

The Story of our School

Where we've been and where we're going – August 2005

As told by Peter Garbus

Origins – the infamous barbecue

Once upon a time there was a barbecue. But if it had been some kind of fantasy or fairy tale, our lives would not have turned so dramatically over these past five years.

Jim Nehring, Brian McDermott (two of our original trustees), and Ted Sizer (the founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools) were gathered with their spouses at Jim's house for an innocent summer barbecue when they got to talking about schools. That's what they usually talk about; each one connected to the Parker Charter School on Devens where Jim had been the principal and now teaches, where Brian was a parent, and where Ted was one of the founders. One of them – no one will claim responsibility – mentioned that someone should really get another essential school started in the area. Parker was receiving almost 200 applications for only 60 spaces in their 7th grade and there were long waiting lists as far as anyone could see. Parker was a successful school and more people wanted what it offered.

I missed that barbecue – that'll teach me. But somehow I went with Brian that August to a meeting at the Charter School Office where they described what it took to apply for a new charter school. Brian and I looked at the process and thought we could describe a school we wanted in the 15 page required summary. We first considered Lancaster and Clinton, the towns we're from, but we soon decided that Fitchburg or Leominster would be a much better choice. Hardly any students went to Parker from these two diverse cities and we wanted this new school to be as accessible as possible to families with the least access. If this new school was really going to contribute something and make a difference, it should serve a diverse population.

One thing led to another, and by the time we finished, we had successfully completed the 50 page charter application describing nearly every aspect of the school we planned to create. From not knowing a single person in Fitchburg or Leominster, I had established a small network of supporters interested in a new essential school for north central Massachusetts.

If you don't know me

I remember sitting on swings at a playground with a friend almost 20 years ago now talking about what kind of school I would want to create if I could. So it really has been that long since my ideas about schools have been forming and it is frankly amazing to me that here stands a school that we all helped to create.

When I was a sophomore at Brown University, I took a course with a gentleman by the name of Ted Sizer on high school in the United States from 1900 to the present. Part history and part diatribe, the course presented context and the central ideas that emerged out of a Study of High Schools, a project Ted spearheaded that looked at what high schools were like. Traveling to hundreds of schools across the country for over two years, Ted and his colleagues were stunned by the incredible sameness and mediocrity of this American institution.

As this analysis unfolded, I saw my own high school experience reflected. I grew up in the privileges of middle class suburbia, the eldest son of a lawyer dad and interior designer mom. I went to a typical comprehensive high school, with an honors track that kept me mostly separated from the so-called general population of the school. I did all of my work, got very good grades, did tons of activities, and rarely created an original idea or project.

Ted's course left me both angry and energized. I became angry at the waste – so many hours spent in school and so many students left so untouched by the mind-numbing routines of those hours. But Ted himself got me energized. Here was this preppy guy, button-down shirt, plaid tie, quiet, proper language, talking about a revolution. Schools did not have to be this way. There are reasons they are the way they are, but are we just going to sit around and let them continue on for another hundred years? He told us about educators who were saying no, they could do better, and they were creating schools that would do better.

I started working with Ted as an assistant in his course for the next two years and with the newly formed Coalition of Essential Schools one of my summers at Brown. I was there with the 10 first schools to join the Coalition and I was there for its second ever national gathering of schools working on the common principles. Mind you, I didn't know much then. But the questions were compelling and I've been exploring their answers ever since.

For two years, I taught English and history in a young, small independent school outside Baltimore, Maryland. I then got my masters from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and did my student teaching at Fenway High School, a great essential school in Boston. Next I was part of the founding faculty in a new suburban high school in Tucson, Arizona where I spent five years teaching world history and American Studies. Within the first two months of that new school, they fired the principal, changed the schedule, bought textbooks, and that planned-for essential school became a bit less essential. Next I came back east to join the Francis Parker Charter Essential School, then in its third year after starting from scratch.

At each phase, I learned a little bit more about what it means to be a teacher and about what it takes to have a good school. I also went to Fall Forum after Fall Forum, the annual meeting of the Coalition. Ted always describes it as "a conversation among friends" and over the years they provided me idea after idea about what is possible. Indeed, our charter application was a synthesis of structures and practices learned from these essential schools and others. Looking back over these years, it's as if each of my steps was a building block in the foundation of this school.

Where we're going – The Vision

When we wrote the charter application, we had to define and describe so many aspects of the school we intended. We did not know our students or our community at that point, and yet knowing them only reinforces what I think of as the original impetus behind this school. If we are truly successful at what we set out to accomplish, we will be a school of high achievement for students from all different backgrounds. High achievement to us means that students possess the essential knowledge and skills to think and learn and contribute in the wider world of college, work, and citizenship. Here is the broad vision we described in the charter:

Executive Summary

North Central Charter: Where Students Learn how to Think, Care, and Act

We live in an ever-changing world. Now, more than ever, we need to help all of our students develop essential knowledge, skills, habits of mind, and strong personal attributes so they are prepared to thrive in such a world. We will need fewer memorizers and more thinkers as technology speeds and widens our access to information, and as the sheer amount of information grows. We will need creative, resourceful problem-solvers who can identify an issue, research it effectively, and sift through piles of information for insight and ideas. We will need flexible, adaptable seekers who know how to learn things because there will be so many new things to learn. Our world is increasingly interconnected, interdependent, and multicultural. We will need leaders who see and care about other parts of the world and who understand how interdependence draws us closer together every day. We will need citizens who contribute to their communities, taking action to improve the lives of their neighbors while securing their own needs as well. In this world, every citizen, every member of society will need to be able to use his or her mind well. The North Central Charter Essential School's central mission is to develop these leaders and citizens.

To achieve that mission, North Central Charter will provide a public education to students at the middle and high school grade levels. It will set high standards and work to help all students achieve them. It will be a regional school, located somewhere in the Leominster/Fitchburg area. It will bring together a diverse student body from the urban, suburban, and rural communities of north central Massachusetts, a region that ranges from small industrial cities to old rural towns to populations of new immigrants from Latin America and Asia and to burgeoning suburban developments. This mixture itself will be an asset as we bring all these different students together to form a community, finding our commonalities and bridging our differences. While good people are working hard in the public schools that serve these communities, this school will offer a public school alternative to the mostly large, comprehensive schools.

North Central Charter will be a small school, which will enable it to teach a diverse group of students to think, care, and act. Research shows conclusively that small, focused, highly personalized secondary schools help students learn well. They encourage the kind of relationships that motivate and support students to reach high expectations. They allow students to develop essential skills and habits under the watchful eyes of adults who know them well. When teachers know their students well, they are able to see different learning needs and personalize their teaching to meet those needs. Students are more likely to take the necessary risks involved in learning when they feel known and respected by their teachers and their peers. Additionally, students want to perform for teachers they know and respect. Again, a growing body of research documents less violence and a stronger sense of community in small schools where students are known well and where they know each other well.

The goals and practices of the school will reflect the Ten Common Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools. As such, the North Central Charter Essential School will be a place that personalizes learning. It will be a place that emphasizes depth and thinking skills over breadth and memorization. It will be a place where students learn by doing and where they learn how to learn. It will be a place where students demonstrate their skills and knowledge through exhibitions. It will be an institution that does not try to do everything, but instead sets out a limited number of challenging goals that all students can attain. It will be a democratic

community where all members have a voice and where students, staff, and families make important decisions together. Teachers will be leaders in this school and they will build a collaborative learning community to serve all students. It will be a public school, open and accessible. Above all, it will be a humane place where people treat one another with respect, trust and decency.

If students leave our school able to approach new situations with openness and confidence, with a solid foundation of prior knowledge, essential skills and habits, and a sense of their own identity, we believe they will be ready for an ever-changing world. We believe they will be ready for just about anything.

This summer and fall of 2005, our Board and community are working to update this vision. While this work is more detailed and perhaps more focused on the operations of the school, the broader vision defined in the charter still holds for the most part.

The State grants a charter

We got the charter! We actually did it – we're approved.

In February 2001, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts granted our Board of Trustees – Jim Nehring, Brian McDermott, Whitney Robbins (a teacher, coach, and sister-in-law), and me – permission to open a school in the fall of 2002. We were one of five new schools approved that cycle, down from the 31 who submitted initial letters of interest in the fall. We had the next 18 months to make it happen.

For those of you with us in the first year, I know you're wondering what we did with that 18 months and why we didn't have more better planned. All I can say is that it's a lot of work to start a school and if you don't believe me go and try it yourself.

The first two things we worked on were hiring a School Director and finding a building. When we received a letter of interest from Melanie Gallo, we felt a number of stars fall into alignment. Melanie had spent twenty years teaching theater and English at Fitchburg High School. She grew up in this town and seemed to have family in every nook and cranny. There were also former students of hers at every turn. When we started holding information sessions, it seemed there was at least one person who'd had Melanie as a teacher in high school or they knew someone who had. Melanie had credibility with these folks and the fact that she was part of this school gave us almost instant credibility. If she was part of this new school, then it was OK for people to send their children to it.

As for the building, where could find facilities to house a school for up to 400 students? A local developer and early supporter of ours actually drove me around Leominster and Fitchburg looking at open space that he owned and buildings he knew about. One piece of land had lots of space and it was right on the line between Leominster and Fitchburg. But as we stood there, no fewer than 3 planes from the Fitchburg airport flew overhead. Seemed like that might interfere with a lesson or two. We looked at a hilltop in Leominster. We looked at a steep site over by Fitchburg State. A building could've gone there, but we were really hoping to be able to have playing fields. Long story short, there really were not any good plots of land where this developer might have built a school for us.

Next we turned our attention to any existing buildings that might suit or spaces that could be renovated to meet our needs. The city of Leominster had turned about 30,000 square feet of new office space into school space for a middle school that was waiting for a new school to be built. But it was located next to a capped landfill and families began to flip out. So how would it look to start a new charter school at a site people thought was polluted? Another potential building was Notre Dame High School in Fitchburg. This had once been a school of almost 300 and now there were only about 25 students. They were possibly looking for a tenant or a buyer. While here was an existing school, it was clear that it did not have the capacity for our full 400 students. If we started there, we would have to move within a couple years. And then there was the fact that this building had seen better days. Lots of new charter schools have to make due with sub-optimal facilities, and we might have been left with few other choices.

Then along came Bob Ansin and the Massachusetts Innovation Center. I had met with Bob while writing the charter application. As a business leader in the Fitchburg, he signed a letter of support for us saying it would be a good thing to have a charter school in the area. We also set up our first office in a small 8x10 room on the second floor of MIC. Soon our initial conversations turned to the possibility of locating the school itself at MIC. Bob bought the building from his father who had become owner of the whole complex in the 1960s. The oldest parts of the building date back to the late 1800s when it was a mill for textile production. The Ansin family had their shoe company there going back to the early 1900s. But how could we put a school there?

In December of the planning year, we signed a letter of understanding agreeing to do exactly that. Bob would build out the space for the school and we would sign a five year lease, extended to 10 if the school received its renewal, and thus we have a school in the former mill. Bob committed to build the school when we had fewer than 80 spots filled of the 240 we had planned on. And these families were signing up for a school that didn't have a single wall in place, let alone classrooms for learning. All sides had to make commitments based on a school that existed in our minds and on paper.

Concordia Architects of New Orleans was hired to design the school with our full collaboration. Indeed, I had connected Concordia to our project while they were working on another essential school project in Providence. Their interest was to design the space to match our essential school style of learning. We had a tiny budget and significant limitations in terms of space and the structural elements of an old mill. We set up the classrooms around the outside of the space, fitting them to the window bays and the columns. The interior areas for labs and the commons were left largely open, hoping to make these spaces alive with the activities of project-based learning. We've already experienced the other side of this feature – namely that if others can see students at work, the students can see them too and be distracted from their work. We also filled so much of the space for learning and offices that we left way too little room for storage. While there were other such mistakes or oversights, we ended up with an interesting, colorful, and mostly well designed space for the school, in my opinion.

We recruited families to the school through two primary methods, one grassroots and the other more mass advertising. From October 2001 until about February 2002, we relied on the grassroots. Melanie and I started our “one library at a time” campaign. With notices in local papers, we held gatherings in the public libraries for every town within the school's designated region. Usually between 3 and 7 families would show up for one of these sessions, and we began to gather applicants. We also did as much as we could with area agencies that served low income families and students of color. We worked to keep these pitches as jargon-free as possible, talking relatively little about the Coalition of Essential Schools, instead emphasizing what would be different and similar at our school compared to their choices. We described values and qualities and general approaches that would guide our new school. By the first lottery, we had about 85 students signed up. Grassroots would not be enough.

We turned next to basics of mass marketing – advertising and buying a mailing list for all households in the school area. We didn't know at the time how long it would take to stuff and address over 3,000 mailings, but with the help of some volunteers, our team got these letters out. By the deadline of our second lottery when we needed to turn numbers in to the state about how many students we would have in the fall, we had our 240 students signed up at least. Bob Ansin was considerably pleased, and just a bit impressed, with how quickly a dire enrollment scenario turned to the positive.

Midwinter we then started the all important task of hiring a staff. Unlike some of our colleague schools in Cambridge or Boston, Fitchburg itself has not been a draw for professionals who aren't from these parts. So people have come to us from nearby through advertising and word of mouth and some rare intrepid explorers from farther away. Some knew Melanie, some knew the Coalition, and some found us through chance. From the beginning, there has been definite energy around being part of a new school. Most who would've been scared off by that prospect never went very far through the process, though there have been a few who bailed quite far in.

That first staff spent three weeks in July ramping up to get ready for just about the wildest school year most have ever been through. We met in the gym at the Parker Charter School, hoping perhaps that their prior success might rub off on us if we planned there. We spent time getting to know one another, hearing people's stories and why they had signed on to help create North Central. Most of the work was on curriculum – what exactly were we going to teach our students? Little did most people know how much of the month after that work would be spent not thinking about any of that; rather, it would be where on earth can we have the school?

Where we've been – Successes and Challenges

We could not have had a more challenging opening. Indeed, the Charter School Office said exactly that. For all of the high aspirations and lofty goals we'd been working on for almost two years, the start of our school was dominated by the fact that our building was not ready for the opening day.

Day one of the North Central Charter Essential School, we met in the parking lot behind MIC. While the eventual home of the school was in site, families dropped off their kids and left them in a parking lot. For the first seven days of school, we met there each day and took buses 30 minutes away to Camp Monomonac on the New Hampshire border. Advisories used cabins as their home base and we did manage to fit all 235 of our new students into an assembly hall where we did our best to introduce this new school. Teachers were amazing in adapting to this setting and scheduling activities and experiences to orient students. While students clearly knew something was going to be different about the school, it was hard to shift their behavior away from summer mode.

After camp school came hotel school. Three large meeting rooms, three smaller break out rooms (only available on certain days), two small extra rooms – one for the nurse and one for gear, and 6 hotels rooms with the beds and TVs removed – these were our facilities for the next three weeks. Our time at the Best Western feels like a strange dream now, but then, we did our best to start the academic learning. There were often 2-3 learning groups with a teacher in the larger meeting rooms, making it extremely difficult to maintain kids' attention. Again, teachers' efforts were valiant, as were those of the hotel staff serving our kids lunch every day. There was an audible sigh of relief when we saw those car pools drive away.

The last phase of our troubled opening was February vacation in October. The building still was ready to open – at least according to the Building Inspector – and we could no longer stay at the hotel because a Doberman dog show was taking over the entire place. If it's not one thing, it's another. Without any next backup, we simply cancelled school for the next seven days. The mayor of Fitchburg finally accompanied the Building Inspector for a walkthrough that gave us temporary occupancy. And on the Tuesday after Columbus Day, our students showed up to One Oak Hill Road, walked through the doors at the bottom of the granite steps, and proceeded to the Commons where we held our first ever Community Meeting in our very own school. Some teachers and many students look back to that opening with nostalgia. That's when our community really pulled together and became bonded. That might be true. But it was a tough way to establish a new school culture. Once in our building, we just had all the regular challenges of starting.

It is a drastic understatement to share how difficult it is to start a school. Others have done it before us – and lived to tell – and others will do it after. Here are some of the highlights we experienced.

Early priorities:

1. Get the classrooms right

Teachers from another start up at a previous Fall Forum had said to get the classrooms right and everything else will follow. By that they meant get teacher-student relationships going well, listen for what students care about, and involve them in the curriculum. Of course our classrooms were camp cabins and hotel rooms for the first six weeks. Whatever early success we had happened in the classrooms.

2. Watch the jargon

We were setting up a non traditional school for mostly traditional families from heavily traditional towns. We did not talk much about rubrics. But we did talk about safety from bullying and unlocking children's potential and genuine caring for the lives of young people and parents as partners. All parents care about those things and that's why they came to our school in the beginning.

3. Sustain

How would we keep our young staff going? Almost a third was in their first year of teaching. Only 3 had any experience with essential schools. There was so much to initiate and determine and implement and design. For the planning year and into the second year even, we chose to generate most first round proposals ourselves, listening to issues from staff and framing possible solutions. Then those proposals would go to staff for feedback and decision-making. We tried not to discuss everything so teachers could focus on their students and their curriculum.

Some key successes:

1. Gumption

We've been scrappy, resourceful, persistent, and resilient. A new school exists where it had not before. Yes, we exist and we're not going away.

2. Relationships

Our students know that they are cared about. And their parents know that too. Whatever craziness has been going on, most of our teachers have been able to get to know their advisees and students well enough to make connections and have students feel respected and listened to. Our students know they have a home with us. In addition, our staff has hung together to the extent that they know and care about one another.

3. Airtime/Problem-Solving

From the first months of school, we have allowed and encouraged members of our community to vent their concerns and frustrations. We call for airtime on a regular basis, but only for short amounts of time (20 minutes) and always in combination with problem-solving. When people bring up issues, we demand that they suggest possible good ideas to help solve the issues. Concerns get raised, ideas get proposed, and we have a shot at moving forward and making the school better.

4. Community of Practice

Now in our third year, we have a one page summary of what we're about at NCCES. This phrase – community of practice – suggests internal commitment to certain values and ways of doing things. Part declaration and part dialogue, these practices have been implemented to different degrees and yet it makes a great difference to say we're together on them.

Our School

When the community shapes and holds the vision, when teachers lead the development and continuous reshaping of the curriculum, when students work hard because they know it matters and they want to, when kids from all different backgrounds can come here and learn together, we will have become a very successful school. We've already come so far together.