100 TIPS & INSIGHTS FOR OPENING GREAT NEW SCHOOLS

GETTING SMART
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Cover Image:
Bulldog Tech, Silicon Valley, Calif.

INTRODUCTION

Ten thousand new schools opened in the last two decades – both a literally and physically groundbreaking development in American education. New schools helped boost U.S. graduation rates and college enrollment rates during that time.

About a quarter of these new schools were supported by charter management organizations and another quarter by nonprofit school developers working with school districts. These organizations and their funders have learned plenty about how to open a great school.

Opening a good, new school is a huge challenge. It is complicated under the best of circumstances. It involves real estate, construction, financing, logistics and marketing – many tasks outside the experience of even veteran educators.

"Most of us want to start schools because we like instruction, but the one thing no one tells us is that when you start a school, 90 percent of what you do early on has nothing to do with instruction," says Dr. Nicole Assisi of Thrive Public Schools who has opened five Southern California schools.

What's most important when opening a new school? We asked two dozen experts who have collectively opened more than a thousand schools. They shared 100 hard-won lessons.

Given the complexity of opening a new school, the first piece of advice comes from Scott Benson, NewSchools Venture Fund, who suggests, "Start early. Give yourself time to explore, design, seek feedback and build support among the community and funders."

After starting as early as possible, most advisers say, getting the culture right is the single most important factor in the long-term success of a school.

New Schools Toolkit

Most of this toolkit addresses the post-approval pre-opening checklist, but given this historic opportunity to create powerful new learning environments, the toolkit starts with important advice on school design (including two great podcasts). It concludes with a summary of 15 rules for great new schools and includes a list of resources and contributors.

Have more to add or questions to ask? Join the #NewSchools conversation.

GOOD SCHOOLS START WITH GOOD DESIGN

Make sure that "instruction drives construction," says Victoria Bergsagel, president of Architects of Achievement. She encourages new school teams to reflect their shared pedagogy and culture in their school facility.

School (or district/network) leaders need to lead conversations that shape:

- **Instructional design:** instructional priorities, academic goals and teaching competencies (i.e., a vision for learner experience)
- **School model design:** schedule and physical space; staffing and performance management; operations, finance and development; and blended learning models.

The shift to digital learning and the emerging focus on competency-based progressions is making teaching more of a team sport with a higher degree of collaboration and with more flexible groupings across a mixture of learning strategies. These new school models suggest new design principles:

1. Lots of presentation spaces, some big, some small
2. Quiet individual working spaces
3. Places for teams to work and build stuff
4. Inviting, natural light, connection to landscape
5. Variety of fitness options for everyone
6. Community connections/services
7. Lots of broadband, lots of electrical outlets
8. Energy efficient, sustainable
9. Managed access and the ability to go from big facility to small facility
10. Make everything flexible/convertible

Victoria Bergsagel, president of Architects of Achievement, helps teams envision successful and inspiring learning spaces. Read and listen for more on designing beautiful learning places that encourage safety, belonging and collaboration. Watch Victoria Bergsagel describe how we can couple what we know about learning with the development of productive learning spaces.

"**Develop a strong visual identity:** By designing clear and distinctive physical learning environments, you can create a great sense of belonging and source of inspiration for both students and educators. It is also an opportunity to reflect priorities and establish your culture."

—Kelley Tanner, Educational Facilities Planner with BrainSpaces and a Board Member with Association for Learning Environments (A4LE)

Liz Whisnant is principal at Horace Mann Elementary, a student-centered, personalized learning environment serving a diverse student body in northwest Washington, D.C., Read and listen for more on translating a vision for learning into a new school design.

GETTING SMART

PODCAST

Horace Mann Elementary in northwest Washington, D.C., is a great example of school facility developed in support of an instructional design and school model.

The school values complementary approaches: one that offers students explicit strategy-based instruction, and one that offers a broad, constructivist approach that allows students to linger in the exploratory and discovery phases, only later to arrive at explicit ones. After a series of community conversations, Principal Liz Whisnant (left standing) converted the school's academic program into facilities design principles (see Appendix).

Three examples of how instructional priorities were converted to design principles include:

- **Collaboration and Connection:** central common space for community gatherings a library, science lab and art studio; purposeful gathering spaces for adult learning; and plenty of windows to make learning visible to all.
- **Sustainability and Stewardship:** LEED Gold Certification; multiple-use spaces that promote efficiency and connection; rooftop gardening, a teaching kitchen and horticultural therapy.
- **Choice and Invention:** flexible and public spaces for learning, mall-group and independent learning spaces (see pictured reading nook to the left), and spaces that invite inventive play!

The entryway includes a garden wall with art that spells out values evident in every room of Horace Mann: adventure, discovery, inspiration and imagination.

Want a Great School? Get the Board on Board
By Carrie Irvin, Charter Board Partners

One of the most foundational, and often overlooked, aspects of starting a good school is a good board--they can be the difference between a good school and an extraordinary school.

HERE ARE SEVEN TIPS:

1 Focus from the very beginning on building a governing board, not a "friends and family" board. Think strategically about board composition – make sure the board includes all relevant skill sets, including more than one person in key areas to give the board depth. Bring on people who can give you really sound and experienced advice – you couldn't afford to pay people like that, but you can get that kind of advice, guidance and support from your board. Don't seek rubber stampers! You want tough questions and push back from a smart and engaged board – you will make better decisions.

2 Seek out good resources and training for your board – there is plenty out there so you don't need to reinvent the wheel. And invest time in recruiting and onboarding your board members, even though you'll feel like you don't have that time.

3 Invest in building formal, good governance processes and structures, and follow them. It's not optional – good governance really matters for compliance, for engagement, for allowing different perspectives to be heard and for keeping the board in the governance lane and out of micromanagement, while still allowing and encouraging board members to make valuable concrete contributions.

4 Don't limit the board's role to fundraising and facilities. You need your board by your side and to have your back, including during those tough early years. Think of it as a partnership – a great school needs both a strong leader and a strong board to be great and to sustain greatness over time.

5 Make sure the board is involved and engaged and knows what's going on. Proactively tell the board everything important that's happening, especially what's keeping you up at night. If you don't trust the board with sensitive or difficult information, you have the wrong board. The board chair should be your first call when you have a problem or something goes awry, not the call you go to great lengths to avoid making.

6 Boards must be aware of particularly sensitive issues involved with running a school and be informed and prepared to handle these. In preparation for a school opening, the board, district or charter should be familiar with state laws that protect individuals from discrimination, particularly students with disabilities, English language learners, or students who come from economically disadvantaged families. Board members need to ensure that their schools are adequately serving students within these categories and must be aware of laws governing their education. Board members should ensure that their schools are in compliance with civil rights laws and must be aware of the role they may play in addressing disciplinary issues.

7 For charter boards, it's important for boards to always know what promises the school made in its charter, when the charter is up for renewal, what it will take to gain renewal and under what circumstances the school can be closed (at least 13 states have default closure laws).

Bad things can happen when schools don't have a good board. At best, the school misses out on valuable leadership, guidance, resources and support. At worst, boards jeopardize the success of the school, overlook or fail to prevent missteps and wrongdoing, or engage in illegal or unethical behaviors. Invest in good governance from the beginning; don't wait till you run into a problem and then try to remediate it. Good boards matter, and ultimately students will reap the benefits.

Visit Great Schools

The most important aspect of the design phase is to visit great schools; you not only see different designs but you experience the culture and context in a way that the best video can't convey. In the first minute of a visit, the sights, sounds and interactions give you a pretty good indication of the school culture. Visit schools with other people and build in some time for reflection. You will see a school from several perspectives, and it will be a powerful professional learning experience.

"Visit other schools to learn the details of how others were doing things," encourages Ben Daley, CAO at High Tech High. "At this point, there are many, many folks across the country with experience starting schools. Get out of your bubble and talk with others who have done it."

"When it comes to schools, seeing is believing," says Brian Greenberg, Silicon Schools. "I've found it more effective to take educators to schools where they can see new models in person rather than trying to convince them with only words."

Visiting 100 schools in seven countries proved transformational for the faculty of Singapore American School, says superintendent Chip Kimball. Their professional learning communities proved to be a critical vehicle for SAS faculty to discuss, synthesize and incorporate observed innovations. A culture of excellence, possibility and care makes SAS an inspiring school worth visiting.

After the design phase and having secured a building and funding: What's next? The rest of this tool kit outlines the final countdown and opening days in the life of a new school. The next section underscores the importance of getting the culture right.

JOB NO. 1: GET THE CULTURE RIGHT

"Attend to your culture," says Jim May, who supports about 25 new schools each year for New Tech Network. "From certificates of occupancy to emergency plans to hiring, the list of operational realities that must be addressed when starting a new school is immense. Thus, it can be easy to overlook the importance of your staff and student culture during those early days. However, it is imperative that even amidst the swirl of starting the school that you are intentional about establishing a strong set of cultural norms and rituals that can animate your work in the coming year."

Andy Calkins, whose Next Generation Learning Challenges has sponsored 100 new schools through national and regional grant programs, says: "You will be tempted to immerse yourself in the vast sea of logistical details starting a school entails, to the point of losing sight of the big picture: focusing on orienting your students/families and immediately establishing the culture-building that is so crucial to school and student success. Don't lose sight of that. Everything else at the start is a detail."

"Pay attention to culture," says Pat DeKlotz, Kettle Moraine School District, who has sponsored four charter schools that operate inside district schools (like KM Global, right). "Listen to students and take the time to nurture the human element. People want identity and purpose. Build that into the culture of your school and you will go far. The processes are important only as long as they bring people along."

GETTING SMART PODCAST

New Tech High in Napa, Calif., got a lot right as a new school 20 years ago with big integrated projects, 1:1 technology and a collaborative, inquiry-based culture. Read and listen to the New Tech Network story about how they added personalized learning and scaled the model to 200 schools nationwide. See advice from Jim May of New Tech Network throughout the rest of this toolkit.

"If the students are engaged in the learning, they will communicate their success to the parents," adds Pat DeKlotz. "A shared vision isn't shared if it is told. It only becomes shared when people participate in making meaning of it, together, co-creating the work. The "why" of what you are doing needs to permeate each individual involved, students, staff, partners."

Make the Best of a Bad Situation

More than slogans on the wall or values in a brochure, culture comes down to what you do and say. "Build the culture you want because if you don't a culture will form and you might not like it," says Diane Tavenner, Summit Public Schools. "The thing about culture – values, beliefs, behavioral norms, traditions and rituals – is you ALWAYS have to make decisions and behave in alignment, even in the 90-day countdown."

"There is no version of launching a new school where something does not go wrong," says Jim May. "When something goes wrong, think of it as a culture-building opportunity, a chance to "strengthen relationships and foster resilience."

If you want a culture that values innovation you need to identify the process that your school will use to manage it. "The most innovative schools succeed because they consistently improve their 1.0 school models," says Alex Hernandez, Charter School Growth Fund. "It's easy for innovation to stop once the kids show up because the team gets overwhelmed with the demands of running a school, particularly when something goes wrong. And it always will when you're opening a new school."

Create Culture On-Ramps

"Spend quality time onboarding ALL, not just new teachers – emphasizing a 'high expectations and whatever it takes' culture," says Terry Grier, former Houston ISD superintendent. "Invest heavily in the orientation experience," says Jim May. He notes that it is common for new school staffs to benefit from only a couple of hours of orientation before the first day of school. "This represents a monumental opportunity missed. There are very few moments over the course of a school year where you can frame your mission, catalyze the collective energy of your team and set a direction for the school as a whole."

"If your school is pursuing personalized, next generation learning, teachers need to experience it fully themselves, as learners, before they can enable their students to embrace it," says Andy Calkins. "Don't think in terms of hours of PD – think how can we develop, with teachers, a strong culture of ongoing professional learning?"

"Think about how to help students accultre themselves to your learning environment," says Alex Hernandez, who has supported more than 500 new schools. "Will there be a boot camp or other introductory experience? How do you want to set the tone around student voice, student agency and joy."

Acknowledge Positive Culture as Precondition for Great Teaching

"Great teaching and learning is built on a foundation of great culture, so start with culture as a critical path for your teachers, parents and students," says Mike Feinberg (left), co-founder of KIPP, a national network of 183 high performing schools.

"Teaching and living the values should be intentional, explicit and full of joy," says Aaron Brenner of 1 World Network of Schools, a nonprofit sharing lessons from KIPP with communities worldwide. Brenner adds:

- **Mission Orientation:** Ensure everyone on the team is orienting their work around the successful execution of the mission beginning with preparation and organization of the classrooms, planning of an outline for the year, planning of detailed lesson plans for the first month of school, visiting the homes of the children who will attend your school. Every action in those last 90 days should be a reflection of the belief in and commitment to that mission.
- **We Watch What We Do To See What We Believe:** Beliefs (why) with values as actions (what) with operating norms (how) with artifacts (daily reminders) with the development of character (where). In recruitment of teachers, in personal development of teachers, in training of teachers, there should be an emphasis in the alignment of the school culture. Everything should align and everything should help lead to the achievement of shared beliefs.

- **Teaching and Living the Values Should be Intentional, Explicit and Full of Joy:** Building on the cultural alignment above, leadership and teachers should plan lessons that teach the values in an explicit, intentional and joyful way. Lesson Planning of Values Lessons should have criteria of success: Rich literature; Integration of Local Community; Integration of Heroes; Opportunity to be Creative through writing, singing, dancing, performing, drawing, painting and/or beyond; a song that connects to the value; specific behaviors/operating norms that the students practice as a reflection of strengthening their living of the values.
- **Artifacts Should Celebrate the Mission, Vision and Values of the School:** Whether it is classroom doors decorated with a college pennant that are also painted to match the color of the university, the value books blown up to banner size, quotes that align with the values on every door and when you enter the building, symbols of the values throughout the school, and uniforms that celebrate and support the mission and values. This intentionality makes the classrooms, other learning spaces, entrances, play areas and every part of the school come alive.

Aaron Brenner suggests getting away from everything in the middle of the 90-day countdown. "It will give you the space to breathe again, to reflect on what is needed to do in the final 40 days before launch, and the renewed strength to do it."

Alex Hernandez says, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."

CREATE AND MANAGE A PROJECT PLAN

If you have gained approval, found funding, secured a location and are in final countdown, it is time to build your final pre-opening checklist.

"Have a countdown," says Diane Tavenner. "Know your goals, objectives and the folks responsible for each. Check in regularly and make sure you are on target. Course correct if needed. Ruthlessly prioritize."

"Create a project plan with key deliverables, roles and responsibilities and due dates. Have someone manage the project plan," says Peter Piccolo (pictured left visiting Roots Elementary, an innovative new blended learning model). Peter Piccolo leads strategy from Denver Public Schools, which has opened more than 100 schools in the last decade. He recommends meeting with the core team at least once a week to review the project plan to ensure all key work is on track.

"Despite all the planning, something will go wrong day one, week one," Peter Piccolo warns. "Plan for it, learn from it and plan for how you will respond if a train falls off the tracks." He recommends districts have an escalation procedure.

[Aspire Public Schools](#) serves 15,000 California and Tennessee students in 38 schools. The Aspire team learned many [lessons about opening great new schools](#) over the years. CEO Carolyn Hack and Casey Hoffman, who supports new school development, urge new school teams to over-communicate. They note the hundreds of moving pieces and many stakeholders involved translate to a high need for communication on every level.

Aspire's new school process includes:

- **Process-alignment kickoff meeting** with primary internal stakeholders from each team involved, including school leadership and department representatives.
- **Weekly check-in phone calls** with primary internal stakeholders from each team involved, including school leadership.
- **A weekly update email** to all internal stakeholders (including Senior Leadership Team) with key headlines and action items.
- **One central point of coordination** to keep everything moving forward and to constantly check in with all key stakeholders.
- **Debrief meetings** to review highlights of process and lessons learned once the school is up and running – the team learns something new every time.
- **Weekly construction meetings:** check-ins with facilities team/ contractors and alignment sessions with facilities leaders and other team leaders impacted by the new site build: Operations, IT, Nutrition, Health and Safety, etc.

The academic program should guide the work, but don't forget about operational priorities. In the months leading up to a new school opening, the primary focus should be on ensuring everything is ready for the academic program to flourish from day one.

The Aspire team notes key operational priorities that cannot be neglected and that need to be discussed as early in the process as possible:

- **Nutrition/lunch program:** How does this fit into master scheduling? Double-checking all health code/permit requirements for the kitchen/ food serving area and ensuring the proper equipment is ordered and installed.
- **Furniture:** Alignment on furniture needs should begin five to six months before school openings as the process always takes longer than anticipated. Getting quotes and designs from multiple furniture vendors can be time-consuming, but could save you money in the long run. Schedule delivery of furniture as early as the site will allow to build in time for replacement furniture and a second furniture order if necessary.
- **Drop-off/pickup routine**: More often than not, the drop-off/pickup routine is a headache for parents and staff from day one, especially if there is not a solid operational plan in place and all staff on board to execute this plan. Visit other school sites with similar configurations before their school year ends to learn from their process and best practices. Purchase extra cones, traffic vests, etc. and consider the presence of crossing guards in the first few weeks at least.

Mike Feinberg emphasizes the importance of execution. "Remember that countless seen and unseen details are the difference between mediocre and magnificent. The biggest difference between those schools (and other organizations) that succeed and those that fail is the ability to execute on the plan written down on paper, making course corrections as necessary, but always executing."

When it comes to adopting software systems, try to avoid a lot of customization. "Unless you have internal expertise and deep pockets, do not plan to build custom software to support your school model in the first few years of operation," says Scott Benson.

"Under commit and over deliver. Managing expectations of students, families and faculty is critical as you open a new school that will take years to fully form. Communicate the vision frequently as well as the reality of what it will take to get there," says Kelly Wilson, High Tech High Graduate School of Education (see white paper).

Plan and Market for Enrollment

"Enrollment matters. No kids, no money for kids," says Matthew Wunder, CEO of Da Vinci Schools, four innovative schools near LAX. "Keep your enrolled students connected and engaged with the school. Recruitment and retention is the financial lifeblood of your start-up."

"Put in the extra effort to have the right number students in your program," says Danny Medved, founder of Denver School of Innovation & Sustainable Design. "This takes time away from design, but without a critical mass of students you are not able actualize the school design."

Despite an innovative design, Danny Medved found that it took sustained outreach efforts to Denver elementary schools to build enrollment in a market with a growing number of quality options.

"Invest in your students and families so they all show up the first day excited and ready to go," adds Alex Hernandez. "Hard to focus on innovation if enrollment is below expectations."

"Ensure everyone on the team is orienting their work around the successful execution of the mission beginning with preparation and organization of the classrooms, planning of an outline for the year, planning of detailed lesson plans for the first month of school, visiting the homes of the children who will attend your school (if that is a component of school start-up, which I highly recommend)," says Aaron Brenner.

"Every action in those last 90 days should be a reflection of the belief in and commitment to that mission," added Brenner.

Prepare for Day-to-Day Operations

Seek support on the basics of starting a school; organizations like charter associations and operations/finance support organizations have a long history of advising on school start-up," Scott Benson says.

Nicole Assisi recommends having everything you need to operate on Day One: attendance plan, safety plan, nutrition plan/provider and procedures for everything (e.g., coming on campus, checking in late kids, cafeteria use/behavior, dismissal, traffic control, technology use, classroom management).

Matthew Wunder stresses the need to plan for service quality for internal and external stakeholders. He adds, "People like clear procedures but they don't care what you know until they know you care."

"Stress test as many of your key process and systems before students arrive," recommends Peter Piccolo. "For example, if there is a full school welcome meeting on the first day of school, do a dry run, ideally with young people so you can receive feedback first hand from your stakeholders."

Secure Resources

If you're opening a charter school, "Apply for your 501c3 as early as possible. You cannot do any fundraising until you have this," says Nicole Assisi. "Most people forget about this little step and have huge consequences of not being able to bring in money. Nonprofit status for schools takes longer than other organizations, so start now."

"Secure critical resources to ensure that you can work the plan, reach year one goals and initially bring the vision to life," says Danny Medved, principal at Denver School of Innovation & Sustainable Development (right), a new school incubated by DPS Imaginarium and supported by a Carnegie grant.

"Know the element that sets your school apart (STEM/ Maker, Entrepreneurship/ PBL, etc.) and secure and prioritize resources that will allow this to shine for an early year one win."

The principal of an innovative district school says that, despite senior leader commitment, working with middle managers to gain access to resources was a challenge. "Many of them will do the same thing they have always done, or what they do for other schools, but I think every school should be a little different." He spent more time than planned dealing with bureaucracy and getting ready to open a new school.
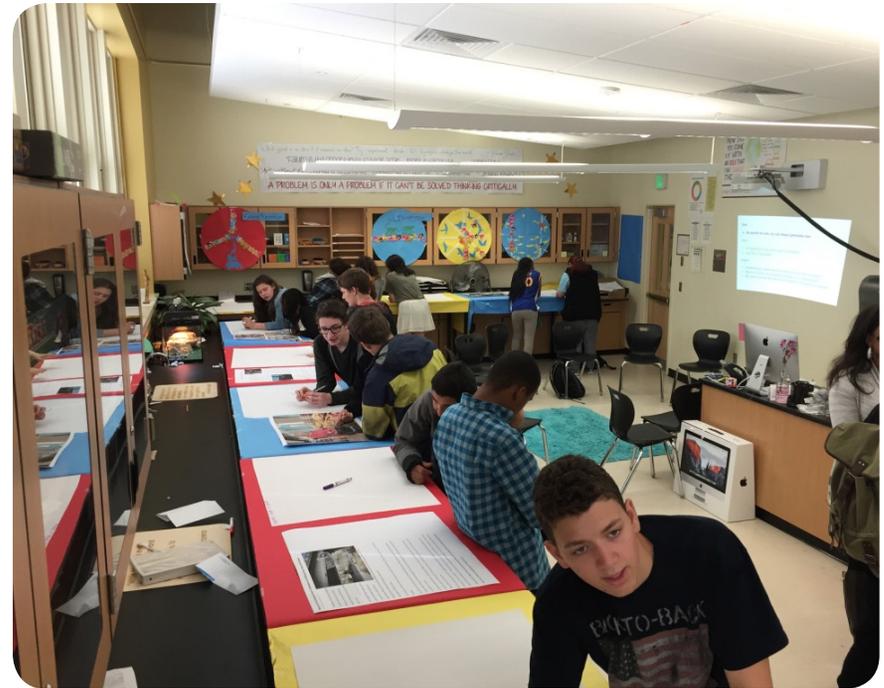
For charter schools, Nicole Assisi says: "Don't take operations into your own hands when it comes to finance and school operations. It can be very complicating and counterintuitive. Just because someone has business experience, that doesn't mean they understand how school finances work. For example, we used to have an accountant on our board who adamantly disagreed how the state of California is handling finances, but just because it is bad business, doesn't mean we can change the state. Team up with someone like ExED or EdTec or another vendor who 'knows the business of school business' and its quirks."

"A good lawyer is worth their weight in gold," she adds. "Think of a charter petition as a gigantic legal contract. You will want someone to look it over."

LESSONS IN LEADING NEW SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Launching your own school offers up many lessons. As discussed earlier in this toolkit, a significant theme within almost every interview with the superintendents and network CEOs was their agreement that getting the culture right was key to success. In addition to culture, the experts share leadership lessons for successful new school development.

GETTING SMART PODCAST

Mike Feinberg, co-founder of KIPP knows a great deal about opening new schools. KIPP has opened 183 schools and serves more than 70,000 students. Listen to this podcast to hear great advice learned by experience.

Build and Test Agreements

"Have a short and sweet vision and mission that will be easy for your teachers, parents and students to quickly understand" Mike Feinberg recommends. The co-founder of KIPP says the mission should make it easy to reverse engineer back from mission accomplished to how day one needs to go."

"Find ways to prototype your designs before you launch, but be careful not to take on too much in the year immediately prior to launch," says Scott Benson, NewSchools Venture Fund.

Ron Berger, EL Education, has supported the opening of dozens of project-based schools. He recommends facilitating staff agreements "on as many consistencies as possible before students arrive, so that things feel clear, respectful and safe for all students." Agreements could include big things like a code of character and small things like cell phone policy or expectations for how adults and students address each other."

"As you design the structures that will support learning experiences for your faculty and students (e.g., faculty retreats, course schedule, advisory structure), keep in mind that form follows function and an essential function of schooling is to provide conditions that foster the creation of deep and meaningful relationships," says Kelly Wilson.

With The Tiny School Project, Matt Candler and 4.0 Schools are encouraging people to think small and to experiment – think pop-up retail rather than big department store or food truck instead of a full restaurant.

"Our testing of new ideas happens in stages – a $10 test of an idea impacts only a handful of people; a $100 test impacts the same people, but for a few hours and not minutes; a $1,000 test of an idea impacts a willing group of volunteers for a week or two. In New Orleans and in New York, where 4.0 has dedicated innovation labs, we've built a network of teachers, students, and family members who have volunteered to test new ideas and education at an early stage. This gives us an opportunity to make sure ideas are ready for prime time. I believe this kind of space in fact changes the nature of experimentation in education."

Market Your Distinctiveness

Why do we exist? What is our value proposition, or the promise of benefit intended to attract and satisfy the communities we serve? What group of students are most at risk? What do we consider success? How is the education market changing?

With expanding school choice in many cities, these are a few of the questions Dwight Jones suggests school leaders ask. Jones is superintendent in residence with Discovery Education and former Clark County (Las Vegas) superintendent and chief in Colorado.

When the leadership team is clear about the distinctive value proposition of the new school, the team can communicate it to stakeholder groups. If a school opens by adding a grade a year, you have several years to refine the mission and communicate your value proposition.

"Charters and schools of choice must distinguish themselves in the marketplace by not only being better than their competition, but being different," says Jon Hage, Charter Schools USA. "We can drive results faster when we embrace our unique autonomy by being platforms of innovation that make us learning labs that benefit students."

Make Learner Experience Vision a Reality

Pat DeKlotz says: "Make sure you understand the student experience within the school. Too often schools are defined around the adults and what they perceive to be best for students. Take the opportunity to spend a day shadowing a student. Experience the school for yourself. It is not always what you anticipate."

Pat DeKlotz's metro Milwaukee district opened three small thematic flex academies as in-district charter schools housed inside a large comprehensive high school. Each started with two teachers and an idea. They now serve almost 40 percent of the students and provide in-school field trip opportunity for teachers. (KM Perform, a performing arts academy, is pictured below.)

"Given the need to spend a lot of time on instruction as well, give yourself room for this by having more instructional time during the day, week and year," says Mike Feinberg.

Opening a new school is about bringing vision and theory to reality and practice, says Danny Medved.

"Have a clear and concise vision that you can map all elements of your program back to and that you can message to all stakeholders in a compelling way," Danny Medved says, adding that a strong year one would:

- Establish a schoolwide culture of ownership of learning among students, staff, leaders and parents.
- Establish a clear and coherent instructional model.
- Deliver on and execute vision and school specific learning experiences that set the program apart: job shadows, student led conferences, college visits, intensive experiential learning excursions, two or three high-impact cross-content projects and end-of-year demonstrations of learning.

"If you're opening a personalized learning school, none of your students have experienced this kind of responsibility for even a moment of their previous years in school," says Andy Calkins of Next Generation Learning Challenges. "In most new schools, NGLC has found a third of students will gravitate quickly towards it; a third will get there within a semester of good scaffolding; a third may take quite a bit longer than that. Be ready."

"We thought we had built the perfect model for a school – and then the kids showed up." Andy Calkins says this is a common reaction heard from NGLC grantees.

Key to creating the desired LX is to create great TX–teacher experience. "When working with teachers, model the instructional practices you want to see in the classroom with students," says Ben Daley. "Lecturing about the importance of student-centered teaching practices is not likely to work."

Hire Early, Hire Well

Terry Grier, former Houston ISD superintendent, recommends "hiring quality teachers as early as possible."

In addition to many new schools and facilities modernization, Terry Grier says: "The most important building that has been going on in HISD's ecosystem is in developing our human capital. We know that our 21st century campuses are only as good as the principals who lead them and the teachers who create magic in each classroom." For that reason, Grier's team enacted bold initiatives to hire and retain the most effective educators possible.

"Hire right the first time!" says Nicole Assisi, Thrive Public Schools. "There is no such thing as spending too much time on hiring."

The Thrive hiring process includes demonstration lessons. Glenn Jacobson flew in from Chicago and demonstrated a lesson with manipulatives (like the one he's using in a rotational blend, pictured left). He was in a master's degree program for using tech in innovative ways and was sick of working in schools that didn't do what he was learning.

Danny Medved thinks it key to "find highly skilled teachers who are bought into the vision, have the skills to work in the instructional model, and a growth mindset."

"During the opening phase, staff tend to be smaller and inexperienced teachers are more likely to be hired," warns Joan Massey, Chavez Schools. She recommends "working toward a balance of staff who have at least three years of experience to support the onboarding of new teachers and the success of the academic program and instruction."

The Chavez team has opened new schools in old buildings, including a converted bread factory (above) near the U.S. Capitol.

Grier thinks it is most productive to "focus on teachers' strengths rather than weaknesses." For example, if a third grade teacher gets great math results and poor reading results, schedule them to just teach math. Don't waste time and money trying to make them a better reading teacher.

Stay Flexible, Distribute Leadership

"Without the right people I would not have considered opening another school," says Alex Magaña, Beacon Network Schools. After a successful turnaround in a Denver middle school (see feature) Alex Magaña is building a turnaround network where many of his teachers "step into leadership roles and influence others."

"Distribute leadership within schools by identifying superstars and putting them in school leadership positions," Terry Grier recommends. Leadership roles could include multiclassroom leaders, subject chairs, new teacher mentors and project managers.

"When your initial plan breaks down it does not mean you should alter the endgame you and your team set out to enact. It does, however, mean that you will have to find a new way to get there," says Jim May. Sometimes, the hardest part of that is letting go of the plan you had already made. "Be fanatically committed to the vision you set forth as a school community and endlessly flexible about what it might look like to get there," Jim May adds.

"Plan how you will use your day, prepare for interruptions, plan how you will deal with those interruptions and share this with your team," says Aaron Brenner, 1 World Network of Schools, a nonprofit KIPP spinout supporting 16 global schools (including one in Israel, left).

"Be fanatical about the end, and endlessly flexible about what it might look like to get there," says May. "Starting a new school is an immensely daunting challenge. Among the most daunting things is that it almost certainly will not go according to plan."

political and politicized. "Change can be hard for folks and you will want to make sure you have some strong community allies."

To mitigate likely vocal critics, Nicole Assisi suggests finding a way to capture and share signs of support through community meetings, petitions, letters of support or press conferences.

"If you are launching a school that is fundamentally different from traditional school models, your students and their parents will need triple the amount of scaffolding and educating that you think they will about how your school will operate and why," says Andy Calkins. His 100 grantees universally say they badly underestimated the amount of outreach they needed to do to parents.

Sequence (But Don't Forget) Innovations

"Rationalize and/or sequence the innovation(s) you are pursuing," says Scott Benson. "Trying to innovate on multiple dimensions while also trying to launch a school will significantly increase the degree of difficulty."

Principal Alex Magaña phased in three core strategies at Grant Beacon Middle School – blended learning, extended learning opportunities and character development – over three years. Each phase was well-designed, well-communicated and well-supported, allowing his staff to master a set of shared protocols before adding a new phase of work.

"Identify the processes your school will use to manage innovation," Alex Hernandez says. "The most innovative schools succeed because they consistently improve their 1.0 school models." The iteration process, adds Hernandez, includes looking at data, reviewing processes and making changes. "It's easy for innovation to stop once the kids show up because the team gets overwhelmed with the demands of running a school."

Build Reputation, Make Friends

"Ask teachers to identify three things they like about working in their school and district, and to share those three things with 10 people prior to the beginning of the school year," suggested Terry Grier. He thinks word of mouth advertising boosts brand recognition and reputation. Teachers can ask their students to do the same thing once school starts

Nicole Assisi notes that whether you are starting a charter, converting a school or working with your district to launch a new program, the work will be highly

Peter Piccolo agrees. "Plan your continuous improvement loop now. If this loop is not clear before the first day of school, it's tougher to put one in place once the doors open for business." (Read more about innovation in Denver.)

"Start small and don't build everything at the same time," says Joan Massey. "When working to be innovative and thinking differently about teaching and learning, it is important to target three high-leverage strategies per year. This allows for clarity from all stakeholders and a better way to monitor and adjust throughout the year."

"It's also not about having the best ideas," adds Alex Hernandez. "It's about executing consistently. The only things that matter are the experiences you can actually put in front of students."

Listen to Feedback

"Always be open to feedback and create opportunities when you actively solicit feedback," says Pat DeKlotz. "Don't expect it to come to you, seek it out. And once you have received it, act on it. Reflect and communicate back what you have heard and how you will use the information. People will quit talking if you quit listening."

The Wisconsin superintendent of the year adds: "Everyone starts out wanting success. What success looks like can differ from one individual to another, but when people are valued for their input, their definition of success broadens to include elements of the organization beyond themselves."

Sharpen the Saw

"Get away from everything in the middle of the 90-day countdown," Aaron Brenner says. "It will give you the space to breathe again, to reflect on what is needed to do in the final 40 days before launch, and the renewed strength to do it."

"Remember to give yourself space to learn from what you are doing and to 'retool' when necessary," Pat DeKlotz says. "You have to become comfortable with learning from your experience, and that includes when you don't get it right the first time.

Andy Calkins recommends mindfulness. "Remember to breathe."

24 Activities to Get Right to Plan and Open a Great School

Leading experts around the country share their lessons on school development.

GREAT SCHOOLS START WITH A GREAT DESIGN

1. Visit great schools
2. Develop the instructional design (think learner experience)
3. Test any new aspects of the instruction design
4. Develop the school model
5. Translate the school model into design principles
6. Build a talented and supportive board
7. Plan distinctiveness
8. Sweat the small stuff (food, furniture, drop-off routine)

BUILD AND MANAGE A PRE-OPENING PLAN

9. Share a crisp mission and vision
10. Build a plan, execute the plan
11. Hire early, hire well
12. Invest in onboarding all staff
13. Plan and market for enrollment
14. Create partnerships for daily operations
15. Secure resources you need for success
16. When stuff goes wrong, make the best of it

FROM DAY ONE

17. Get the culture right
18. Make learner experience vision a reality
19. Stay flexible, distribute leadership
20. Build reputation, make friends
21. Sequence (but don't forget) innovations
22. Listen: remain open to feedback
23. Sharpen the saw: stay fresh
24. Over-communicate!

Mike Feinberg says, "Remember that countless seen and unseen details are the difference between mediocre and magnificent."

RESOURCES

Related Posts: New School Trends
- Next-Gen High Schools
- Visiting Schools: Transformative Professional Learning
- What's Next? Personalized, Project-Based Learning
- School Networks Scale Innovation

Related Posts: Innovative Schools
- One Stone Launching Innovative New High School in Boise
- New Schools Flourish in Phoenix
- An Ambitious Plan to Make the Nation Proud of its Public Schools
- Blended, Project-Based and Social Emotional Learning at Thrive Public Schools
- Innovative Urban Education in Denver

- Denver Public Schools and KIPP Colorado Partner for Student Success
- How Roots Elementary Intentionally Designs Each Scholar's Day
- 66 Middle and High Schools Worth Visiting
- 65 Elementary & Middle Schools Worth Visiting
- 30 Districts Worth Visiting 2015

Related Resources
- Aspire Public Schools: An Approach to Opening New Schools
- Fairfax County Public Schools: New School Opening Handbook
- Jersey City Public Schools: School Opening Checklist
- Kenneth Lane: Strategies for Opening New Schools: A Planning Guide for School Personnel
- New York City: Pre-Opening Checklist

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- Ron Berger, EL Education, leads instruction for a national network.
- Victoria Bergsagel, Architects of Achievement, helped hundreds of teams imagine new learning environments.
- Aaron Brenner, 1 World Network of Schools, supported development of 75 KIPP elementary schools and 16 international schools.
- Andrew Calkins, NGLC, sponsored 100 next gen learning models.
- Matt Candler, 4.0 Schools which incubates people, tools, and schools.
- Ben Daley, chief academic officer for the High Tech High network.
- Pat DeKlotz, Kettle Moraine School District and Wisconsin superintendent of the year.
- Mike Feinberg, co-founder of KIPP, a network of 183 schools.
- Brian Greenberg, Silicon Schools, provides seed funding for innovative school models.
- Terry Grier, Sonima Foundation and former Houston ISD superintendent.
- Carolyn Hack, Aspire Public Schools which supports 15,000 students in 38 schools.
- Jon Hage, Charter Schools USA, opened 70 schools.

- Alex Hernandez, Charter School Growth Fund, supported networks with more than 500 new schools.
- Carrie Irvin, Charter Board Partners, supports boards nationwide with a long track record in Washington D.C.
- Dwight Jones, Superintendent in Residence at Discovery Education and former Clark County School District superintendent.
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- Alex Magaña, Beacon Network Schools, a new network in Denver.
- Joan Massey, Chavez Schools, opened 17 schools in districts and networks
- Jim May, opens about 25 schools every year for New Tech Network.
- Danny Medved, Denver School of Innovation & Sustainable Development.
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APPENDIX: DESIGN TEMPLATES

Horace Mann Elementary School values and associated design implications are shown below.

VALUE	DESIGN IMPLICATIONS
*At Horace Mann we aspire to nurture a love of learning in **all learners**, small and tall. Collaboration among and between our students and adults is ever constant.*	○ Paramount need for adequately sized flexible spaces that enable cross-grade and small group collaboration among students and adults. ○ A Media Center that is highly visible and accessible and serves as a hub for learning and collaboration and celebrates a love of reading. ○ Non-classroom meeting space that helps us serve an additional adult community in our role as a Professional Development School for American University and others (Trinity, George Washington University) and a professional lab site for schools across the city and region seeking exemplars in the teaching and learning domain (Balanced Literacy, Responsive Classroom, inquiry-based science, constructivist math, ELL programming, etc.). ○ Special requirements for our smallest PreK learners with a design that supports our Reggio Emilia program (ample light, project space, natural furniture, access to the outdoors). ○ Desire for communal planning spaces for faculty rather than discrete ones; classrooms should not be designed with "offices"; shared planning spaces that promote collaboration and community are needed.
A persistent and daily goal is the capacity of the school to enable all its members – student, faculty and parent – to be known, valued and connected	○ Gathering spaces that enable students and school adults to assemble for community-building celebrations and performances. ○ Places to play! ○ Attention to appropriate scale (e.g. size of rooms, lobby and furniture height) for young learners. ○ Ample avenues for presentation of student work (hallways, wall surfaces). ○ Adult spaces that are shared and promote collaboration (no separate offices). ○ At least one gathering space that enables the full assembly of students, school adults and parents for community-building celebrations. ○ A clear and accessible main entrance with a purpose-filled welcome/security station and access to waiting area that is not connected to instructional space. ○ A premium on creating a pedestrian campus with exterior spaces that support the tradition of students and parents gathering in class communities outside at morning drop-off and afternoon dismissal.

The place where we live is to be cherished. Understanding our role as caretakers and stewards of the Earth's resources is paramount to being an educated citizen

- The traditional look of our original building (front porch, natural woods, ceramic tiles) is to be valued as part of our legacy. New spaces should be in harmony with these elements and sense of place.
- Our outside learning spaces are as critical as our inside ones and should provide relevance and ownership for all in our community; outdoor play spaces will be inventive, natural, and easily accessible and serve various sizes of learners. Outside learning should include hands-on gardening as well as demonstration spaces for instruction.
- Spaces that connect us – physically and visually – to the outdoors will help us realize our goals of connection, appreciation and place-based learning. In turn, our indoor spaces should bring the light of the outdoors in and allow vistas to the environment outside.
- The building should serve as a teaching tool, an exemplar of how the principles of conservation and sustainability can be lived and practiced; these elements should be visible, tangible and interactive forces within our building, not passive ones.
- A teaching kitchen for adult and student use will connect our gardening work and our commitment to healthy living through attention to both what we eat and where it came from.
- A messy room that serves as a transition space for indoor and outdoor projects and provides a place for exploration and creation
- Spaces should be built to serve multiple roles, not singular ones; we value design features that purposefully engage use of space in dynamic ways.

We believe that choice is the basis of democracy and is a right that belongs to all within our community

- Instructional spaces need to be highly flexible in design, with few installed pieces of furniture so that configurations can be modified by staff for various work stations within a class as well as combined class collaborations.
- Attention to public, private and shared spaces for learning responds to the varying needs of learning styles in our community.
- Design features and decisions need to match our community's practices (e.g., serious attention to the value we place on learning outdoors; with over 50 percent of our population who bring daily lunch to school, a full-scale from-scratch kitchen is not warranted; a small dual purpose kitchen with attention to scale, demonstration areas, recycling and composting is).

Mann is a passionate, joyful community that values play and invention

- ◉ Spaces that live multiple lives enabled through innovation in design (garage door walls that open to the garden, decorative floor surfaces etc.).
- ◉ Design of the studio art space that is flexible, inventive and visible is paramount; the space should take full advantage of natural light.
- ◉ As we currently enjoy multiple outdoor play spaces separated by age groups, a premium on maintaining multiuse spaces will be made; improvement to an indoor play space is badly needed.
- ◉ A science room that can shift from classroom to lab easily and that connects to our gardens and outdoor learning spaces.
- ◉ A multipurpose space for messy work with our hands, whether for art, science or cooking.
- ◉ Every opportunity to be playful in the design of space will be appreciated; color and attributes of learning will be welcome!