

**A Different Kind of High School:**

**The Challenges of Going to Scale with New School Designs**

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

It was not until the early 1990s that the phenomenon we discuss in this book became imaginable. The United States has been preoccupied with school reform - especially high school reform - since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and questions of how school reform spreads and of what *spread* really means have long been of interest. But hardly anyone before the early 1990s thought of school reform in terms of creating new and multiple school designs, and "going to scale" with them - that is, replicating them many times in different contexts. By that time, however, the United States had experienced nearly a decade of school "restructuring" - particularly high school restructuring. Propelled by a powerful critique of the American high school captured in several widely read and influential texts, the restructuring effort aimed implicitly to produce a new standard design.<sup>i</sup> The effort was full of political struggle - particularly within schools themselves - but had minimal impact beyond new design ideas and some design exemplars. A few veterans of the effort - among them some people highlighted in this book - wanted by the early 1990s to try another approach. This involved moving away from standard design, and embracing multiple designs. It also

seized an opportunity created by a growing worldwide tendency to apply market thinking and market mechanisms to social services.

In 1990, for example, John Chubb and Terry Moe rescued Milton Friedman's thirty-five-year-old idea about giving families vouchers to buy the schooling they wanted instead of assigning children to particular government-operated schools (Friedman, 1955; Moe, 2001). In 1991, Minnesota passed the nation's first law authorizing charter schools, hailed then and now by its proponents as a "supply side" innovation fostering a more equitable schooling market (Nathan, 1999; Viteritti, 1999). That same year, the New American Schools Development Corporation was launched. It promised the development of "break the mold" comprehensive school designs by not-for-profit school designers, and the marketing of these designs to districts (Berends, Bodilly & Kirby, 2002; Glennan, 1998;). In 1997, Congress passed a law known as the Obey-Porter legislation (named after the Congressional sponsors) which helped build the market for such designs by offering up to \$50,000 each year for three years to school districts willing to adopt one (Keltner, 1998). In 1993, Edison Schools, led by a former president of Yale University, opened for business as a *for-profit* school designer, one prepared to work with charters or

districts. By the end of the decade, voucher systems had been launched in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Florida, and charter schools were in operation nearly everywhere - often designed and run by not-for profit or for-profit entities called charter management organizations.

By then too, many school districts had begun to outsource operations previously undertaken in-house - contracting not only for lunch and transportation services, but for curriculum and professional development tied to the curriculum. It would not be long before they were contracting as well as for school management - including management by design. Today, major school districts like New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia are described as "mixed systems" - whereby school choice co-exists with school assignment, city-supported charter schools compete with their more regulated counterparts, market and bureaucratic jargons intermingle, and schooling by design - in particular, *high schooling* by design - has become common if not yet commonplace.

Thus questions that concern us in this book became important:

- How should third-party proprietary designers of schooling go about installing and supporting their design in many different contexts?

- What challenges should the designers expect to meet in the process?
- How best can the designers manage these challenges?
- What should their clients expect?
- What roles must both be prepared to play?

These questions have few direct antecedents in educational inquiry. They sound more like business questions because they are business questions. This fact has not been lost on funders of the new design work - especially the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which began to invest heavily in new high school design and its replication in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nor was it lost on the authors of this book when another foundation (which wishes to remain anonymous because it does not usually fund such work) commissioned us in 2002 to try to answer the questions above through a close study of a high school designer that Gates had just funded.

The designer is the Big Picture Company. In 1996, it opened a small and different kind of high school in a corridor of the Rhode Island State Department of Education in Providence. Today, it oversees a network of nearly 70 Big Picture schools nationwide. In studying the effort of the Big Picture Company to go to scale with its new high

school design, we also studied high schooling in general and what schooling by design can do for it.

### **About the Big Picture Company**

The Big Picture Company (BP) is a non-profit education reform organization headquartered in Providence, Rhode Island. It was founded in 1993 by Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor, experienced educators and adventurous educational entrepreneurs. Littky was founding principal in 1972 of the Shoreham-Wading River Middle School on Long Island, New York. In her 1984 book about exemplary middle schools, Joan Lipsitz calls him "the red-bearded rebel" (p.155). At about the time the Lipsitz book appeared, however, Littky had become a graying rebel who was about to be fired from his next job as principal of Thayer Junior-Senior High School in Winchester, New Hampshire. He was fired by a school board uncomfortable with his innovations, but then re-instated in a dramatic turn of events chronicled by Susan Kammeraad-Campbell in her 1989 book, *Doc*, and then in the 1992 NBC-TV movie derived from the book, *A Town Torn Apart*. Littky stayed at Thayer for more than a decade after his re-instatement, and helped make the school an exemplar of late 20th-century high school reform as a charter member of Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools.

Elliot Washor had worked closely with Littky on Long Island, then joined him in his later years at Thayer, where he produced an early reality TV show called *Here, Thayer, and Everywhere*. It played a role in disseminating design ideas across the Coalition of Essential Schools, as well as other reform networks, and it also stimulated both men's interest in new design adventures. Washor and Littky moved to Rhode Island in the early 1990s at the invitation of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, then headed by Sizer. They came determined to go beyond the bounds of the reforms they had achieved in their previous work together. Thus they were among the people we mentioned above - restructuring reform veterans who wanted to re-think the re-structuring approach. The Big Picture Company was the product of this re-thinking, and it was incubated at the Annenberg Institute. Its first project was to design a different kind of high school for Providence - different physically, different in its curriculum, and different in its relationship with the city and the state. The result was the Met - the one we mentioned above that opened in 1996 as a state-supported school. The name stands for the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center. It was designed to enable students to discover and follow passionate interests

through "real-world" learning. Each student is immersed two whole days a week in a community of adults working in the same area of interest, mentored closely and on a voluntary basis by one of the adults. For the rest of the week, in an environment more like a design studio than a classroom, and with coaching from an advisor (who works with roughly a dozen other students too), the student pursues projects in accordance with an individualized learning plan. The advisor, varied mentors the student takes on over his or her years at the Met, and the student's family collaborate to develop successive plans and monitor the student's learning progress toward the achievement of the school's overall learning goals. All Met students are pressed to apply to college and to attend college, and many take college courses while still at the Met - for example, at nearby Rhode Island Community College. Elliot Levine's (2002) book about the Met, entitled *One Kid at a Time: Big Lessons from a Small School* is a good source for learning more about the Met.

The larger mission of the Big Picture Company is to generate and support educational institutions that tailor their work to the unique interests and qualities of the people they educate, and that also situate learning to the greatest possible extent in the "real world" workplaces of

their communities ([www.bigpicture.org](http://www.bigpicture.org)). To this end, BP provides designs, professional education, school coaching, and other kinds of assistance to schools (K-12), colleges, networks of schools, a network of youth organizations creating schools, and individual educators. Still, it is best known today for the Met (now with six small campuses in Providence - five in the city's poorest neighborhood), and the national network of Big Picture schools that replicate the Met - 67 of them as of 2008, in 13 states. These schools are not directly operated by Big Picture (except in Providence), nor are they franchises in the ordinary sense. They operate independently under memoranda of understanding between BP and districts or charter management organizations, and they use BP designs and other assistance. The provision of assistance has been supported by grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other sources. While the original Met is still located in a corridor of the Rhode Island Department of Education, the other five Met campuses are in new buildings that were constructed to BP specifications under BP direction. Elliot Washor, who served as general overseer of this construction project, captures the important physical side of new school design in a 2003 online book about this

project. His book plus Dennis Littky's (2004) book are the best sources for tracking BP's intellectual roots.

Liberated from the task of restructuring the conventional American high school, Littky, Washor, and their colleagues imagined a high school design that would prove particularly attractive to youth who find themselves un-attracted for various reasons to the conventional design. This may be because it seems to them too constraining, boring, impersonal, excessively "academic," and/or incapable of dealing successfully with their unique interests and needs. In his 2004 book, Littky refers to a different set of three "R's" guiding the Big Picture design: *relationships* (adult to youth, and school to family); *relevance*, achieved through work-focused, community-based learning; and *rigor*, of the kind that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and sociologist Barbara Schneider (2000) say is characteristic of the early formative experiences of creative and productive people - providing opportunities for enthusiastically intense concentration in a challenging area of great interest.

Big Picture school students, as we mentioned above, spend at least two full days a week in an experience BP calls Learning through Internship or LTI. Here they may work with a photographer, a medical technician, a police

officer, a TV producer, or some other mentor whom the students themselves have often helped to locate while pursuing some strong interest (one that may shift or change as they mature). The rest of the week they learn under the tutelage of an advisor within an advisory of roughly a dozen other students. Conferring with the student's family in the process, the advisor helps each advisee craft a unique Learning Plan tied to the interest explored in the LTI and designed to meet Learning Goals within five broad domains:

- Communication
- Empirical reasoning
- Quantitative reasoning
- Social reasoning
- Personal qualities (respect, responsibility, organization, leadership, reflection, and striving)

On a quarterly basis, students are assessed on their progress in meeting these goals by means of public exhibitions of project-based work they have completed. For one of her quarterly projects, a student interning at an organic farm built a garden that replicated the farm on a small scale. To meet her quantitative reasoning goal, she devised an Excel data base to keep track of the farm's crops. She incorporated historical data in the data base,

and analyzed trends. For empirical reasoning she looked at whether moon phases affected seed germination rates. For social reasoning, she conducted research into community-supported agriculture, its history and arguments for and against it.

The quarterly exhibitions are chaired by advisors, and attended by other students as well as parents, mentors, and sometimes guests. Advisors prompt the exhibitors to step back from their work and answer such questions as, "What have you learned about yourself?" "What problems did you encounter and how did you overcome them?" and "What would you change about your work to improve it?" Following each exhibition, students receive lengthy written narratives from the advisor reviewing the exhibition with the Learning Plans and Goals in mind.

Intellectually, the Big Picture School design is rooted in John Dewey's complex ideas about the role of interest and experience in education - in particular, his ideas about what makes an interest educative (he thought it was its connection to a larger world of experience), about the role of expert guidance in the pursuit of an interest (he thought it crucial), and about the important role of practical activity in the process (also crucial) (Dewey, 1938). As both Littky's and Washor's books make clear, BP

taps these Deweyan roots directly, and through the work of other thinkers and writers. Among these others are some who urge more patience than educators or educational policymakers generally show for the natural development that derives from just growing up among caring and thoughtful adults. These thinkers and writers include the school-rooted reformers Ted Sizer (1984, 2004) and Deborah Meier (2002); the insightful reform skeptic Seymour Sarason (1972, 1982, and 1995); the de-schooling advocate Ivan Illich (1971); and the home schooling advocate John Holt (1964, 1967). Other writers and thinkers who have helped to shape BP's ideas and practices include advocates for the role of hands in thinking and learning. Among them are the 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian educator Maria Montessori (1966), the Stanford neurologist Frank R. Wilson (1998), the cognitive psychologist Roger Schank (2000), and National Public Radio's "Car Talk" star Tom Magliozzi (Magliozzi & Magliozzi, 2000).

Trust in development plus emphasis on hands-on learning make the Big Picture curriculum far more experiential than the typical high school curriculum. At any given moment, a student in a Big Picture school is much more likely than a student in a conventional high school to be active with his or her hands, to be moving about rather

than sitting down, to be working outside rather than inside a classroom or school building, to be initiating a project of his or her own design, and to be working beside adults. This also means that he or she is less likely - at quarterly intervals, say - to have covered some specified amount of content knowledge. Indeed, BP is deeply skeptical about the intellectual and developmental value of the kind of content frameworks and timelines that are highly characteristic of American schooling, and it is wary of the kind of content auditing that constitutes much of American educational accountability. BP believes instead in the power over time of the three R's - *relationships*, *relevance*, and *rigor* (as defined above) - to help young people grow up, become in the process smarter, more literate, more knowledgeable in ways that connect them successfully to the world and the world's occupations, and that make them more morally attuned to others and society. It chooses therefore to be accountable in terms of other markers of progress: Does the student who hated school come to like it? Does the student develop and sustain intellectual interests? Does the student grow perceptibly - in the view of his or her mentors, teachers, and family - in the five broad domains of learning bulleted above?

Does the student stay in school? Does the student apply to college, get into college, and stay in college?

Of course, BP functions within a policy climate that relies principally on other measures of educational progress than these - not just for individual students, but for schools, educational management organizations, and school designers. The other measures especially include standardized tests tied to disciplinary content frameworks. Given the dominant influence of such tests - and in consideration of Big Picture's ideas and unconventional practices - it seems quite remarkable at first to learn that there is even *one* Big Picture School operating in the United States today, let alone nearly seventy. The fact that there are nearly seventy is partly a testament to BP's political skills in the face of the scale-up challenges we discuss in this book, though it is surely a testament also to the fact that BP does not aim to be a new standard high school. It aims instead to serve those who are most dissatisfied with that standard - a group that in urban areas constitutes nearly half of all youth as measured by the drop-out rate.

The Gates Foundation divides all its school design grantees into three groups. The first group - called "traditional" - includes designers like Aspire Public

Schools, Knowledge is Power (KIPP), and Early College High School. They have created schools that are *different* in some of the ways we use the term in this book. For the most part, however, they are not different in the content of their curricula. Gates says they teach traditional subjects but in ways that prepare all their students to succeed in learning them well. Such school designers make an important contribution to high schooling. As we argue in chapter 6, however, the portfolio of high school designs necessary to prepare all American youth well for higher education and the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace will also have to include designs that take other paths to intellectual development, that operate on the basis of an epistemology less tied to traditional academic disciplines. Gates apparently agrees, and thus its second group of funded designers - which it calls "theme-based" designers - argue for different curriculum content too. For example, High Tech High weaves pre-engineering throughout the curriculum, transforming it in the process. Expeditionary Learning Schools puts character development on a par with academic development to similar effect. The third group of Gates-funded designers - which the foundation calls "student-centered" - includes BP, as well as Diploma Plus, YouthBuild Schools, and several others. These designers,

as Gates puts it, "create individualized plans for each student, often with students' input, and may focus especially on drop-outs or at-risk youth" ([www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)). Following Gates and other funders, many policymakers make room for such radical high school designers because they take on the toughest cases.

We must add, however, that the network of Big Picture schools continues to grow because the schools' cumulative record - even on conventional content-focused achievement measures - is good when matched with an appropriate comparison group. It is also because the record is exceptionally good with respect to conventional measures of progress that BP itself targets - namely attendance, graduation rates, and college-going rates. More about how Big Picture schools measure up in chapter 6.

### **How We Studied Big Picture Going to Scale**

We are educational researchers - we would unabashedly say *school* researchers - and we knew that we would have a lot to learn about taking a business perspective on Big Picture's efforts to start other Big Picture schools. However, we were nonetheless eager for the adventure. One of us (McDonald) had written about the Big Picture Company earlier (or BP as we refer to it throughout the book), and he was interested in how it had developed in the

intervening years (Walker & McDonald, 1996). He has long been interested in high school reform generally, but particularly in efforts that make high schooling more intellectually powerful *and* less academically narrow. This is the design task that BP especially set for itself. At the time, McDonald had also just completed a study of the National Writing Project as part of a larger study by the Rand Corporation of going to scale with school reforms, and he wondered about the applicability of the Rand findings to the Big Picture case (Glennan, Bodilly, Galegher, and Kerr, 2004; McDonald, Buchanan, and Sterling, 2004). Meanwhile, the other two authors of this book were then beginning their now completed doctoral studies. One (Riordan) was interested - for reasons traceable in her own education and teaching career (and now in her post-doctoral career path) - in the role of experiential learning in school design (Riordan, 2006). Of course, the Big Picture design puts a heavy emphasis on experiential learning. The other author (Klein) was interested in the role that professional development plays in replications of successful educational practices. To what extent, she wondered, was replicating a school design all about professionals learning the design (Klein, 2005).

By 2001, the Big Picture Company had already replicated the Met once and was in the process of building the campus that would house four more replications. Taking notice, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation asked BP if it wanted to try the same thing in places beyond Rhode Island. As we began our study, BP was building new Big Picture schools in five other states. We followed this work closely for the next three years. In the process, we discovered that while the questions that guided our study (bulleted above) begin in economics, they also involve politics. Of course, readers more familiar than we were then with business reform literature could have told us so. The good news in this for readers of this book is that politics makes good stories - in this case, stories of challenge and response to challenge, of conflict meeting invention, and of unexpected opportunity and transformation.

Of course, if you only wanted interesting stories, you'd have bought a book of fiction rather than this book. But we believe that our stories and the other material that make up this book are relevant as well as interesting - broadly relevant to education. Although our research focused on one high school reform effort, our findings apply - through a process we describe below - to reform at

other levels of schooling too, and to reform that focuses more on policy, curriculum, or pedagogy than on school design. At the 1993 White House announcement of Walter Annenberg's half-billion-dollar gift to American school reform, President Bill Clinton declared that all of the problems besetting American education had already been solved somewhere, and that the trick was to find out where, then get the solutions to travel. His "travel" is another name for "going to scale."

We conducted our research using conventional social science methods that included observations, interviews, document collection and review, electronic data storage and analysis, and triangulation of data sources as a basis for drawing conclusions. However, we mixed these methods with somewhat less conventional ones that have had an impact on the book. For one thing, we presented findings iteratively in four essays written over two years while we were still collecting data (McDonald, Klein, & Riordan, February 2003; June 2003; February 2004; August 2004). We called them essays with the French root of the word in mind - *essai*: an attempt. Each attempted to capture a complex and shifting phenomenon. We named strategies we were seeing in BP's work, and from the strategies we inferred the challenges these strategies addressed - eventually

enumerating seven of them (plus one more that we reveal in the book). We did all this in dialogue with BP designers, using the successive essays (as well as drafts of them) to conduct this dialogue. We also circulated the essays among a small mix of other school designers, school reformers, policymakers, and funders - including our own funder. We asked them whether the challenges we were naming seemed plausible to them as challenges applicable beyond the Big Picture case. We were of course *not* suggesting that research findings based on a single school designer's experience could be regarded as generalizable to other designers in the ordinary sense of the word. We were fishing instead for what Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1996) call "reflective transfer."

Reflective transfer happens when parties working in a somewhat parallel situation to one that has been carefully documented and analyzed say how their situation is both like and unlike the situation presented. In the process, they gain greater insight into their own situation, and possibly gain access as well to strategies adaptable to their own situation. We encouraged this reflective transfer in our essays through analogy. The essays were laced with analogy - as is this book. Some instances involve *close-in* analogy- for example, between BP and other

school designers - especially Expeditionary Learning Schools, or between BP and other educational reform organizations like the National Writing Project. Still others involve *big-stretch* analogy - for example, between BP and the performance artists collectively known as Blue Man Group, or BP and Whole Foods Supermarkets, or BP and Starbucks. Moreover, we take two big-stretch analogies to considerable length - what literary analysts would call *conceit*, though we call a *distant mirror*. One comes at the end of chapter 3 and the other at the end of chapter 4. Like most of our other big-stretch analogies, they are drawn from a field of interest you're likely to find quite familiar - namely food. We thought that a single and familiar contrasting human service focus might enhance the power of our analogies to induce reflective transfer (and might also make the writing and the reading more fun). Thus you will read in this book not only about high schools and other kinds of educational settings, but about restaurants and grocery stores, and about bread, olive oil, ice cream, and coffee. Bon appétit!

We have also aimed to capture in the book a facsimile of the dialogue that surrounded the essays as we circulated them and discussed them with others. It takes the form of a kind of hyper-text composed of comments on the main text

by two early readers. We call them our *dialogue partners*. In order to help us prompt your reflective transfer, we've asked them to say how the Big Picture experience in going to scale is both like and unlike their own experiences in going to scale. Their comments thread through the book. Mimicking the interplay of different kinds of analogies, one of these dialogue partners is an educational entrepreneur, and the other is a food entrepreneur.

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<sup>1</sup>The most widely read and influential of these texts was the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, called *A Nation at Risk*. Also influential and widely read were John Goodlad's (1984) *A Place Called School*, Ernest Boyer's (1985) *High School*, Ted Sizer's (1984) *Horace's Compromise*, and Arthur Powell, David Cohen, and Eleanor Farrar's (1985) *The Shopping Mall High School*.