

under pressure: on money and mission.

QUALITY



Public Purpose on a Shoestring



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FTEN, THE MOST WIDELY

heralded independent-school models of public purpose are those found in well-resourced schools — schools with the capacity to endow programs and hire staff for development and implementation. In these current economic times, however, the independent school with fewer resources or a modest financial profile is beset with major challenges simply to achieve fiscal stability: maintaining enrollment, retaining high-quality faculty in a competitive environment, covering the astronomical cost of employee healthcare, offering sufficient tuition assistance, and attending to the upkeep of aging school buildings. It is no wonder heads of school and trustees are hard pressed to imagine developing and sustaining programs that serve the community beyond the boundaries of their own school.

BY TOM LITTLE

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL NORTHRUP

Nevertheless, more and more independent schools are inclined toward public-purpose work in their mission and strategic planning — and, thus, questions inevitably emerge. How can the lesser-resourced school launch and sustain this work without a substantial budget supporting its efforts? Are there models available where schools are actively engaged in low- or no-cost public-purpose work? Must a school hire additional staff to sustain its public-purpose work? Or, more simply: How can we possibly afford it?

In the early 1990s at Park Day School (California) — an indepen-

Making the Connection

Our public-purpose story began in 1993, with a walk down the street to meet the principal of Emerson Elementary School, a neighborhood K–5 public school in Oakland. Emerson serves a largely disadvantaged group of children, many who walk long distances to and from school each day. Ninety percent of the students are eligible for the federal free-lunch program. The principal at the time, Lotte Clayton, a wise and affable school leader, greeted Grossman and me (the head of Park Day School then and now) after deftly handling a mini-crisis in the school library where a parent

must not involve monetary costs. Neither school could afford to invest more than time in these efforts.

This conversation, and our subsequent visits, brought into focus the defining character of the public-purpose and community outreach work at Park Day School: We would devote ourselves to partnering with Emerson School (and later with many schools within the Oakland Unified School District). Grossman's role as community outreach coordinator would emphasize partnerships, and she would look for ways to connect each grade to public school partners. As head of school, I would champion



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dent K–8 school in Oakland with 300 students — Laurie Grossman, the school's community outreach coordinator at the time, turned the central question around: How can a school committed philosophically to social justice and community involvement afford *not* to engage in serious public-purpose work? In answering it at Park Day School, we discovered that it was less a matter of budgetary commitment than of *institutional* commitment. With a strong commitment, strategies can be developed that substantively engage students in ongoing, meaningful, civic-minded activities without, as they say, breaking the bank.

This is good news for small schools committed to instilling students with a strong sense of social responsibility and civic participation.

loudly accosted a teacher in the presence of a class of students. This, she reported, was a typical, if not frequent, episode in the life of an inner-city principal.

We had approached Clayton to explore the possibility of collaborating as neighbor schools. Our intention was, at all costs, to avoid any semblance of *noblesse oblige*. We were not the “experts who wanted to save the public schools,” and we certainly did not have any solutions to the problems that Clayton confronted daily as a public school principal. We simply wanted to be part of a broader educational community and meet our neighbor. If there were collaborative activities that could engage students from both schools, we were interested in pursuing them. But there was one caveat: Whatever we decide to do together

the program and herald its successes to our board and in the community at large. We would aim for focused success, and we would engage public schools as equals.

Clayton and we agreed that there were relatively easy, no-cost ways we could partner. First, since we were only two blocks from one another, we would coordinate our neighborhood disaster relief programs. Should a natural disaster occur, each school would immediately assess its usable campus resources, assuming dangerous conditions were present in one or more of our school buildings. We would determine which school would best accommodate a large number of students and which might be available for the neighborhood. This project would create an easy interface between the emergency prep teams at our respective schools.

This constituted an early success for the partnership: We were talking and coordinating together as equals, and at no additional cost.

Next, we would have the students engage as partners in neighborhood cleanup efforts. We would bring our kindergarteners together and take supervised walks up and down the surrounding blocks, picking up trash. Which blocks had the most trash? How much could we collect? To integrate math into our partnership, we had the students estimate, count, and weigh the trash, and graph the results.

Now the students from the two schools were working with one another — and the partnership was up and running.

We realized that bringing the teachers from the two schools together was also an important early step if we were to forge a lasting partnership and build institutional buy-in. After introducing the concepts of neighborhood collaboration and partnership to our respective faculties, we agreed that Park Day School would host a reception for the

teachers from both schools. Parent volunteers provided snacks and beverages, and we gathered the teachers in one of our classrooms. During the round of introductions, we asked the teachers to share a curriculum unit their students were currently studying. Though we cannot underestimate the existing differences between our schools, we noticed early on in the sharing that the teachers had much in common. The barriers between independent and public school were blurring, and teachers were engaged in discussions about kids and learning.

We've learned a few essentials along the way. Whenever it is possible, we try to integrate partnership programs into existing curriculum. We ask: Can student conceptual development be enhanced through a real-world experience? Can we reinforce academic skills and school values for students through the specific partnership programs?

We have also learned the power of institutional commitment. The board receives regular reports about the part-

nership activities and, over the years, has renewed the institutional imprimatur necessary for the programs to endure.

It is also essential to build support among the faculty, as it is the teachers who, year in and year out, implement the activities and maintain the relationships with the public school folks. If the teachers see that the activities align with the mission of the school, strengthen their curriculum, and provide opportunities for project-based learning, they are more apt to be supportive.

And, crucially, we have learned the power of "showing up." Public school officials are often visited by evangelists who have the "magic formula" or the next "great fix." We have discovered that the most valuable source of support is a consistent presence. Year after year, we return to reinstitute the programs and demonstrate our commitment to the partnerships. The consistency builds trust and rapport, which pay dividends again and again in strong, lasting relationships.



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Launching Projects

We have learned much about private school privilege in our conversations with Principal Clayton and the Emerson community. As with other types of privilege, it means that independent school educators need never think about public schools. We need never turn our attention to the issues and problems confronting our public school counterparts, or their districts. Simply being in the Emerson classrooms brought this home.

In one of her visits to Emerson, Grossman noticed that there were few, if any, books in the classrooms at Emerson — just a few teacher resource materials and a set of textbooks here and there. This was in stark contrast to our school where all the classrooms were teeming with children's literature. Indeed, we realized that most of the students in our school had more books on their bedroom bookshelves than Emerson children had in their classrooms.

This startling revelation was the inspiration for launching *Spread the Word*, a book drive project where hundreds of thousands of good books and children's literature have been donated to Oakland Public Schools over the years. It was an early collaborative effort between the students at Emerson and Park Day School.

In addition to collecting books, our sixth-graders and Emerson fifth-graders gathered to learn about literacy rates and the relationship between literacy and access to print. As they gained knowledge, it became clear to them that collecting books for students in the Oakland public schools would contribute mightily to literacy programs. The kids made flyers and wrote letters. We approached other schools, parents, libraries, and other local sources of good children's literature. Through these efforts, we soon collected boxes and boxes of books. The students then collaborated to sort them (discarding the "junk"), categorize them by grade level and subject,

and create literature-packages for classroom teachers. The look on the faces of the teachers who received the books for their students was testimony to the effectiveness of this project. So, we've repeated the project annually for the past 15 years.

Connected with our emphasis on literacy, we regularly engage in *Reading Buddies* programs with the students at Emerson and train teachers from public and independent schools how to create similar programs. *Reading Buddies* allows older students permission to read illustrated books that enhance their word-attack skills and sight-word vocabulary, while younger children benefit from the relationships with their older buddies and the inherent reading lessons.

Spread the Word and *Reading Buddies* demonstrated to the Park Day School community that much was to be gained by our public school partnerships. Over the years, we have engaged

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our teachers and students in scores of projects, few of which have any associated cost other than the commitment of teachers' time.

One of the early projects was constructed in the late 1990s when the phenomenon of bullying was becoming ever-present in the media. The second graders from Emerson and Park Day School collaborated on a bullying awareness campaign, which resulted in the publication of a well-developed brochure that was adopted by the school district as a student-created anti-bullying guide.

Under the guidance of our current community outreach coordinator, Jeanine Harmon, we expanded our neighborhood partnership to students from Oakland International High School, where we launched our *Filmi-gration* project. In this project, recent immigrant students from the international school forge relationships with students from Park Day School who create an original video featuring the new arrival. Our students develop cultural competency and media skills, while the high school students have a chance to practice their English skills in real-life situations. Our friends from the International School now volunteer at our school, helping in the classroom and in our gardens. Here again, we partner as equals on projects that have little or no budget impact.

Most recently, Park Day School initiated the *Mindful Schools* program. Again, the inspiration for the program occurred to Grossman when she was in conversation with an Emerson teacher who was describing the violence that her students regularly witness. The idea is that students need to develop the internal strength to cope with everyday stress and the commotion of inner-city life. *Mindful Schools*, which has now spun off as its own nonprofit program (www.mindfulschools.org), teaches young students mindfulness practice, and works to create a kind and loving climate in the classroom and the school. The program has spread internationally to public and private schools.

In its early days, as the *Mindful*

Schools program emerged, more and more school principals in Oakland became interested in introducing the program in their school. It was clear that funding would be necessary to train and hire teachers; however, we did not have the financial means to create a budget for this program. Here, the currency and credibility that we had established by sustaining the partnerships over the years served us well. A local foundation provided a major grant to fund the program for three years. To paraphrase the foundation's program director, Park Day School would never have been considered for funding had it not been for the reputation it had built through its consistent history of partnering with public schools.

The Mutual Benefits

We believe that our partnership programs have been of significant benefit to our school in several ways. They have advanced our mission as a school committed to social justice and made us a part of a larger educational community. They have attracted the attention and enrollment of many families who would have never countenanced the idea of their children attending an independent school, but have been convinced that our commitment to the public schools is enduring. Oakland Unified School District officials have grown to know and respect our partnership programs, and we are often invited to participate in district activities. The programs have provided inspiration for third-party funders who have contributed funds to the school because of our work in the community and commitment to the public schools. We have been prominently featured in local and national news programs and articles. Most of all, though, our students understand their community in a deeper way, and have developed relationships with children beyond the boundaries of their own school. They have learned much about socioeconomic differences that exist between public and private schools, and are committed more than ever to community activism. Clearly, the

partnerships contribute well to the overall value proposition of the school.

What has it cost the school financially? Beyond the compensation of our community outreach coordinator who, along with classroom teachers, has been responsible for sustaining the program over the years, we have meticulously avoided programs that have any costs attached. When significant funding was necessary for a project, we approached third-party donors or foundations for support. For schools without such a staff position, we would encourage a team or committee approach.

Assuming the support of the board and head of school, teachers and volunteer parents together can develop and sustain public-purpose programs. Though partnering with public schools can be an honorable path to public purpose, it may not be a match for all schools. Equally significant alternatives include partnering with a community organization to serve the poor or hungry; serving alongside environmental organizations; and maintaining regional or state parks, intergenerational programs with senior centers, and international programs serving those in need. All are examples of programs that can be sustained without significant resources by the efforts of committed faculty and staff.

Starting with that simple walk down the street to meet the principal at our neighbor public school, we have launched scores of partnership programs over these past two decades, building strong and enduring relationships. Our partnerships work because they are founded on the principles and practices of equality and mutual exchange, and they expand the worldview and experience of our students. It's rich and rewarding public-purpose work.

As a school with deeply held philosophical beliefs about social justice and equity, it is crucial that we sustain our commitment to public purpose, even on a "shoestring budget." As Laurie Grossman reminds me, "How can we not?"

Tom Little is the head of Park Day School (California).