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Introduction

Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), an alternative high school, expands on the successful learning environment created at the Central Park East Elementary Schools over the last 20 years. The secondary school is a cooperative project of Community School Board #4, the New York City Board of Education Alternative High School Division, and the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national high school network.

CPESS was started in the fall of 1985 with 80 7th graders. The school currently enrolls 450 students in grades 7-12 and although CPESS will not grow larger, we have begun the creation of 11 new Coalition high schools in New York City. The students who attend CPESS are mostly neighborhood (East Harlem) residents. Eighty-five percent of the students are African American or Latino, and more than 20 percent are eligible for service provided by special education. From careful tracking of our students, even when they move and attend other schools, we know that 97.3 percent of the students who have attended CPESS graduated from high school. And 90 percent of those graduates attended college.

The fundamental aim of CPESS is to teach students to use their minds well, to prepare them for a well-lived life that is productive, socially useful, and personally satisfying. The school’s academic program stresses intellectual achievement and emphasizes the mastery of a limited
number of centrally important subjects. This program goes hand in hand with an approach that emphasizes learning how to learn, how to reason, and how to investigate complex issues that require collaboration and personal responsibility.

The final high school diploma is not based on time spent in class or Carnegie units, but on each student's clear demonstration of achievement through the presentation of 14 portfolios to a graduation committee. The school's values include high expectations, trust, a sense of personal decency, and respect for diversity. The school is open to all students and expects a lot from each student.

The school is guided by the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national organization of high schools directed by Ted Sizer. The Coalition's principles include:

1. **Less is more.** It is more important to know some things well than to know many things superficially.

2. **Personalization.** Although the course of study is unified and universal, teaching and learning are personalized. No teacher is responsible for teaching more than 80 students (40 at CPESS) or advising more than 15.

3. **Goal Setting.** High standards are set for all students. Students must clearly exhibit mastery of their school work.

4. **Student as Worker.** CPESS teachers "coach" students, encouraging them to find answers and, in effect, to teach themselves. Thus, students discover answers and solutions and learn by doing rather than by simply repeating what textbooks (or teachers) say.

**Habits of Mind, Work, and Heart**

*It was Friday, May 2, 1992. Our students had spent the week talking, organizing, and dealing with powerful feelings in the wake of the Rodney King verdict and the riots in Los Angeles. As luck would have it, an all-white choir from a small Michigan town was scheduled to sing for us that day. While L.A. was burning, and probably scared to death, the choir faced an audience of mostly African American and Latino teenagers, many still brimming with eagerness to protest. There was tension in the air as one of our seniors stepped up to ask if he could say a few words that he thought might help.*
"I took it on myself to come up here and talk to all you students about what we’ve been going through. I know from the Senior Institute that a lot of students have been talking about what’s been going on in L.A., and it bothers them a lot.

“I just wanted to tell you that no one here is our enemy . . . and that we have to stick together.

“. . . and that there’s lots of people from . . . Michigan, right?” The students laugh. “Michigan, not California, right?” There is more laughter from students.

“What they are doing here, they are doing for us. They are not here to make us feel better. They are here because they like to sing, and they’re here to show us what they’ve got.

“They are not our enemies either. There is no one in this room that is our enemy. If we can stick together and stay with each other, we can show these people that we are not falling apart like some other people are.” Cheers and whoops fill the room.

“You got to do what you got to do, but showing your anger at these people here isn’t going to do anything for any of us.”

If the primary public responsibility and justification for tax-supported schooling is raising a generation of fellow citizens, then the school—of necessity—must be a place where students learn the habits of mind, work, and heart that lie at the core of such a democracy.

Since you can’t learn to be good at something you’ve never experienced—even vicariously—then it stands to reason that schools are a good place to experience what such democratic habits might be. It’s as simple as that, and as complex. You can’t learn to play a game you’ve never seen played. No one would think of raising up musicians without being sure to place them in the company of musicians, including some at the top of their art.

Our task at CPESS was to take this idea seriously once again, and return the business of rearing our young to such basic principles. Instead of placing students in cohorts of equal ignorance and creating settings in which no expert ever performed his or her craft in the presence of novices and in which no one, novice or expert, ever showed what they could do, but only talked about it, we tried to turn the tables on it all.

We’d keep the idea of kindergarten, where we both began our careers, going all the way through high school—and long after, we hoped. We
wanted a schoolhouse that was naturally organized to be interesting, just like a good kindergarten room. We wanted a place where young people and their teachers could work in shared ways around topics and materials they were inclined to enjoy, for long stretches of time, and without too many preconceived strictures. We wanted opportunities for the least expert to watch and observe the more expert, and then to practice out at their own pace. We wanted settings in which people knew each other through each other's works, through the close observation of actual practice—by our teacher colleagues and our student colleagues. A truly collegial setting.

So, we knew we had to be small, multi-aged, intimate, and interesting. Family and school would need to be allies, as the two institutions responsible for shared child-rearing tasks. Between us, we had to find ways to make the idea of growing up seem wonderful and enticing, and noticeably varied enough to include everyone. We had to make the idea of being a powerful citizen on an ever broadening platform, with the capacity to play effective roles both in public and private, seem feasible and imaginable and appealing.

That's what good schooling could do. But it took taking apart all this large and wordy rhetoric and finding the details that counted, just as we had both done when we daily set about putting together our kindergarten classrooms, from the block corner to the sand table, the selection of particular books, the organizing of pencils and paints, the placement of works of art, always with particular children in mind, always with particular purposes in mind.

So we put together CPESS, over time, collectively, modifying as we went, mindful of all the details of a place filled with many stories as well as common purposes. We created a structure in which people—students and students, students and teachers, and teachers and teachers, and their families—could think aloud together and jointly make decisions. We had to define what "using your mind well," the Coalition of Essential Schools' overarching mission, meant. What were the habits of mind that defined a democratic citizen? We thought of friends who were "good citizens" and tried to imagine what it was that they had in common. Surely it wasn't the ability to recall some body of facts or information, although they were curious about such mundane details. The two qualities that seemed to define our ideal citizen were empathy and skepticism:
the ability to see a situation from the eyes of another and the tendency
to wonder about the validity of what we encountered.

Our operational definition of a thoughtful person, a person whom we
would be proud to claim as a graduate of our school, was one who could
demonstrate to us, in a variety of ways and in numerous disciplines, that
he or she was in the habit of tackling the following five questions:

- How do you know what you know? (Evidence)
- From whose viewpoint is this being presented? (Perspective)
- How is this event or work connected to others? (Connections)
- What if things were different? (Supposition)
- Why is this important? (Relevance)

We have organized our curriculum and our assessment around the
idea that a person in the habit of looking for answers to these five
questions when presented with a novel situation is using his or her mind
well. The nuances, the vocabulary, the tools change from physics to
literature to geometry and so on. If these questions are the right ones,
however, they ought also to apply to the playground and the workplace.
Of course, such habits are neither learned nor used in a vacuum. They
are embedded in appropriate subject matter; they depend on the ability
of the learner to use skills of reading, writing, logic, computation,
research, and scientific inquiry to give them substance. But we hold to
the concept of their universality across subject matter and age. A person
in the habit of asking these five questions is a thoughtful person.

In fact, the biggest step we took was deciding that a student would
graduate CPRESS almost entirely on the basis of evidence of such thought-
fulness, over and over again in 14 designated fields of work. We called
this Graduation by Portfolio, although our portfolios are compilations
not merely of written work, but of everything and anything students
believe speaks to their meeting the graduation standards we have spelled
out.

We invented graduation committees, which are a little like doctoral
committees. Each committee includes at least two faculty members, an
adult of the student's choice, and another student member. Their job is
to read, review, observe, listen to the evidence, and make appropriate
recommendations for revision or approval. When we started, it was hard
for us to imagine such a process. But today stories like the one beginning
on page 33 reinforce our commitment to this time-consuming process.
The 14 Portfolio Areas: An Overview for Students and Parents

The primary responsibility of the Senior Institute student is to complete the 14 portfolio requirements listed below. These portfolios reflect cumulative knowledge and skill in each area as well as the specific CPESS habits of mind and work. Students will present the work in all 14 portfolio areas to their Graduation Committee for review and acceptance. They will meet for a full review of their seven chosen “majors” to present, discuss, and defend their work. There are, therefore, two stages to keep in mind: (1) preparation of the portfolio materials in collaboration with the advisor and others, and (2) presentation and defense of the materials. In some cases, portfolio work will need to be expanded, modified, and represented for final approval. Students may also choose to present work a second time to earn a higher assessment.

It is important to remember that a majority of the work done in connection with a portfolio can and should be the outcome of the courses, seminars, internships, and independent study that a student has engaged in during the normal course of his or her Senior Institute years. In addition, some of the material may be an outgrowth of work initiated in Divisions I or II or, where appropriate (e.g., the Language Other Than English portfolio), work completed prior to entering the Senior Institute.

Portfolios include work in 14 areas: seven “majors” and seven “minors.” There is no one way to complete these requirements, nor one way to present them. People are different, and the individual portfolio will reflect these differences. The term “portfolio” covers all the ways in which a student exhibits his or her knowledge, understanding, and skill. CPESS recommends interdisciplinary studies wherever possible, so work completed to meet one requirement may be used to fulfill other requirements as well.

While the final review is based on individual accomplishment, almost all portfolio requirements can be based on work done in collaboration with others, including group presentations. Such collaborative work is encouraged, since it often enables a student to engage in a much more complex and interesting project.

Quality and depth of understanding, good use of CPESS's five habits of mind, and the capacity to present competent and convincing evidence of mastery as relevant to each particular field are the major criteria used by the Graduation Committee; however, portfolio work must reflect a concern for both substance and style. For example, written work must be submitted in clear, grammatical English that reflects the expected proficiency level of a high school graduate in spelling, grammar, and legibility. Errors should be eliminated before the portfolio is presented to the committee. Written work must generally be submitted in typewritten form. The same care in preparation and presentation applies to all other forms of work. Portfolio work should represent a student's best effort. The same holds true for the manner of presentation.

(continued)
Different characteristics are more or less relevant to each portfolio area. Each academic discipline, for example, has developed its own “scoring grid” to help students and Graduation Committee members focus objectively on the appropriate criteria. Over time, the criteria for acceptable performance will be more fully developed through both the creation of new scoring grids and the compilation of past student work that demonstrates accepted levels of skill. Students are expected to become familiar with the criteria by which they are measured (both the scoring grids and former student work).

At Graduation Committee meetings, students should be prepared to discuss not only the content of the portfolio, but their computer knowledge and growth in particular fields of work.

The following are the 14 Portfolio areas:

1. Postgraduate Plan
2. Science/Technology*
3. Mathematics*
4. History and Social Studies*
5. Literature*
6. Autobiography
7. School and Community Service and Internship
8. Ethics and Social Issues
9. Fine Arts/Aesthetics
10. Practical Skills
11. Media
12. Geography
13. Language Other Than English/Dual Language Proficiency
14. Physical Challenge

Senior Project

One of the above portfolio topics or items will be separately assessed as a final Senior project. Each student is required to make a major presentation in 7 of the 14 areas described above. These include the four starred Portfolios, and at least three others chosen in cooperation with the advisor. Grades of Distinguished, SatPlus, Sat, or MinSat will be used to grade work as a whole. In the seven “minor” portfolios, a student will be graded pass/fail. Passing will be upon recommendation of the advisor and approval of the full Graduation Committee.

The student may, however, request a grade from the advisor (Distinguished, SatPlus, etc.). In this case, the student must provide the committee with sufficient time to review all relevant materials and to discuss the recommended grade at a meeting of the committee. Such a grade would be subject to approval by the entire committee.
A Meeting of the Graduation Committee

It is a warm Friday afternoon in September and Monique’s graduation committee has convened for the first time. As we wait for Monique’s mother to arrive (each student is allowed to choose one adult, and Monique has chosen her mother—according to local wisdom, always a risky choice), Monique is so nervous she can’t sit still. “I’ve got to go to the bathroom,” she says, and makes her third trip in the last 15 minutes.

Finally, we all settle in around a table in my office and Monique begins her presentation. She has chosen to present a paper on AIDS discrimination in health care. She refers to her paper, but only occasionally. At the start, she is somewhat ashen-faced. She sits bolt upright, as opposed to her usual adolescent slump, and begins nearly every sentence with “I put . . .” —as in “I put in an interview with a nurse who works in the emergency room to describe the feelings of a professional whose primary responsibility is not AIDS-related.”

Monique finishes her presentation and asks if there are any questions. She knows there will be. This is the part of the meeting where committee members probe to see if she has acquired our five habits of mind, the hallmark of a CPESS graduate. We begin gently asking her for the source of some of her information. She handles these questions easily. Students always discuss committee experiences with their friends, and Monique expected questions about sources.

But the questions quickly become less predictable. “Monique,” I ask, “you spoke of doctors who screened patients for the HIV virus without their knowledge or permission. You see this as a bad thing, an invasion of their privacy. Just last Sunday I saw a TV program about Cuba and their response to the AIDS epidemic. In Cuba they test everyone. They don’t ask permission. When they find an HIV-positive person, they quarantine them. They are put in a comfortable place with good food and excellent health care, but they must stay there. Period. One result is that they have greatly lessened the spread of the disease. What if they were to do that here?”

Monique is on her own here. She certainly did not anticipate this question, and she can’t begin her answer with “I put.” But something happens to her at that moment; a physical change takes place, one that I’ve often seen at a graduation committee meeting. Monique doesn’t hesitate. She straightens up, leans forward, looks me right in the eye, and
says, "My father died of AIDS and that's why I decided to present this portfolio first. It is real important to me."

She continues, "I would be in favor of anything that prevents AIDS or even slows it down a little bit, but I don't know about not telling people that you are testing them. I can see both sides of the question and I don't want to decide. I think we should take a vote."

"Who should vote?" I ask.

"Everyone," she answers immediately. "Even little kids. This is so important that everyone should be able to vote."

The committee meeting ends after an hour of presentation and questions. Committee members fill out grids that we have created here at CPESS: one to assess the major project in the portfolio (our portfolios are compilations of work) and a tabulation form that gives a grade for this portfolio, her first of seven major portfolios.

As I announce the grade to Monique—a better than satisfactory grade—and give her our feedback on what we thought was strong in her work and what we thought might have improved the portfolio, she grins from ear to ear. She is back to her younger self. She can hardly listen to us and immediately excuses herself to go and talk to Yuiza and Frances, her best friends, who are waiting in the lobby for her.

I put papers and forms and tabulation sheets away and prepare for my next graduation committee. Carlos is presenting his literature portfolio—or rather, he is presenting himself as a person in the habit of using his mind well, of using our habits of mind, and he is going to demonstrate these qualities through his work in the field of literature.

After school, I meet some school friends and they ask me why I am so "high." It is because occasionally, during committee meetings like Monique’s, I witness the fruits of our work together. I see the hidden hours of struggle that so many teachers and parents and students have invested in learning. The committee meetings are not only our final assessment, they are often "payoff time," a concrete reward for having studied and read and written and argued and thought so long and so hard.

And once in a while I see magic. Not sleight-of-hand magic, but the magic of a child's first step or her first word. Magic that has been earned. The magic of students growing up as thinkers, gaining confidence, showing off their minds—of a young person changing, in front of my eyes, into a woman who is confident, thoughtful, and competent.
The Choices We Have Made

How did we create graduation committees as rigorous and as personal as the one described above? How did we create a school organization that allows teachers to attend to details, the way early childhood teachers do? The changes we have made are not simple. They have forced us to make weighty choices, and there have been sacrifices involved in each of them.

Half-Day, Theme-Centered Classes

CPRESS offers a common core curriculum for all students in grades 7 through 10, organized around two major fields: math/science for half the school day and humanities (art, history, social studies, and literature) for the other half.

Each class is centered around a theme. Here, for example, are two themes of study, one in humanities and one in math/science, both taken from the curriculum of our Division II, 9th and 10th grades:

Justice: Systems of Laws and Government. At least two very different concepts of justice are explored in this year-long theme: one consensual and the other adversarial. Ideas of fairness, conflict resolution, and equity are examined in these two societies. The American justice system and critical legal landmarks are examined in detail. Students develop first-hand experience with the preparation and defense of a legal brief. They explore the jury system and the nature of evidence. The essential questions in the study are: How is authority justified? How are conflicts resolved? Are justice, morality, and fairness synonymous?

Motion and Forces of Energy is a two-year theme driven by the following essential questions: How do things move? How does energy behave in its different forms? Is energy ever made or lost? In the investigation of these questions, students work on projects such as designing and analyzing an original amusement park ride or doing a scientific analysis of a projectile (e.g., a basketball or a javelin in flight). They used a variety of commercially produced computer software to model and analyze projectile motion and collisions of two or more bodies. The theme includes an emphasis on the scientific method and the techniques of statistics and probability. Students also investigate the mathematical themes of counting, measuring, locating, and describing,
which lead them to a more intense study of algebra, geometry, trigonometry, mathematical transformations, vectors, and matrices.

In grades 7 through 10, each class period is two hours long, and each teacher teaches two classes a day rather than the five classes that are common in many other schools. This change has meant a reconceptualization of instructional practice. Two-hour classes push teachers to use a variety of strategies, such as whole-group instruction, small-group collaborative work, library research, and hands-on problem solving. The teacher can’t bore kids by lecturing them for two hours at a time.

Instruction in the Senior Institute—our name for grades 11 and 12—works a little differently. Students in this transitional stage spend more time taking courses out of our building: at colleges and museums, at internships, and in independent study. A substantial portion of their day is also spent with their advisors, preparing for graduation and the steps beyond.

**Small Classes**

A second priority is to reduce not only the number of classes taught, but also class size. To accomplish this goal, we have chosen to concentrate the great bulk of the resources allotted to us in core classroom instruction. As we have grown from a single 7th grade class in 1985 to our full complement today, we have made the ratio of students to teachers our priority. We have no guidance counselors, no gym teacher (although we do have an extensive intramural program and a substantial after-school athletic program), no music teacher, and a single art teacher for the whole school. We have no department chairs, no deans, and one social worker; in return for class sizes of under 20, other teachers have assumed many of the functions traditionally carried out by these personnel. All professional staff are advisors to a group of under 15 students for two years. This group meets for several hours each week, and it is the advisor who has long-range, in-depth relationships with each student’s family.

**Critical Friends**

Powerful as this educational process is, it puts us at odds with ideas of curriculum and assessment that stress memorization and coverage. This kind of learning is personal; it requires internalizing, not just saying, difficult ideas. It assumes an active role by the learner and, like other
creative acts, it is unpredictable and full of surprises. No textbooks or standardized tests exist for teaching this way. Adults must work together to constantly re-create curriculum, invent new forms for exhibiting knowledge, and decide when the school is ready to say, “She’s done it. It’s time to hand her a diploma.” Such chutzpah requires that standards be constantly discussed and agreed on.

External colleagues, what we call “critical friends,” are essential to help us look critically at the school’s work. “Autonomy” can’t be synonymous with privacy. Quite the opposite. CPESS, and its work, are always public. We bring in experts of various sorts several times a year to help us set standards and examine our curriculum. For instance, professors from local colleges and universities have come to our school and reviewed the writing quality of portfolio items, in almost all cases confirming our staff’s own evaluations of the items. And we’ve even had critical friends join us for a full day of graduation portfolio review. These teachers from traditional public schools in New York City, state education department employees, principals of comprehensive high schools, principals and teachers from our sister schools, foundation representatives, and outside experts looked at portfolios of differing quality, talked to students about their studies, and watched videotapes of student presentations. They also met with us and with teachers, offering thought-provoking comments, criticisms, and advice on a range of topics, from the structure of our school to academic requirements. By opening our program to this kind of outside scrutiny, we hold ourselves accountable to the public while also providing rich collaborative experiences for the staff.

**Time for Planning, Collaboration, and Assessment**

To make such collaboration possible we had to address another priority: teacher time. We had to build into the professional life of teachers time for adults to do this new kind of planning, collaboration, and assessment. Every Monday, staff meet from 3:00 to 4:30. On Friday, we have classes from 8:00 to 1:00, and the staff meet again from 1:30 until 3:00. This is three hours a week that staff work together on whole-school issues. Some of that time is used by vertical teams (all the humanities teachers and all the math/science teachers) to meet and discuss scope and sequence and standards of work from 7th grade through graduation. At least once a month, our whole staff gather to
discuss issues of race, class, and gender. And once a month, we gather to consider school matters such as family conferences, report writing or reports, and recommendations from various working subgroups. Several times a year, we meet over weekends for public review of students’ work and developing curriculum. We’ve even raised some funds to pay teachers a stipend for working during July on collaborative projects.

In addition, each week we have carved out a three-hour block of time for teams of teachers who work with the same students to meet. We have done this by requiring that each student in grades 7 through 10 have a community service placement. We have one teacher who is responsible for these placements. We organize the placements so that students who go into the community to work do so in constellations of 80 students per day. This arrangement frees teams of teachers to work together for that half day. The students check in with their advisor at 9:00 a.m. and then go to their placement. They return at noon and go to lunch and midday options (gym, library, etc). Their teachers have until 1:00 to plan collaboratively, and the students have rich opportunities for using their minds in a wide variety of institutions, from day-care classrooms to museums, hospitals, and homes for the aged.

These formal and informal gatherings that take place all day long are where “staff development” occurs. They are where the newest teacher learns his or her trade, and senior staff reexamine and revisit old issues. While everyone complains occasionally of being exhausted—and so we skip a meeting here and there—we don’t complain of burnout. We’re never treated like appliances, but are in control of our own profession.

Through these varied forms of face-to-face meetings, the governance of the school is enacted. Decisions are made, wherever possible, by those who must implement them. But decisions also belong to the wider community of staff, parents, and students, and they have always the right to ask that a decision be reconsidered, defended, and explained. In these open and accessible ways, staff and students learn about the complexities of democracy. They learn of its limitations and of the realities of institutional trade-offs. And they imagine how they might even do it better. We ourselves are forever tinkering with ways to govern better (and less), using the same habits of mind we ask of our students.
Altered Perceptions

We come back to the personal (as former kindergarten teachers, we couldn't do otherwise), which includes looking at children as members of their family and reflecting on how schooling has altered both children's and family's perceptions of themselves. One mother described to an audience of teachers how this kind of schooling has changed her family; her words convey what it is we hope for from our schooling:

As we (our family) became familiar with the process of presenting work for criticism to a supportive group of peers, we all became involved with it.

I remember when Zawadi (my middle daughter) was doing a portfolio item on Philip Parnell, a case of a teenager who was shot down and killed by a police officer in New Jersey. I went to the library with her and we did extensive research. She told me what to look for.

She interviewed my brother, who is a NYC police officer, so she could get a feeling for what a police officer feels like when something like that happens. She didn't want her exhibition to be biased...

I watched her formulate her questions. I watched her interview people. I watched her over a period of several years pull all that information into a play that she decided to use a vehicle for her presentation.

And then I watched her have her friends from school come to my living room. I watched her become the director. And I watched her listen to them—to take into account how they felt—how they would have responded in that case.

My son chose to focus on his experience as a child living in three different states and how they impacted on who he has become.

This having to define himself was insightful to us all. His accounts of specific instances of racism were validated by his sisters and led to family discussions about those instances and how they could be empowering if you change the anger to strength.

My youngest daughter has taken to documenting the family history, which has brought into the picture the total United States history and the history of the Caribbean. She has had to do extensive research...
around those oral histories, which are important to me because I grew up with them but never thought to document them. This process allowed her to do that and to give her the time so that she wasn’t doing the rote kind of work our children used to do, but she was placing her time in something that was meaningful and important to her, and she was excited about that.

The history of progressive education has largely been written in schools for young children—in kindergartens and early childhood centers and Head Start centers. Its spokespeople have been professionals who have studied and practiced their craft with the young. Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, John Dewey, Lillian Weber and Barbara Biber, and so many other teachers who have gone before. They created schools where what students studied was intimately connected to their lives, and where people had a chance to work and learn side by side. Our success at CPESS is to re-create those structures and to implement goals in settings where older students learn. It is also our challenge.

We have created a structure where it is possible to learn to know students well so they can learn to use their minds well; we have created a structure where teachers can be in responsible control of their professional lives and where there is a strong professional community supporting them; we have created an assessment system that can hold students to high standards without standardization; we have created a curriculum structure based on habits of mind that focus on tools for thinking, not just bits and pieces of information. That’s the easy part; the hard part is making it happen.