



The Six Predictable Failures of Free Schools... and how to avoid them

Laura McInerney
Foreword by Loic Menzies

At L.K.M Consulting we believe that ‘Everyone Outstanding’ should not be an oxymoron...

There are many examples of schools, voluntary organisations and social enterprises that provide the outstanding services young people deserve. They transform lives and society and prove that it is possible to deliver this quality of service. We therefore believe that there is no excuse not to do everything in our power to help **all** organisations to do so.

We are excited to be advising Free School applicants on their proposals and the ‘setting-up’ process. We are committed to providing advice focused on the principles outlined above. All consultation work is personalised to you and your young people’s context, and is as rigorous and honest as possible. We use our experience to look at the context and factors contributing to education in your area and you can be sure that we will tell it as it is, guided by the interests of young people. At the same time, we will always use our creativity to find solutions and make it happen.

L.K.M Consulting also provides teacher training, mentoring, coaching, quality assurance audits and school improvement services. We work with third-sector youth organisations developing their strategy and services and carry out policy and research work like this, founded on our hands-on experience. What we advocate is what we’ve seen work.

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Twitter: @LKMco

‘Enabling Organisations to Deliver the Outstanding Services Young People Deserve’

About the Authors



Laura McInerney is Policy Development Partner at L.K.M Consulting and an Advisory Teacher in an East London school. She trained as a Citizenship teacher with Teach First. Previously she worked for KPMG on a range of public service projects including on policing and transport. She holds a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from St. Peter's College, Oxford.



Loic Menzies is Director and Lead Consultant of L.K.M Consulting, a Tutor for Canterbury Christ Church University's Faculty of Education and a trustee of the charity Changemakers. He was previously Associate Senior Manager and Head of History and Social Sciences at St. George's R.C School in North West London. He holds a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from Magdalen College, Oxford.

Contents

Foreword – Loic Menzies **ii**

Introduction **iv**

Executive Summary of Recommendations **1**

Chapter 1

Avoiding the curse of superiority, external constraints and
'rubbing everyone up the wrong way' **4**

Chapter 2

Time and resources are neither infinite nor guaranteed **9**

Chapter 3

Dealing with conflicting goals and the problem of 'being in
charge' **16**

Chapter 4

A Plea to the Policy-Makers **20**

Conclusion **22**

References **24**

Foreword

Loic Menzies

Director and Lead Consultant

I'm not usually a grumpy person, but the morning of the Free Schools launch I sat in the corner of the DfE looking distinctly unimpressed. I was fiercely opposed to the policy. Yet in the months that followed, my attitude softened. My concerns have not disappeared: I fear the impact of school competition on pupils stuck in sinking schools with falling rolls and I wonder whether the right sort of government control would not be a better way forward than casting schools free altogether. So why has my attitude softened to the point where I find myself commending the first *L.K.M Publishing* report to you, designed as it is, to support the establishment of Free Schools?

At L.K.M Consulting, we believe that all young people deserve to benefit from outstanding services. We work with all sorts of different schools, informal educational establishments and a whole range of third-sector organisations. Yet wherever we go, we find that it is the quality of provision not the type of structure that guarantees quality. As such, we have no doubt that some Free Schools will achieve great things.

Since that morning at the DfE several organisations have spoken to me about their plans for a Free School and asked for my support. I want to help them all; if they can make a difference to the lives of young people, opposing them would be nonsensical and go against everything we believe in. I have a sense of déjà vu about this: when I started teaching and was posted to a Catholic School my passionately secular principles put a question mark over what I was doing. Five years later, the improved life chances of the hundreds of young people I worked with tell me I did the right thing by taking up the post, though my views on faith schools remain unchanged.

All the evidence points to the fact that as many Free Schools will fail as traditional schools. Indeed, my favourite contribution to the argument comes from Stephen Gorard whose research shows that there is little or no evidence that any school type does better than any other (Gorard 2010). So let's move on from the endless 'evidence ping-pong' about the success rates of Free Schools/Charters/Academies v. the mainstream. School failure takes place amongst all school types and it is always a tragedy for the pupils affected. I would like to use this foreword to call for unity. Let sceptics and enthusiasts leave behind the structural arguments and instead come together around a discussion of this reports' recommendations. Let's use evidence and experience to work out how young people can get the best deal from the Free Schools policy. It will be implemented, like it or not, so whether sceptic or fan, put your energies to good use. This report is a first step in telling you how. I hope you will add to it, tell us where we're wrong and ultimately, help us to ensure that more young people benefit from the outstanding services that they all deserve.

*Please join in the discussion on Twitter @LKMco #6failures, on L.K.M Consulting's Facebook page, or leave your comments at:
www.lkmconsulting.co.uk/interact*

Introduction

“If 90% of businesses and 50% of marriages fail, why should a Free School be any different?”

The current Free School debate lacks sophistication. On one side, the pro-Free School movement argues that 30% of these schools in the US and Sweden deliver rapid educational progress for their students. On the other side, sceptics rightly argue that 30% of Free Schools in these countries fail miserably (CREDO, 2009; NAPCS, 2009). Yet among the arguments about whether or not the policy is correct, no-one seems to be asking the most crucial question: ***Under what conditions do Free Schools succeed?***

Free Schools *will* soon become a reality, regardless of conflicting policy or philosophical arguments about fairness. Given this, our concern must be that 30% of them *do not* fail. Spending time arguing about the relative merits of the policy is not the way to make this happen.

Thankfully, Seymour Sarason -- the recently deceased American academic -- spent 50 years studying education reforms in America and over 25 years looking at Charter Schools, the US version of Free Schools. His body of work is vast and provides specific details of the failures and successes of new school settings that opened in the US, yet many people currently planning Free Schools have no knowledge of his work.

The essence of Sarason's work is clear: 'Do not under-estimate the complexity of opening a new school'. Failure to understand how difficult it is to run a school is the main reason why so many US Charter Schools floundered, and will be why many UK Free Schools do the same. Sarason demonstrates, through many examples, "the enthusiasm, the fantasy of enduring goodwill and a belief in the accomplishment of 'success' that blocks out attention to (or mammothly downplays) the predictable problems of any venture" (Sarason 1972, p.61). In the rush to do something exciting new leaders inevitably forget to make realistic plans. Firstly, they forget the small stuff. Deciding on 'ethos and vision' and designing uniforms is exciting and quickly takes precedence over how many dinner staff will be employed or where textbooks will be stored.

Whilst such things may seem small, taking care of the small stuff is often the difference between a good and a mediocre school.

Secondly, few people recognise the importance of the ‘before-the-beginning’ setting. In America the average time between a Charter application being approved and the school opening was just six months (Sarason 1998, p.54). What we do not know is how long there was between the founder conceiving of the school and submitting the application. So little research focuses on this pre-application time that it is difficult to give accurate estimates, yet Sarason continually argues that the use of this time makes the difference between schools that succeed and those that do not.

When writing Free School applications the temptation is to apply a positive spin in order to get the application passed. Few people want to wait several years before opening a school so there is always the pressure of a September deadline. This pressure leads people to write their applications quickly and worry about the practicalities or ‘extra detail’ later. The problem is, if the average time between acceptance and opening is only six months, the immediate focus is meeting a tight implementation schedule. Thinking time is suddenly replaced with the need to *do*.

Reflecting on all the Charter leaders he studied, Sarason confirms that all principals wish they had allowed more time before starting. One principal commented: “My enthusiasm for what we wanted to do was so strong and compelling that I was totally insensitive to the fact that I was operating according to a self-constructed schedule that I know now was nonsensical.” (Sarason 2002, p.67)

Time is, of course, limited and leaders will always want more of it. Therefore, Sarason's point is not that leaders should stall their plans forever, but that they should recognise that the 'before-the-beginning' stage is critical: if this stage is not completed properly, gaps in planning may never be filled.

So what are the most important things that people overlook in the initial planning stages? Sarason argues that six patterns present themselves in the beginning of any new setting, whether it is a marriage, a business merger or a school (Sarason 1972).

These six issues are:

1. Feelings of superiority & uniqueness
2. Potential external constraints
3. The myth of unlimited resources
4. Limited time
5. Conflict over goals and values
6. Issues of power and authority

Understanding how these problems manifest themselves in Free Schools and how best to overcome them is Sarason's gift to those embarking on new schools. The rest of this document synthesises his work and shows how predictable failures can be converted into increased chances of success.

Executive Summary of Recommendations

“It’ll be different for us...”

- Read the OFSTED reports of all local schools (primary & secondary), identify the problems they face and carefully plan how your school will deal with each issue. Always assume these problems will affect you too.
- Ask yourself: “What problem are we solving?” and market your school as a *complementary solution* rather than as a unique or superior institution.
- Develop strong relationships with all local stakeholders by working with them to solve common issues. This will reduce the external constraints that you could face if trying to be competitive or combative.
- Avoid the temptation to justify your position in the market by pointing out the flaws you perceive in other schools. Focus solely on the problem you are solving.
- Seek out criticism. Change your plans if, and only if that criticism shows a way that you are not best solving the problem you wish to solve. If you and your team tend to avoid situations where you will be criticised, your long-term success is at risk.

“We’re a winning team...”

- The Free School applicant team should avoid self-selection for leadership without a full and fair process and should consider hiring an external candidate.
- Survey the property market before submitting your application and allow at least twelve months for a property search if you do not have a site already secured.
- If local schools struggle to recruit, assume you will have the same problem. Teacher pay can be used as an incentive, but finding ways to treat staff better (through extra training or reduced hours) has the additional benefit of reducing staff-burden. Give yourself adequate time to find the right staff.
- Balance your teaching teams in terms of experience and personality.

- Recruit for support staff as thoroughly as you recruit for teaching staff.
- If you promise individual attention for all students, then budget for it. Work with co-ordinators of specialised services in your local borough to find the average school spend on these. Add 10% so that you can honour promises.
- When writing financial plans write an annual 'co-option' plan detailing your strategy if subsumed by the local authority.
- If you are struggling to do something today, assume that tomorrow it will get worse if you do not tackle the subject soon. It is unlikely to get better on its own, no matter how much you believe that to be true.

“What makes us special is our passion...”

- Be clear about your school's goals and values and ideally base them on a local problem.
- Test for consistency in the way people interpret goals and values using scenarios. When policies are developed ask members of staff to interpret how they would respond on the basis of the goals and values.
- All staff should be aware that promotion will be based on evidence of their contribution to school goals.
- Give people adequate time to get to know each other before beginning the school. You will need at least two weeks with all staff working in the new school building before students arrive.
- Resist the push to 'over-commit' staff time

“Policy makers just need to cut tape and let a thousand flowers bloom...”

- Make it a requirement for all new Free Schools to show their service is complementary to existing local schools .
- Ideally, Free Schools should be funded in addition to current provision; at the very least existing schools should have a gradual reduction in funding as numbers decline.
- Require all new schools to commission independent research for their setting-up process
- Increase the detail required in applications for Free Schools
- Require a minimum of 12 months between application approval and school opening

Chapter 1

Avoiding the curse of superiority, external constraints and ‘rubbing everyone up the wrong way’

In “The Creation of Settings & The Future of Societies”, Sarason (1972) describes a sense of uniqueness and superiority that blinds people embarking on new ventures from learning from the experiences of those around them.

Whilst young couples have often grown up watching their parents struggle and are usually acutely aware of divorce rates, they do not question why marriages fail. Instead they commit to their own marriage believing things will be ‘different’. This phenomenon is known in Social Psychology as ‘False Uniqueness:’ most of us consider ourselves ‘better than average’ at, say, driving or remaining calm in difficult situations. False uniqueness blinds us from learning from our environment. We attribute the failures of schools and marriages to the particularities of those within them and believe that we will be different and exempt from others’ problems.

People setting up Free Schools are particularly prone to believing that they are unique and superior for two reasons: firstly, new school leaders feel they must offer something ‘new’ in order to justify the resources they need to set up. Secondly, they tend to be created in reaction to local ‘bad schools’. Sadly, this frequently leads to the second predictable failure of Free Schools: not asking *“why are there no good schools in this area already?”*

There are often external constraints that new-school leaders have overlooked. Asking all stakeholders about these can be extremely useful. For example, the local Youth Offending Team might explain that balancing the needs of different cultural groups in schools is important in order to reduce gang divisions in the area. To do this, schools may offer a diverse curriculum that seems a ‘bad fit’ for any *one* individual. Yet, in the long-term, this curriculum provides the best opportunities for learning across the community as a whole. Without this balance students may find

their learning disrupted by frequent cross-school fighting, especially on their journey between home and school.

Look at local schools and find out why they are not succeeding. Use this information to create a plan for your school and for how you will overcome these issues. Saying “it won’t happen to us” or dismissing the problems faced by local schools will not be enough to overcome them. These are the issues that will predictably affect you and which must be dealt with early in planning.

That said, we must not be afraid of innovation in schools. Several Free School models are exciting, particularly where they meet the needs of groups previously excluded from a good education. However, all innovation in Free Schools should be for a purpose rather than to provide a conveniently marketable ‘uniqueness’.

The easiest way to check whether your Free School is purposeful is to ask yourself: “Is our school the best way to solve a genuine problem?”

In some cases the answer will be “Yes”. For example, many parents regularly move due to employment. Getting a state education if you are in such an occupation is difficult. Schools teach subjects in different ways and to different exam boards. Building a Free School chain with a standardised curriculum and a clear virtual learning tool would help solve this problem. The school would be unique in its offering, but its uniqueness would be *complementary* to current provision rather than just claiming to be ‘superior’.

The Case for Complementary Provision

If a Free School cannot show that by opening its door it is genuinely the best solution to a real problem, then local schools will predictably feel snubbed and misunderstood. This is not a helpful situation given that you will be facing the same external constraints as those schools and may need the goodwill of the community in key areas such as managed moves, planning permission, negotiating admissions codes, extra-curricular provision and positive marketing in the local press.

Many Free School leaders believe that they are wildly courageous because they are 'flying in the face of the local establishment'. Sarason gives several examples of why such courage is akin to a person setting out to climb Everest believing that motivation, rather than technical skills and proper equipment, is all that is needed to arrive at the summit. In particular he describes the setting up of Community Progress Incorporated (CPI) in New Haven, USA. The CPI believed that traditional public agencies were not adequately supporting those in poverty and that a social enterprise could more productively run social programmes. The CPI loudly proclaimed their difference and justified it by arguing that the public agencies were 'dinosaurs'. In doing so the CPI soon became isolated from agencies with resources and experience that the CPI could have benefited from. Feeling criticised and rejected the agencies became hostile and the CPI found itself facing more public attack and scrutiny than they had planned for and more than they had the resources to cope with (Sarason, 2002).

An alternative history is, of course, possible. The Community Progress Inc. might have ridden the storm and proved a success. After all, many Charter Schools do flourish. However, even then, criticism and dismissal of the other agencies would demotivate these 'competitors' workers and reduce the quality of service they provide. In this case, whilst the CPI might have led to a better service for those on its own programmes, it would risk reducing overall quality of provision in the community. Competition in the context of schools can have negative externalities and these are not in anyone's interest so should be reduced wherever possible. Thankfully, these drawbacks of competition are not a necessary consequence of Free Schools. Compromise and collaboration is possible. This may sound idealistic but it is essentially pragmatic. For example, a local school may struggle to provide support for students achieving below a set standard of reading by the age of 14. The existing school's curriculum for 14-16 year olds might, for example, focus on GCSEs that do not suit these students. A Free School that delivered a strong curriculum for these students would therefore be complementary and in everyone's interest. Competition could therefore be shifted from a zero sum game through collaborative sharing of student data and maintaining pastoral links with the original school.

Where Free Schools are not solving existing problems, or where they are not the best solution to a local problem, leaders are likely to find resentment and anger among the local community. Free School applicants should therefore engage in early and extensive dialogue with local stakeholders, particularly teachers and school leaders at nearby schools and the Local Education Authority. Doing so may reveal problems which genuinely need innovative solutions: perhaps there is a shortage of places (as there is in East London from 2012), maybe a school is needed for excluded students, or students whose sporting or acting talents regularly take them away from school.

If your school can solve one of these problems rather than trying to compete for innovation's sake, you will more successfully justify your place in the market and so face less obstruction from the community on key issues such as finding a property, admissions and managing the local press. Your work will not only benefit those who get a place in your school but all of those in the wider community of schools.

Many potential Free School leaders do not want to hear this advice because they are afraid of the negative attitudes they will encounter. However, resistance is inevitable and it is better to face it early on than to ignore it. Opening a school is not for the faint-hearted.

If you can't face speaking with other Head Teachers, this game is not for you. Bear in mind, the main reason why marriages fail is because there was a clear conflict that both partners knew before they married (e.g. only one partner wanted to have children) but both chose to ignore it because the pain of discussing it would end the romantic 'pre-wedding' phase. In reality it is far better for you to know about any local prejudices or conflicts in advance so you can fight them before your school opens its doors (or even puts in its application.)

Potential Failures

- Feelings of superiority and uniqueness mean that many new school leaders fail to learn from other local schools and so make avoidable mistakes.
- Feelings of uniqueness lead school founders to ignore possible constraints and pressures in the local community.

Key Recommendations.

- Read the OFSTED reports of all local schools (primary & secondary), identify the problems they face and carefully plan how your school will deal with each issue. Always assume these problems will affect you too.
- Ask yourself: “What problem are we solving?” and market your school as a *complementary solution* rather than as a unique or superior institution.
- Develop strong relationships with all local stakeholders by working with them to solve common issues. This will reduce the negative external constraints that you could face by trying to be competitive or combative.
- Avoid the temptation to justify your position in the market by pointing out the flaws you perceive in other schools. Focus solely on the problem you are solving.
- Seek out criticism. Change your plans if, and only if, that criticism shows a way that you are not best solving the problem you wish to solve. If you and your team tend to avoid situations where you will be criticised, your long-term success is at risk.

Chapter 2

Time and resources are neither infinite nor guaranteed

In the 2010 BBC Documentary, “Start Your Own School” the programme-makers follow Toby Young, on his hunt for a building to house the Free School he and his fellow parents are proposing. Throughout the programme Young seems genuinely surprised at his team’s difficulty in securing a property, even though they are searching through one of the most expensive and densely populated areas in England. Similarly, in a recent article for the Telegraph, Young lamented the difficulty of finding a Head Teacher (Young, 2010) despite the much publicised and worsening national shortage of Head Teachers. To add to his misery, Young is up against a tough deadline with the school due to open in September 2011. Misunderstanding just how difficult it is to find required resources in a short period of time, Young is exhibiting two further ‘predictable failures’ faced by those starting Free Schools: the tendency to believe that human and physical resources will always be in supply and that there will be enough time to implement a complicated vision.

Why do people believe resources will always be available?

Toby Young is not alone in such naivety. Most humans wildly overestimate their ability to achieve in the future due to their innate tendency to believe ‘something will turn up’ when resources are limited. This is one of the reasons people are so poor at addressing environmental concerns even when presented with clear facts about the impact in the not-so-distant future; we ration that, in all likelihood, someone will get us out of the mess (Shu & Bazerman 2010). This leads us to consistently believe that our future will be brighter and better than our past, and the past of others (Taylor 1989). Such estimations mean new school leaders ignore the fact that local schools struggle to get Head Teachers, or afford new buildings, instead believing that these resources will ‘somehow’ appear.

Furthermore, we are particularly prone and most wildly overestimate our abilities in areas where our competence is low. This is known as the Dunning-Kruger effect and is why Sarason is highly sceptical about the many 'self-selected' leaders of Charter Schools (Sarason 1972, 1978). Given this, Sarason argues that those who seek to create a new setting must also seek a leader through a fair open process which includes external applicants.

The Importance of Buildings

Once a leader is in place, securing **the right** buildings is one of the most poorly considered parts of the new school process. In his historical review of education reform, Sarason explains how the original US Charter Schools were encouraged to open in any available building. This led to schools opening in disused offices, warehouses, even shipping containers. At first this was seen as a realisation of American initiative and 'triumph over adversity'. However, when unreliable contracts meant schools had to keep moving, or poor conditions led to poor health and high levels of staff absence, many schools suffered terribly. Without well-designed spaces secured for long periods of time, the uncertainty took its toll on students and, even more so on staff. As a result, these schools were the most likely to suffer high staff turnover and the associated damage to student relationships and achievement (Sarason, 1998).

Securing a building does not require Free School applicants to find somewhere particularly aesthetically pleasing, but the space must be fit for purpose and it should be secured on a long-term contract. As most schools start small and expand with each year's intake, several Charter Schools began in small buildings with a plan to find larger spaces each year. Sadly the usual pattern was that these schools found themselves without accommodation, or failed to take into account the emotional, physical and financial costs of moving the schools each year or converting inadequate facilities (Meyerson, Berger and Quinn, 2010).

Young is therefore correct to focus on his building as a priority, but he should not be surprised or dejected by the difficulty he has faced in securing one. Nonetheless, those setting up Free Schools must not succumb to the temptation to take something 'adequate for now'. People often put off finding the right building believing that it can be sorted later, but it is too significant to leave.

Give yourself time to secure a quality learning space and to prepare it for learners before they arrive. Creating learning opportunities for hundreds of children is difficult at the best of times, you will find it almost impossible if teachers are constantly moving children between rooms and edging around decorators.

Money: Can you do a superior job with less funding?

Sarason is very clear about why money has been problematic for US Charter Schools. He writes: "If there is anything in common in applications for charter status, it is the explicit emphasis on the individual attention that will be given to students" (Sarason 2002, p.48). He explains that it is on this basis that many parents enrol their children. However, money is always tight in schools and with the additional costs of opening, many Charter schools simply did not plan for students who presented unique learning difficulties or special needs. These students then needed services that the school could not provide as their already over-burdened staff did not have enough hours available and no cash had been set aside to fund extra services. The parents then complained and sometimes successfully led campaigns to discredit the school leaving it floundering in its early vulnerable years. One can only imagine how this impacted on staff and student morale

Sarason finds over-promising without the necessary cash to be a common trait amongst Charter Schools that went on to fail. However, he blames the US government as much as the schools. Governments are equally guilty of over-promising and though Charter Schools were hailed as 'innovators,' money to support their goals fluctuated dramatically. There is no reason to believe the picture in England will be any different. Although the Coalition government are committing funds to Free Schools at present, it may be that a future government is not so accommodating. When Labour stopped giving money to independent schools for Assisted

Places there was a dramatic impact on the business plans of many schools who had assumed Government money would continue. In the US, Charter Schools that plan astutely and use third and private-sector support tend to flourish. Those which rely on continual Federal handouts frequently fade away.

Time-perspective, Time-Shifting

The public are always amazed when great building projects over-run, but deadlines and budgets slip because it is difficult to estimate how long certain parts will take and other elements are contingent on the first parts being finished. A new Aquatics Centre is being built in Stratford, East London for the 2012 Olympics, with a roof designed by award-winning architect Zaha Hadid. The roof is a new type of structure, never before created, and initial estimates for the time it would take to erect were several months short of the reality. Consequently, internal building works were delayed meaning that a significant problem with the pool-heating design was not discovered until the end of 2010; very close to the expected completion date. The problems have had to be resolved quickly and costs have therefore increased dramatically.

Increasing costs prompt the media to lambast the Olympic Project Managers for 'allowing' costs to spiral. However, initial costs and completion date could only ever be estimates. It was impossible for anyone to foresee the roof problems, just as it is impossible for anyone considering opening a Free School to know how difficult it will be to secure a building or hire staff. What the Olympic team did do was to plan enough contingency time to ensure the heating could be fixed – albeit at a higher cost.

Flexibility with timing, within reason, is important for schools. If timetables are too rigid the school leader tends to become compulsive about not deviating from timings even when it would be the right thing to do. Sarason talks about a number of people setting up nurseries who believed that starting 'anything' and working things out from there was always the preferred option. Yet later, on reflection, almost all said that the timetable was an unnecessary, almost imaginary, force stopping them from noticing warning signals and addressing problems before the setting opened (Sarason 1972, p.62).

Sifting for excellence

Given the recent explosion in research showing that teacher quality is the key determinant of student achievement, it is little surprise that new schools prioritise hiring quality teachers. Describing the work of five principals whom Sarason worked with, he says that all followed the same pattern; they began the job with less than six months until opening and usually whilst still completing another job, and they focused the majority of their attention on hiring quality teachers. Unfortunately this focus does not always achieve the expected effect.

Excellent teachers in one context do not necessarily convert to another situation. New school leaders generally prefer teachers who can show strong results in their previous school, but this previous setting is likely to be one that was already established. Being able to thrive in an existing setting is not the same as being an innovator who is able to contend with the anxieties and unpredictability of a new setting. Also, while the teachers were individually excellent, little thought was put into group dynamics. Hiring several dynamic and outgoing partners can begin well, but as pressure mounts in the first weeks, similar personalities can become explosive. The most successful recruitment strategies devolved recruitment to those responsible for leading and managing the teachers day-to-day. They were also provided with at least a fortnight of planning time together *before* students arrived. This allowed them to settle in as a team and understand one another's personalities without the immediacy of term-time pressures.

Due to the focus on hiring quality teachers, few of the principals created plans for teacher illness or fluctuation in performance. The logic seemed to be that if the people hired were excellent, excellence would last forever. Equally, little concern was given to the support staff – with the result that lower-quality janitors and administration teams were hired shortly before the school opened. Teachers are important, but they are not a school therefore:

Plan the recruitment of all staff thoroughly to ensure that high quality teaching is not undermined by a lack of support.

A final word of caution is implicit within Sarason's work. Knowing that time and money are precious many school leaders turn to young teachers – particularly those on programmes such as Teach For America or Teach First: their energy is high and their price low. One teacher on the board of a Charter School explicitly stated that their school hired teachers in their early twenties because they were less likely to have family obligations keeping them from making the enormous time commitments necessary (Weiss 1997). In these situations, teacher burn-out becomes inevitable and contributes to the high number of teachers who leave the profession within 5 years.

For individual Charter Schools, the loss may seem unremarkable, but in the longer-term such schools will struggle to find middle and senior leaders. Founders who wish to retire into consultancy or part-time roles will struggle to find adequate replacements and may find that the schools that they spent their entire career working to build become defunct when they move on because their school cannot find a replacement. Again, this is because leaders are guilty of believing that the future 'will solve itself'. It won't. Burn-out can cause serious health problems and damages the likelihood of your school sustaining itself in the long term.

In the short-term remember that teachers regularly move between schools, and often interact with each other. Younger staff members who feel badly treated or overworked are likely to seek alternative employment and will take their opinions of your work with them. A reputation for being a bad employer will not help you secure the highest quality teachers who, as Toby Young has come to realise, are not as common as you might expect.

Key Failures

- School founders often fail to recognise that physical and human resources are in short supply meaning their procurement will be complicated, expensive and time-consuming.
- Schools open in September each year and schools therefore feel the pressure of a strict deadline. Leaders frequently fail to account for the damage too short a deadline can cause.

Key Recommendations

- The team seeking to set up a Free School should avoid self-selection for leadership and hire a leader through a full and fair process which includes applications from candidates other than the initiators.
- Survey the property market before submitting your Free School application and allow at least twelve months for a property search if you do not have a site secured.
- If local schools struggle to recruit, assume you will have the same problem. Teacher pay can be an incentive, but finding ways to treat staff better (through extra training or reduced hours) has the additional benefit of reducing staff-burden. Give yourself adequate time to find the right staff.
- Balance your teaching teams in terms of experience and personality. It may be wiser to allow several core group members to each select a number of new teachers.
- Recruit for support staff as thoroughly as you recruit for teaching staff.
- If you promise individual attention for all students, then budget for it. Work with co-ordinators of specialised needs in your local Borough to find the average school spend on services. Add 10% so that you can honour promises.
- When writing financial plans write an annual 'co-option' plan detailing your strategy if you were subsumed under the local authority.
- If you are struggling to do something today, assume that tomorrow it will get worse if you do not tackle the subject soon. It is unlikely to get better on its own.

Chapter 3

Dealing with conflicting goals and the problem of ‘being in charge’

A unique aspect of Sarason’s work is the extent to which he was involved in setting up learning organisations, including university departments and educational residential homes. From his own experience he talks candidly about the final two failures: Failing to deal adequately with conflicting goals and values among the staff of a developing organisation, and failing to manage the tricky issue of power and authority when only a few key staff must work together.

Free Schools are particularly prone to these failures because new schools, at least initially, are small. Most Free Schoolers are excited by this, arguing that “it makes things easier to control”. Whilst this has some truth, small new schools also face two persistent but frequently overlooked problems. In a small community, every deviation from the norm can be spotted straight away. This can have the desirable effect of helping to establish a clear ethos to be followed. However, it also means that conflicts can quickly arise over interpretations of goals and ethos. Secondly, everyone knows in what order staff were selected and this can cause tensions over distribution of power and authority.

Verbal agreement on goals and values does not mean everyone agrees

In several of his books Seymour Sarason talks about one of the most successful settings of all time – the Manhattan Project, the American team who worked collaboratively to discover the Atomic bomb (Sarason 1998). Sarason argues that the clarity of the goal – learning to harness the energy of split atoms– meant everyone focused on the same thing. Though personal arguments sometimes flared up, it was easy to quell frustration by focusing everyone back on the task of atom splitting.

Schools tend to believe that their goal is something simple. For example, 'help everyone learn as best they can'. They are confident that this will bring them together. However, a phrase like this will mean wildly different things to different people. Some will measure this through GCSE scores, others through well-being scores and some even say it should not be measured at all. There are also disagreements about whether or not learners should be *forced* into being their 'best' regardless of their desires or of the consequences to their physical or mental health as a result of exhaustion. Much has been made of the extended school day/week/year in some US Charter Schools which sometimes results in seventy hour working weeks for pupils, but is there a limit to how many hours a pupil should of work per week? Or is the only thing that matters 'doing your best'? How should goals be interpreted in answering this question? Having a goal that everyone signs up to is easy if the goal is vague. Yet implementation will quickly reveal how widely values are interpreted.

Difficult decisions are made every day in schools so ask teachers in the community about the most difficult decisions they have made during their careers. Put these to your team and see if your proposed values would suggest making the same decisions – if not, why not? How would you resolve the disagreement if it came up? Testing how values would be implemented in practice as early as possible will help avoid explosive disagreements once term begins.

Though goals and values are sometimes the source of conflict, they can also stop further conflict once the boundaries have been tested and people are clear on the values they are signing up to (Christodoulou, 2010). When promotions need to be made, senior management should be guided by which staff are contributing most to the agreed goal. This principle should be made clear to the staff from the beginning. Sadly, this has not always been the case in Charter schools and the sense that being 'first on the scene' guarantees future promotion has often led to the sixth predictable failure of free schools: issues over power and authority.

The problem of the ‘Core Group’

Once ethos and goals have been set, Free Schools often proclaim the advantage of being able to select staff on the basis of compatibility with school ethos. Research on Charter schools in Michigan suggests that this is a motivating factor for teachers choosing to teach in them (Miron and Nelson, 2002). A leader is first selected, and then they start appointing a deputy, managers and so on. Knowing who was selected first, then second, and third might not sound particularly controversial but it can breed a sense of entitlement. For example, as extra year groups join the school, more Heads of Year are needed. Knowing the order of selection often means earlier members feel they have more ‘right’ to promotion than newer staff members. Equally, ‘core members’ (as the founders often think of themselves) tend to want their views listened to more seriously than those of newer staff, as they ‘understand’ the school more readily. Being aware of the politics involved and balancing these pressures will be vital to ensuring success. Avoiding animosity between staff is crucial if teachers’ energies are to remain focused on the classroom rather than on staffroom politics.

Sarason notes that new settings usually bring together colleagues who have enjoyed working together in the past and who believe that they can create great results by working collaboratively in a new environment. All of the teachers who are currently planning Free Schools that have offered their thoughts on this matter mentioned they are working with “friends” or “other excellent colleagues.” Sadly past relationships do not predict how you will fare in a new context. Given that most teachers finish one job and go straight into another school there is little time for each of these ‘excellent teachers’ to get to know one another in a new context and establish the *modus operandi* they will need in order to resolve the questions and problems that inevitably arise as they move forwards.

Equally, people change over time. The ‘fantastic’ Head of English you employ may face unexpected circumstances at home leaving them unable to give as much commitment as you require. As a Head you may have promised your community that all staff will put in 100% of effort to support their child, but if someone’s traumatic divorce means their capacity is only 80%, what do you do? It is easy to believe we will always

‘do the right thing’, but the reality is quite different when faced with a friend who gave up their previous job to help you begin your risky Free School venture.

Of course, all schools face these difficulties, but when you set up a new school you may think that the problems of ‘old schools’ will not follow you. They will. On top of that you will be expected to maintain a ‘perfect veneer’ to prove that you have a right to exist in the local marketplace – a pressure other schools do not face.

Key Failures

- School leaders frequently fail to understand that goals and values can only become meaningful when put into practice and conflict inevitably arises as a result.
- Schools fail to deal with conflicting pressures over power and authority.

Key Recommendations

- Be clear about your school’s goals and values and ideally base them on a local problem that you are seeking to address
- Test for consistency in the way people interpret the goals and values using specific scenarios. When policies are developed ask members of staff to interpret how they would respond using the goals and values.
- All staff should be aware that promotion will be based on achieving goals for the school.
- Give people adequate time to get to know each other before term starts. You will need at least two weeks with all staff working, in the new school building, before the students arrive.
- Resist the push to ‘over-commit’ staff time

Chapter 4

A Plea to the Policy-Makers

The recent Coalition White Paper “The Importance of Teaching” carefully describes the case for Free Schools and provides guidance on the kind of accountability structures the government wishes to create. Yet nowhere in the paper or the corresponding evidence-base is there recognition that Free Schools and their equivalents have frequently failed and that Sarason’s work shows that these failures can guide new Free School leaders on how to succeed.

Given the wealth of material Sarason presents through his books, the following are sensible recommendations for policy makers and implementers:

- 1. Make it a requirement for new Free School to show that their service is complementary to existing local schools**

If local schools feel threatened the evidence suggests that one of two outcomes results: It causes the Free School to become isolated and criticised by the current schools, or, it demotivates the staff in the existing schools causing a decrease in the quality of provision for children in those schools and therefore the community as a whole. In contrast, if provision is complementary the most likely outcome is collaboration and increased outcomes for all.

- 2. Ideally Free Schools should be funded *in addition to* current provision; at the very least existing schools should have a gradual reduction in funding as numbers decline**

Nothing causes a more predictably negative gulf between schools than when funding is removed from existing settings and put into new Free Schools. Sarason argues passionately that in order to be truly innovative and increase quality in the education system Charter Schools require funds beyond those already in the system. There is, he argues, no evidence that Charter Schools can produce better results for less money. Furthermore, making money ‘go with the student’ means that existing schools face sudden

unexpected deficits that cause crises in recruitment and resourcing, both of which damage the service offered to students. Protecting local schools from these sudden financial drops is critical to at least maintaining quality. There is no clear recommendation for a percentage decrease, but 5% drop in any one year cap seems reasonable.

3. Commission independent research into Free Schools' setting-up process

Thousands of research papers debate whether or not Free Schools are effective; but they only do so once the schools have started. Little research exists that captures the ways schools began and the lessons the new school teams learned. Without this information new schools will continue to struggle, and fail, in their first few years. If public money is going to schools, post-hoc accountability should be married to information on the lessons learned and made available to future applicants.

4. Increase the detail required in applications for Free Schools

The Free School application process currently requires applicants to describe the vision and ethos of the school but there is no test for what this means in action. The form should require the applicants to discuss their vision in more detail by asking more specific questions such as what actions would be taken in particular scenarios. This would show if there was real consensus on the ethos of the school. The outcome of the application need not depend on how the applicant would respond in the scenario but on whether their reasoning revealed a well thought-out and consistent ethos.

5. Require a minimum of 12 months between application approval and school opening

Finding buildings, staff and children in a timescale of less than 12 months will lead to decisions being guided by the deadline, rather than because those decisions will provide the best education for the children involved. Starting a setting in the wrong way means the school is far more likely to fail and become an expensive waste of taxpayer's money.

Conclusion

Education is not a short-term business. It is the equivalent of setting up Amazon, rather than a lemonade stand. Amazon spent the first ten years of business in massive debt – this is because the owners were not out to build a vanity project, or achieve notoriety in the short-term. Its owners had realised that getting to shops is a problem for busy people; if they could make the items go to the people, they would solve an existing problem. Amazon therefore spent time researching, planning, responding and developing. They reached out to *everyone* in the marketplace and never closed down options based on what it thought an internet shop *should* be. Where other retailers stuck to their initial guns (‘no thank you, we are just a book shop’ or, ‘no, your second hand goods are not welcome here’) Amazon found out what people wanted from a shop and then tried to deliver it. As a result you can now buy from second-hand sellers or other major brands through their doors. It became competitive precisely by being collaborative and it is now a long-term, viable and extremely successful business (both in terms of profit and customer satisfaction).

Even if you believe your Free School is going to be different – and no doubt, in some respects it will be – there are still traps that you will predictably fall into. Using research completed across several studies Sarason argues these problems can be summarised as follows:

“The expectation of better or superior consequences; the belief that motivation and goodwill are sufficient to overcome obstacles; that verbal agreement on values and purposes mean the same things to participants; that little or no significant issues surrounding leadership and power will emerge; that personal differences in style, ambition and future perspective among the participants will be secondary to the overarching concern for the welfare setting; that people or forces external to the setting but who are interested in or impacted directly or indirectly by the new setting will not be threatened by it; that there are or will be sufficient resources to surmount difficulties; that whatever problems or conflicts occurred in the ‘before-the-beginning’ phase have been resolved and will not appear”

(Sarason 2002, p61)

Believing any of these things means predictably walking into failure. If you are committed to building a Free School, think long-term. Think in terms of responsive and responsible stakeholder engagement. Actively engage with and listen to your community; get them to ask you questions, answer them, and always remain open to their ideas. Find ways to interact with and complement services in other schools. Ask yourself again, and again, “How are we being helpful?” and “What problem are we solving?” Knock down doors with your kindness and generosity, but all the while be realistic about what you can offer.

Finally, and most importantly, recognise that if you do not go through the steps we have described your school is *more likely to fail than succeed*. For some that is a depressing thought. If it depresses you, we suggest you forget about starting a school because it is not for those who quickly become depressed at the thought of failure. But, if you are motivated by that statement – if you want to join the 17% of Free Schools who have out-performed existing local schools, rather than one of the 37% that have failed to do so (CREDO, 2009) – then start planning and start talking to your team about the difficult things: promotion, values, money. If you can get things right at the beginning, Seymour Sarason’s work shows you are on your way to beating the odds.

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“If 90% of businesses and 50% of marriages fail, why should a Free School be any different?”

This is the question with which Laura McNerney opens this report. By the end, any potential Free School founder should be equipped with the questions they need to ask if they are to avoid failure. Drawing heavily on the research of the American academic Seymour Sarason, McNerney asks the obvious but easily forgotten questions: “How many dinner ladies will you need?” “Where will you store the stationery?”

No punches are pulled, but that’s how it should be. That’s what will make sure your school flourishes. The message is clear. Any school can fail, but if you confront these tough questions, then you might just succeed...

"Extremely useful. *'The 6 Predictable Failures...'* certainly changed my thinking and helped me to clarify my plans. This report is essential reading for anyone thinking about setting up a Free School and for all those interested in the debate."

**Adam Nichols, Chief Executive of Changemakers and
Prospective Free School Founder**

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