

# WILL THE XQ "SUPER SCHOOLS" LIVE UP TO THEIR NAME?

## A NEW PHILANTHROPY'S COMPETITION TO REINVENT HIGH SCHOOL

**HALFWAY THROUGH SEPTEMBER 2016**—roughly a year after the contest was launched—"XQ: The Super School Project" announced its 10 high-school design-team winners at a "Facebook Live" event in Washington, D.C. Even as a tumultuous presidential campaign was grabbing a big share of the headlines, the two-hour event attracted coverage by major newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Boston Globe*. President Barack Obama provided a video greeting, and folks like Nancy Pelosi, MC Hammer, and Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, took part in announcing the winners. It added up to one of the splashiest "reveals" in education in a long time.

It didn't hurt that XQ was the first major education investment by the Emerson Collective, LLC, which was established by Laurene Powell Jobs, the widow of Apple's co-founder Steve Jobs, or that the media team behind it projected a relentlessly upbeat tone, focusing on the possibilities rather than the obstacles. It didn't hurt that each of the 10 winning design teams would get an eye-popping \$10 million over the next five years to turn their ideas into reality.

by ALEXANDER RUSSO

PHOTOGRAPH / COURTESY XQ INSTITUTE





*Russlynn Ali (left) and  
Laurene Powell Jobs recognize  
the inaugural class of Super  
Schools, September 2016*



The money was new, and came from a nearly bottomless well. Hopes and expectations were high.

“This isn’t a philanthropic, state, or local approach,” said Michele Cahill, who consulted extensively with the XQ project and was previously involved with New York City high-school-reform efforts. “It’s an open call to the country.”

Originally intended to result in just five winners, the XQ project was open to anyone who thought that they could revolutionize the American high-school experience. Teams of educators and experts came together from around the country to create new high-school designs for the competition. Some were experienced operators who wanted to try out a dramatically new idea. Others were expert practitioners who hadn’t yet started or run a school. Ultimately, the competition results reflected no explicit endorsement on the sponsor’s part of blended learning, or charter schools, or any other particular approach. The 10 winners included both charter-school models and district schools, and also presented a mix of familiar schools and themes along with some surprises (see Figure 1).

In tackling high school reform, the XQ team was pushing

against some of the largest and most stubborn problems in American education. Attempts to reinvent high school have occurred regularly over the past several decades. The New American Schools (NAS) Development Corporation is one early example. Founded by corporate CEOs in 1991, the initiative asked participating R&D teams to “break the mold” of American education in devising innovative high-school models that used a business approach. Another example is

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the \$500 million Annenberg Challenge from the mid-1990s, a multidistrict effort funded by former ambassador Walter Annenberg that allowed district stakeholders to come up with their own ideas for making improvements. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Small Schools Initiative of the early 2000s devoted roughly \$1 billion to breaking up large-enrollment high schools into smaller groupings. Since 2010, the Next Generation Learning Challenges has given \$40 million to 130 grantees to disrupt and transform existing educational models.

However, none of these efforts appeared to succeed on any significant scale, and many have already faded from memory. The Gates Foundation effort was abandoned, though recent research suggests that the decision may have been premature. And with the exception of Expeditionary Learning, a school model based on the Outward Bound program, the models that sprang from the NAS initiative have all fallen off the radar.

“With XQ, Emerson took on a big, tough challenge, laden with a Gordian knot of tradition, state graduation requirements, college entrance requirements (and the tests that go with them), and the traditions of prom, football, and everything else,” observed Mary Ryerse, strategic director at Getting Smart, a Minneapolis–St. Paul non-profit, who was among the judges for the competition.



*In setting up an open call for contestants, the XQ project mimicked the familiar design of reality television shows. XQ advertised in print, on broadcast television, and on city buses, as well as online.*

## Building Awareness

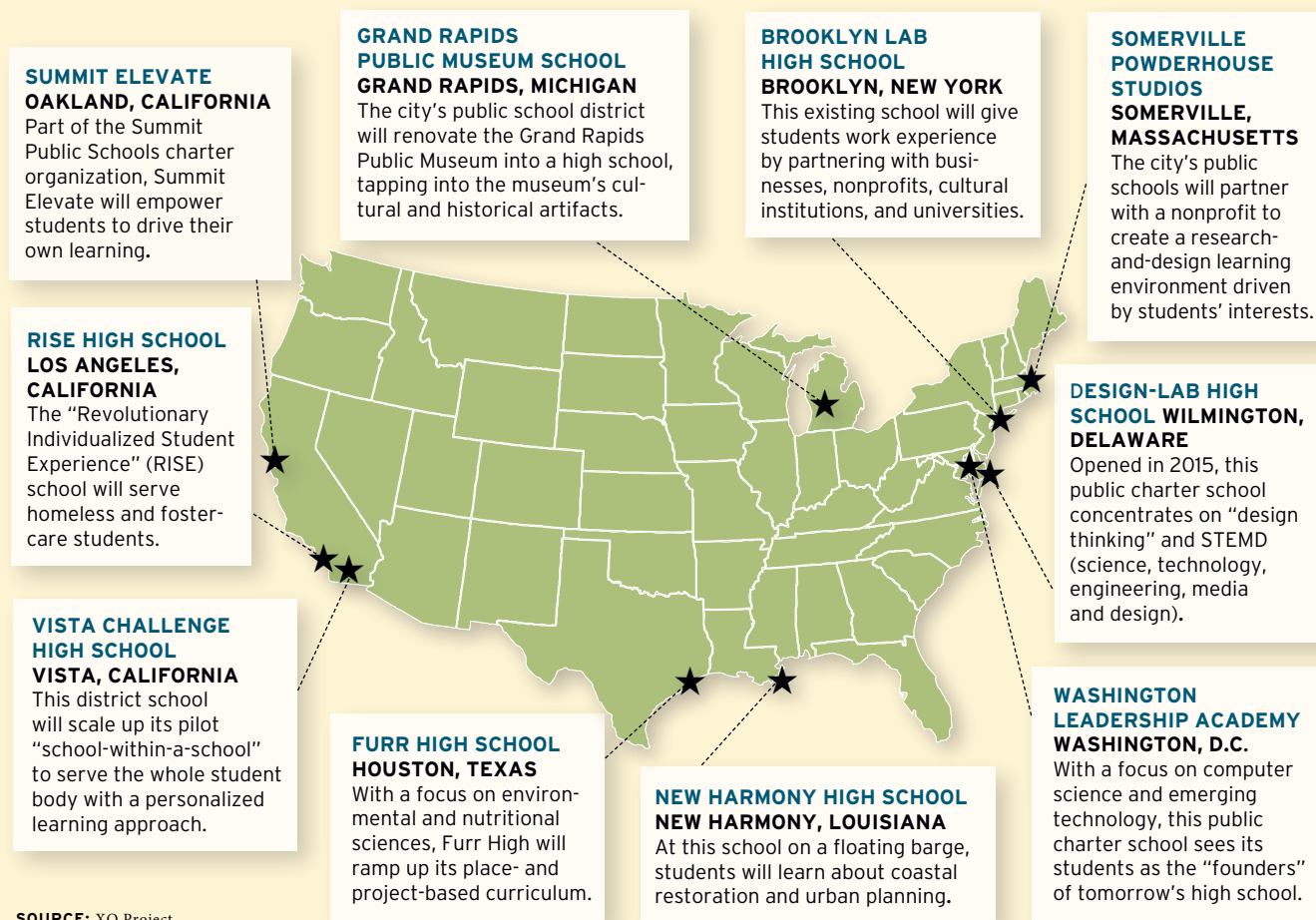
In setting up an open call for contestants, the XQ project mimicked the

## feature

### XQ PROJECT RUSSO

#### A Look at the Super Schools (Figure 1)

*Each of the 10 winning design teams will get an eye-popping \$10 million over the next five years to execute their ideas for transforming high school.*



familiar design of reality television shows such as *The Voice*, *Survivor*, or *The Amazing Race*, in which anyone can vie to participate in a series of increasingly difficult challenges. And from the start, the efforts to create public buzz set it apart from previous high-school-reform initiatives.

Working with Apple’s ad agency and high-profile consultants, XQ advertised online, in print, on broadcast television, and on city buses. The competition got coverage in mainstream publications like *Us Weekly*, launched a Twitter campaign, staged a nationwide bus tour, and produced promotional videos. (One of them featured an XQ “astronaut,” played by *The Daily Show* correspondent Jessica Williams, striding toward the camera, *Right Stuff*-style, then talking to viewers from the middle of a busy New York City sidewalk,

reminding them of the 1960s moon race and asserting, “We need to talk about high school.”)

Organizers of the XQ project seemed to understand instinctively that public engagement, media communications, and grassroots authenticity would be integral to their success and that these elements had been lacking in nearly every other previous education initiative.

Beyond the hoopla and big-dollar prizes, the XQ project had other features not common to recent philanthropic efforts. In focusing on individual school models and putting forth an open call for ideas—rather than insisting on a prescribed list of policy-related preferences—the initiative appeared to depart significantly from the kind of education grant making that has been practiced for the past

15 years by philanthropists such as the Gates, Walton, and Broad families.

“It does seem like a project that’s taking a different direction than what we’ve been observing from big foundation philanthropy in recent years,” said Sarah Reckhow, an assistant professor at Michigan State who studies education philanthropy. “It’s not quite a throwback to the wide-open Annenberg Challenge—but there are still some big differences” between the XQ prize and recent philanthropy.

Partly because of the XQ project’s upbeat, open approach, the competition was the first major education-grant program in recent years that didn’t set off an immediate wave of public alarm from critics. Even though Powell Jobs stands squarely on the reform side of education’s long-running civil war over how to make things work better for American students, the XQ effort seemed to represent a refreshing change of direction. And not a moment too soon, according to some observers.

“We’re ripe for something new to come along,” noted Reckhow.

But it isn’t entirely clear yet whether XQ truly represents a more promising way of approaching high school redesign and education philanthropy or is simply a return to an old, somewhat discredited model in which funders let a thousand flowers bloom but never achieved large-scale improvement. Does the project stand a reasonable chance of making a real difference in how American teenagers are educated? Will it build awareness of the high-school-reform cause that pushes broader, deeper changes?

Initially, nearly everyone who commented publicly was supportive of the effort. Few people questioned the motives behind the project or wanted to stand up against one of the newest, most well-funded education philanthropies in the nation. And some were genuinely enthusiastic.

Eventually, though, a small chorus of skeptics started to speak out, both on the record and otherwise.

One of the first was *Education Next*’s own Rick Hess, who wrote in *Education Week*, “These paper promises are, at best, an unreliable guide to what happens in practice. That’s the problem

Beginning with its launch in September 2015, the XQ competition generated a staggering 700 completed applications from an original field of 1,500 registered teams.

with these design competitions in education—it’s a lot easier to say things than to do them.”

To what extent the XQ “super schools” live up to their name will only begin to come clear when the 10 high schools open next fall—assuming they all make it that far.

## The Challenge

During the yearlong process launched in September 2015, the XQ competition generated a staggering 700 completed applications from an original field of 1,500 registered teams. In April 2016, 350 teams were informed they’d made it to the second round. By summer, the group had been winnowed to 50.

Russlynn Ali, the former Obama administration staffer who has headed up the XQ Super School Project, says she was astonished by the response it drew and the creative optimism that it seemed to represent. “Who knew a competition could create this kind of authentic renewal of faith and hope that we are witnessing?”

Relatively few prescribed paths or strategies were set forth in the competition guidelines. Unlike many foundation-funded efforts of late, XQ did not decide on a “solution” ahead of time and then go out and find folks who would shape their plans around it. “These groups got to put forward their own proposals and design



*At the project-based Furr High School, students work in groups to build “five-minute robots.”*





*The Grand Rapids Public Museum High School is turning a museum into a school and involving students in one of the country's largest urban river restoration projects as part of the school's science curriculum.*

them,” noted Reckhow. “That’s different than what we’ve seen in recent years, when funders told education innovators, ‘We’ll call you.’”

This is how education grant making was commonly done 20 and 30 years ago: foundations identified an area of interest, sought out the best people and ideas they could find, and funded them.

### A New Direction?

The idea of offering a cash prize for innovative concepts is something that’s relatively new in education, though increasingly common in other areas of philanthropy.

“A well-executed prize, in theory, should change the nature of the market and redefine supply and demand,” said Tom Vander Ark, who headed the Gates Foundation’s education program through much of the 2000s and worked afterward with the XPRIZE organization, which conducts competitions designed to benefit the public. Big “inducement” prizes attract attention and talent, as well as peripheral

investments, and can fuel breakthrough ideas.

But Vander Ark notes that such prizes are usually focused on concrete technological innovation, not a complex human system like secondary education—and most are awarded on successful completion of the effort, not at the outset.

In some ways, the XQ competition resembled Race to the Top (RttT), the \$4.3 billion federal education program tucked into Barack Obama’s 2009 economic stimulus package. Under RttT, states had to compete for a share of the money by passing through a series of reviews. Forty states and the District of Columbia applied to the well-publicized program; just 18 of them, plus D.C., won grants. Still, the competition’s impact went far beyond the money that was eventually awarded.

However, Race to the Top was prescriptive rather than letting states determine which approaches might work best. And the process came to be dominated by consultants who promised states they could help ensure a competitive advantage.

“You could point to the number of consultant firms and match back to who got those awards,” said Ali of the RttT process. “Stakeholder engagement and commitment

dwindled quickly” after the grants were announced.

The XQ project was intent on avoiding top-down directives or any implication that it was seeking certain predetermined results from the competitors. And unlike RttT, the XQ competition was focused on individual schools and innovations, not on systems of schools, districts, or replicability.

“Replication was desirable, but not required,” wrote journalist Lisa Miller in *New York* magazine. “A singular, artisanal school might win, as long as it was inspirational, with lessons that might be applied by others. The goal of XQ was not to make a cookie-cutter high school but to foment, instead, a global sense of possibility.”

### No Change in a Vacuum

The project’s focus on individual school models represented a significant break from recent philanthropic thinking. As Reckhow and others have noted, the focus in grant making has been on pushing new approaches and broader policy changes that might *indirectly* foster improvement in high schools—through higher standards, stronger graduation requirements, and better teacher training. This thinking held, for instance, that revamping high schools only made sense if the policy environment in which they operated was changed. Otherwise, district and state regulation would impede progress.



*The design-thinking approach to learning at the Design-Lab High School develops skills in communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity.*

Without systems redesigned to support them, new schools “either have to exist outside the system to survive, or they get derailed ... because the current structures and policies are inappropriate or ineffective in sustaining the new designs,”

Many of the “super schools” are as different from each other as they are from a typical high school today. The winning models include a school on a barge, where students will study coastal restoration, a school for homeless and foster children, and one that’s housed in a museum.

said the Annenberg Institute for School Reform’s Warren Simmons in *Education Week*.

“Supporting high school redesign and innovation is an important and critical endeavor,” he continued. “But you can’t sustain that work and take it to scale unless you think about systems.”

### The Winners

The 10 competition winners, selected in July, were notified via a videochat that was met with all the clapping, hugs, cheers, and tears one might expect.

One salient focus among the cohort was education technology, which figures prominently in the current trend toward “personalized learning.” Other proposals were more focused on project- and inquiry-based learning. Some wanted to create or expand new schools. The winning concepts included a school on a barge in the wetlands of New Orleans, where students will learn about coastal restoration and urban planning; a school located in the Grand Rapids (Michigan) Public Museum; another focusing on homeless and foster children that will include physical sites, online learning, and mobile resource units that travel to the students; and a lab school in Brooklyn that will aim to give students career experience through partnerships with nonprofits, cultural institutions, businesses, and universities. So, in many ways, the winning school models are as different from each other as they are from any “typical” existing high school.

There were no private or parochial schools among the mix, noted some conservatives who perceived a progressive bias among the winners. None of the brand-name charter networks like

**feature**  
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*At Washington Leadership Academy, students will experience innovative learning opportunities through STEM and new technology, such as virtual reality and, eventually, holography.*

KIPP, Achievement First, or Success Academy were represented either. (It is unclear if any of them applied.)

Still, to some observers, the list of winning-proposal sponsors was perhaps overly familiar. The winning teams included a former adviser to Arne Duncan, a Teach For America team, and “a well-funded West Coast chain of charter schools,” noted Miller in her *New York* article. Half of the winning proposals had roots in the Next Generation Learning Challenges initiative, according to its deputy director, Andy Calkins. EdSurge editor Mary Jo Madda said she was surprised to find that she was familiar with 4 of the 10 players that won. “I thought this was going to be about finding school model designers out of the woodwork that hadn’t been recognized,” she said.

Other observers worried that the proposals didn’t depart enough from today’s typical high schools. None of them, for instance, include such dramatic changes as ditching the 12th grade or “unschooling.” “It felt like the winners were showing great ideas all within the frame of high school as we know it,” said one observer who asked not to be named. “Are they really breaking the high-school design mold?”

Still others thought there weren’t enough proven operators in the final mix. Bob Slavin, who chairs the board of the Success

for All Foundation at Johns Hopkins University, remembered that during the New American Schools effort there were “people who had done this kind of thing before, who were professionals at it, and knew what needed to be done.” But there were also newcomers to this kind of process. “They were doing things for the first time. They were struggling from day one. They had never run a school or an organization before,” said Slavin. “It was a lot to take on.”

Just 3 of the 10 XQ winners—Summit Elevate, Washington Leadership Academy, and Brooklyn Lab—have much of a track record. About the rest, one education insider who asked not to be named said: “I have zero confidence they will build something that is workable, scalable, or ‘super.’” Then again, 3 out of 10 isn’t a bad result if the 3 are unicorn-level successes that spur broader changes.

### **Beyond Innovation**

“When I saw the ads on TV for the first time, I was really excited,” said Marc Tucker of the National Center on Education and the Economy, who is a veteran of decades of attempts to fix American high schools. “They conveyed neatly how the



world has changed enormously and requires a rethinking of the American education system.... That struck a chord with me.”

His excitement was short-lived, though. “When I discovered what they were trying to do, I thought, ‘Oh, no. It’s déjà vu all over again.’ I see this as another likely link in the chain of failures.”

According to Tucker, the competition’s focus on innovation is misguided. “We’ve got plenty of innovation; we’ve been very good at that for a very long time. What we lack is effective systems,” he said.

And even if insufficient innovation were the problem, according to Tucker, high schools are the wrong end of the pipeline to target. “You can’t fix the problem by fixing high schools.”

Tucker is not alone in this opinion. The publicity efforts surrounding XQ “reflect a view that has been disproved over time—that the reason these reforms haven’t taken hold is that people are not aware of them,” said Annenberg Institute senior fellow Simmons. “The ‘exhortation’ strategy—build it and show it and they will come—hasn’t been very successful.”

But not everyone agrees. Vander Ark sees a tremendous need for innovation. “The dominant high-school model was badly obsolete when I started working on it [in the 2000s], and the world has changed dramatically since then,” he said. “I think that the secondary years have to be full of novelty and complexity, and that doesn’t look anything like what we have today.” According to Vander Ark, there are no more than 10 school networks nationwide that are already doing a good job at personalized learning and project-based approaches.

## Devil in the Details

Already, the project has encountered a few small but nagging operational problems. The first, noted by Ali, is that the XQ contest turned out to be governed by state sweepstakes laws, which limited interactions between the contest runners and contestants during the approval process. The second is that the legal, contractual nature of the relationship between XQ and the winning groups has proven to be complicated. Powell Jobs and Ali did not want to give funds to school districts or exclude teams that lacked legal expertise, so they did not require contestants to establish ahead of time a legal entity that could legitimately receive funding from the LLC. Now, winners are scrambling to create legal entities for this purpose and to work out agreements among themselves about how those entities will be governed.

Both the XQ project itself and the winning teams are grappling with other operational questions as well. Will every team member, including students and teachers, have an equal say in decisionmaking? How will disputes be resolved? Will each team be in charge of scaling up its own model, or will everything that’s learned be handed off to XQ for dissemination?

## A Movement, Not a Model

XQ supporters are hoping that some years from now these 10 schools, and maybe others, will be reaping great results. But that’s not all they’re hoping. The overarching ambition of the project sponsors is to raise awareness and bring new energy to the broader high-school-reform effort—to stoke interest in reinventing our century-old model. In the end, XQ might be better known as a broader advocacy effort aimed at reinventing secondary education rather than as a discrete attempt to develop new-look high school models.

The competition creators intended the design and development stages to be just as powerful and useful as the actual work the grantees will do on their schools. The support materials that XQ provided—13 “knowledge modules” and 250 resources that XQ curated for participants—resulted from

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conversations with school design teams that were competing to win XQ’s approval. The materials constitute a framework and a base, according to Cahill. “They can grow and develop. They’re not an ideology.”

Cahill said she views the XQ project as “a conversation and a process, not a bunch of educators saying ‘here’s the model; we’re going to do more of this.’” By putting local groups in charge, the XQ project also hopes to build momentum for change that even the strongest research evidence doesn’t always foster.

And as big a bet as the 10 \$10 million grants may appear, the contest may only be the beginning of what the XQ project aspires to accomplish. Ali says that they are trying to build a community and an “ecosystem” around high school redesign, and to promote public engagement well beyond those directly involved. She talks about “earning” a movement.

“The contest is a vehicle to accelerate and galvanize that hunger and public interest and civic will,” according to Ali. Ten hugely successful school models would be great, but they were never intended to be the “it” of this work. Ali says she wouldn’t be surprised if Emerson’s additional spending is in the tens of millions.

But first, they need some amazing examples of what these “super schools” could look like—beacons that shine a bright light on what the high schools of tomorrow might become.

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