

Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School

Questions as derived from Panel Review

Mission and Vision

1. How do you define social justice and why did you choose Paulo Freire as the inspiration for your proposed school?

- We define it as creating a set of skills in disadvantaged students that allow them to access resources in the same way as other students. Some of us were born with more resources and access. Social justice is about getting those who weren't born on third base to get on plate to hit a home run. Doesn't mean everyone gets the same things, but that everyone can get access to the same knowledge.
- We chose Paulo Freire because his writing really excites people around literacy and critical pedagogy – what education is about. Paulo really speaks to that social justice piece, to people not born on third base, but still getting a space at the table to learn. We're not using a strictly Freirian approach, but we are very invested in critical pedagogy and literacy.
- Reading and writing are important, but so also is speaking. Important to promote the notion of self advocacy.

2. What are the priorities of the vision?

- First priority is individual excellence. Want students to gain skills and abilities to function well in the world. Want to create leaders who see their communities as an important part of their lives. Want students to be leaders in showing others how to do this.
- We always start with the student and work from that perspective. Provide resources and support to help students achieve the highest level they can. Have to connect students to the community and to the world. If we want students to be leaders, they have to be aware of world around them.
- A charter school is not an opportunity just to create a school, but to set up a model for other schools, to see how things can be done to make the best use of public education. We have a commitment to inner city school without resources. Want to create a sense of more equality, especially in inner city schools.
- Not only creating a school, but a change in the community. Have to work with parents and community members to do something profound.

Description of the Community (ies) to be Served

1. Why have you decided to serve this geographical region?

- Interested in the Holyoke area. It's important to us not to have a negative impact on city of Holyoke. Another piece is bringing folks from outside the community to the school to enable sharing of resources. Parents coming into Holyoke will invest in the community because their kids will be doing service here and learning here. After that, we consider the issue of distance and transportation; we need to be near some form of public transportation.

- The Hampshire part of Pioneer Valley is really forward looking. There are a lot of people who want the rural life but have commitment to social change. We want to involve them into the school. That's why we shifted the geography a little bit to bring in the Amherst College community. The college has indicated to us that they want their students to do student teaching at our school. It's a huge financial and capital resource for us to have professors and students come into the school.
- 2. How have you determined the level of interest of Western Massachusetts families for this type of social justice programming? What evidence do you have?**
- We don't know who really will come. We've done lots of outreach in the past 10 months, speaking at rotary clubs, talking with schools and afterschool programs. We collected data and conducted student surveys. We're going to do pre-application next week.
 - We are fairly certain well-to-do families in Amherst know about us. We're working hard to make sure low income families know about us too.
- 3. How will the proposed school enhance and expand the educational options and meet the needs of both middle school and high school students?**
- We will provide a full range of services. Will do intensive evaluation at the beginning to determine level of needs of students.
 - Supports will come in summer programs, during the school day, after school, in the evening programs (to support parents), and on weekends. Will set the bar high, and the only way to do this is to have services available any time a student needs them.
 - Local colleges such as UMass-Amherst, Amherst College and Hampshire College can provide tutoring support, training of teachers, etc. We don't know who the students are who will come, but the adults have come in great numbers to support this effort. Holyoke not doing very well right now. The drop out rate is one of the highest in the state.
 - We don't expect to start middle school until 5 years out. Want to create a middle school to feed into the high school. In working with Global High School, we know it's best to start with 5th grade and have extra years to prepare students for high school. The most important need now is the high school, so that's where we want to start. This need comes out of the parents and the community. Then after that, we can develop the middle school.
 - At 8th grade, 53% of students are ready to drop out. It's critical for the community to have a positive option for the 9th grade to keep kids in school.
 - The rationale for the middle school is that this is when students go through the period of identity transformation. Gang problems prop up because kids need to feel a sense of belonging in a community. We are going to provide this sense of community without the violence and the drugs.

- 4. What specific challenges do you expect to encounter with a significantly larger school, different educational programming, and broader grade span? What expertise do you have that will help you effectively address these challenges?**
- When it gets to 600 students, it will be two schools of 300. We don't see it as a school of 600, since we'll be managing the school in terms of two pieces, middle and high.
 - Challenge with money in this economy. Everyone here at the table has amazing social and cultural capital to get the funds we need.
 - What we're doing here is radically different. We're trying to meet the needs in a social service way vs. a traditional education way. We're setting a very high standard with this new school.
 - We never say we can't do it. We say we will find a way and resources to do everything we need to. E.g. Offering a range of performing arts classes at Pioneer Valley when other people said it couldn't be done.

Educational Philosophy, Curriculum and Instruction

- 1. What other schools have you researched that implement the 'social justice' school model?**
- There are other models in the country. One is actually called Paulo Freire in Arizona. We did connect with them and looked at their materials. We also looked at Harlem Children's Zone.
 - We don't want a cookie cutter approach. We made a conscious decision not to do a "no excuses" model, because we wanted to respond to our specific community needs. We consider what works for students similar to our target student population, such as wraparound health services.
 - Also looked at the successes of Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School. What makes PVPA work is that it draws in a lot of kids in danger of dropping out. Parents often frame PVPA as their last stop in public education. PVPA has been successful because of some of its cultural aspects – principal greeting students at start of day, importance of relationship building, and high standards for everybody.
 - In traditional school, if kids don't pass, then they are just marked as failing and you move on. At PVPA, kids have the opportunity to revise things, retake tests, do alternative presentations – this gives kids hope.
- 2. How will curriculum be developed, evaluated, improved and refined during the school year?**
- Curriculum will follow the state framework and federal standards and provide full scope and sequencing. Out of this will come specific detailed course outlines. Out of those course outlines will come standards and benchmarks. This approach is very important to let parents and students know what to expect before each class begins, so that students are aware of what they're learning.
 - Rubrics will also be used, so students know how to move to different levels. Assessments will be used so they will know how they are doing throughout process.

- Will use differentiated learning, hands-on and projects-based learning, and experiential learning.
- Part of curriculum development is in dialogue with students, an approach from critical pedagogy. Students learn when they are part of the designing process.
- We also engage teachers in curriculum development. We want teachers to own their classes and bring their own experiences to the standards.

3. What type of instructional techniques will be used to deliver the curriculum?

a. How will the internship program operate?

- By the third year, we'll have full time people doing managerial oversight. You have to put in staff resources for this to work.
- In the first year, it will be part of a person's job to coordinate volunteers to work with UMass teacher training program, the social justice Master's program and the legal studies program; Amherst College community engagement center; and similar groups at Hampshire and Springfield Colleges. We'll be working with them around placements, whether they are teacher trainers or volunteer tutors.
- Part of teachers' time during the day is meeting with volunteers to hand off the work.
- A manager will work with all the staff to implement specific assignments.

b. Service learning?

- We started to build those partners already, for example, the Career Center in Holyoke, Care Center, and the Holyoke Public Schools.
- A staff person will meet with students to match up their interests with the partner opportunities.
- Will have pre-service learning classes to teach our students what to expect on service learning projects and how to conduct themselves.
- We intend students to do service learning in two ways. One is a school-wide service learning project – might be a big event. In the second semester of senior year, we will have students implement individual project for 150 hours.

c. Tutoring

- Our school day will go to 4pm. We have a dinner program. Kids will get dinner before going off to tutoring. Parents can come in for dinner and then go off to an adult learning class. The dinner piece is about building community.
- We have studies in the schedule for kids with IEPs and 504 plans where kids can get one-on-one attention or small group work.
- Tutoring is based on our summer academy and diagnostics against their individual student success plans (ISSP).

4. How will the school determine the professional development needs of the staff and when will it take place?

- Before the summer academy for students, we provide month-long professional development for teachers. We'll look at differentiated instructions, brain-based learning, cultural awareness etc. We'll have sample curricula in place in the first year, but teachers can tweak to fit their teaching needs. The sample curricula will be developed during the spring, prior to the summer institute.
- During the school year, teachers come in at 7:30 a.m. and meet every morning. Once a week, there will be a full faculty meeting. The student support meeting will also be once a week.

5. How will teachers successfully implement the Individualized Student Success Plan (ISSP)?

- We begin with the summer academy, looking at past MCAS scores and other testing results, and implementing our own testing if needed. We plan to meet with parents and students to talk about their previous school experiences and identify what the students' strengths are. From the information we acquire, we will put together a plan to identify specific needs by subject area. This plan will go to teachers working with students.
- We'll have a group of individuals during the summer to put these plans together. Will get support from special education and English Language Learner specialists to put this plan together. It will be the principal's job to choose who's going to be on that team for each kid.

Assessment, Promotion, and Graduation Standards

1. Clarify your promotion and graduation policy.

- Specific courses have to be passed. The curriculum has to be fulfilled. Students can graduate when they meet those requirements.
- The graduation plan entails goals and objectives for each year, and students have to pass a majority of those goals to pass to the next grade level. If students need to make up work, they can go to summer school.
- We don't want to let anyone graduate early, but advanced students can take college classes if they want.

2. What tools will you use to assess whether the proposed school's mission is being realized?

- A detailed evaluation of the Executive Director's evaluation is part of this assessment.
- One of toughest challenges is the accountability piece. It's up to the board to ensure that school metrics are met. We realize there are many regulations from the federal and state governments that we are required to meet also.
- We'll be looking each year to see whether we are upholding the charter. If we're changing anything, we have to make sure the state knows. School viability is very important. Charter schools are very fragile in the first few years. Financial management will be key.

a. How will you know if students are successful?

- I will know through the students themselves. Will know through relationships with students. See their transformation over time.
- We're going to be collecting data and looking at attendance, discipline issues, how students are doing in the class, whether they are completing classes etc.

School Characteristics

1. How does your social justice curriculum encourage students to reach their own conclusions? How will your school culture support differing points of view?

- Our culture will be about teaching students thinking skills, to evaluate what they're given as information. It is very valuable. People see only what's around them. In urban environments, they have a limited perspective. We want the students to question their reality and ask what makes up that reality or whose vision makes up that reality. Students will learn to look at the different voices and different opinions and form their own opinion. We'll let students know it's okay to raise questions. Children in inner city feel that they don't have a right to question or disagree.

Special Student Populations and Services

1. What type of academic supports will be in place for students in the general education classroom?

- The kids will have study periods built into the day. We want to keep kids in the regular classroom to the maximum extent possible. Provide academic support (pull out services) during study periods. Use apprentice teachers for special education students in the regular classrooms. We will use apprentice teachers rather than paraprofessionals to provide support. They might not have teaching credentials but do have a bachelor's degree. The idea is that they work with special education and ESL staff to train them to become new teachers.
- For ESL kids, kids at Levels 1-3, their services will be provided outside the classroom. Depending on level, we may have an ESL teacher co-teaching in the content area classroom. We may also need a translator in the classroom for Levels 1, 2, or 3; there will be a need to facilitate things by having someone who can translate.
- We expect to have some personnel conversant in both Spanish and English. We want someone always available within the administration and faculty. We want 1/3 of our staff to be able to speak Spanish fluently but we are thinking about training as well.

Enrollment and Recruitment

1. Why did you develop a plan for 110 in year one, when you expect 100 per grade?

- We expect some level of attrition in that some kids won't find the right fit with us. At PVPA (Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter School), we experienced a 10% attrition rate in beginning.

2. Why did you develop a plan that will require you to shrink enrollment at the high school once you expand to include grades 5 through 8?

- In our fifth year, we're going to carefully evaluate our experience with the high school before we open the middle school. In PVPA's experience, we decided to shrink the high school.
- a. Why didn't you just apply as high school and then come back to apply for the middle school?**
- At PVPA, we saw that it was a disadvantage to students to start fresh in high school. If we were to start at a younger grade, it would give a lot more time for students to be prepared to do well when they get to high school.
 - We don't trust the amendment policy; it may change from year to year, and we want to make sure that we have the option to open the middle school. This is our way of planning ahead.

Capacity

1. What are the qualifications you are looking for in an Executive Director? What process did you follow to select Bob Brick? Why is he the best candidate for this role?

- We were looking for someone with a demonstrated track record. I've known Bob for 25 years in a lot of other capacities where he was successful. We saw what happened at PVPA, and Bob is the best candidate to implement this comprehensive model.

2. What have you learned from the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter School experience regarding what has worked and what hasn't?

- Critical thing is flexibility. All this planning is wonderful, but in the real world of starting schools, we have to ready for curveballs. We need a good team to deal with curveballs. For a school to be vibrant, we have to keep the possibilities open and have to be able to shift gears. For example, there was a federal funding cut back and we had to muster all our resources to the table to continue with the work of the school.
- Where PVPA fall short over the years is we didn't focus on board development. We have to make sure we're bringing in new people who are right for the position and train them for the responsibility. Self-perpetuating boards tend to have a narrow vision. For us, the traditional top-down board doesn't make sense in the social justice spirit.

Governance and Management

1. Please give examples of board versus administrative level policy decision-making.

- In terms of governance, the board creates policies and bylaws.

- Board has oversight of the Executive Director. Board generates the tone of the policy setting. Board monitors the overall direction and progress toward our goals.
- The executive committee of the board sets the agenda for board meetings. Bob would meet monthly with parent groups to get input about what they want to be brought to the board's agenda. The agenda will be posted ahead of time.
- We want to devote some time to training the non traditional board members – faculty, students, and parents.
- The school is based on social justice. Exploring ways of doing governance outside the box reflects some of this social justice commitment.
- Can't have direct conflict of interest of course, for examples, teachers sitting on policy meetings about raising teachers' salaries. We will define the scope of their participation, but not entirely exclude them from the process.
- At the heart of it, a charter school is not there to recreate the same system, but to explore new ways of doing things.

2. Please describe in detail the evaluation process proposed for faculty and administrators.

- We have a review system for teachers. Other schools look at evaluation as a one-shot deal, but we see it as a process. We form teacher peer groups at the beginning of the year. We collect from teachers 3 times a year their lesson plans, their students' work, and how they evaluated the work. Informal evaluations would occur regularly. Formal evaluation to take place on annual basis.
- In the first year, it's the principal's role to evaluate the teachers. The Executive Director evaluates the principal and other administrative positions. When we have department heads, the principal will evaluate them.

Facilities and Transportation

1. Please clarify the fee-based bus service that you propose.

- For students who are too far away, we will procure bids for a bus system, which will be made available to students on a sliding scale. Depending on where the student population comes from, we will have central pick up points on the bus routes.

2. Have you consulted a lawyer about procurement issues related to facility renovation?

- Bids are coming in February 11, and we'll be ready to negotiate a lease two weeks afterward.

Budget

1. Please explain your major assumptions for FTE staff numbers?

- Problem with the Excel formula, so we did the staff position in hours.

2. Why do you budget zero funds for testing and assessment?

- Our plan at this time is to use only the MCAS. We may do some diagnostics.
 - For special education and ELL testing or psychological testing, we will contract specific services. We also plan to purchase in-house tests.
- a. Training costs?**
- Training will be done in-house. Teachers have 5 days of training before they come on salary, and another 5 days of training on salary. These two weeks are in conjunction with the summer academy.