Creating small public schools in New York City and Boston proves a daunting—and exhilarating—task.

In 1974, Anthony Alvarado, then-superintendent of New York City's Community School District 4, approached me with the idea of starting my own school in East Harlem. At the time, the notion of creating a new public school from scratch seemed both wonderful and absurd.

Something similar had happened a few years earlier in the district that includes Greenwich Village. A group of parents had persuaded district officials to reopen an old building and start a school designed by the parents. The venture had seemed exciting. At the urging of several colleagues, I had applied for the principal's job. I hadn't been selected, but the idea of starting a new school stuck in my head. When Alvarado made his proposal, I was ready to sign on, and I had a circle of friends prepared to come along.

Central Park East

We began the Central Park East Elementary School together—five of us who knew one another well and had shared the experience of working with Lillian Weber, the open-education guru, at the City College Workshop Center. We were an ethnically and racially mixed group, and we were all seasoned veteran educators.

The prospect of having our own territory, lots of freedom, and only our own constituency of volunteer families and staff members to answer to amazed us. We asked no questions. We did no haggling. We had no budget and received no start-up funds. We got money to pay the salaries of five teachers and one aide, enough staff to cover the 100 five- to seven-year-olds we had promised to take in. That was it.

We made some furniture, borrowed some, and scrounged for the rest on the streets. We brought books with us from our old schools, stole books from our own children's collections, and looked for bargains at used-book stores. I found a supply of blocks lying unused in the attic of one of the schools in which I had been a consultant the year before. We drove a truck to upstate New York to pick up seconds for free from a kindly religious order that made blocks and children's furniture.

We didn't have time to grumble. We just kept our fingers crossed that “they” would leave us alone. We pretended that we were a one-school district—just us. As I recall, one of our first acts was to cut the wires to the building's public address system—but perhaps I only imagined it. It is true that for the first few years, the only receptionist in our makeshift office was an answering machine that said, “Sorry, we're all with the kids. Leave a message and we'll get back to you.”

What really mattered, of course, was what went on in the classrooms. Everyone at CPE, as the school came to be known, was learning. With a few exceptions, the parents were thrilled. We had our share of internal struggles, confronting the differences that surfaced as we tried to put ideas into daily practice and finding the time required to be good teachers to our students and good colleagues to one another. It took time to develop productive ways to handle our disagreements. Perhaps because such an atmosphere was never boring, few of the original teachers left CPE or the teaching profession.

By 1978, when we started the second CPE school in response to popular demand, we thought it proper to
insist on furniture and supplies. And when our third school opened, we had a start-up budget and early-childhood-appropriate furniture. The original CPE staff looked askance at all that their colleagues were receiving and began to feel a bit neglected. Over time, we started demanding more for them, too.

When I started the Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), times had changed. Favoring small, autonomous public schools of choice no longer seemed to be synonymous with being against public education, and many of our pedagogical ideas had entered the mainstream of education. We began to bargain harder for our due. If we were to test our ideas, we had to insist on the time and resources that more traditional schools took for granted. We discovered that newly created traditional schools expected start-up time and money and that in New York City's high school division, principals had flexibility in how they used their budgets. Why couldn't we have all this?

Did we succeed where it really counts—in long-term positive effects on our students? Researchers studied carefully the Central Park East elementary schools that we had founded in the 1970s and 1980s to track their impact on students. David Bensman of Rutgers University and Paul Tainch of the Bruner Foundation looked at the data and conducted in-depth interviews of our graduates many years later. Similar data were kept on the Central Park East Secondary School. More than 90 percent of our students graduated, and 90 percent of the graduates went to college, largely to four-year schools. The data indicate that the population we served was at least as diverse as that of the New York City school system as a whole—but our overall graduation and college attendance rates were substantially higher. Our cost per student was no greater than the citywide average, and our cost per graduate was considerably lower.

**Mission Hill**

In 1996, I accepted an offer to start the pilot Mission Hill Elementary School in Boston. We had officially all the freedoms that we had exercised secretly in New York. We had more time to focus on the nature of the schooling we'd be offering, simply because we didn't have to spend so much time creating the physical environment from scratch and inventing ways to get around the district's rules and regulations.

In Boston, I began to think that perhaps I could fulfill my original dream and be both the principal and a full-time teacher. Fortunately, I didn't bank on it. It remains difficult to protect and operate a small school, even with a dedicated and competent staff and support from key officials in the system. Many other factors interfere with the school's smooth operation. For example, the actual space of the school sometimes requires revamping a favorite design plan. Even if you have free rein in hiring decisions, the staff members you carefully select often have ideas that differ from yours. The families that join you in a remarkable act of blind faith have their own conceptions of what you promised them and their children.

And then there's the central office. They have schedules of meetings and new teacher orientations, forms to be filled out that have no relevance to your structure or staffing, and rules about homework and promotion that conflict with your philosophy.

“But . . . but . . . but . . . ,” you splutter. And you compromise, or not, depending on your strength, your reputation, the political clout of the families you serve, the members of your own school board—crucial to put in place—and the particular allies you've picked up along the way, including university connections, powerful politicians, and press people. Break-the-mold teachers have to negotiate each year as they translate their great ideas into workable classroom strategies. Determined and visionary principals of traditional schools who are bent on change also confront, and occasionally overcome, many of the same roadblocks we have faced.

Far too many things can and will go wrong at first, even if you have all the time in the world to plan. At Mission Hill, none of our furniture arrived by the opening day of school. Fortunately, we found friends from whom we could borrow tables and chairs. But that meant that time intended for planning curriculum went
into hauling furniture. We all believed that the condition of a school’s bathrooms was a sign of that school’s concern for the dignity of its students, and we had made a point that our bathrooms would reflect this concern—only to discover that our bathrooms had no stall doors.

One staff member left after only two months. He loved us and we loved him, but teaching involved a level of anxiety and a time commitment that he hadn’t envisioned and wasn’t able to sustain. It took us six weeks to find a permanent replacement for him, and the experience left us with a lot of angry families. Small schools of choice sometimes face unrealistic expectations from families and staff members, with both positive and negative consequences.

We had to put in place quickly everything from reading programs, books, and storage areas to procedures for recess and moving students to and from the bus and around the building. We began with only 100 students in five classrooms, and we had two full-time staff members (another colleague and me) and a number of full-time volunteers and assistant teachers-in-training in addition to our teachers. Nevertheless, the endeavor felt nearly as impossible to pull off as the first Central Park East elementary school in 1974. How could that be?

Maybe there are difficulties of planning and opening a new school—whether traditional or innovative—that you simply can’t avoid. No matter how well you plan, how much freedom you have, or how ample or sparse your resources are, the real experience of starting the school can’t measure up to the dreams of those involved in bringing the new school to fruition. The amount of work it takes to do schooling well is nearly superhuman—and in the first few years of a school, that work is doubled. Patterns and routines take several years to establish.

**What Successful Schools Share**

The new schools that I’ve seen start and survive over time that have promised new approaches to teaching and learning have possessed certain uncommon strengths. They all have a strong sense of collegiality among the teachers rather than one strong leader. Staff members tend to like one another, which helps them tolerate the amount of time they have to be together. Big decisions are made inside the school by the same people who have to implement them. Families have strong ties to the school and positive relationships with their children’s teachers. For these reasons, parents generally do not become incensed if the school staff makes mistakes.

Staff members set aside plenty of time for conversation. People feel appreciated for the work they do. When possible, staff members receive financial rewards for some of the extra time that they must devote to operate a more collegially governed school.

A successful new public school also requires a strong and commonly held vision or shared picture of what staff members consider fundamental. After all, if the school begins to look and feel much like any other school, why should anyone work so hard and devote so much extra time and effort to sustaining it?

Finally, a successful school needs the support of at least one of the district’s leaders—someone who is willing to keep a friendly eye out for the fledgling school. In Boston, we have the added asset of a network of new, small public pilot schools with its own organizational leadership and staffing to nurture, support, aide, advise, and occasionally criticize. But even with such a network, one won’t last long in the face of a completely hostile system. New schools created during one administration sometimes suffer under another that has no stake in their survival.

For new small public schools like ours to have much influence will take far more than merely the absence of hostility from the city’s education system—but I’ve learned to live with it when system officials just let us be. I still dream of a time when school planners will strive to create a system that matches the needs of small schools invented by different people in different ways, rather than wishing we’d all be a little more
like everyone else. But that's another story.

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