8:00 a.m. I got my son Thomas to school on time, but had to return an hour later for an Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD). Thomas is autistic—and was about to flunk physics. He had been entering middle school when I started a charter school several years ago, thinking I could create a more user-friendly instructional environment for him. He’s now a junior—at the local public high school.

He often reminds me that only one of the three years he spent in the school I founded was good; the other two positively “sucked.”

Luckily, my reasons for starting a charter did not all revolve around my disabled son. What tenured education professor doesn’t harbor a secret desire to start a school? We got the doors of the Brazos School for Inquiry & Creativity open in August of 1999, in a church in Bryan, Texas’ only Hispanic barrio. Something they don’t teach you in education schools: We had advertised for middle school students, but discovered that to get them we had to take their brothers and sisters too. That first year we had about 40 kids scattered across grades K–10.

10:00 a.m. After the ARD meeting, I checked my cell-phone message box. It was full. It must be the school’s new program. We’ve just rejiggered it, adding more computers. It’s generating a lot of interest. We’ve already got a waiting list. Discipline problems have dropped almost to zero, and this is with kids that came to us mainly because of discipline issues.

10:15 a.m. Carolyn from the bank called. My main problem today, as it has been all week, is the usual one: money. The automatic deposits that Region IV said were coming in haven’t hit the account yet. Carolyn said she’ll cover any overdrafts, but we’ll have to pay the overdraft fees.

I also called the Telecommunication Infrastructure Board people again. Once more they routed the request for funds to the wrong person. Come on! We started this process last November. . . . Board meetings are also becoming somewhat of a drag. Politics. It’s ironic, perhaps, because when I incorporated the nonprofit that holds the charter in 1998, I called it “Democratic Schools Research, Inc.” In my mind, this is still a research project, and research projects can only be so democratic.

1:00 p.m. After lunch I drove up to our Old Hearne Road school, where we have about 20 high school students in our 21st-century classroom. You could put a classroom like this anywhere in the world. Computer workstations and lots of plants. Several kids were working on their PowerPoints for the week. I liked what they were doing, the interaction they were having, but I couldn’t help wondering how they would do on the state-mandated test that was coming up next month.

3:10 p.m. I drove down to the Autumn Circle campus, which houses our 65 Pre-K through grade eight kids, and where I have my office. My mailbox there was crammed with stuff from vendors and the state. There was also a note from a parent complaining about the lunches. Our principal, an energetic and highly efficient young Korean-American woman, was eager to fill me in on recent events and happenings. Obviously, I wasn’t going to get to my university office today.

Epilogue

Eighteen months have passed since that (pretty typical) day in February. Our total enrollment across four schools is now 260. The literature says that 250 is the magic number. We’ll see. We’ve also had 18 more of our students graduate from high school, half of whom were the first in their families to do so. Money is only slightly less burdensome—and our board is still a bit too unwieldy. But I’ve switched phones and have a Blackberry. I got Thomas one of his old tutors from the Brazos School, and he passed his physics course. And I still have my day job.

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