

Think Big, Go Small

A different approach to starting a school

BY MATT CANDLER

OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS, I've been involved in more than 100 charter-school start-ups. Until recently, I had one consistent approach to getting a school up and running. It involved a lot of money and at least a year of groundwork: studying effective school models, organizing all the logistics, and preparing a 300- to 400-page charter application.

Although it usually worked, my approach had a big flaw. I rarely tested the new school models before the students showed up on day one. And it could take another two or three years to discover if the school was a winner or a dud.

What if there were a way to refine a school concept before risking all that time and money, not to mention the academic and emotional lives of students?

In 2010, I founded 4.0 Schools in New Orleans as a nonprofit "incubator" of new ideas for doing school. The mission: to bring together a community of creative educators and entrepreneurs and help them develop and launch their ideas. I asked the six people in our first cohort to get started in my usual way, by committing a year to soaking up proven concepts in successful schools.

But one of the participants, Josh Densen, challenged my approach. Josh didn't want to sink a year into studying existing models. He wanted to ask parents what *they* were looking for in a school. He started hosting sessions in living rooms around New Orleans, and learned that the two things parents most wanted in a school were socioeconomic and ethnic diversity and a focus on creative thinking. He did a lot of searching on the web but couldn't find such a school to emulate.

Then Josh had a crazy idea, inspired by the competition that had erupted between old-school New Orleans restaurants and the new food trucks that were roaming around selling their wares. Why not try a food-truck version of his school? Josh bought some creative-thinking manipulatives and started doing "pop-up" versions of his school at community music festivals. Kids and parents loved it, and some became regulars. Josh then partnered with the Samuel L. Green Charter School. Each week, he and some of the kids from the festivals would visit the school and engage Green students in testing his concept for a class designed to boost creative confidence. In 2013, Josh opened Bricolage Academy—now one of the most diverse schools in New Orleans.

At 4.0, we've been trying since then to "de-risk" the

process of new-school creation and make it more iterative, responsive, and agile. Four years after Josh's first pop-up experiment, we're formalizing this approach through an initiative we call the Tiny Fellowship.

The idea is to give aspiring school and learning-space founders the resources needed to test promising concepts on a tiny scale. Students and their families provide feedback during the pilot, allowing for improvements to the model before a full-scale version is launched. 4.0, which is funded largely through philanthropy, provides design guidance, leadership coaching, and financial support.

One school that's been incubated this way is Rooted School, founded by Jonathan Johnson, which will open as a New Orleans charter in 2017. Rooted's unique model provides students with internships in high-growth, high-wage start-ups—gigs that pay \$16 an hour.

After doing some pop-up experiments, Jonathan wanted to further test his concept before launching his school. First, he partnered with the Algiers Charter School Association. Then he pitched his idea to dozens of families and recruited 15 students to participate in a one-classroom, one-semester version of Rooted hosted on the Algiers campus. With lots of help from the Algiers staff, the Rooted team (I'm the board chair) learned far more from those students and families than we ever could just talking about our ideas.

A trial run with only 15 students is not a perfect test—but it's far less expensive and risky than betting a few million bucks on a full-fledged school with no prior testing. Our process is based not on paper but on pavement—the pavement under the feet of school founders and real students and families.

It's great when people think big, but even better when big thinkers test small, early, and often. If we can validate our ideas on a tinier, more human scale, listening carefully to students and families, we might find a better approach to school reform—doing it *with*, not *to* each other.

Getting away from paper and onto pavement may seem like a tiny change, but I think it's a big deal.

Matt Candler is the founder and CEO of 4.0 Schools.

This article was adapted from a chapter he contributed to Educational Entrepreneurship Today, edited by Frederick M. Hess and Michael Q. McShane.



The Tiny Fellowship gives aspiring school founders the resources needed to test their ideas on a small scale.