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A New Model of Connected Learning

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A New Model of Connected Learning

Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor always dreamed of building a **new type of high school**. Throughout his many years in public education as a teacher and administrator, Washor felt that high schools were failing to meet the true needs of students, their families and the community as a whole. Littky imagined building a school that approached learning in a new way, making it a true hands-on experience and involving more than just students and teachers in the process.

In 1995, they saw a window open. The Rhode Island state legislature approved a bill mandating the creation of a **new type of career and technical school**. A \$29 million bond was passed to build the school, but the legislature left the question of who would design and run the school unanswered.

That prompted Littky and Washor, who were both teaching at The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University at the time, to meet with the governor and Commissioner of Education Peter McWalters to propose that they design and operate the new school. Their knowledge of and long-time interest in experimental high schools won them the job. In 1995, the Rhode Island Department of Education and the Board of Regents contracted with The Big Picture Company, a nonprofit founded by Littky and Washor, to finalize the implementation plan and prepare to open the new school. Under the approval of the state, Littky and Washor set out to design a school that would set a precedent in the education world and make their dreams of offering a **new type of education** a reality.



Mentor Chris Hempel
assists students
(front to back) Juan Hu
Amanda Eso
and Brian Paulin



FORGING NEW TERRITORY

The first concern for Littky and Washor was designing a school that would truly maintain a unique foothold in the education world. "We wanted to make sure it was going to be a school that would be the best of both career and technical, and a comprehensive high-school, education," said Washor. "It would be a series of small schools with no more than 100 students in each and it would be a school for all kids — not just those tracked for technical or academic success, but a mixture of all students, abilities and interests."

In 1996, Littky and Washor opened Met Center High School in Providence, R.I., with just 50 students. Since that time, the school has grown to 200 students and the pair have added a second Met Center facility in the city. In doing so they have succeeded in building a model that has, indeed, made "the Met" a unique facility.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the Met and its public school counterparts is that students start their education from their interests. Then their teachers, who are

their advisors for four years, deepen their understanding by having them apply academic skills into the context of students' interest in real world settings.

"We engage students around their interests, one student at a time," said Washor. "All academic learning is conceptualized and in context with their interests. So instead of having English, math, science, social studies and foreign languages, we have academically applied learning goals like empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, communication, personal qualities and social reasoning. Putting it in context with the real world means it's understood and it sticks."

Each student's education at the Met involves many people. Once a student figures out where his or her interests lie, he or she is required to seek out a mentor who works in that field and form alliances with them. Then a Learning Plan Team is formed and meets four times a year. The team is comprised of the student, the student's parents, teachers, advisors and mentor. The team's goal is to develop a unique learning plan based on each student's goals and

interests. The goals have to be applied to the standards of the real world. "We turn education around," said Washor. "Instead of starting with broad courses to try to find interest, we start from interest and students take classes based on those interests. Approaching it that way helps develop a student's talent, abilities and motivation."

The Met is run in a very democratic manner. Each student has a voice and a choice in what they're studying and how well they do. Not only does every student's schedule look different because their Learning Plan team comprises a unique plan for them, but students are also responsible for planning their own weekly schedules and developing their own projects.

Students at the Met cannot go through school without playing an active role in their academic careers and their future. "Students can't just show up to classes and doodle in their notebooks here," said Washor. "This is a very engaged learning program. There are very few lectures; students are always active."

One of the activities students are busy with are LTIs, or Learning Through Internships. Students are required to seek out internships in their fields of interest and to spend time learning and helping in the community. "A big part of our school is to pair kids with adults around a similar interest. Students go out two days a week minimum and work with mentors in LTIs, where they strive to apply academics in an interest- and project-based learning situation."

While teachers outside of the Met might doubt giving students so much freedom could work, Washor said their students have done amazing things. "Our students do LTIs with performing artists, high-tech firms and biomedical professionals, they do LTIs in prenatal care in hospitals, etc. We've had people who think our students are in their 20s and on the job for real. Giving them an opportunity to be professional and responsible often means they rise to the occasion."

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Seeing the Big Picture

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Big Picture Company is a nonprofit organization with a sole mission: to encourage and effect school change. The company's co-directors, Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor, are nationally known educators with a long history of effecting successful educational innovation. The Board of Directors includes both national education leaders and prominent Rhode Island business professionals. Big Picture's goal is to provide forums where educators can design plans that take bold steps toward change within their own school settings.

With the freedom to "start from scratch" and escape tradition, the Met is developing new practices of schooling that truly capitalize on what its founders believe works best for students. With a mandate to "be bold" and a mission to share its learnings, the Met is a perfect school from which Big Picture Company can collect data and research.

The Met opened in 1996 as a state public school. By legislation, 75 percent of its students come from Providence, R.I. and 25 percent come from urban, suburban and rural towns in the state. Over the next several years, the Met will grow to encompass multiple small schools of no more than 100 students each, separately located but within a single organization. Littky and Washor concurrently serve as co-directors of the Met.

Washor has been involved in school reform for more than 20 years as a teacher, administrator and video producer. He has taught all levels from kindergarten through college, in urban and rural settings, across all disciplines. He has served as a consultant to schools throughout the U.S. and Europe. At Thayer High School in Winchester, N.H., his professional development programs won an Innovations in State and Local Government Award from the Ford Foundation and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Littky is nationally known for his 25 years of work in secondary education in urban, suburban and rural settings. He has been a community organizer, curriculum coordinator and principal of two innovative schools. His recent work at Thayer High School was featured in an NBC movie, "A Town Torn Apart," based on the book, *Doc: The Story of Dennis Littky and His Fight for a Better School* (Contemporary Books, 1989).

Although it seems somewhat revolutionary, Littky and Washor insist that the Met is really an old concept. "It's based on the whole idea of matching students with adults. It just seems new because most schools don't operate like this, they age-grade people and shut them away from the world," Washor said. "This is a way to glue students to really understanding things and really getting them ready for college, becoming lifelong learners, being productive and doing good things for their communities. People learn best by doing, by using their hands and engaging themselves in things they're interested in. This is a school that tries to meet all student needs."

The Met is also meeting the needs of teachers who prefer a non-traditional method of instruction. Teacher/advisor Chris Hempel previously taught at a public school but said he doesn't see himself ever going back. "In many of the other schools there was a constant tension, kind of an adversarial relationship with the students. You held the grades and the students had to work to get them. At the Met it is a much more supportive relationship. I'm here for the students, and they recognize the role of the advisor as someone who is supportive, not someone who's trying to hold them back. They see us as being much more of an advocate for them. We don't do much of what you'd consider traditional lecture. More often, it's helping students find a direction and focus."



TECH TOOLS AND CORRIDORS

Two things that are innovative about the Met are its strategic uses of technology and unique building design. With a 3:1 student-to-computer ratio, technology is used to connect mentor relationships, to bring the outside world into the Met and to help students design multimedia presentations. All computers in the school are fully networked with Internet access and high-speed digital lines. The Met has also developed a digital portfolio that students use to combine their research, information and LTI experience into one document they can eventually use as the basis for a resume and college transcript.

The Met's buildings are also unique. At the main building where Washor spends most of his time, for example, there are no corridors in the school. Washor said that's because buildings are designed with an emphasis on relationships rather than content. Buildings are designed as circles that spiral inward. Looking from the outside in, there is office space for teachers, which branches into seminar advisory rooms, which then open into project rooms with a bank of 13 computers each. Project rooms then open up into a large public space. "Most of the area at the school is set aside for meetings and collaboration areas, because we do things much more like a business than a traditional school," said Washor.

BEING THERE

Alex Rivera is a senior who came to the Met with an interest in the outdoors and video production. Since being at the Met, he has worked at Cox Cable preparing sets for a video shoot and doing some actual videotaping. "That motivated me because I got to do what I wanted to do and I was able to learn the technology and work with people," said Rivera. "It was 10 times better than my previous school, where these kinds of opportunities were just not available. I was just sort of going through the motions. I didn't have a passion or an interest I could explore." >>



Joe Clapprood
senior, Met Center



Alex Rivera
senior,
Met Center

"I got to be who I wanted to be without anybody pushing me into being something I didn't want."

Rivera said it was the hands-on method of learning that first interested him in applying to the Met. "I didn't really know what I was getting into when I applied, but I knew it was going to open new opportunities for me," he said. "I had problems with violence at school previously. At the Met I got more from my education and turned all the negatives into positives. Here, I got to be who I wanted to be without anybody pushing me into being something I didn't want. This is me, building my future, making my own decisions and learning through the whole process."

Joe Clapprood, also a senior, was in a traditional K-8 school when he heard about the Met and decided to apply. "Coming here from a public school was at first total culture shock," he said. "Nothing can prepare you, it's so different. They asked us the first day what we wanted to learn about, and I had to think about it for a while because I really didn't know. It wasn't a question I expected because that was always decided for me."

Clapprood eventually discovered he was very interested in the Vietnam War. During his freshman year he did an LTI with the Army National Guard and interviewed Vietnam veterans. The next year, he continued to study that topic, doing projects

on Agent Orange and other aspects of the conflict. He did another LTI at one of Rhode Island's airports, working with people that run the airfield, learning their procedures, even helping to write a part of their procedure book. Last year, Clapprood took a history course at Providence College and got a B.

This year, he's doing a senior thesis that will include a trip to Vietnam to gather different perspectives on the war. Accompanying him will be his father, a Vietnam veteran. "I hope it will open doors for me to be able to talk to kids in schools about the Vietnam War," he said. "I think that's important, because it's a topic that's not talked about much or taught about much in schools."

Chris Hempel has been an advisor to both Rivera and Clapprood throughout their four years at the school. Hempel said he has seen the boys change dramatically during that time. "I think they have a much better sense of who they are, where they are headed and how they as individuals affect their community. In having the opportunity to express their individuality, they've also come to appreciate the need for community. They are leaving with much more confidence and a belief that they can accomplish anything they put their minds to."

MOVING FORWARD

The school Littky and Washor envisioned appears to be materializing. Demand to enroll at the Met is rising quickly, and the Rhode Island Department of Education has been impressed with what they've seen, according to Washor. Plans are now under way to create six to eight more of these small Met Center campuses in Providence. If Littky and Washor have their wish, the idea will spread and more and more schools will begin concentrating on a formula of "focusing on student interests, putting learning in their hands and connecting them with their communities." ■

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