haste.

On the other hand, it is hard to argue against haste in the context of a 70% Hispanic drop-out rate, and in the presence of a consensus that there is a rational process of school development that works. One of the things that SSI does for its schools is to provide formative evaluation. Recall that this is within a context that defines evaluation as one of the three prongs of successful reform. Nagle describes the process as follows:

We ask how the school is doing in terms of some benchmarks that we’ve established. This involves interviews, some surveys. It’s intended to be an internal, formative evaluation. But it does put some pressure on, and that pressure has been interpreted at times as being “Are they with us or against us?” In fact, I heard from the people at a west coast event that Dennis and Elliot had asked people there about us – and the quote I heard was “What is going on in Merton – Is Jordan our friend or not?” But our perspective is that this school –

and the other schools we work with - are going to get killed if they don't pay attention to the things that we can bring out now in a safe way for them. They need the push-pull of a critical friend. Elliot is supposed to provide this for all the BP schools, but he can't do that – partly because he just can't get around enough, and also because he doesn't know the local conditions – the same ones that will just kill them if they're not careful.

At the end of its second month of operation, SSI's formative evaluator of Desert Met, James Collins, offered a considerable amount of encouraging feedback:

One must take into account that of the 62 students enrolled at Desert Met, only 24 have passed the state's qualifying exam for high school. The rest have not even taken the exam. Many lack the credits. Several attended school less than 40 days last year. Many were discipline problems in their previous schools. Many were on the verge of being transferred, expelled, or dropped out. Some are active in gangs. Several remain on probation. Traditional school structures fail children like this, which is why SSI has supported the Big Picture model here.

Collins then goes on to recount the reactions of these students to their experience at Desert Met:

“If you would like observe me for awhile, you'd see I changed a lot. Because I do my work, and last year I didn't want to come to school and now I do. Oh, I love this school.”

“When I first came here, we went to a park. I was like, “We're at a park? Aren't we supposed to be at school, sitting down, doing work? [But] this is a different kind of school. This is a school where you work on what you want to learn and what you want to be when you grow up. And you follow your dreams and they help you do that. I think I will be here until graduation because I think this is going to be a good experience for me.”

“If I wasn't at this school, I'd be dropping out.”

Collins acknowledges that it is evidence of a good school design to elicit this kind of attachment so early – and among students so unused to attachment. It is the one-kid-at-a-time philosophy, he says. Littky or Washor would agree, and then argue that its effects cannot be rushed. Effects come from the art of a long process, they would say, which begins with attachment. But Collins is in a hurry. What this school needs now, he writes at the end of its second month, is articulation with the state's standards and curriculum frameworks, and also more resolution with respect to its own design. For example, he says, the school claims that Learning through Internship (LTI) can substitute for classes in terms of the state's curriculum demands, but the school is slow to insist that every student have an LTI, and even where LTIs are up and running, the advisors fail to inform the LTI mentors what the demands of the state's curriculum framework are.

Negotiating

Desert Met’s principal George Rhodes has had to negotiate the differences between Big Picture and SSI. One partner gives him a design, a curriculum, a network, and an inspirational rhetoric that works well among students who might otherwise give up hope. The other provides a lifeline to funders, policymakers, and local community leaders. It gives him formative feedback using a framework based on the criteria on which his school will be judged when it comes time to renew its charter. And it insists that he pay attention to what is at stake: not just keeping Hispanic kids in school – though this is crucial – but ensuring that they graduate with the skills and knowledge they need to improve their prospects in the world. Collins’ reports put a voice to this need – as, for example, when he quotes one of Desert Met’s students: “If I stay on this road, I’m going to be doing something different than my sisters are doing. I mean, yeah, it’s benefiting them to be housewives in Mexico, but it’s not what I want to be.”

Big Picture insists, on the other hand, that he think hard about what this student means when she says she’s *on this road*. It will take a while for her to develop enough sense of belonging and then self-concept to acknowledge that the road necessarily involves taking and passing the state’s high-stakes graduation tests. Don’t rush it, Dennis Littky would say. “Nationally,” he writes, “nine out of ten states with the highest dropout rates have graduation tests, while none of the ten states with the highest graduation rates have such a policy” (Littky, 2004, p. 175).

In the end, Rhodes told us he had concluded, “I have more at stake with SSI and less so with Big Picture.” Still, he tried to strike a balance. The result was a degree of curricular adaptation at Desert Met by the end of its first year that set it apart from other Big Picture schools – including, for example, direct instruction in math skills and writing. But the school continued to exhibit resolute loyalty to the Big Picture ideals, especially the practices of “one kid at a time.”

challenge within

The challenge of negotiating the politics of local adoption enfolds the dynamics of another challenge, namely figuring out on a continuous basis what is too much fidelity to the design, and what is too little.

Commentary

This story joins the ranks of the other three in attending to local reform history and the residue of theory and design that accumulates in its wake. It is this residue and the tacit knowledge it contains that produce the story’s second *challenge within*.

Local politics have nuances that can easily elude an outside designer.

Every reform initiative attempting to scale up experiences this gap early in the process, and either devises a strategy to address it or suffers significant political failure. The strategy might involve regional teams or centers that are directed centrally but responsible for understanding and handling regional politics. Or it might, as in this story, involve finding a local partner. Here the partner is an intermediary organization – a kind of broker for new school development. Several such intermediaries are active now in various cities and states. They are often funded by foundations that support small school development, and that know from experience the odds facing small schools going it alone. Examples are New Visions for Public Schools in New York City, the Small Schools Project in Washington State, and Jobs for the Future in Boston.

Intermediaries vary in terms of how intrusive their own theory of action is with respect to the brokering they do. So New Visions imposes very little direction on the schools' theories of action – leaving that entirely to the school district and to outside designers. By contrast, Jobs for the Future is more prescriptive because of its interest in school-to-work connections. SSI is prescriptive too because of its interpretation of what the local political environment demands. Meanwhile, all intermediaries make it their business to understand and deal successfully with local political environments, but some environments are more demanding than others.

Local environments vary in terms of whether they have a prevalent and coherent theory of action for school reform. To the extent that they do, new school designers must expect that their work will be evaluated by its light.

Principal George Rhodes has a different set of political choices than do the principals in the other stories. They are in relatively fluid situations where it seems possible to press for a coherent theory of action that can accommodate their schools' difference. This is not easy to do, but the kind of moves that Ortiz made in Silver Lake, or Houseman made in appointing her Board, or Greene made in interacting with her condo neighbors suggest the way. By contrast, Rhodes faces a coherent theory of action already in place – one that BP dislikes, but SSI supports. How can Rhodes handle this *challenge within?*

The challenge of negotiating the politics of local adoption enfolds the dynamics of another challenge, namely figuring out on a continuous basis what is too much fidelity to the design, and what is too little.

On the one hand, Rhodes can work on accommodating the prevailing theory of action. This risks hurting his relationship with BP, but is likely to preserve and even enhance his relationship with SSI. It seems from the story to be the direction in which he is headed. So he introduces some direct instruction in science and math, and follows evaluator Collins' advice in general to align what he can of the Big Picture design with the state standards. This may be the safest route toward ensuring that his charter will be renewed, though much may depend in this regard on the state of the politics two years hence between SSI and the Merton School Board. This may also be the safest route with

respect to protecting Desert Met's association with local funders and other regional leaders, as well as its relationships with other charter schools in the state.

On the other hand, Rhodes can confront the prevailing theory of action, and choose to make his school the ideological outlier – even at the cost of rupturing his relationship with SSI. A good reason to make this choice would be if he felt (a) that the prevalent theory of action and the Big Picture design were inherently incompatible; and or (b) if he felt that confrontation might make his school and its design more influential. It happens that BP Co-Director Dennis Littky is an old hand at influential confrontation. His willingness to make a stand on principle demonstrated at Thayer High School in New Hampshire what can be gained from confrontation. See, for example, Susan Kammeraad-Campbell's 1989 book, and the NBC movie made from the book called *A Town Torn Apart*.

What can we imagine might be the basis of the confrontation, however? What argument might Rhodes and his BP ally make in the face of an apparently prevalent and widely compelling counter-argument? Certainly, the argument that good schools take a long time to grow and that stakeholders should be patient – however true this may be – is not a winnable political argument in this context. The ghost of Partners for Change and the enormity of the achievement gap militate against it. But these same ghosts and this same enormity can be interpreted in a completely different way – as the economist and educational author Richard Rothstein (2004) has recently suggested. He argues that initiatives like Partners for Change did not fail just because they put too little emphasis on curriculum and accountability, but because they did not put enough emphasis on dealing with issues that schools can address but are seldom designed to address – all of them predictable consequences on average of low social-class status. They include poor health and nutrition, less access to rich out-of-school learning environments, and fewer opportunities to engage in substantive ways with adults functioning in professional roles.

Moreover, Rothstein argues, these initiatives failed – as will their contemporary successors because they put too much faith in school reform. Contemporary reformers claim that they can do better than Partners for Change in helping schools to overcome the achievement gap by exercising strong leadership, by aligning policies and curricula, by engaging in accountable teaching and learning practices (for example, high-stakes testing), and by infusing what is often called *vision* (as captured, for example in the phrases “all children can learn,” and “no excuses”). To this strategic list, the state where Merton is located adds two others: by creating small schools and by chartering them.

But achievement gaps of the size that exist in this state, Rothstein asserts, cannot be wiped out by these strategies alone. To expect that they can, he says, is to engage in an historical delusion, comparable to believing, for example, that macroeconomic policy can raise median household income 40 percentile points up a distribution in just a few years.

Eliminating the social class differences in student outcomes requires eliminating the impact of social class on children in American society. It requires abandoning the illusion that school reform alone can save us from having to make the difficult economic and political decisions that the goal of equality inevitably entails (p. 149).

Rothstein is not the first to make this argument. Christopher Jencks and his colleagues (1972) made it a generation ago. It was not a winning political argument then, and it may well not be one now. However, we are now at the end of long policy chain based on what was then the winning argument. It claimed that the success of a small number of outlier schools in overcoming the achievement gap shows that all schools can do the same. It is the claim behind the federal law known as No Child Left Behind. If it proves to be an inadequate claim at this late and powerful stage of effort, then the perception of its inadequacy might make for new politics.

Meanwhile, throughout his book, Rothstein reminds the reader that he is *not* saying schools can do nothing, and *is* saying that achievement gaps are merely measures of central tendency. In other words, they say nothing about what one kid can do, or about what a school can do one kid at a time.

3.

Conclusion

Challenge: Negotiating the Politics of Local adoption

The four stories help us to define some terms:

- *Politics* means the dynamics of competition among groups and individuals with power to determine the fate of a school.¹
- *Negotiating* means building relationships sufficient to understand what interests these groups and individuals represent, and dealing directly with the problem of satisfying these interests. It also means clarifying and asserting the interests of the school.
- *Local* signifies those aspects of the political dynamics that insiders already know, but outsiders have to learn.
- *Adoption* always involves adaptation. Part of what is at stake in this challenge is optimal adaptation – enough to create local ownership without sacrificing design integrity.

Strategies

Many people have a stake in the successful local adoption of the Big Picture school design – including, of course, local officials, intermediary organizations, charter holders, parents, and students themselves. In framing the following list of strategies, however, we view the overall challenge of negotiating the politics of local adoption (with its many *challenges within*) from the perspective of the designer. We include in this category not only BP – its co-directors, school coaches, and other staff – but also the school’s principal. Within BP’s theory of action, the principal is not only the front-line political actor, but also the front-line designer – the one who has to figure out in the end how much adaptation to permit.

At the same time, however, we insist that the designer cannot successfully operate alone on the politics of local adoption. Multiple levels of local political knowledge are crucial, and gaining this advantage almost always requires a local operation or a local partnership. Having a local partnership *does* add another level of local politics to deal with – as one of our stories suggests. However, we believe that its value exceeds its cost in this respect.

We group the strategies into two groups – what we call phase 1 and phase 2. The first has especially to do with starting-up: scouting, making the first connections, seeking the first commitments, “sealing the deal” as BP puts it. The second has to do with all the

¹ Based on a definition by Ross (2004).

political negotiation that must follow. The distinction is only a matter of emphasis, however, since all the strategies are useful in both phases.

Phase 1

- Expect that local politics will work to distort your intentions and your designs.
- Find out about this kind of distortion in other situations, and learn how people in your position managed to counteract it.
- Find a theory of change that helps you make sense of both distortion and of how to deal with it.
- Take advantage of your initial status as an outsider on the inside to learn the local politics from people who know it.
- Map out the groups who have the power to help you or hurt you and then determine what power resources you can marshal and connect to yourself. They can protect you and allow you to take action (Ross, 2004).
- Reach a political understanding – as understanding is defined in the local culture. Make this the basis of contractual negotiation.
- In negotiating a contract, seek to pin down as many details as possible, while leaving maximal room for design changes and for start-up and growing pains.

Phase 2

- Expect incoherence in the policies that bear on your work. Act wherever possible to reduce the incoherence.
- Look continually for opportunities to do whatever you can to make a place for your school and its different design in the political context.
- Know how to resolve conflicts by assessing and addressing parties' basic interests. Practice the skill whenever and wherever you can.
- Keep explaining your school again and again: how it works, and what it values.
- Affiliate, affiliate – but know that you must work hard to make each affiliation a source of strength and advantage
- Remember that politics is all about who has leverage and is willing to use it. Get some, and use it.

- Understand that no design is adopted without adaptation. Go for optimal adaptation - one that protects the school and enables it to gain influence, but also maintains the design's integrity.
- Above all, stay engaged politically.

References

- Argyris, C. and Schon, D. A. (1996). *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Ascher, C., Fruchter, N., and Berne, R. (1996). *Hard Lessons: Public Schools and Privatization*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press.
- Barnes, C. (2002). *Standards Reform in High Poverty Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gootman, E. (2004). City's small schools uneasy inside the big ones. *New York Times*, April 14.
- Hall, G. E. and Hord, S. M. (1987). *Change in Schools: Facilitating the Process*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hill, P.T., Campbell, C., and Harvey, J. (2000). *It Takes a City: Getting Serious about Urban School Reform*. Washington, D. C.: Brookings Institution.
- Jencks, C., Smith, M., Acland, H., Bane, M. J., Cohen, D., Gintis, H., Heyns, B., and Michelson, S. (1972). *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Kammeraad-Campbell, S. (1989). *Doc: Dennis Littky's Fight for a Better School*. New York: Contemporary Books.
- Levine, E. (2002). *One Kid at a Time: Big Lessons from a Small School*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Littky, D. (with S. Grabelle) (2004). *The Big Picture: Education is Everyone's Business*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Lusi, S. F. (1997). *The Role of State Departments of Education in Complex School Reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- McDonald, J. P. (1989). When outsiders try to change schools from the inside. *Phi Delta Kappan* (November), 206-212.
- Merseth, K. K. (1997). *Cases in Educational Administration*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.

Ross, D. (2004). Workshop on politics for Big Picture principals and others. Big Bang, North Smithfield, RI (August).

Scholes, R. (1985). *Textual Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Schon, D. A. and McDonald, J. P. (1998). *Doing What You Mean to Do in School Reform*. Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

Schon, D. A. and Rein, M. (1994). *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Controversies*. New York: Basic Books.