Prime Public Charter School: A New Approach to Professionalizing Teaching

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Prime Public Charter School:
A New Approach to Professionalizing Teaching

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.) Capstone

Submitted by:

Jonathan Skolnick

To the Harvard Graduate School of Education
in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education Leadership

May 2016
Acknowledgments:

“Who is wise? One who learns from every man... Who is strong? One who overpowers his inclinations... Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his lot... Who is honorable? One who honors his fellows.” – Ben Zoma, Ethics of the Fathers, 4:1

There is insufficient space here to honor all those who have contributed to my growth as a scholar and a mensch (as my grandmother would say) during the Ed.L.D. program. In the past three years, I have written about my grandmother’s unforgiving questions, I have mourned the passing of my wise and patient grandfather, I have welcomed a new niece and watched with amazement as two others grew into little people. I have paid respect to my amazing father and paused in admiring wonder at the strength and support of my stepmother. I have used a “self-us-now” speech to rekindle a relationship with my stepfather, and I have received unending love and support from my mother, my best friend and twin brother Josh, my brother Adam, and my sisters Naomi, Rebecca, Jordana, Shira, Alexandra, and Talia.

Thank you to Tony Siddall, our wise and steady Board Chair, who signed on to this project early because he believed in our vision, and stayed with it until the end (for now).

To my peer coach Allison Rowland and my colleague Jamie Davidson, who have kept me laughing and level-headed throughout the charter application process, I am reminded of the Proust line, “Let us be grateful to people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.” And thanks to Andrew Frishman, the team at Big Picture, and Dirk Tillotson, whose early support helped us create our first charter application.

A charter school I admire says its goal is two-fold: to ensure that every student feels both challenged and known. I love that goal, because it represents how I have experienced this residency year:

To my supervisor, Ben Jackson, who never wavered in his support and lives out his values in everything he does.

To my professors: Before my residency even began, Professor Moore helped me work through the challenges of leadership during an independent study during which I wrote our charter application. All of our conversations were models of challenge and support, in which we each showed real vulnerability. Prime found additional inspiration in Professor Elmore's class and in his willingness to explore the edges of learning. And I wove Prime into a residency through my caring advisor, Professor Monica Higgins, who has always been willing to both check me and check in on me, even on Sundays. Thanks also to Professor Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell, a wise thought partner and editor throughout this process, and Matthew Shaw, whose straightforward advice and cheerful encouragement helped me to see the end of the road.
And perhaps most importantly, I am grateful for all those who have simply checked in on me. Entrepreneurship can at times be lonely. I'm thinking of Kristin and Austin, or Bob, Deb, and Professor Jewell-Sherman, who always made sure to wish me luck as we went through another application round. I'm thinking of Professor Kay Merseth, with whom I worked all last year. Whenever we meet, I am reminded again about the centrality of relationships to teaching. She really knows her students deeply, as people and as professionals, and it makes such a difference. As she says, “This work matters. You can do it. I’ll never give up on you.” I’m very grateful for the opportunity I’ve had to try to make this work, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to fail. (at least temporarily!)

And thank you to my teachers, from Ms. Powel to Frankie Pal, who helped to shape my belief that great teaching can transform lives.

After we found out that Prime would not open in 2016, I was inspired to write the following set of haikus about how lucky I am to have so many wonderful people who have let me learn and teach beside them. In this poem, I'm still not sure if the narrator is the teacher or the student. And that's probably the point.

**Come, Learn Beside Me**

Come, learn beside me  
Share the sunrise and sunset  
of each holy class.

Come, teach beside me  
Share the rhythm and the rhyme  
of my mind's music.

Come, search beside me  
Join my treasured treasure hunt  
for truth and beauty.

You made my questions,  
my daily struggle to grow,  
your lifelong passion.
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Abstract

The school reform movement of the past 30 years has focused primarily on increasing school choice, accountability, and leadership capacity in our schools. In particular, charter schools have tried to incorporate all three elements in their attempt to provide families with better options for their children. But many charter schools have not fundamentally changed the role of teachers or the organization of the school itself, leading to issues of sustainability and insufficient autonomy for teachers. This capstone describes an attempt to address this problem through the creation of an innovative charter school, Prime Public Charter School (Prime Public). The school’s proposed model would have allowed for teams of teachers to start, manage, and grow their own “Teaching Practices” within a school community, much in the same way that lawyers, doctors, therapists, or private tutors run their own practices. This capstone describes and analyzes the attempt to gain approval for and launch Prime Public in New York given the context of the charter sector and the challenges of entrepreneurship as it relates to school creation. After three unsuccessful application attempts, the school did not gain approval to launch in 2016. Implications include the need for greater resources for early-stage founding teams, a more transparent and supportive authorization process, and a greater emphasis on long-term sustainability when considering the growth of the charter sector.
Introduction

In 4th grade, I met Ms. Powel, and it changed my life. Ms. Powel was a teacher in my enrichment program, but she did not work for the school district on Long Island where I grew up. Rather, she started a company that contracted with several districts to run their enrichment and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) programs. She had control over the curriculum, the use of time, and the use of materials. She was able to hone her expertise, and over time she hired assistants or co-teachers as demand for her services increased. Her classroom was a magical place, filled with experimentation and inquiry around questions like “Why don’t skyscrapers fall down?” or “Why are no two people exactly alike?” She seemed to me, even then, liberated from the stifling confines of traditional school. Years later, after teaching for two years as a NYC Teaching Fellow, I even worked for her company for a year, and I learned more about how it worked. In 2012, during a year helping to create a new school in California, I entered an essay competition asking for radical new school ideas, and I began my essay with a description of Ms. Powel’s approach. So by the time I entered Harvard Graduate School of Education in Fall 2013, I had formed a belief that Ms. Powel’s autonomy was a critical component of her (and my) success.

The next year, as I began to design my own school model, Prime Public, during a course that required us to design a project that might change the education sector, I put staffing redesign at its core. I believed that only through a radical restructuring of the teacher’s role could schools achieve truly professionalized teaching. My concept was to allow teachers to team up (in teams of 2-3) and start “Teaching Practices,” much in the
same way that doctors, lawyers, therapists, and private tutors create practices that grow over time and are paid based on the number of clients they serve.

**Figure A: Prime Public’s Unique Career Ladder**

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<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Partner</th>
<th>Fellow</th>
<th>Resident</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td>A Partner starts a new Practice with a co-Partner. They have significant responsibility for curriculum development and new teacher development. If successful, these teachers can add students to their Practice, hire new Residents, and earn more over time.</td>
<td>Fellows work within an existing Practice, sometimes in preparation to open their own Practice. They learn how to coach new teachers in preparation to become Partners.</td>
<td>A resident is a relatively new teacher who works within an existing Practice and is coached by both the Partner and the Principal. They teach under the supervision of a Partner or Fellow.</td>
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<td><strong>Level of Experience and Achievement</strong></td>
<td>All Partners have at least three (and usually more) years of teaching experience and demonstrated ability both to improve student learning and to coach/mentor new teachers.</td>
<td>All Fellows have at least two years of teaching experience and demonstrated ability to significantly improve student learning.</td>
<td>All residents have at least one year of teaching or relevant experience and demonstrated potential to significantly improve student learning.</td>
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**Figure A** above shows the new career ladder we proposed for Prime Public Charter School. A new teacher would work as a resident in an existing Practice, a Fellow would receive training on opening an independent Practice, while a Partner would run his or her own Practice as part of a team whose student population expanded over time as the principal raised the cap on the number of students who could match to that Practice.

I wanted families to play a key role in this matching process. To do this, we proposed that families view each Practice’s online page, which would include videos of
teachers in action. The proposed structure would also give parents the ability to choose their child’s teacher, with support from a principal who would act as a “portfolio manager” ensuring basic consistency and quality across Practices, even as each Practice differed in its approach to the use of time, space, staff, and the use of technology.

Prime’s model thus sought to fundamentally increase teacher autonomy as well as to redesign the process by which students were assigned to teachers. In our conception of a Teaching Practice, the teacher would have significantly more control over resources than typical teachers. As just one example, Practices would be able to hire new interns as they expanded. My research revealed no current examples of teachers given the budget to hire their own support staff.

I paired this core innovation with some of the more common elements of “next-generation” schools that I had seen during my work prior to the Ed.L.D. program. For example, some of these schools used blended learning. According to the Christensen Institute (“What Is Blended Learning” n.d.), a leading think tank on blended learning, “the definition of blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns: at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace; at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and the modalities along each student’s learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.”

In some next-generation schools, for example, students learn the main curriculum online at their own pace¹, while teachers pull out groups of students struggling with the same skill for additional in-person, small-group instruction. Other elements of these schools often include project-based learning, which the Buck Institute, a leading project-based professional development organizations, defines as “a teaching method in which

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¹ Carpe Diem and Vertus Academy are two examples of such schools.
students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an engaging and complex question, problem, or challenge” (“What Is Project-Based Learning” n.d.). A final element we incorporated was the use of a personalized learning plan, which allows the student and teacher to track student goal-setting and mastery of key academic competencies over time.

In our design for Prime Public, we wanted to use the Teaching Practices during the foundational academic periods of the day (called Prime Core), while we focused on social-emotional development during Prime Journeys (45 minutes per day) and allowed students to work on passion projects during Prime Studio (about 90 minutes per day).²

*Using the Charter Sector and TNTP to Launch Prime Public*

I had the option to start the school in one of three ways: as a district school, a private school, or a public charter school. I had seen some district schools attempt to incorporate innovation into their designs, but as my sector-change project took shape, I realized that my particular staffing model would require either a private school model or a charter school model. This is because most union contracts that cover district schools have stipulations about pay scales, class sizes, and other parameters of the teaching job that did not align with a model in which teachers were paid more based on the number of students they taught. Nor did it align with a model in which teachers had a say in setting their own schedules and controlling other resources such as technology or hiring apprentices. And because I wanted my sector change project to actually change the entire sector, rather than becoming a niche model for the private school sector, I was

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² For more information on Prime Public Charter School’s proposed model, please see Appendix 1.
increasingly attracted to the potential of charter schools to become a vehicle for realizing this vision of education.

Indeed, over the past 20 years, the charter school movement has become one of the critical engines of school reform in the United States, challenging and in some cases beginning to replace the district model of school organization (Mehta, Schwartz, and Hess, 2012). In addition to providing families with additional school options within the geographic boundaries of an existing school district, charter schools also have greater freedom to create their own schedules, salaries, and staffing designs.

In many ways, then, the charter sector seemed like a natural place to create this kind of next-generation schooling model. Charter schools represent two trends in education reform: flexibility and choice. Although charter schools are now considered a mainstay of the education reform movement, the movement itself began in earnest with a call not for flexibility and choice, but for higher standards and increased accountability—in other words, better outputs (Nathan, 1997). Over time, this focus on outputs meant that policymakers and educational entrepreneurs were willing to embrace more flexible inputs, such as longer school days, that might lead to higher academic achievement.

In the late 1980s, charter schools were proposed as one such way to help teachers devise creative new school structures to ensure that students met these higher standards. In his landmark speech to the National Press Club in 1988, former AFT President Al Shanker described two reform movements: the first, focused on accountability and standards, was “top-down…regulatory, with thick books full of legislation telling everybody how many minutes there should be in the school day and the school year, how many minutes there should be of this and that” (Shanker, 1988). The second,
characterized by reformers such as Ted Sizer\(^3\), was more bottom-up and focused on creativity and flexibility. In addition, this Second Movement was largely teacher-driven.

While Shanker agreed with the end goals of the First Movement, he believed that a Second Movement was needed to create the organizational structures that allowed schools to creatively meet high standards. He thus proposed allowing teachers within a school to create their own program with the approval of the administration, and he embraced charter schools as a means to achieve this. In a *New York Times* article (1998, July 10) following his speech, he wrote that the delegates to the recent AFT convention were excited by the prospect of charter schools. “The main idea that gripped the delegates was the prospect of having hundreds, even thousands of school teams actively looking for better ways—different methods, technologies, organizations of time and human resources—to produce more learning for more students.”

The work to launch a new charter school was extensive, and I relied on external support from my residency site, TNTP. TNTP is a nationally known education reform organization that has significant expertise in staffing (for example, it had started the NYC Teaching Fellows program, an alternative teacher certification program that I joined when I began teaching in 2004), curriculum improvement, and general strategic management—all areas where I knew I would need assistance. In addition, in late 2014 TNTP published a paper, “Reimagining Teaching in a Blended Classroom” (TNTP, 2014) on the changing role of the teacher within blended learning environments. The research process involved a TNTP team visiting blended learning schools throughout the

\(^3\) In Sizer’s books such as *Horace’s Compromise* (2004) and *Horace’s School* (1992), he describes a smaller and more intimate high school environment that could deeply engage students in a meaningful curriculum. His audience was school leaders more than policymakers and his focus was high schools more than school systems, which may explain why his proposed curricular and school structure reforms never became a core part of the policy landscape.
country in order to see the effect of such flexible environments on teacher roles. The report found that such schools had the potential to disaggregate the teacher role, allowing teachers to become integrators of existing content, guides, or researchers and developers. This kind of flexibility was aligned to the model I was proposing in my charter application. My supervisor, Ben Jackson, who was the lead author on this report, became a critical thought partner during my residency project, and in turn I helped TNTP to understand the detailed steps involved in new school design, approval, and launch.

*Overview of Capstone*

My residency project, to gain approval for and launch Prime Public Charter School, took place during a planning year with TNTP during which our team refined the design of the school and sought charter authorization from New York State and funding from education philanthropies. As a result, I was not able to determine the success of the model itself during the project, but I was able to assess whether we were able to gain support for the model. As I embarked on the strategic project, I undertook the following Review of Knowledge for Action in order to answer the following question:

What are the key strategies and actions necessary to gain both approval and support for an innovative charter school given the political and operational constraints at play in both the charter sector and in the particular community in which I planned to start the school? For the purposes of my residency project, I did not deal with the important question of how such a school might expand to the entire sector. Instead, I wanted to create a proof point demonstrating that such a school could be designed and approved. If this school could radically reshape the role of the teacher in ways that improved student
outcomes, then I believed it would attract sufficient donor support and credibility to spread to other parts of the charter sector.

In Part I of the capstone (Review of Knowledge for Action), I first explore literature and experiences that call traditional charter schools into question, then I provide a research basis for the public value of Prime Public Charter’s School’s reorganized teaching model, and I conclude by reviewing relevant knowledge about operational capacity and legitimacy and support that proved critical for successfully addressing all elements of the project. In Part II of the capstone, I describe how I developed and implemented my theory of action for the strategic project and then describe and analyze its results. The third and final section of the capstone discusses the implications of my work for myself, for TNTP, and for the sector.

PART I. REVIEW OF KNOWLEDGE FOR ACTION

My residency project centered on my use of the strategic triangle (Moore, 1995) to launch a single charter school, Prime Public Charter School, inspired by the teacher-driven Second Movement of school reform. The strategic triangle is a theory about the components of a public project that allow an entrepreneur pursuing that project to succeed. The three components of the triangle are the public value of a project, the operational capacity of the team pursuing the project, and the authorizing environment—the external legitimacy and support—that are consistent features of public projects (Moore, 1995). It was particularly important for me to provide a research basis for the public value of this particular school model. After all, there are currently thousands of charter schools throughout the country (Mead, Mitchel, & Rotherham, 2015); why do we need
another? The answer is that most charter schools have not changed fundamental organizational structures in order to professionalize teaching, and I reasoned that without such a fundamental structural change, progress in terms of teaching quality, and therefore student achievement, would be limited at best.

*The Eroding Public Value of Traditional charters*

Richard Kahlenberg and Halley Potter (2014), in their book *A Smarter Charter*, write of what can be called the First Movement charter schools: “Proposed to empower teachers, desegregate students, and allow innovation from which the traditional public schools could learn, many charter schools instead prized management control, reduced teacher voice, further segregated students, and became competitors, rather than allies, of regular public schools” (Kahlenberg and Potter, p. 1). Two reasons why First Movement schools developed these characteristics are (a) rapid expansion and (b) these schools’ focus on ‘Academic Return on Investment’ (AROI), both encouraged by funders whose investment was necessary to help charters compete financially with their district counterparts.

*Rapid Expansion*: Over the past 15 years, significant philanthropic dollars have gone toward helping high-performing charter networks to expand rapidly (Scott, 2009). In part this is due to the growing demand among parents and state policymakers for high-quality school options. Given the fact that most charter schools hold lotteries, it is fairly easy to determine whether the supply of seats is meeting the demand from parents. When supply does not meet demand, there is usually public pressure (from parents and local community members) on policymakers and philanthropists to help networks to expand their supply of schools in order to meet this demand. As just one example, in 2014, in
NYC alone, 70,700 families applied for 21,000 available charter school seats at 198 schools (Short, 2014).

Richard Whitmire (2014) writes about these lofty expansion goals in On the Rocketship, which explored the initial growth plans of Rocketship Education, a charter network with which my company Junyo partnered in 2012. Whitmire writes about Rocketship as a network of “Fibonacci Schools,” which are expanding exponentially (according to the Fibonacci sequence in math, in which each number in the sequence is the sum of the two prior numbers). Rocketship initially had a plan to create 2,500 schools over 30 years. In a more recent Education Week article, Rocketship founder (who has since left to start an education technology company) John Danner noted how lofty this goal was. “Historically, people who have tried to expand too quickly have failed...The rate of expansion for most of us will be relatively cautious. We have to be pretty conservative about what we take on and make sure that we do it well” (Cavanaugh, 2012).

Indeed, there are several concerning organizational effects of charters’ rapid expansion. Most importantly, in order to provide new leadership for each school while ensuring that such leaders are organizationally well aligned, rapidly expanding charters typically poach from their teacher force, which is young to begin with. During my time visiting Rocketship schools in California, most of the school leaders I met were under 30 years old, with fewer than four years of classroom teaching experience. Thus the leadership, while extraordinarily devoted and energetic, often lacked significant classroom experience and may not have been able to stay even in school leadership for more than a few years (either because of burnout or because they will be asked to take on
another role in the rapidly expanding network). One study found that “the odds of a charter school teacher leaving the profession versus staying in the same school are 132% greater than those of a traditional public school teacher. The odds of a charter school teacher moving schools are 76% greater” (Stuit and Smith, 2009).

The other important effect of rapid expansion is the degree to which centralized control through uniform processes and curricula becomes a means of ensuring quality control during such periods of rapid growth. While some networks, such as KIPP, give significant autonomy to principals at the risk of sacrificing some quality control, other networks, such as Success Academy Charter Schools, have a fairly uniform curriculum and highly uniform procedures (Moskowitz and Lavinia, 2012) in order to ensure that everyone is (quite literally) on the same page. The other reason for this level of consistency is because these networks, due to high attrition and the need for relatively low-paid teachers, rely on mostly young teachers who must be trained quickly and consistently. By giving teachers too much autonomy, such rapidly expanding networks might risk diluting their brand, quality, or culture. But the effect is that these schools have difficulty keeping teachers for very long or providing teachers with the kind of academic freedom that might help them to see teaching as a long-term profession. Indeed, Ingersoll (2001) finds that the degree of teacher decision-making power is one of three key organizational variables that predict teacher turnover. On a six-unit scale, a one-unit difference in the extent to which staff report that they are involved in decision-making resulted in a 26% difference in teacher turnover (Ingersoll, 2001).

_Academic Return on Investment:_ While the rapid charter expansion cited above is largely due to parent demand, another factor is the interest in rapid expansion from
philanthropists who have created formulas to determine how much “learning” is “produced” by a given investment of dollars. This is referred to by Nathan Levenson (2012) as Academic Return on Investment. It has been adopted by the District Management Council, a consultancy that helps districts to make budget decisions with the following formula:

\[
\frac{(\text{Amount of Learning}) \times (\# \text{ of Students})}{\text{Total $}}
\]

This elegance is clear. Rather than focusing money simply on the number of students served by a given program, with wishy-washy descriptions and testimonials about the success of such programs, philanthropists can use standardized performance measures to determine how many ‘units’ of learning there are for each dollar spent. The obvious danger of such a model is that learning is reduced to simple metrics such as test scores and college graduation rates, which, in turn, is where First Movement charter schools turn their focus.

Indeed, networks such as Success have produced incredibly high test scores that match or exceed those of schools in the richest areas of New York State (Pondiscio, 2014). And students at KIPP schools graduate college at rates over three times (30.6% vs. 8%) higher than their peers of similar economic background who attend traditional public schools (KIPP College Completion Report, 2011). What this has meant in practice is that the best First Movement charter schools have become adept at learning how to produce those measures, but a system characterized by high parent demand for expansion and the risk-averse desire of philanthropists to maximize AROI does not encourage these schools to question or improve their underlying values or structures.
This system of First Movement schools demonstrates what Chris Argyris (1976) refers to as “single-loop learning,” which he defines as the detection and correction of errors. In order to organize a school around single-loop learning, data becomes an essential tool, because it is the means by which errors in the current system, with the current system’s metrics, are identified and corrected. Thus, students at high-performing charter schools are encouraged to spend significant time producing data, which in turn are used by teachers and leaders in order to detect and correct errors in instruction. The result is a highly capable organization that is nonetheless unable to engage in what Argyris terms “double-loop learning.” The difference is as follows:

One might say that participants in organizations are encouraged to learn to perform as long as the learning does not question the fundamental design, goals, and activities of their organizations. This learning may be called single-loop learning. In double-loop learning, a participant would be able to ask questions about changing fundamental aspects of the organization (Argyris, 1976, p. 367).

A focus on double-loop learning is dangerous to first movement charters, and critically, to their authorizers, since it might require questioning some of the practices that enable the organization to detect and correct errors that lead to higher results in the current paradigm. For example, if an organization begins to question the value of test scores, then it no longer has firm footing on which to detect and correct errors. Instead, it must engage in deeper questions about what success in school actually means. I have met many leaders and teachers in high-performing networks who are eager to engage in these conversations because they sense that something is wrong with the current system of single-loop learning, but the incentive structure of the organization encourages them to put their doubts aside and continue improving the system as is.
There is a real question as to whether even positive results can be sustained over time when the organization’s characteristics (high accountability, low professional autonomy, and a focus on simplistic measures of knowledge) may lead to rapid teacher attrition. This is not to say that the high-level leadership of these organizations is unaware of some of these issues; it is indeed often focused on creating better work-life balance for employees, deepening the curriculum, and so forth. But the problem is that the teachers in the classroom, the ones who affect what Elmore (2000) calls the instructional core (students and teachers in the presence of content), cannot simultaneously question the fundamentals of the organization while implementing those fundamentals. This phenomenon is similar in some ways to Clay Christensen’s notion of the “innovator’s dilemma” (2003). In such a dilemma, an organization is motivated to increase its profits through deep engagement in single-loop learning. As the organization continues to produce its best products at higher margins, it becomes incapable of pursuing more innovative, game-changing solutions that will not initially be as profitable. But over time, those game-changing solutions do become profitable, and the entrenched organization is left without the means to defend against these new challengers (Christensen, 2003).

*The Potential Public Value of Second Movement Charters*

Second Movement charter schools, the “smarter charters” (smarter in part because they are focused on deeper learning rather than more superficial metrics of success) that Kahlenberg (2014) discusses, have the potential to become disruptive forces that may attract families and teachers that are frustrated by some of the behaviorist, scripted teaching practices in the First Movement schools.
The public value of Second Movement charters is due to their organization rather than their curriculum, physical spaces, or funding. This greater public value emerges from a theory about school improvement that focuses on organizational structure. In particular, it represents a form of contingency theory, which states that there is no single organizational structure that works for all times and all environments (Donaldson, 2001). Rather, an organization must set up systems and subsystems organized to fit its particular environment. To be effective, organizations must allow for both significant differentiation among its sub-components as well as significant integration across components.

Lawrence and Losch (1968) studied the balance of these two characteristics in “Differentiation and Integration in Complex Organizations”. The authors examined six organizations and concluded that successful organizations required both a high degree of differentiation between subsystems as well as a high degree of integration between these systems through an integrative subsystem.

In terms of schools, each classroom can be considered its own subsystem within the larger system of the school. In a typical First Movement school or school systems, the classroom subsystem is not designed to be differentiated from the others. On the other side of the spectrum, giving each teacher unlimited freedom to differentiate itself in order to solve for the needs of her/his particular students can create an incoherent school environment unless there is an integrative subsystem that can ensure that the school as a whole is adapting to its environment. Lawrence and Loesch conclude that, “effective performance would be related to achieving both a degree of differentiation consistent
with the requirements of the sub-environment and a degree of integration consistent with the requirements of the total environment” (p. 29).

Because research indicates that there is greater variation in achievement between teachers in a single school than there is among schools as a whole (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005), there is a growing movement to give qualified teachers some of the autonomy and room for growth that they may have lost in the past 30 years of the First Movement reforms. As Smith and O’Day (1991) write in “Systemic School Reform,”

“A critical element of the second wave of reform is the issue of how to enhance the professionalism of teachers. Sykes (1990) argues that professionalism will be enhanced as teachers are given more and greater control over resources within their schools. Certainly, it will be impossible for major changes in the quality of schooling to take place if the quality of teacher workplaces continues to be as shabby as now (p. 244).

Indeed, it was only three years after A Nation at Risk (date) was published (discussing the need for higher standards for U.S. schools) that The Carnegie Foundation published its report noting that such higher standards could only be achieved if teachers became true professionals. And within months of that report, Tucker and Mandel (1986) went even further, arguing that fundamental aspects of the teacher role, and not just the certification requirements, needed improvement in order to give the best teachers more influence within their schools.

More recently, the work to improve the quality of teacher workplaces and teacher roles was highlighted in A Smarter Charter, Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens When Teachers Call the Shots (Berg and Dirkswager, 2015), as well as The Cage-Busting Teacher (Hess, 2015). In Trusting Teachers with School Success, Berg and Dirkswager (2015) highlighted schools such as the Avalon School, which is run by a
teacher cooperative that makes decisions collectively about salary, curriculum, evaluation, and so forth. In *The Cage-Busting Teacher* (2015), Hess highlighted individual teachers who take education reform into their own hands by taking control of such processes as the principal interview. In these examples, the structure of school changes to allow teachers to have true decision-making power, not simply in “organizing to execute” but also in “organizing to learn” (Garvin, Edmundson, and Gino, 2008). The end result is that teachers themselves can engage in double-loop learning because they are not merely implementing other bureaucracies’ policies. Rather, they are defining and reflecting on their own values and creating new means of learning around those values.

This focus on teacher professionalism was not a major component of the First Movement reforms, which instead focused on helping human capital offices to implement the “Four R’s” of traditional teacher human capital reform: recruit excellent candidates, retain the high-performers, remediate low performers, and remove the lowest performers. Although we know more than ever, through the use of Value-Added Models and robust evaluation systems, about how to sort teachers based on their ability to help students to succeed on exams, this kind of external accountability is a major obstacle to moving toward more teacher choice (Day, 2002); such a system sees teachers as labor to be sorted rather than management to be empowered within the school system’s organization. Typical teacher accountability systems leave out a fifth “R”: Role.

While Jal Mehta, Linda Darling-Hammond, and others have written extensively about the need to

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4 The concept of “organizing to learn” versus “organizing to execute” comes from the HGSE course A608: Leadership, Entrepreneurship, and Learning, in which we differentiate between the mindset of implementing known procedures (organizing to execute) and the mindset of creating new procedures that require us to change our own mindsets and work collaboratively to do so (organizing to learn). The concept builds upon the technical vs. adaptive distinction made by Heifetz.

5 I learned this framework during conversations with Joel Rose, founder of New Classrooms, which seeks to reimagine the role of teachers within the classroom.
reimagine the teaching profession through pre-entrance exams, extended teacher residencies, and a more guild-like professional mentality that has been used in medicine for nearly 100 years (Mehta 2013, Darling-Hammond 1990, Starr, 1982), these do not in fact restructure the teacher role once inside the classroom itself.

To better understand how new teacher roles might lead to more successful outcomes, more recent research on organizational structure identified nine elements that successful firms use when conceiving an organizational design that can both ensure smooth operation while encouraging innovation and flexibility (Goold and Campbell, 2002). These are divided into both determining the right fit or market, and determining the best design for that market. While a discussion of the former is useful, given that we already knew the community or market in which we planned to start, here I focus on Goold and Campbell’s (2002) “tests” used to determine a sound design within our given “market”:

1. **The Specialist Cultures Test**: In the Specialist Cultures Test, the designers create ways for various subcomponents of an organization to have unique cultures. The authors note that this enables the sub-units to “think and work in ways that are distinct from the prevailing organizational norms” (2002; page number).

2. **The Difficult Links Test**: In this test, designers create a structure that allows for sub-units to link together—this is essentially the “integrative sub-structure” discussed above.

3. **The Redundant Hierarchy Test**: In this test, the presumption should be toward “decentralizing decisions to frontline units and retaining decisions at upper levels only if those levels can add value. (page number)” This is critical in schools,
where so often decisions are not just made at higher levels of school-based management, but at the district, state, or even federal level. The authors note, however, that some sub-units may lack necessary skills, and thus development of these sub-units becomes a critical task of higher levels of management.

4. *The Accountability Test*: In order to allow for greater autonomy at lower levels of an organization, accurate measures of performance must be created. But, the authors note, this is often difficult when multiple sub-units are responsible for a given output, or when such metrics are fuzzy due to their somewhat subjective nature. In such a circumstance, they recommend managers who are deeply involved in the work of the units who can make such subjective judgments with authority and credibility.

5. *The Flexibility Test*: When evaluating a design, one must ask whether it allows for sufficient organization and adaptation. The test is to sit down with employees and ask them for their best ideas on improvement; if the design would necessitate shutting down these good ideas, a modification might be necessary.

The research above demonstrates that there is cause for optimism about Second Movement schools: Devolving power to teachers or teacher teams might enable increased specialization, greater flexibility, and less hierarchy. At the same time, precaution is necessary to ensure that more autonomous teachers can effectively collaborate with others (Difficult Links Test) and that there is an overriding structure to a) ensure accountability across classrooms (Accountability Test) and b) ensure that all Practices share at least some research-based “best practices” that are context independent in order to improve student learning.
Operational Capacity Challenges for Second Movement Charters

Given the potential public value of Second Movement charters, why have they not spread to become the norm in the charter space? David Tyack (1974) highlights one challenge of truly progressive and context-specific education within traditional bureaucracies in *The One Best System*. Here, he describes why progressive schools were often set up in flexible, charter-like environments that made rapid, citywide adoption difficult:

It was no accident that when Dewey and his daughter Evelyn described teachers who exemplified his ideals of democratic, active education in the School of Tomorrow, they concentrated on small and private schools rather than large and public systems. A gifted teacher in a one-room country school house might alone turn her class into Dewey's model of social learning, but changing a large city system was more difficult, for Dewey's ideas of democratic education demanded substantial autonomy on the part of teachers and children–an autonomy which, as we shall see, teachers commonly lacked.

(p.197).

Nearly 30 years after Al Shanker’s speech, few Second Movement schools have been created. In part, this is because many states set up regulatory frameworks that made it very difficult for a typical school-based team to set up charter schools. As I can attest from my own experience applying to open a charter school in New York State, the application process was onerous, requiring hundreds of volunteer hours of preparation and community engagement. Furthermore, the focus on accountability meant that states increasingly approved replications of existing models that had already showed positive results and had significant funding to pay employees to submit polished new charter applications. For example, in 2014 Success Academies received approval for 14 new charters in a single year (Chapman, 2016). From my own experience, our founding team
has struggled to compete with the financial and operational expertise of the larger charter networks.

_Charters In New York State_

New York State has two charter authorizing bodies: the New York State Education Department (NYSED), which has its own charter office and is overseen by the Board of Regents, and The State University of New York’s (SUNY) Charter Schools Institute (CSI). The first charter law in New York, the New York State Charter Schools Act of 1998, legislated the use of charters to achieve the following goals (New York State Charter Schools Act of 1998, April 2014):

(a) Improve student learning and achievement  
(b) Increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students who are at-risk of academic failure  
(c) Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods  
(d) Create new professional opportunities for teachers, school administrators and other school personnel  
(e) Provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system; and  
(f) Provide schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems by holding the schools established under this article accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results.

(p. 3).

Given the goals of the authorizers, Prime’s model aligned well with these criteria for charters. If the charter authorizers indeed emphasized and evaluated our charter application based on its promise of greater innovation (criterion c), greater teacher flexibility and new teaching roles (criterion d), or greater choice of educational opportunities (criterion e), then I was confident they would approve our application.
In terms of the actual bodies that would be able to approve charters, The Act permitted both the Board of Regents as well as SUNY to authorize, in addition to local school boards (including the NYCDOE). But importantly, the law placed a cap on the number of charters permitted in New York State by each authorizer. By January 2015, SUNY had only one charter left to give out, while NYSED had 24 left. This made the choice to apply to NYSED obvious, even though several consultants and others had warned about the challenging political climate at NYSED as well as the reluctance of authorizers to move beyond more traditional, First Movement charters.

Within this charter context, Prime Public’s proposed structure provided a possible rationale for the creation of a new charter network that might improve teacher professionalism (and, in turn, student achievement) in ways that existing models cannot. However, for the purposes of my strategic project, my intent was not to demonstrate these potential outcomes. Rather, my project focused on the design and launch of such a school. In particular, research on strategic management in the public sector suggested three components critical to successfully launching a venture such as Prime Public. These three components, as described by Moore’s (1995) strategic triangle, are (1) the public value of a project (2) the operational capacity of the team pursuing the project and (3) the authorizing environment—the external legitimacy and support—that is a consistent feature of public projects in particular. I thus use this triangle both to describe the theory of action to launch the school and also to analyze the results of my project.

**Theory of Action**

If I can:

a) develop and support an effective, volunteer founding team and Board of Trustees that can turn the project’s value into a concrete plan,
b) use that plan to gain support and legitimacy from New York State charter authorizers, and

c) gain legitimacy and support from the local community, funders, and others who will offer support to this vision and team,

then I will:

obtain the resources and authorization to launch a new charter school in Fall 2016.
IIa. Description of the Strategic Project

There were four key elements of the strategic project: building an effective team and Board of Trustees, obtaining a charter from New York State, gaining support from the local community, and gaining support from the funder community. Although my Theory of Action above describes these elements linearly, they actually interrelate in a cycle, described below. They match the elements of Moore’s “strategic triangle” in which public good is created by a) conceiving of some public value, defined as “something that would improve the quality of individual and collective life for citizens (Moore, 2013, p. 8) ” b) gaining the legitimacy and support to implement the public value and c) securing the operational capacity to implement the public value.

Figure B: Elements of the Strategic Project

In Figure B, I show how the next-level of my theory of change, in terms of specificity, was as follows: If I can build an effective team
and gain legitimacy and support from the local community, then I will be able to gain authorization from New York State in the form of a charter, which will in turn catalyze support from the donor community that will enable us to improve the efficacy of our team and gain even more support from the local community.

But even this less linear description did not adequately capture the complexity of the project, because the project took place in an entrepreneurial environment. Entrepreneurship can be defined as “the pursuit of opportunity beyond resources controlled” (Stevenson 1983, p. 3). My project began without any legitimacy or support outside of my own ideas about the project’s public value. This added an element of entrepreneurialism to the project such that, even if I were to do everything right (which I certainly did not) there was still likely less than a 50% chance of success. As just one illustration, last year 38 schools submitted an initial Letter of Intent to Apply in Round 1 of the application process, 15 schools were even permitted to submit a full application, and zero received a capacity interview, let alone an approval (Decker, 2015). In an environment in which more entrepreneurs apply than there are available spots, even if all are qualified, some will not open.

In the following pages, I briefly summarize my strategic project chronologically and then dive deeper through an exploration of pivotal events related to each project element above. Most project activities related to two of the three parts of the strategic triangle: legitimacy and support (from authorizers, the community, and donors) and operational capacity. However, throughout the project, I had to effectively communicate the public value to all stakeholders as a method for motivating both my team as well as the broader authorizing environment. We explored this value primarily in the Review of
Knowledge for Action above; the strategic project, perhaps mistakenly, focused on turning that fixed value into reality by leveraging the other two aspects of the strategic triangle.

Project Summary:

In early 2015 I assembled a founding team and a proposed Board of Trustees in preparation to submit a charter application for Prime Public Charter School, a proposed 6-8 middle school in Community School District (CSD) 13 in Brooklyn, New York. Over the course of the following 11 months, this team applied to NYSED for a charter three times, with the intent to open in Fall 2016 with approximately 108 6th grade students. In Figure C below, I present a timeline showing the key events of the strategic project, including the pre-work phase prior to the official start of residency:

Figure C: Strategic Project Timeline

| January 2015 | Founding Team is Formed  
|             | First Community Event Held |
| February 2015 | Round 1 Letter of Intent to Submit Submitted  
|             | Founding Board of Trustees Created  
|             | Second Community Event Held |
| March 2015 | Round 1 Charter Application Submitted  
|             | Residency with TNTP finalized |
| May 2015 | Round 1 Charter Application Rejected  
|             | Founding COO steps back from the project |
| June 2015 | Residency Officially Begins |
| July 2015 | Founding Principal steps back from the project  
|             | Fourth Community Event Held |
| August 2015 | Round 2 Charter Application Submitted  
|             | Submit application for NewSchools Venture Fund Grant |
| Sept. 2015 | NSVF 2nd round interview  
<p>|             | Round 2 charter application rejected |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 2015</td>
<td>Round 3 charter application submitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NSVF rejects grant application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MSOne Brooklyn, a proposed district school, begins to gain support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principal interviews ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 2015</td>
<td>Round 3 charter application rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principal interviews ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 2015</td>
<td>I begin to take on non-Prime work with TNTP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 2016</td>
<td>Decision not to apply for SUNY for 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prime Public Charter School put on indefinite hold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before the project began, I gained legitimacy and support in two key areas: building my own team and securing a residency to support my ability to plan and launch the school.

**Pre-Residency Foundations: Building a Team and Securing a Residency**

In the Fall of 2014, I began to talk with Amy, a former colleague from the NYC Department of Education, about the need for a new middle school in Central Brooklyn and in particular, in Community School District 13 (CSD 13). Amy served on the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) of her child’s school and had lived in the local neighborhood for many years. She had credibility with the elementary school parents who would be critical to ensure that the school had community support. Attracted by the opportunity to work together to create a school for her child, Amy agreed to join the team.

In parallel, a colleague I had worked with recommended Donna to be our founding principal. Donna was an administrator in one of the approximately 60 “school support networks,” which are organizations (similar to districts) that district schools chose to help them implement their instructional vision. (Each network had about 25-30
schools and several “achievement coaches” who worked with a set of schools or a particular sub-population of students.) I met with her in the late fall and she became increasingly excited about our school model.

By Spring 2015, I was pleased with the founding team (Donna, Amy, and I) I had built and the charter application we had created together. The work to accomplish this was significant. We had to recruit eight Board members, each of whom had to complete a full application, replete with college transcripts, three letters of recommendations, and short-answer essays about their dedication to the team. We also had to write a charter that reached nearly 120 pages including appendices and various letters of support. Our Board Chair was Tony Siddall, who had previously been responsible for authoring charter reauthorization applications for Achievement First, one of the largest CMOs in New York State. Based on his experience writing reauthorization applications, he believed that the application we created was strong enough to yield a capacity interview, and that if we did well during that interview, we were likely to be approved.

In February 2015, with a founding team in place, I was able to secure a residency with TNTP, which became interested in the staffing model that we were exploring. Amanda Kocon, VP of Emerging Services, and my eventual supervisor, Ben Jackson, believed that Prime Public presented TNTP with the opportunity to explore a new school model at a more intimate level of detail. TNTP had recently moved away from a focus solely on improving human capital and had embarked on a plan that would allow it to become the go-to resource to solve any student achievement challenge. As a result, the organization began to explore curriculum and school environments in addition to human capital. If TNTP excelled in these areas as well, then it might have the expertise
necessary to launch a full school. It was unclear whether TNTP wanted to launch its own school, but it was interested in learning more about the process in order to make that determination.

In addition to focusing on more holistic school support, TNTP was engaged in a concerted attempt to understand teacher roles within next-generation school models as well as the current state of teacher improvement efforts in existing schools. As I began residency, TNTP was finishing a study, *The Mirage* (Jacob and McGovern, 2015), that outlined the often-disappointing results of current professional development efforts in schools and the need to rethink schools and school roles. One of the recommendations was to “[explore] ways to combine the disaggregation of the teacher’s role…with alternative models for school design that allow higher-performing teachers to reach more students” (TNTP, 2015, p. 39). Prime’s model, which allowed higher-performing teachers to teach more students as their Practices grew, using more flexible, blended learning environments, thus aligned well with the direction of TNTP’s research on next-generation staffing and school design. Ben and I agreed that my residency project would focus mostly on starting Prime Public, but that I would also spend time sharing school startup lessons and contributing to other school design work that TNTP was pursuing.

*Project Element 1: Building an Effective Team and Board of Trustees*

In May 2015, our first charter application was rejected by NYSED, and one of the consequences was that Donna, our founding principal, and Amy, our founding COO, both became increasingly frustrated with the process. In mid-May, Amy told me that she needed to take a step back from Prime because it could no longer be a priority for her. I understood, and I did not think it made sense to try to convince her otherwise.
While losing Amy was a challenge, I was more concerned that Donna herself was beginning to lose faith in the project. There were several signs that she was beginning to remove herself from the work: First, she became increasingly vocal about her doubts about charter schools in general. Second, she became less responsive to phone calls, often rescheduling numerous times before we could find a time to talk and when we did talk, she seemed more negative than positive about our prospects. As much of our early relationship had occurred long distance, prior to my moving to New York City, we had little time to connect face to face. After she presented at a local community meeting in Brooklyn on June 19, we eventually had time to debrief and for me to assess how she was doing. Unfortunately, she decided that the community meeting had been a turning point for her, and that she could not commit 100% to Prime and no longer wanted to be the founding principal.

Despite my disappointment and desire to move on to find the right principal, I knew that next time I would need to take the time necessary to ensure that I had the right person. This meant that in the short-term, I needed Donna to stay on the team in order to provide an appearance of continuity to the state. She agreed with this and told me that she would stay on to help ensure our approval. But over the course of the summer, her participation continued to dwindle. Donna became even less involved, and the other founding team members she had selected to help develop our curriculum also became less involved; when she left, it seemed that they left as well. This meant that when revising the charter, I had to rely on my own connections (which were not as deep in schools) as well as advice from TNTP for particular curriculum choices. TNTP proved to be a useful resource, both for recruiting a new principal as well as providing feedback on
the charter application, but this could not compensate for the lack of a strong founding team, in part because only team members and the Board could attend a potential charter capacity interview.

I did manage to recruit a team of students at Harvard Graduate School of Education to use their fall semester project to help me sketch the details of how Teaching Practices would be recruited, developed, and marketed to families (See Appendix G). I also relied on our Board Chair to help me revise the second and third charter submissions, and I received significant help from another Board member on our grant application with NewSchools Venture Fund.

*Project Element 2: Gaining Support from the Charter Authorizers*

The key authorizer in this project was NYSED. While they approved our initial Letter of Intent, as mentioned earlier, on May 5, NYSED informed us that we did not receive a capacity interview. We later learned that none of the 15 schools which had submitted charter applications received an interview. While this made the news easier to bear, it did not negate the fact that we now had a significant challenge: Without approval, we would not be able to raise money from funders to offer a salary to our founding principal, Donna, and founding COO, Amy, in the following school year (at that point both were still involved). Furthermore, without approval we would be unable to secure a potential facility, and without a facility it would be hard to get families on board. We knew that we had another opportunity to apply with NYSED in August, and so we began reviewing NYSED’s feedback to improve for the next round.

One month later, however, we found out that SUNY was going to be able to authorize additional charters in New York State. During negotiations at the end of the
legislative session in Albany, the legislature passed an updated charter law, which both raised the cap on the number of permitted charters and no longer delineated which of these could be authorized by NYSED or by SUNY. Instead, the two authorizers shared an updated charter cap that allowed them to charter up to 50 additional schools (NYC Charter Center, 2015). Still, it was unclear whether SUNY would solicit charter proposals, and under what timeline. In early July, SUNY did in fact issue a request for proposals for new charter applications, but the deadline was only a few weeks away. It was clear to me that there was insufficient time to put together a lengthy application that was significantly more detailed than the application we had just completed. Furthermore, due to events I discuss below, our team lacked the capacity to put together an application on such a short timeframe. In contrast, NYSED had already given us feedback on our application, encouraged us to apply again, and had a next Round 2 deadline in August rather than July. For these reasons, we decided that even though SUNY was now technically an option, NYSED still made more sense. It was, as the saying goes, the devil we knew.

In early August, I submitted our Round 2 charter application, including letters of support from over 20 different leaders and groups, such as parents, the CEO of TNTP, the education director of a local YMCA, the founder of a church-affiliated after school program, and NY State Assemblyman Walter Mosley. We updated our schedules, calendars, and curriculum to provide more clarity and less risk for the authorizers. For example, our initial application included several different schedules for each type of Teaching Practice, in order to demonstrate the ways in which each Practice could start and end at different times. The state’s feedback made it clear that this was too complex,
so in the Round 2 application we simplified the schedules to highlight a single sample schedule from one Practice. Throughout the process, we struggled to balance between, on the one hand, providing enough detail to ward off potential questions about the model, and on the other hand, not getting so deep into the weeds that the reader would not be able to make sense of the model (particularly since it was such a significant departure from a typical school).

Unfortunately, NYSED once again failed to grant us an interview. Frustratingly, part of their feedback for Round 2 was simply incorrect. For example, they stated that we failed to include Attachment 8A, when in fact we did include this in our submission. Other feedback was vague. For example, the office did not believe that we had a teacher recruitment plan that would yield the kind of experienced teachers we would need for our model, but it did not provide evidence for this assessment. At the same time, our model was a) innovative and b) required expert teachers at the outset, so it was an understandable critique but nonetheless hard to remedy in a subsequent application without further detail.

By the time we submitted again, I knew that even if we were approved, it might be too late to open in Fall 2016 given the need to find a facility, recruit staff and families, and develop much more detailed plans. The day after Thanksgiving, November 26, we received notice that we did not get an interview in Round 3. This time, I was upset but I had waited over a month for a response. NYSED was supposed to conduct Round 3 interviews between October 21 and November 5.

Project Element 3: Gaining Legitimacy and Support from the Community
There was an interrelationship between getting support from authorizers and getting support from the community, because an important part of the application asked us to demonstrate community support, and a consultant working with us told us that the authorizers saw that as a critical gauge of the project’s legitimacy. Once residency began in June 2015, I worked hard to build more support from local parents and politicians.

To gain this support, I moved back to New York City full time rather than staying in Boston and moving later in the summer. I also decided that I would need to rely more on my own biography: I am from New York City, my parents and grandparents had all graduated from NYC public schools, and I had spent two years as a teacher and five years as a policymaker in the NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE). Thus, I had many connections throughout the city’s education sector and I felt like a more authentic member of the NYC schools community. I was aware of the potential hostility toward outsiders coming to a new area and experimenting with other people’s children. But I had lived in Brooklyn for several years and felt that I was a legitimate member of the community there.

Now, rather than managing the project from afar, I would be able to get first-hand information and meeting community leaders and potential families. I realized that it was critical to build authentic support within the local community over the summer, when parents had the focus and time to research potential school options for their children. The centerpiece of my organizing efforts was a mid-summer community event in mid-July. I saw this event as an opportunity to bring together both families as well as local politicians to learn more about our vision. I wanted to mobilize them to become emissaries for Prime Public and bring additional families on board.
Our efforts around this event involved media outreach, one-on-one conversations with parents and local non-profits, and phone calls and emails to key politicians. Our media strategy involved flyering, posting on local online sites, and using our Facebook page and newly launched website to spread the word about the meeting. Over the summer, I spent significant time working with a former student of mine who worked in graphic design. We created a logo for Prime and launched a new website with updated information about our team and our approach. We also created a listserv with MailChimp so that I could send a monthly newsletter about Prime to our growing community. The newsletter had 120+ subscribers, while the Facebook page had over 230 Likes.

I also spent significant time cultivating two particular parents in the local area. Using the framework I had learned in Marshall Ganz’s (2010) organizing workshop, I wanted to build these strong one-on-one connections as a way to gain deep support from a few rather than shallow support from many. But despite my one-on-ones, neither parent showed up to our July 29 community meeting; both were wary of charters based on their prior experience, and while both were happy to talk, they were not ready to commit. I also tried to cultivate parents whose children might help us to meet our recruitment goals for English Language Learner (ELL) students or students with special needs. I also wanted to meet a few parents who would become attached to our particular model and were intrigued by the idea of “teacher choice” in addition to “school choice.”

In order to reach as many families as possible, I spent time talking to local non-profit leaders, particularly at the Ingersoll Center, a community center in Downtown

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6 This organizing approach emphasizes building support through one-on-one conversations in which personal stories and shared values are explored, resulting in deeper connections. These allow the community itself to invest in the initiative, and these small ripples of investment come together during a launch event where a new constituency is announced.
Brooklyn, and at the Bedford-Stuyvesant YMCA, a community hub that offered many after-school programs for middle school-aged students in the neighborhood. I also wanted to target local churches (or the programs housed in them) in the area. I began to receive support from one local church across from a potential school location; though we differed in terms of philosophy, we both agreed on the need for better school options.

Finally, I wanted to use the summer event to showcase Prime to local politicians who could provide us support throughout the application process. In the appendix of the charter application, each group can include letters of support, and we knew that getting the support of at least a couple of local elected officials could help to convince the state that we had the backing of the community. The state cared about this because they knew that without such support, the community might rally against the school by protesting its location or by having politicians rally parents not to enroll at the school. I reached out to Assemblyman Mosley, who knew a member of our founding team and whose children went to P.S. 11, a local elementary school whose parents were eager for better elementary school options. I was able to get his chief of staff to attend our July event. She was initially skeptical of us as a charter, and wanted to know more information about our approach toward the community. During the July event, I was able to spend significant one-on-one time with her, which resulted in a meeting with Assemblyman Mosley in early August. Following this meeting, he signed onto a letter of support for Prime Public.

But in the early fall we seemed to lose some support from the local community. In the fall a group of parents began to organize around a new district middle school, which they called MS OneBrooklyn. The NYCDOE already had plans to create a new school building as part of the Atlantic Yards Project, but it was unclear what grade levels it
would serve. The mostly likely initial outcome was that it would be a K-8 middle school to accommodate the rapidly growing population in this part of Brooklyn. But a group of families from relatively successful elementary schools rallied to lobby the NYCDOE to make this a dedicated middle school, arguing that there were already strong elementary schools in the district and that a K-8 school would not provide their students with a strong middle school option following 5th grade. They quickly gained support from local politicians (McGibney, 2015). Councilwoman Cumbo, for example, advocated strongly for new options, though given her unwillingness to meet with me, I believe she primarily wanted new district options:

“I think the need for a middle school has been more pronounced than any other conversation I had heard from educators,” Cumbo said. “We’re at a place in history where people want as many choices as possible. It’s not only capacity, it’s also about selection of choice to find a school that’s more tailor made for your child’s interest.”

(McGibney, 2015, para. 12).

Project Element 4: Gaining Legitimacy and Support from Funders

In October, shortly after we found out that we did not receive a capacity interview with NYSED, we also learned that we had not received an important grant from NewSchools Venture Fund, which had recently launched a new grant competition to support new school models. We initially submitted an application in August, and we did receive a phone interview, which included me, my supervisor Ben Jackson, as well as our Board Chair and Donna. The hardest part of the interview came when the questioners from NewSchools asked about our team. It became obvious that I was the primary person leading the effort, with minimal help from the rest of the team. I tried to answer vaguely when they inquired about how much time our proposed founding principal was spending
on the project, but they pressed for a specific number of hours. I tried to dodge gracefully, but it became clear that I was essentially now a one-man show with a supportive Board of Trustees.

When I called for a post-interview phone call, the leaders at NewSchools said this was a critical factor in their decision not to move us to the next stage of the process. They also noted that our model seemed more focused on teacher professionalism than student personalization. They were looking for more of a model, be it online adaptive learning, one-on-one tutoring, or something similar, that would guarantee that each student was indeed moving at his or her own pace. While our application spoke about personalized learning plans for every student, a unique teacher-student matching process (wherein students and parents learned about and matched to a particular practice), and our belief that students should be working in unique modalities and demonstrating evidence of mastery in the ways that worked best for them, the reviewers noted that the actual proposed model was fairly vague on how this would happen on a day-to-day basis.

**Part IIb. Results:**

My attempt to start Prime Public Charter School has not yet succeeded. There were four elements of the project: gaining a charter, gaining community support, gaining donor support, and building an effective team. In **Figure D** I provide a quick summary of the successes and challenges in each of these areas, as measured against my theory of change:
Figure D: Summary of Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of Action</th>
<th>Success to Date</th>
<th>Key Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>If I...</em> Get Authorizer Support through a Charter</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Successes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>Pre-Residency:</em> In Round 1, out of 38 schools that submitted an initial Letter of Intent to apply for a charter, only 15, including ours, were invited to submit a full charter application.</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>- In Round 2, out of 42 applications submitted, only 12 were invited to submit a full charter, including ours.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- We received positive feedback on our charter application from seasoned consultants who worked with us.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Challenges:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I struggled to translate our model clearly, particularly to the state’s charter office, whose reviewers may not have been familiar with innovative models.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- This was a particularly challenging year for charters in New York State, given the uncertainty around raising the charter cap that lasted until the end of June, coupled with ongoing personnel changes and capacity gaps at the NYS Education Department’s Charter School Office. This is demonstrated by the comparatively small number of schools (4, including replications) approved in 2015 ((2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- On all three attempts, we failed to earn a capacity interview for the charter application.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gain Support from the Local Community</strong></td>
<td><strong>Successes:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td>----------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We received signatures from well over 100 members of the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We conducted four community meetings and elicited letters of support from several local non-profits and parents and one elected leader.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Challenges:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We never galvanized a large and enthusiastic group of parents to come together to support and advocate for Prime. The community was reluctant to support any new charter school, despite the widespread belief that the current available middle school options were insufficient.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Gain Donor Support</strong></th>
<th><strong>Successes:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I was able to secure a residency with TNTP to provide support from Prime throughout the application process, including a letter of support from the CEO on ongoing support from my supervisor and the VP of Emerging Services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We were invited to a second-round interview with NewSchools Venture Fund.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We attracted interest from Charter School Growth Fund and the Robin Hood Foundation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Challenges:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We did not receive any additional grants from funders, most of whom wanted us to have a charter and a facility before considering funding us.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Build an Effective Team and Board of Trustees</strong></th>
<th><strong>Successes:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We put together a very strong Board that had experience with facilities, financing, philanthropy, law, special student populations, and academics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We were able to put together a strong initial founding team.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Challenges:
- In part due to our failure to gain charter approval, as well as our inability to fund a principal and COO position, we lost our founding principal and founding COO over the summer.
- Additional founding team members did not cohere as a group and eventually became unresponsive non-contributors to the project.
- Our Board members were engaged at varying levels; some struggled to attend meetings, participate in conference calls, or reply to emails.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intended Outcomes</th>
<th>Success to Date</th>
<th>Key Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Then I will... Be able to launch Prime Public in Fall 2016</td>
<td>Prime will not launch in Fall 2016, but some of its ideas have spread throughout the education sector through organizations such as TNTP or funders who now know about the model.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Figure C shows, while there were some successes, the most important task in launching–gaining a charter so that we had an opportunity to open in Fall 2016–was not successful. In some ways, it would be easy to dismiss this failure as a result of the political climate in New York State. According to Dirk Tillotson, the educational consultant who worked with us on the first application, our problem was simply that we applied to the wrong authorizer in the wrong year. While I discuss the political climate’s role in the outcome of the project below, this explanation, while tempting because it allows me to blame the system and the bureaucracy, is insufficient. First, because there were some schools that applied successfully this year, and second, because I know–both emotionally and intellectually–that I made some critical missteps. This is not to say that external forces did not play a critical role in the project’s outcome. The charter authorization process in New York State and donors’ limited appetite for supporting new
and unproven concepts were real and critical challenges. But choosing to focus on these challenges wrongly assumes that the project could not have succeeded regardless of my personal decisions.

**Part IIc. Analysis of Results**

In Figure E and the analysis below, I use the strategic triangle to analyze the factors both outside my control as well as those under my control in order to discuss the causes for the results shown above. Note that the analysis includes an examination of public value, even though this was not a part of the original theory of action. One of the lessons from the project is that I should have included public value as a part of that theory, because my inability to effectively fix the weakest parts of the model, as well as my struggle to communicate that value to stakeholders, affected my ability to leverage the other parts of the strategic triangle.

**Figure E: Summary of Analysis Using the Strategic Triangle**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of Strategic Triangle</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>In My Control</th>
<th>Not in My Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authorizing Environment</strong></td>
<td>The Political Climate in NY</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vague and Inconsistent Application Feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Donor Appetite for Early-Stage Innovative Models</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Operational Capacity</strong></td>
<td>Founding Team Departures</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insufficient attention to details</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Too Fast</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of expertise in all areas of the charter</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Value</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with the Model Itself</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wavering Personal Commitment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwillingness to “Play Their Game”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Challenges of Entrepreneurship**

It is difficult to analyze the reasons for Prime’s successes and failures without understanding the inherently risky nature of entrepreneurship. According to Stevenson (1983), entrepreneurship can be defined as “the pursuit of opportunity beyond resources currently controlled” (p. 3). In my particular context, it was also the pursuit of opportunity without regard to research demonstrating the efficacy of my idea. In entrepreneurial environments, a simple theory of action based on prior experience either does not apply, or it means something more like, “If I do X, Y, and Z, there is a 30% chance of success.” Much like a political campaign, one enters an entrepreneurial endeavor realizing that luck (in terms of timing, competition, and a zero-sum-game in which not everyone can win) will play a role. In my experience, though, successful entrepreneurs have certain characteristics that make success more or less likely: a willingness to make fast decisions with confidence in the face of incomplete information; the ability to adjust rapidly to changing circumstances; the willingness to make oneself the face of the project, which may necessitate less (public-facing) vulnerability; and the need to build a team from scratch whose members have no guarantee of future success.
Additionally, research has shown, and my own experience working for several entrepreneurs such as Joel Rose at New Classrooms, shows that those who become entrepreneurs often have entrepreneurial role models (Brockhaus, 1982). Because I saw his success, and the successful launch of Caliber Schools, I may have underestimated the true risk inherent in my project.

While the entrepreneurial nature of the project necessitates risk, because I pursued it using a structured, public process (the charter authorization process), there were therefore many elements of the project that were fairly predictable, time-bound, and specific. For this reason, I used the strategic triangle to analyze the successes and failures within the context of what was necessarily a risky venture.

**Part IIc. Analysis of Authorizing Environment**

*Political Situation in New York State Regarding Charter Schools*

To many outside observers, the problems we faced were mostly the result of an unfortunate political environment surrounding charter schools in New York State. In January 2015, John King, the New York State Education Commissioner, left to take a job as assistant secretary of education in the US Department of Education. The assistant commissioner left to become commissioner of the Rhode Island Department of Education. The following spring, the director of the charter schools office at NYSED, Bill Clarke, resigned, and no replacement was imminent. The entire department, but in particular the charter schools office, was understaffed and underresourced, but it was the only real option for us given that SUNY had reached its charter cap.
The common wisdom (based on conversations with our charter application consultant and other charter founders) was that SUNY was a more professional authorizer, rigorous in its evaluation of proposals but collaborative in its approach, while NYSED was a deeply entrenched bureaucracy that was open to independent charter schools but wary of authorizing anything very innovative for fear that the failure of such a school would become fodder for the news. This issue became even more prominent in late November 2014, when news broke that one of the schools that NYSED had authorized, Greater Works Charter School, was led by a leader with fraudulent credentials (Murphy, 2015).

As noted previously, due to a change in the charter cap, SUNY eventually was able to become an authorizer for schools that wished to start in Fall 2016. Had this occurred earlier in the year, it is very likely that we would have applied to SUNY. But given the late timing, the fact that we already had feedback from NYSED, the length of the SUNY application (some applications were well over 500 pages), and comments from SUNY about its inability to charter without more funding (Darville, 2015), we decided to apply again through NYSED.

The political climate was challenging not only because of the weakened state of the authorizers given the charter cap and the turnover at NYSED, but also because of the contentious standing of charters in New York City. This manifested itself through the city’s more antagonistic relationship with charter schools as well as a general backlash against the education reform movement in New York State.

Toward the end of the Bloomberg administration (2001-2013), an increasing number of citizens grew disillusioned with the education reform movement that had
placed a high emphasis on test scores in math and ELA at the expense of non-tested subject areas such as social studies, arts, and music. In addition, the Bloomberg administration earned the ire of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) largely due to its teacher accountability system, in which up to 50% of a teacher’s performance could be based on their students’ actual test scores as compared to their predicted test scores. Because Bloomberg was a staunch supporter of charter schools as well, and was willing to shut down underperforming district schools and replace them with new district or charter schools, his charter policy came under critique as well. There were growing concerns among advocates such as Diane Ravitch that New York City charter schools were not serving the same population of students as traditional district schools. They did this through several methods: first, these schools could target recruitment toward particular families.

Second, because families had to enter charter school lotteries, they naturally attracted a student body with more involved parents. Third, these schools often suspended students at higher rates than other schools or used contracts with families as a way to ensure that the students they served were at least willing to sign on to the often-strict discipline policies that these schools used to create orderly learning environments. Fourth, when students did leave charter schools, the schools often did not replace, or backfill, these students. Therefore a school could start 6th grade with, say, 120 students, but only wind up with 50 or 60 students by graduation. The end result was that the 8th grade students were not representative of the student body of that district as a whole.

As a result of the perceived inequities in charter demographics as well as the broader backlash against Bloomberg’s efforts to institute performance management
through testing throughout the system, in the 2013 mayoral election, Bloomberg’s education policies were on the ballot even though he was not. De Blasio won the election with over 65% of the vote, a huge mandate for his education policies, which were skeptical of charters and in particular of the policy of closing down rather than improving underperforming schools. The UFT embraced this education agenda, and with their uncompromising support, De Blasio and the new Chancellor, Carmen Farina, rolled back much of the Bloomberg education policy. In the charter realm, this meant that the administration no longer supported colocations.

For Prime Public, these changes meant that gaining support from the local community was more difficult. In particular, local politicians such as Councilwoman Cumbo (who was quoted expressing support for more district schools and school options) were largely hostile to charters (and particularly co-locating charter schools in district schools), based on information I had heard from other charter founders in her district. Assemblyman Mosley was only mildly supportive, and added a note to his letter of support stating that he would not support our school if we were to co-locate it within an existing building. Many parents in Brooklyn, and in particular, the white parents who had the means and power to become more involved, became anti-charter because they saw charter schools as representative of a top-down, no-excuses approach to discipline and instruction. They were longing for better district schools that had a progressive education model. While I attempted to share our very progressive model with these parents, some would not even have a discussion with anyone from a charter school. These more liberal parents and leaders believed that the same hedge-fund super-rich philanthropists against whom they protested for corrupting the political system were also supporting charters.
Furthermore, the changes to charter policies meant that, had we been approved, we would have faced an uphill battle to secure a public facility within an existing school. The alternative was to use state funding to purchase a private facility, but given that our school’s enrollment would increase by 100% its second year (from 108 to 224 students) and 33% in its third year, we would need to move each year or figure out an arrangement to share the space with another charter or private school.

By early 2016, parent demand for better middle school options eventually led the district to create two new district middle school options in the community. One was a redesigned middle school that was under-enrolled, and the other was the aforementioned M.S. OneBrooklyn, a middle school concept that a group of parents at P.S. 9 had created as a way to ensure that the new school built at the Atlantic Yards site (a huge super-development in the district) would become a standalone middle school. Prior to July, neither of these two options existed, but by the time my project ended, both provided families with additional (and less controversial) district middle school options.

_Vague and Inconsistent Feedback_

Despite the political climate in New York State, there was a charter application process, and for each Round, we received significant feedback on the application (See Appendices 2-4). The problem was that the reviewers changed from round to round, and there was no real inter-rater reliability to ensure that feedback remained consistent. After Round 1, for example, we heard that the reviewers wanted us to focus less on research and footnotes and more on the details of the school, but in Round 2, we were cited for offering too few footnotes and research citations.
In addition, some of the feedback was vague. For example, after Round 1, the reviewers noted that “the mission…was not clearly reflected throughout all sections of the application” (See Appendix 2) without a follow-up explanation of where it was missing. In other situations, the feedback was simply incorrect. Our Round 1 feedback noted that we failed to note the dates of specific meetings that we held, when in fact we did specifically note those dates. After Round 2, we were cited for not submitting Attachment 8a, when in fact we did submit that attachment (See Appendix 3).

The authorizing environment was thus difficult both from a political perspective as well as from the perspective of the operational capacity of the authorizer itself. As Dirk Tillotson noted in an article about New York State charters, “This standstill was never legislated. Immense needs still exist. It’s not that there aren’t qualified planning teams, or communities desiring more options. So what is up? The state’s charter authorizers don’t have the funding they need to do their jobs, for one” (Tillotson, 2016). He goes on to explain the consequences of this lack of authorizer capacity:

“This has costs. Very talented, committed, and passionate people who have devoted time, energy, and resources into applications are being left stranded. They reel back in that entrepreneurial energy and go back to teaching or their university jobs, or just leave the education arena altogether.

(2016)

_Lack of Donor Appetite for Innovative, Early-Stage School Models_

A related political reality was the lack of appetite for true innovation among both the donor community as well as the authorizers in New York State. Some of reluctance stemmed from the Academic Return on Investment model discussed in the Review of Knowledge for Action, wherein donors are motivated to support existing solutions to
existing problems through metrics that they can easily understand. But these very metrics by their nature define the kind of educational environment that we create. I found that in my discussions with donors, they were often curious about the model but reluctant to fund our team until we had gained support from the charter authorizers, found a facility, and so forth. While these concerns are very understandable, it presented a kind of chicken-and-egg problem: Without their support, it became challenging to hire the kind of team that would be able to improve both our operational capacity and the support from the community.

As just one example of this, in the summer I met several times with a local community organizer who served on Community Board 2. While the presentation we made did not go well, this organizer saw our potential and wanted to help us reach more families. She grew up in District 13, where we intended to open, and wanted to give something back to her community. But she needed money to work with us on even a part-time basis. Eventually she took a job with the Harlem Children’s Zone. In general, one of the real struggles throughout the project was our challenge in keeping the founding team and the Board motivated. I joked in the early fall that I wanted to write a leadership book about how to motivate volunteers who aren’t paid and have no real guarantee of a successful outcome. But I realized that only in education is this unusual; in the rest of the economy, this is what entrepreneurship is about. The difference is that there is a greater willingness to fund early-stage startups. In our case, even funders such as NewSchools Venture Fund, which had a greater risk appetite, eventually awarded their initial grants almost entirely to schools that already existed (See Appendix 5).
Part IIc. Analysis of Operational Capacity

Founding Team Departures

This lack of operational capacity became more apparent as my residency began. As noted earlier, one of the key pivot points for the project was the departure of both Donna and Amy from the founding team. While I tried to make the best of it at the time, their increasing absence from the project made me feel more alone and less confident about my own ability to successfully launch the school.

In particular, since they were volunteering, their status on the team took a back seat to the many responsibilities that they had as mothers, daughters, and working professionals. Had we been able to pay them and keep them on the team, it is possible that we could have done a better job with subsequent applications, earned the support of additional donors, or simply galvanized more support from the Board (each of them was responsible for recruiting 2-3 members of the Board, and these members’ seemed to lose some of their excitement with Donna and Amy’s departures) and the larger community.

Insufficient Attention to Details

Without their contributions, I struggled to focus sufficiently on the detail-oriented execution that is critical in the charter approval process. I often saw people who were too execution-oriented as lacking vision, creativity, or heart. I also was scared that doing the real work of any project would become boring. In the past, I often was unwilling to commit fully to projects due to my frustration with the hard, meticulous work of execution. If I stayed in the ideation phase of a project, I could demonstrate my vision and my creativity, which are two areas where I tend to do well. But once it came down to ensuring that our application was neatly aligned to each of the state’s criteria, I was much
less effective and thus less interested in trying hard. I realized this blind spot early on, and it was one of the reasons why I recruited Amy to our team. She had a knack for organization and logistics that I thought would serve us well. When she stepped back from active involvement after Round 1, it was my responsibility to step up and add that level of detail-orientation that the project required.

**Hiring Too Fast**

In an ideal situation, I would have had time to recruit a new person who could help with these kinds of tasks. But in a fast-paced, entrepreneurial environment, I had to take on this role, even though it was not one I relished. I did this grudgingly and somewhat ineffectively. After each round of the charter application, I found several mistakes. For example, in the Round 3 application, we had to submit a timeline of all critical events that had to take place prior to opening. I did not include “hiring a principal” in this timeline, because in earlier versions of the application this was not necessary. Since NYSED did not give feedback on this timeline in Round 2, I did not even look at it again during the Round 3 editing process. I simply cut and pasted the table and put it into the application. If I had done a full re-read of the application for Round 3, I might have caught this and other similar mistakes that NYSED noted in our Round 3 feedback.

Another example of this failure to press into the hardest elements of the project was my decision not to apply to SUNY in Round 2. Of course, there were good reasons to continue with NYSED as our preferred authorizer, but the fact that submitting a new charter application through SUNY would require more than 100 hours of additional work definitely played a role in my decision. I found myself scared of the work involved in
switching, and so I was on the hunt for good reasons to avoid this amount of work and simply revise the charter application for NYSED.

I attempted to mitigate our lack of operational capacity by relying on the support of our Board, TNTP, and a group of graduate students at HGSE. I had become close to our Board Chair over many conversations, and he understood the need to contribute more to keep Prime from losing momentum. He also cared deeply about our public value as a truly innovative new school model. As a result, he stepped up. When neither Donna nor Amy could make an information session, he came and stayed the whole time. When I needed a co-editor for our charter application, he went through the entire document and then spent hours helping us ensure our attachments were correct.

TNTP also played a key role, both clearing my work time to ensure that I could focus on charter edits, as well as providing key feedback on the charter application itself. In fact, TNTP’s experience with not just staffing, but also curriculum selection and assessment, proved very useful as we edited the parts of the application related to curriculum and assessment. When we applied for the NewSchools Venture Fund grant, my supervisor, Ben Jackson, joined the call and provided a key voice of support and authority, despite our ultimate failure to gain that grant. Finally, as I presented key ideas to various teams within TNTP, their feedback helped me to hone both my “script” as well as parts of the model itself.

Finally, I was successful in obtaining free support from graduate students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In the early fall, I heard about an opportunity to partner with students in Jal Mehta’s Fall 2015 course, “Deeper Learning for All: Designing a 21st Century School System” (A305). I found a group of four students who
helped me to flesh out some of the details around Teacher Practices (See Appendix 6). Their contributions were impressive, but by the time they completed their materials and made their final presentation, Prime had already been rejected in its third and final attempt to gain approval to open in 2016. Had we been approved, however, their documents – in areas from defining the Teaching Practice pages online to creating options for Prime Studio – would have been an important support while we looked for more full-time staff members.

Throughout the fall, I had to move quickly in order to make sure that we could sustain our momentum both internally and externally. But the project suffered as I made fast decisions in order to take advantage of closing windows of opportunity. This started at the outset of the project, when I hired Donna to be the principal without going through a more formal interview process. I was concerned that such a process would not only take too long, jeopardizing my ability to use the residency to plan and launch the school, but that it might detract potential candidates who would be wary of a long interview process for a job that initially paid nothing.

We were, in many ways, organized to execute rather than organized to learn (Garvin, Edmundson, and Gino, 2008). I wanted to get the application done, and often this came at the expense of understanding the details involved. Once we got our team together, we decided that we were better off applying for Round 1, even though we had only two months to put together our application, schedule community meetings, and so forth. Again, there were good reasons to rush and apply in Round 1 (for example, a successful application would elicit more donor and community support and allow me to start paying our founding team at the end of the year).
But it is clear now that the quality of the charter application suffered as a result of our focus on speed. For example, there were parts of the application that focused on curriculum that I myself barely understood. My approach for completing the sections around various subject areas was to delegate authority to Donna, who in turn delegated to a group of founding team members who she knew from her prior experience working at the network. I had only met these team members once before we submitted the application. I did not care much about who they were or how dedicated they were; I felt that, given the time crunch of the project, I had no choice but to trust Donna to choose a team she felt good about.

This would turn out to be a poor decision, because after Donna departed, so did the team members she recruited. Given the nature of the organization, in which the founding team itself just consisted of Amy, Donna, and I, I could have spent additional time to vet these other founding team members. Had they not met muster, I could have done additional outreach to others or simply done the due diligence around curriculum to work on it myself.

*Lack of Expertise in All Areas of the Charter*

As a result of this delegation, I did not have as deep an understanding of how the various curricula and assessments integrated into a coherent whole. Those who had written those sections were gone, and while they were together I did not bring them together as a team to create a coherent whole.

In the end, when we received feedback on the application, some of it was about areas around which I had very little expertise. When I went back to the team members who wrote these sections, they were unenthusiastic about participating in the revision
process. Of course, it makes sense that a leader of a new school will not become an expert on every aspect of the school, from facilities to nursing policies to special education services. But at several points, in the name of expediency, I failed to ask important questions about parts of our model (for example, how our staffing model would allow us to ensure adequate services for students with special needs or students learning English).

Part IIb. Analysis of Public Value

Throughout the process of pitching the school, it was clear that the unique structural changes we wanted to incorporate into Prime Public were appealing to many educators who were used to seeing the same First Movement schools. One of the reasons we were able to attract Board members so quickly, before the residency project began, was due to the unique features of the model. For example, one Board member’s application to join the Board (personal communication, February 4, 2015) stated,

“What struck me most about Prime Public’s philosophy is its thoughtfulness and its adaptability. It is neither addicted to the traditional methods of schooling, nor attempting to steamroll what works in pursuit of what is new and different. Rather, it is a model based on a respect for teachers and parents, but one which tries to maximize their potential.”

Similarly, Dan Weisberg, CEO of TNTP, wrote a letter of support for Prime (personal communication, August 14, 2015) that echoed these sentiments:

“The plan for Prime strikes a much-needed balance between proven methods and structures...as well as new and innovative approaches (e.g. “Teacher Practices” and personalized learning plans). The idea that students and families are not just choosing a school, but will have the opportunity to match their needs to a particular instructional style within the school, allows for a level of personalization unavailable in most district and charter schools across the country.”
One indication that the idea itself had potential value was the fact that I was able to match to a residency site to explore this idea. Amanda Kocon, Vice President for Strategy and Emerging Services, made clear from the outset that my primary focus for residency was to do whatever was necessary to gain approval so that we could see test the model in a real school starting in 2016. Even when residency started and the school’s application had already been rejected once, TNTP’s support for the model never wavered.

Problems with the Model Itself

At the same time, I had many conversations with my supervisor, Ben Jackson, about the challenges of explaining the model to more skeptical audiences. While educators at TNTP or on our Board might be excited about the model, I often received more tepid reactions from outsiders who saw several potential problems with what we were presenting.

One key area of concern about the model, and again, this is partly due to the nature of innovation, was the lack of research to support the proposed Teaching Practices. A number of potential funders, such as NewSchools Venture Fund, asked specifically about the research behind Teaching Practices as a frame for the school. Had I started with a small-scale pilot, through an organization such as 4.0 Schools, I may have collected sufficient data to demonstrate the public value of Prime Public’s model. In addition, the authorizers gave us feedback about the lack of research behind the model. In Round 2, for example, their feedback stated that, “…the presentation of a unique school design requires either sufficient evidence of success, if drawing on existing school models, or if the design does not have a precedent, sufficient research or other information that supports its efficacy; the narrative fails to meet this criterion.” (personal correspondence,
September 21, 2015). While we included research on similar schools, one challenge was that there truly were no similar schools, and so this undermined the perceived public value of the model we proposed.

Additionally, some funders were unsure whether the model was financially feasible. After all, while we envisioned that Teaching Practices would expand over time and hire lower-paid, early-career teaching support, it was unclear how we would manage our finances in earlier years, when we needed to attract veterans to staff our entire school. A related question was one of scale: If our final student population was fixed, then the model was unlike a medical, legal, or personal fitness practice, which could expand indefinitely. At some point, would Practices stop growing? If so, how would teachers continue to make more money? If it necessitated increasing the per-pupil allocation per student, then how would we fund this?

Furthermore, when we talked to educators, some of them were unsure whether teachers would feel overwhelmed with the responsibilities of both teaching effectively as well as running a Practice. The latter could potentially require hours of additional operations work in order to effectively market the Practice and deal with resource allocation, depending on how much budget control we wanted to give teachers.

Moreover, these teachers, as well as some parents with whom we spoke, were concerned about the potential impact of creating a “marketplace” for teachers. What if parents began demanding certain teachers for reasons other than their teaching quality? What if some teachers were easier than others? In addition, there was concern that a competitive market model would inhibit teachers’ willingness to collaborate across Practices, and that this, in time, could undermine the ability of any given teacher to grow
professionally.

We also confronted questions about how the model would work beyond the Teaching Practice innovation. During interviews with NewSchools and other funders or parents, we often failed to present a coherent explanation of the model in a way that both captured our unique staffing model but also demonstrated that we had sufficient expertise in curriculum and personalized learning. Because several other charter networks, such as Rocketship, Intrinsic, and so forth, already focused on personalized learning, I chose to emphasize what made Prime unique and left out details about our Personalized Learning Plans. But for some audiences, this signaled that Prime was not yet clear about its model for personalized learning, which matter greatly to them.

Finally, I received many questions about whether a school built around Teaching Practices could provide a coherent learning experience. How would we sustain a single culture and climate given the inevitable variation in Teaching Practices? Over time, would each Practice feel the same and differ only in terms of the personality of the teachers involved? Perhaps, I thought, some convergence would take place and parents would choose based on personality, but this was a critical difference that current schools failed to account for. After all, don’t many people rightly choose their doctor based on a sense of “fit” or “personality?”

When engaging with these critiques, I tried to strike a balance between acknowledging their merit while asserting the greater value of our model compared to the current education models in place. For example, on the issue of competition, I agreed that there was potential for teachers to compete in order to gain students, but I also noted that this could be a net-positive for students. After all, why wouldn’t we want teachers to feel
a sense of urgency to achieve results in order to attract families that wanted a high-quality education? These rebuttals struck a chord with some groups more than others. I spoke to one potential funder who had worked for the Hoover Institute, a free-market think tank based out of Stanford, who was attracted to applying free-market principles to education. But others were wary, in a time when they already saw too much corporate influence in education, of introducing such radical changes that could create an environment of winners and losers.

These conversations yielded mixed success. On the one hand, by acknowledging the issues, I demonstrated that I was a rational actor who was willing to listen and improve. On the other hand, the fact that I had to engage in such tradeoff conversations lessened the value of the school in the minds of certain audiences. They might have thought that while Prime would be a net-benefit in some areas, it would inevitably have negative and unpredictable side effects.

*Wavering Personal Commitment*

Over time, some of these conversations had an effect on my own commitment to the project. I began to see the legitimacy in some of these critiques. I did not want the school to converge on a single kind of Practice, I did not want teachers to feel that they could not effectively collaborate, and so on. And if I, as the founder, began to have doubts about the public value of the project, then it was inevitable that this might have an effect on my ability to effectively communicate that to important stakeholders.

Many of the aforementioned issues resulted from my struggle to communicate effectively a single, unwavering public value proposition to multiple audiences. We had to pivot constantly between talking to potential donors, teachers, parents, local
politicians, and our team, and this was a difficult challenge. For example, our website could only have so much text—should we target it to the donors who might want to see what we were proposing, emphasizing what was new and shiny about our model, or to parents, who wanted to hear a message about quality curriculum and a safe school environment? Likewise, when we wrote the charter itself, we had to decide the extent to which we would write it for ourselves, for families who might look at it online, or for the authorizers whose approval we needed?

Unwillingness to Play the Game and Listen to Others

A related challenge to this was the distinction between top-down and bottom-up design. We learned a tremendous amount in the Ed.L.D. program about the importance of listening to the community. Adaptive leadership is defined by the ability to confront a community with its own crises and allow the community to address these problems. I was unwilling to let the community solve its own problems; I felt that my expertise and entrepreneurship provided me with a special kind of knowledge that the community at large lacked. Therefore, when community members emphasized that they wanted a safe school or a school with a strong computer science curriculum, I nodded politely but rarely gave these suggestions serious thought.

Throughout the project, I struggled to balance between my desire to include both the community and the authorizers’ ideas about Prime Public with my own insistence on the ideas that I had about the nature of our model. I wanted to be a good listener, but I knew that good listening also includes one’s own inner voice and values. In my Review of Knowledge for Action about the pitfalls of First Movement charters, I noted that they often had a top-down approach. I wanted to include more voices in our process, and yet
my own fear of failure meant that when it came time to make a final decision, my own voice often won out. I thus inadvertently fell into some of the pitfalls of the kinds of charters I had criticized.

From the outset, one of our key consultants told us that in order to get approved, we had to say what the authorizers wanted to hear. In one email following our Round 2 rejection, he wrote “My approach-- the goal of the app is to get approved-- then you can amend charter or do what you want within it, pare down some of the great ideas (that may not have great research backing) and really convince them around the other pieces” (personal correspondence, 9/24/15).

He suggested that we align ourselves more closely with “no excuses” first movement charter schools that had achieved significant success on state test scores. I was willing to do this, and I added the following language to our charter application:

“our model brings together the culture of high expectations and talent development used in high-performing “no-excuses” charter schools while concurrently adopting structures to add relevance, meaningful relationships, and deeper learning to each student’s experience” (Skolnick 3-4).

But our consultant also recommended that we downplay the innovation inherent within the teaching practices; or, at the very least, he was concerned that our emphasis on both personalized learning and professionalized teaching through new staffing models would be too much for the average reader to understand. In some of these areas, I was less willing to modify the model. In part, I wanted the charter to be an authentic founding document that set out our values about teaching and learning. I also knew that the charter application was a public document and that we would be held to the words in it by authorizers during the charter renewal process. But a big part of it was my stubbornness: I
had an idea, and I wanted to tell the world about it.

Nonetheless, I do not believe that these challenges were detrimental to the project. Given the existing leadership challenges at NYSED as well as their contradictory feedback (particularly since different reviewers read the application in each Round) it was hard for me to know what the authorizers wanted to hear. It was much more likely that we simply did not provide enough clarity or detail in the application in ways that addressed each of their concerns. This was due more to the challenge of focusing on the details when I wanted to be focusing on the big picture, rather than my unwillingness to change our model in the face of authorizers’ concerns or parental demands. In fact, in an email I sent to the Board that included the authorizers’ feedback, I noted that the state seemed wary of how innovative our model was, and a Board member rightly pointed out that the feedback focused more on particular issues with the application rather than the degree of innovation in the model. In retrospect, it was easier for me to blame the project’s failure on its innovation rather than on our simple failure to address each of the authorizer’s concerns in sufficient detail.

In sum, then, my overall analysis of the project is that there were multiple reasons, in each part of the strategic triangle, why we did not succeed to the extent we had hoped.

The key issue was the lack of a stable authorizing environment due to the political situation in New York State. This resulted in us applying to an authorizer that lacked the capacity or appetite to approve new schools, let alone new schools with a model as innovative as the one we proposed. At the same time, the authorizer insisted that they made a decision based on the merits and that they were willing to interview teams that
demonstrated adequate capacity. My conclusion about the lack of authorizing capacity is based on speaking with our Board chair, our consultant, and others in the charter sector who repeatedly said that this year was particularly challenging and that in prior years our application would have been approved.

In terms of operational capacity, our team lacked a real director of operations and an instructional leader who had spent time, day-to-day, in the midst of a school environment. First, neither Amy nor Donna had served in the respective roles of operations director or principal, and second, they both left following our Round 1 rejection. I had rushed into hiring decisions that I saw as the only way to get the project off the ground, and we suffered as a result. Over the summer and into the fall, I tried to compensate for their departures by relying more on my supervisor, my own skillset, and help from graduate students. But I knew that I lacked the time and the skillset to do the visioning work, the external relations work, and the detailed operations work necessary to increase our chances of success.

And critically, in terms of public value, although we gained team members inspired by our unique vision, I struggled to crystallize our approach for various audiences in ways that gave stakeholders confidence in our ability to execute the model successfully. For reasons related to weaknesses (or at least, lack of detail) in the model itself, my own struggle to “change the script” for various audiences, and my own emotional vacillation about the project and the model, I failed to consistently provide the right pitch for the right audience, be it in our charter application itself, in the way that I spoke to donors about the model, or in the way I motivated team members. While in retrospect, the Theory of Action I began with still seems sound, there were times when I
failed to adequately develop and communicate the public value of the project in ways that would have helped me to leverage the two other parts of the strategic triangle to increase my chances of a successful launch despite the uncertainty of entrepreneurship and the challenging authorizing environment.

Part III. IMPLICATIONS FOR SELF, SITE, and SECTOR

Part IIIa. Implications for Self.

My strategic project has some significant implications for my own leadership development.

First, I learned that I was capable of committing fully to an entrepreneurial project. The decision to start Prime began in part through the Immunity to Change mapping process at the outset of the second year of the Ed.L.D. program. This framework, developed by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey (2009), allows leaders to describe those ways in which they can get in their own way. In other words, while we might profess to a certain goal, in fact we have “competing commitments” that directly inhibit our ability to reach the goal. Here is part of the Immunity to Change map that I created with support from my peer coach at the outset of Year 2:

**Figure F: Immunity to Change Map**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEADERSHIP GOAL</th>
<th>WHAT AM I DOING AND NOT DOING THAT INHIBIT THIS GOAL</th>
<th>COMPETING COMMITMENTS / WORRIES AND FEARS</th>
<th>ASSUMPTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To follow through on and commit to one of my</td>
<td>I tell myself that someone else is probably already</td>
<td>I’m committed to never spending time on anything that won’t work out well for me in</td>
<td>I assume that if I try something and it doesn’t work, then I’m not smart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entrepreneurial ideas this year.</td>
<td>doing it.</td>
<td>the end.</td>
<td>or I’m not creative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># 4.5 This is important because I feel like I have good ideas but then for whatever reason I don’t actually see them through. I have done this for YEARS. I have ideas about articles and books to write, companies to start, schools to design, and so forth, but then I always seem to find a reason not to follow through on it unless someone else has authorized me to do it. I can’t seem to authorize myself to get these ideas off the ground.</td>
<td>I talk to a few people about an idea and if I can’t figure it out easily I give up and move on to the next idea.</td>
<td>I’m committed to being seen as a creative thinker, not a hard worker.</td>
<td>I assume that relationships and ideas that don’t work out result in years of pain and recovery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I research an idea for a while but then I forget about it for months at a time.</td>
<td>I think a lot about an idea until I find a reason not to support it.</td>
<td>I’m committed to not being hurt, or hurting others, by being too rash about an idea or a relationship commitment. I’m committed to being 100% sure about everything before doing anything to protect myself from being wrong and getting hurt.</td>
<td>I assume that relationships and ideas that come to an end were not the worth the time spent being involved with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t think I’m smart enough or skilled enough to do whatever idea I have.</td>
<td>I don’t think I’m expert enough to actually get the idea done.</td>
<td>I’m committed to being perfect and not having to find out that my ideas are not perfect.</td>
<td>I assume that only stupid people have to do the hard work of seeing an idea realized. I assume that smart, creative people just have “aha” moments and then get other people to do the work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I make up hypotheticals that might get in the way of accomplishing my goal.</td>
<td>I look at the other side of doing something and convince myself that both sides are valid and so action doesn’t make sense.</td>
<td>I’m committed to not separating my worth from the worth of my creative ideas.</td>
<td>I assume that people in power are making dumb decisions, so I don’t want to be in power. I assume that people who jump into things aren’t seeing the big picture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel lonely if I don’t get support for an idea.</td>
<td>I assume that if I’m wrong about a particular idea, then I must be wrong about all of my ideas.</td>
<td>I’m committed to not having any bad ideas and committed to not realizing it by testing it with other people.</td>
<td>I assume that if I’m wrong about this idea, then I need to go back and re-evaluate every previous idea I’ve had to see whether I was wrong about those ones, too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m committed to not making mistakes. I’m committed to not committing.</td>
<td>I’m committed to keeping all ideas doors open. I’m committed to staying divergent and not convergent.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Figure F shows, by fully committing to starting Prime, I was testing both my ingrained habits (in Column 2) as well as my commitment to NOT committing (in Column 3). I certainly made progress in dealing with some of my competing commitments. By fully diving into the project, committing my residency to the project, and by building a Board of Trustees and bringing others into the project in ways that made me personally accountable for its ultimate outcome, I was able to overcome my prior reluctance to dive into my work with full dedication. For example, when I worked with Caliber Schools, a new charter school in Richmond, California, there were moments when I felt as though, since I was not the leader of the project, I had the freedom to be half-in and half-out. In practice, this meant that I could criticize the model without fear that I was questioning my own worth. Instead, I was an insider with an outsider’s critical mindset. As I embarked on starting Prime, I no longer had the luxury of being the chief critic or the person with great ideas who left the actual decisions to others. Instead, I gained valuable experience in taking full responsibility for a wide range of decisions about the work.

But at the same time, I often found myself slipping back into a mode where I stepped “up to the balcony” (Heifetz, 1994) to take a look at the project with an outsider’s perspective. Ordinarily, this would be a strength, allowing me to view the work from multiple perspectives rather than plowing forward with blinders on. But in the context of an entrepreneurial project, I realized that my own hesitation and doubt quickly created a kind of energy that may have impacted others’ ability to fully commit. I often shared my insecurities or my doubts with others on my team, and I did this intentionally: I was refusing to be the kind of leader who seemed to lack self-awareness. I wanted to be
a leader about whom others might say, “Jonathan isn’t sugar-coating this; he’s brutally honest with himself and with us.” But in retrospect, I could have done a better job of projecting confidence. When there were serious setbacks, such as Donna’s departure or interview rejections, I often took them personally and started to question my ability to commit to this kind of work over the long haul. By sharing some of these doubts, I thought I was being an authentic leader. But in retrospect, I was also demonstrating to my team that I was able to be cowed by challenges and would only fully commit to the project during times when the feedback was positive and things were going smoothly. And because I took so many ideas into consideration and vacillated between strategies in the face of challenges, I reinforced an existing view of myself as a leader who was more about ideas and vision than about real execution.

I went into the Ed.L.D. program having been a member of several entrepreneurial teams, but I never took on the role of initiating and leading a new project myself. I found that I really enjoyed being the initiator and the creative decision-maker behind the project. I loved that I could come up with the name, and that yes, people would start using that name! I loved the moments when I would show up at a meeting and win over skeptics who were intrigued by the idea of creating a new model of teaching. And most important, I enjoyed the sense that my experience and the lessons learned from prior projects seemed to pay off, both in the design choices we made as well as in the credibility I earned from donors, the community, and TNTP. While we ultimately did not get as much support as we wanted, I never felt that anyone questioned my ability or authority to start a school. It confirmed for me that it was not too early in my career to start my own organization.
Second, I learned that the most important investment I can make as a leader is in the team with which I surround myself, not just because of that team’s expertise, but because feeling like a part of a healthy team is what enables me to believe that the risks of entrepreneurship are worth it. This process was lonely at times, particularly when my founding team stepped back. Given the complexity of the project, in which I not only had to be Chief Academic Officer but Chief Operating Officer, Chief Community Officer, and Chief Development Officer, I longed for more of a team. Indeed, given that most entrepreneurial projects do not succeed, it becomes especially important to mitigate that risk through a thriving team. When I had that, I was happy to take on risks, both financial and otherwise. When I did not, the benefits no longer outweighed the costs. As a result, I am not going to pursue Prime until I have a strong and sustainable team that I trust.

And while I now know more about hiring processes, I do not have any foolproof solutions. I did believe there were risks to the team members I brought on, but I believed such risks were inevitable in time-sensitive hiring environments. Perhaps the lesson is that I should not let the time sensitivity of a project impact the quality of the team selection; when given a choice between starting at the right time or hiring the right team, choose the latter. Also, I could have set clearer milestones for hiring or worked with some of the initial team members on a more provisional basis. I was so grateful that they were willing to join the team that I did not want to add pressure on them through more formal milestones, but that may have been projection on my part; perhaps they would have appreciated the chance for honest feedback and a faster assessment of what was going well and what needed improvement.
And finally, I learned more about my own areas of growth as a leader. In particular, I held on, perhaps too stubbornly, to certain parts of the model to which I felt emotionally attached; as a result, I was unwilling to play the game as much as necessary. I also learned that I needed to have a greater depth of knowledge at more levels of the organization, rather than remaining satisfied with understanding the big picture. While I initially thought that such micromanagement was a detriment, I learned through the process that early-stage organizations require just that—organization. This is not only because an organized and meticulous approach can demonstrate professionalism to donors and authorizers, but because the model simply wouldn’t work until I figured out some of the smaller but tough questions about how the model worked. My initial image of entrepreneurship—a motley crew of highly caffeinated and creative collaborators who were improvising as they went—might have been romantic, but it was not a recipe for success. Instead, I needed to be more methodical, both in addressing the logistics of the charter application process, and in building the team. As noted earlier, I barely knew some of our so-called founding team members because I had delegated this task to our principal. As a result, I did not have as deep an understanding of the application as I needed to have in order to make the necessary application changes with confidence.

Part IIIb. Implications for Site

There are several important implications for TNTP in the analysis of Prime’s success and challenges. They fall into three primary categories: First, TNTP invested at a very early stage, providing resources to launch a radically different learning model that would otherwise not have taken shape. Second, TNTP invested in starting a new school
in New York, but given the difficult political environment, it might benefit from a deeper discussion of the political environment prior to making similar investments in school design teams. Third, TNTP has learned about the qualities of strong founding teams; while these teams need a strong, entrepreneurial leader, they also need supporting roles that are funded in order to persist through what can often be a multi-year process of authorization.

As I considered launching Prime in the fall of 2014, I was uncertain whether I would be able to find support for my project. Most funders, such as the Charter School Growth Fund, were unwilling to invest until I had a) a charter b) a facility and c) a school leader. While I was able to find a school leader by the end of 2014, I needed seed funding to support a team that had the time and expertise to get a charter and in turn secure a facility. TNTP was in the early stages of school design exploration.

The nascent school design team at TNTP sat within the Emerging Services team, which was designed as a kind of research and development space within the organization where new services and systems could be tried. Not all of these were revenue-positive or revenue-neutral; some investments, like my residency salary and the time from Ben Jackson, were a cost to the organization in the short-term. The reason TNTP was willing to make this investment was two-fold: first, while the organization had ideas on how to pursue school design, it needed to be closer to the process of starting a new school to truly understand it. Thus, it provided a way for TNTP to gain the expertise it needed to market itself to other schools and districts as a viable school model incubator. Second, it was a way to attract new talent and skills to the organization and to continue staying
abreast of the latest trends in school innovation by leveraging talent outside of its existing staff.

Importantly, then, TNTP had a fairly high degree of risk tolerance that other organizations solely focused on school investment may not have had: There was no big press release about their investment, no public forum where the residency was announced or explained, and no Board members requesting information about the investment. As a result, TNTP was able to fund a project that others may have seen as a risky investment. The implication for the future is that TNTP can play a uniquely risk-tolerant role in the school incubation space since school incubation is not its primary activity. According to Mike Tushman, Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, successful organizations are able both to exploit current strengths and opportunities, but also to explore new opportunities that are not currently profitable (Tushman, 1996). And unlike organizations whose goal is such investments, TNTP could place its exploration of school design off to the side in a way where I had a great deal of freedom to propose a more radical model.

At the same time, if TNTP indeed wanted the investment to pay off in a fully realized school model—as opposed to paying off in terms of organizational learning—in the future it may want to work with entrepreneurs to do a risk-analysis exercise that includes the political considerations at work. Indeed, where other funders pressed me on both my choice of New York City as well as the depth and diversity of my founding team, TNTP invested in the idea and in me. Given the entrepreneurial nature of such projects, it may never be possible to analyze the chances of success precisely, but going forward perhaps TNTP might work with potential entrepreneurs to analyze the political and operational
risks in order for both parties to have a better sense of a given project’s likelihood of success.

Another opportunity is for TNTP to link its policy work more closely with its innovation work. That is to say, TNTP could play an important role in innovation simply by advocating for better charter policies that would encourage more teacher-centered or simply more radical new models to develop. In addition, it might advocate for more flexible licensure requirements in ways that would allow more flexible staffing models to emerge, or it could give TNTP more of a rationale to advocate for radical compensation structures that are justified by the structural innovations inherent in models like Prime.

Third, TNTP might offer additional support going forward in team design and management. For example, the organization learned about my team members primarily from me. While my supervisor was on a call or two with my principal, going forward it might make sense to meet all the team members, not just to assess the risk of the investment, but to understand each member’s strengths and weaknesses; this might help the entrepreneur to know how to recruit the right team, develop the existing team, or remove team members who are not right for the project. Alternately, it would behoove TNTP to invest in individuals before they form a team rather than counseling out or assessing after the fact; perhaps TNTP could help entrepreneurs to build the team from the outset.

**Part IIIc. Implications for Sector**

In the process of navigating the authorization process for one school, there are several implications for the education sector at large: first, the authorization process
needs to change if demonstration schools are ever going to catalyze change throughout the sector. Second, new school models must radically rethink teacher roles in order to attract and retain the best possible talent. And finally, entrepreneurship in the public sector requires some prerequisite conditions beyond an innovative idea and a motivated founder.

In terms of the charter authorization process, the sector needs more organizations such as TNTP that are willing to invest time and resources into early-stage, groundbreaking models that do not yet have formal charter approval. These incubator organizations need to provide resources that go beyond money, however; they need the political savvy and operational know-how to shepherd new models through the application process. The New York City Charter School Center is one such organization, and others such as 4.0 Schools are experimenting with funding small-scale pilots, but participation often costs money; entrepreneurs are left in a chicken-and-egg dilemma: They cannot get funding without a charter, and they cannot get a charter until they have the funding necessary to support an effective team. I know that our team’s morale suffered due to the fact that we were all working as volunteers for the first part of the project. Recently, 4.0 Schools has begun a “Tiny Fellowship” (http://4pt0.org/programs/tiny-fellowship/) in order to help entrepreneurs test their ideas without quitting their jobs. This is a promising new track for potential entrepreneurs.

The authorization process should also become more transparent and more open to innovation. It was maddening to navigate NYSED’s charter authorization process, in part because the process was opaque and the criteria for judging applications seemed subjective. One possible alternative for more risk-averse authorizers (because I do believe
that charter authorization cannot become too lenient) is to provide a “summer charter” along with associated funding that allows a team to earn a charter to provide summer school programming as a low-risk testing environment for innovative ideas. Such pilots could provide early evidence of success that might mitigate the risks inherent in more innovative models. Or, innovative but less proven models could be given a shorter charter renewal period than the current five years.

My project also has implications for school design more generally. While the charter sector has shown some promising early results, if it loses a focus on sustainable innovation led by professionalized teachers, successful CMOs are likely to hit an achievement wall. New school founders should consider the ways in which their models will either enhance or impede double-loop learning that embrace more teacher autonomy. At the same time, the sector has not yet grappled with the potential unintended effects of teacher autonomy; as my analysis of the public value demonstrated, if the sector moves toward giving teachers more autonomy within a context of “teacher choice” rather than “school choice,” it will encounter difficult issues around teacher competition, schoolwide cohesion, and the potential drawbacks of teacher competition. This does not mean, however, that the sector should default to current role definitions; rather, the sector (through foundations, policies, and research institutions) should test and measure the results of such innovations in order to design environments that strike the right balance between teacher autonomy and teacher collaboration under an overall goal of increasing professionalism among teachers. To do this, authorizers thus might include a sustainability criterion in the initial charter application, or determine the extent to which teachers were involved in the design of the school, or require that teacher professionalism
and autonomy become an essential element in any approved model. The original promise of the charter movement, as envisioned by Shanker, was for teachers to identify local, contextual problems and use innovative tools to solve those problems for their students. It is up to policymakers to ensure that teachers remain leaders in the charter movement. If, instead, the sector continues supporting policies that treat teachers as replaceable labor in a system larger than the unit of the classroom, talented teachers who might otherwise make teaching a longer-term career will leave the classroom quickly. This turnover not only has an effect on student achievement, but it also has a financial impact that one recent study calculated at $2.2 billion annually (Haynes, 2014). The sector would thus benefit from placing an emphasis not only on outputs, but also on sustainable inputs and a model of teacher professionalism that will improve the prestige of teaching and reduce teacher training costs over the long-term.

Finally, my project has implications for entrepreneurs who are interested in starting new schools. First, context matters: Although an entrepreneur might feel more comfortable in one state than another, what matters most is the authorizing environment in that state. If I were to embark on this journey again, I would not have been so quick to start in New York just because I felt like less of an outsider there; although that kind of legitimacy is important, it is ultimately not as essential as finding a state where the authorizer has the capacity and the willingness to approve new schools. Second, it is essential for entrepreneurs to build a strong team and a strong Board of Trustees with at least one financial backer. My Board had relevant experience, but no one was able to contribute funds at an early stage to help us through the first, difficult year. Finding that champion can help overcome bureaucratic and financial hurdles along the way. Many
entrepreneurs are so dedicated to the mission of the school but are not yet prepared to make financial requests or to grapple with finances more generally. Sometimes it takes time to find this backing or to build a fundraising mindset, and it is essential for entrepreneurs not to rush headlong into an application process without first building a foundation for success. This does not mean that entrepreneurs need have all the answers at the outset, but simply having an innovative value proposition, even coupled with support from organizations like TNTP, may be insufficient; instead, it may be wise to wait until one has at least a clear financial backer, a strong founding team, or a very friendly authorizing environment to start in earnest.

**Conclusion**

My longer-term goal has been to not merely create a new charter school, but to transform the education sector through a new model of teacher professionalism. For the purposes of my strategic project, however, my primary concern was not to lay the groundwork for expansion or sector change, but to ensure that we successfully gained approval in ways that would not preclude the organization from further expansion in the future. But as I considered the longer-term implications of this work, I began to sketch a theory of sector change along the following lines:

(I) If we can create new charter networks that allow teachers and families (to the extent that they can make more meaningful choices about their children’s education through the selection of their children’s teachers) to engage in double-loop learning, and if we allow such networks (including the teaching teams themselves within a school) to
expand adaptively rather than merely replicating, then we can achieve greater long-term success for students.

(II) Moreover, the creation of more “smarter charters” may be able to disrupt the First Movement charter schools, which focus on relentless improvement of the current schooling model – a model that may inadvertently degrade the teaching profession because the profession in such a framework becomes more technical than adaptive, more about execution than learning and growing. Smart charters may force First Movement charters to change or lose students to schools that are more focused on a holistic and adaptive approach to student development.

(III) To the extent that charters can use their legal flexibility to provide teachers with true agency, the profession may increase its prestige, leading to a positive feedback loop in which talented individuals enter teaching because they see it as a place where they can take charge of their professional lives. Such teachers will be better equipped to meet the needs of individual students, leading to greater levels of student personalization and, ultimately, student achievement.

As it became clear that Prime was no longer going to launch in 2016, I wrote a memo to my Board about the potential ways that we could still pursue our mission—our public value—in the face of a difficult political environment. I outlined four potential pathways:

First, we could simply switch authorizers and attempt to apply for a charter for 2017. Indeed, our key consultant and several other charter founders had worked with SUNY and found greater success there. My colleague, Jamie Davidson, switched to SUNY the prior summer and was able to gain approval to open in 2016. The challenge
with this strategy was that, in the process of applying through the State Education Department, we had lost momentum as well as several founding team members. While I continued to interview potential team members, it was unclear how I would fund yet another planning year, particularly when there was no guarantee that SUNY would approve us.

In such an environment, perhaps the idea of starting a new charter organization was itself the problem; what if, instead, we could work within an existing organization or CMO and get that group to incubate and launch the school. After all, that might help mitigate the critique that we had no evidence of success. After a conversation with the Founder and CEO of Achievement First, however, it became clear that that particular network was already working on its own experimental school and did not have the capacity to support another. Furthermore, I began to doubt whether any existing CMO, because of an inevitable focus on immediate results and a desire to improve in a “single-loop” paradigm, would be willing to truly redesign even a single school within a network. It did not seem worth it to take on a lesser role within a foreign network if I could not ensure that we would be able to engage in a radical restructuring of the model.

Another path forward was to apply in another state with a more favorable charter environment. But similarly, I would have no team in another state, and if I had learned any lesson through this process, it was that the right team is an absolutely critical component of the work. Furthermore, I had just moved to New York from Boston, where I had moved from California, and I was ready to stay settled for the time being. A related option was to start a private school, either in New York or elsewhere, but for the time being, I did not have the team in place to pursue that level of entrepreneurial school
design. Some of our Board members were less interested in a private school, and so I was concerned that by pivoting to a private school, we would lose some of the limited support we had gained.

Finally, we could decide not to start a school in order to pursue more of a consultative approach in which we worked with existing schools or networks to engage in radical staffing design. While these schools would not necessarily adopt our full model, even partial adoptions would be a step in the right direction and would give us useful learning experiences that we could use if we decided to pursue a school in 5 or 10 years.

Ultimately, the Board Chair and I agreed that attempting to start a school in New York State was not the right path forward. We agreed to explore the possibility of starting a consulting firm that could help create staffing models that empowered teachers and students to achieve their potential. This opportunity was fraught with risk as well, particularly because we did not yet know if there was a market/need for this kind of firm.

But as I neared the end of my residency, the thought of working as an outsider leading an independent organization that nonetheless worked to disrupt conventional schools appealed to me. It might allow me to draw on some of my key strengths—creativity, building strong relationships quickly, and communicating and implementing complex ideas quickly—that I had gained during my time in the field working at School of One, Caliber Schools, and so forth. Regardless of the form that the work takes going forward, I ended my residency convinced of the benefits of redesigning the teacher role in ways that empower great educators to reach their potential.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Prime’s Mission and Key Design Elements

A. Mission Statement and Objectives
Prime Public Charter School (“Prime”) is a middle school proposed for grades 6-8 in Brooklyn’s Community School District 13 (“CSD13”). Prime’s mission is to personalize learning and professionalize teaching so that all students have the academic, personal, and professional preparation necessary for success.

Prime believes that in order for all students to become college and career-ready, we must reimagine the traditional, industrial-era school model that treats both students and teachers as identical, standardized, and interchangeable parts. In its place, we must build a school that enables (a) personalized and flexible learning environments that help students to take ownership of their own unique path to success and (b) professional teaching roles and environments that allow us to unleash the talent of expert educators to flexibly meet the needs of their particular students.

To achieve personalized learning, we:
• personalize the student-teacher assignment through a unique matching process that allows families to explore and match to a particular core academic teaching team.
• personalize the student’s pathway and progress through a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) that allows us to set and track individual goals\footnote{See Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Smiley & Dweck, 1994} and tailor the learning experience for each student.
• personalize the curriculum through Prime Journeys (a personal development class) and Prime Studio, which allows students to explore and become expert in a career-based passion area of their choice.
• Personalize the teacher-student relationship through smaller total student loads for each teacher and the ability to loop with the same teaching team over multiple years.

To achieve professional teaching, we:
• Hire master teachers to become Partners who can start and grow their own “Teaching Practices” over time. A Teaching Practice is a team of two or more educators who teach core academic content. As they demonstrate success, they have the option to take more students into their Practice, earning more and hiring new Teaching Residents (novice teachers). This allows the best teachers to teach more students than do early-career teachers, thus increasing learning gains across the school.
• Allow the Partners to hire Teaching Residents to work under their supervision, supporting Residents to hone their craft over time without sole responsibility for a group of students.
Prime will measure success using several metrics, including proficiency on the New York State English Language Arts and New York State mathematics exams, yearly student portfolios and exhibitions, and student and parent feedback. Given this unique model, students will leave Prime with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to succeed in high school and the world beyond.

Prime will address several of the purposes of Education Law §2850(2). Our model will improve student learning and achievement through a personalized core academic model that uses data early and often to inform instruction and to determine additional supports that students need. Upon enrollment, families learn about and match to one of several Teaching Practices – unique core academic teaching teams – giving families unprecedented involvement in their child’s academic experience (See sections regarding Key Design Elements, Achievement Goals, Curriculum & Instruction, and Assessment System, below, for more information on Teaching Practices.). This flexibility and personalization will enable Prime to increase learning opportunities for all students, particularly those with special needs.

Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) will be developed for every student at the intake process, aligned with Individual Education Programs (IEPs), language development needs, and/or other areas of strength or challenge. Our flexible use of instructional time and technology (enabled through laptops for each student) will ensure that we normalize the individuation found in IEPs.

Finally, because we offer an innovative teacher growth and career pathway, with a corresponding compensation model based on demonstrated results and impact, we will create new professional opportunities for teachers, providing them with greater structured autonomy over time, under close principal supervision. Please see sections Evaluation and Professional Development, below.

B. Key Design Elements

Prime Public Charter School (“Prime”) is a middle school proposed for grades 6-8 in Brooklyn’s Community School District 13 (“CSD13”). Prime’s mission is to personalize learning and professionalize teaching so that all students have the academic, personal, and professional preparation necessary for success.

While most middle schools aspire to similar goals, too many fall short of truly reaching them. While the middle school (grades 6-8) was founded to address the unique needs of adolescents, too many are set up more as “junior high schools,” designed to help accustom students to the departmentalized, subject-specific teaching they would encounter in high school. To meet the unique needs of young adolescents, including interdisciplinary learning to sustain curiosity and supports to help students navigate the social and developmental changes of adolescence, middle schools often provide additional programming. These programs, however, tend to be relegated to “extra curricular” status, which leads to a disjointed and disengaging experience for many students, despite the efforts of great teachers.
Prime reinvigorates the original promise of middle school as an integrated and personalized experience where academic learning, social-emotional development, and individual aspirations complement and reinforce each other. Achieving this kind of integration requires not only a different mindset, but also an innovative and flexible set of scheduling and staffing practices. Over the last two decades, educators have increasingly used autonomy and new technology to make learning more rigorous, personalized, and engaging. The Prime school design is based on the lessons of these innovators, and it is informed by the voices of CSD13 families who have told us that they want a new middle school option that is more personalized, more engaging, and has more effective instruction than existing middle school options.

Three components form the foundation for a typical day at Prime:

1. **Prime Core.** Students spend most of their day in a Teaching Practice, which is an interdisciplinary teaching team that provides Common Core-based instruction for a single group of students. In Year One, when we will have three teaching teams for 108-118 students, the Teaching Practice model allows each Prime teacher to have a student load of approximately 36 (in contrast to the typical middle school teacher load of 100+ students), allowing teachers to know each student well and meet their unique needs and interests. Research has shown that lower total student loads are associated with increased student achievement. The Teaching Practice also allows significantly more flexibility for co-teaching, project-based learning, and small group intervention, which will be particularly helpful for students who come to Prime below grade level or otherwise need customized support.

2. **Prime Journeys.** In groups of 12-16, students in Prime Journeys explore social-emotional and college-readiness skills such as self-reflection, conflict resolution, time management, diversity competencies, citizenship, and leadership. Our teachers will utilize a year-long structured and research-based personal development curriculum.

3. **Prime Studio.** In Studio, 6th grade students rotate through a series of two-week modules focused on Arts & Culture, Health & Fitness, and Design & Engineering. These modules are created by dedicated Studio Specialist Teachers, who coordinate with community-based organizations and local professionals to offer students opportunities to discover a new expertise through the creation of authentic products and projects on behalf of the outside organization. In 7th grade, students choose a focus area, and in 8th grade, students engage in a real-world internship in the surrounding community. With these three structures as the foundation, Prime will bring the mission of personalized learning and professional teaching alive through the key design elements described below.

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8 For research on the potential of an integrated, engaging approach to middle school curriculum, see Beane, J. A. (1993). *A middle school curriculum: From rhetoric to reality*. National Middle School Association.

To personalize learning, Prime will:

**Personalize the Learning Relationship**
- **Small Student Loads.** Each grade level will contain approximately three Prime Core Teaching Practices covering ~108-118 students, for an average of 36-40 students per Practice. Compared to a typical middle school teacher, who may teach well over 100 students in the course of one school day, our Teaching Practices have the ability to offer students much more detailed assessment feedback and to build more meaningful relationships.

- **Teaching Practice Matching Profile.** After a family accepts a seat, the Principal meets with each student and his or her family to fill out a Teaching Practice Matching Profile (TPMP), which helps each family determine which Teaching Practice is the right fit, based on a match of identities/interests, areas of expertise, and teaching methods. Research has shown that of all the various methods of family involvement, involvement in choosing the teacher is one of the few that is positively associated with increases in student achievement. Families can watch videos of each Teaching Practice, meet with teachers in prospective Teaching Practices, learn more about each practice’s pedagogical styles and areas of expertise, and receive support from the Principal in the match process.

**Personalize the Pathways to Mastery of Rigorous, Common Core Standards**
- **Common Core-Aligned Instruction.** Teams of two teachers (one of whom is generally dual-certified in special education) lead a Teaching Practice that collaboratively teaches math, English Language Arts (ELA), social studies, and science content that aligns to rigorous Common Core State Standards. Over time, the Teaching Practice may add support staff for particular subjects, but even in the first year of operation, each Practice is supported, either in planning and/or implementation, by a grade-wide Special Education teacher as well as Prime Studio Specialists in Arts & Culture, Design & Engineering, and Health & Fitness. Teachers begin with established curricula in ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies that have been vetted to ensure strong alignment national standards (CCSS and the Next Generation Science Standards). They then adapt these curricula based on their own unique passions and expertise, designing units and lessons that take advantage of the flexibility offered by the Prime model. This approach is based on the one used at Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS), which uses a team-teaching approach. Their model has proven quite successful: In 2013, WHEELS was one of the top 10 middle schools in NYC. We have also observed this model at High Tech High, a very successful school (98% of graduates go on to college and 86% of high school graduates are either still in or have graduated from college) serving a diverse population in California, in which teams of two teachers work together to teach all core content areas.

- **Personalized Learning Plans.** Each student will have a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) that sets specific academic, personal development, and career/college

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readiness goals and charts an individualized pathway to meeting these goals. The PLP will span Core, Journeys, and Studio, and will be based on standards-based diagnostic assessments, guided personal reflection, and family input. The PLP establishes a shared vision for each student’s learning among adults at Prime and between school and family, and helps students learn to take more responsibility for their own learning. We base our use of broad-based PLPs on the work done at Summit Public Schools, one of the highest performing charter school networks in California.

- **Multiple Pathways to Mastery.** The Teaching Practice model provides the flexibility to offer multiple modalities of learning, so that students master Common Core standards according to the most efficient and effective pathway for that student (which is described in his or her PLP). The flexible nature of this model will help all students, but because of the opportunity for dynamic pull-outs and push-ins, it will be particularly effective for students with disabilities, English Language Learners, or students who are struggling academically. Instead of stigmatizing push-ins, pull-outs, and small-group tutoring, these formats will become a normalized part of a personalized learning environment. The two primary teachers in a Teaching Practice may occasionally co-teach all students in a large group, but it will be more common for teachers to split the group as needed into smaller groups of students, with each group taught by one of the Practice’s teachers. In Year 1, the three Practices will each have two main teachers, but over time Practices may add students and staff, allowing great flexibility in student groupings. Since Practices have varying numbers of students based on how many students match to that Practice, we will need large, flexible spaces and significant technology to accommodate the less rigid nature of class sizes. For students who reach middle school and need remediation, the teachers have flexibility to meet with such students in targeted small groups based on frequent formative assessment data or to use online learning programs to accelerate growth. In addition, the teachers in a Practice can pull in a Prime Studio Specialist to support instruction as needed. For example, in a 7th grade unit on Early America, the Arts & Culture Studio Specialist (see more below) may assist the Prime Core teachers in implementing a unit that includes a trip to see “Hamilton,” a new Broadway musical that explores the life of Alexander Hamilton using hip hop as the musical backdrop. The Arts & Culture Studio Specialist will also have ESL certification in order to provide ELL students with required supports throughout the day.

- **Data-Driven Instruction and Intervention.** Prime teachers, under the supervision and support of the Principal, will look at formative data (academic as well as social-emotional) at regular intervals to ensure that students are on track toward grade-level mastery and their PLP goals. This allows us to intervene early with students who may initially struggle with a more self-paced learning environment. Prime will

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11 For larger-group instruction, teachers will utilize the principles of Universal Design for Learning – see Pisha, B., & Coyne, P. (2001) – a model that gives every student a variety of ways to access content within the same space. For example, in a unit on animal cells, a teacher might allow students to choose whether to use an online video simulation, a textbook, or a peer discussion to start a lesson on how cells produce energy. The content and rigor across these stations are similar, but the means of access differ based on student needs.
also have a floating Special Education teacher who can pull out and push in as necessary in order to meet the needs of students with IEPs. This teacher, one of the two Practice teachers, or Prime Studio Specialist Teachers thus has co-teaching flexibility to implement an intervention program such as Wilson, Just Words, or to supervise an adaptive online remediation program. The special education teacher will track the push-in/pull-out IEP goals for any students with special needs. This teacher will also make sure that any students who require a small classroom environment are provided with one. To ensure high levels of rigor and appropriate progress, we use the Response to Intervention (RtI) model to identify at-risk students and provide them with proactive targeted support. Students with IEPs will have PLPs that match them to special education-licensed teachers, and English Language Learners will likewise have PLPs that use tools such as the NYSITELL to determine ELL status and match them to teachers with expertise in ELL instruction.

Personalize the Curriculum

- **Interdisciplinary Learning.** Interdisciplinary learning has been shown to [insert research references about why interdisciplinary learning is good], particularly when rooted in rigorous standards like the CCCSS. Prime Core facilitates high quality interdisciplinary learning by allowing teachers to work in a consistent Humanities/STEM teaching team (i.e. a Teaching Practice) for the full year. It also provides teachers with the flexibility to adjust daily schedules to allow for larger blocks of instruction, which are essential for robust interdisciplinary lessons and units.

- **Personal Development.** During Prime Journeys, students develop health habits of body and mind through a robust social-emotional curriculum designed to give them the toolkit necessary to navigate diverse environments. Particularly for students with behavioral or emotional challenges, Prime Journeys will provide a space to peacefully resolve conflicts, explore changing identities, and develop a “growth mindset” that enables students to act on the belief that effort can yield significant academic and personal progress. Because research shows that social-emotional learning is most effective in the context of a structured, research-based curriculum, we will partner with PowerTools, LLC, a group with extensive experience in developing high quality advisories for adolescents.

- **Real World Learning.** Our model helps students re-engage in school by developing professional exposure and expertise in a passion of their choice, through Prime Studio. In 6th grade, students will rotate through two-week modules with each of three Prime Studio Specialists. The three Prime Studio Specialists we anticipate hiring for Year One will specialize in Arts & Culture, Health & Fitness, and Design & Engineering. Thus, in any given six-week period, students will gain exposure to all three of these areas through a two-week module in which the Specialist co-teaches with local volunteers from creative, commercial, or cultural organizations. In 7th and 8th grade, units deepen as students dive into particular areas. In 8th grade, students complete an apprenticeship outside of school.
To professionalize teaching, Prime will:

**Give Master Teachers Significant Autonomy to Increase Performance and Retention**
- Teaching Practices are led by a team of experienced, accomplished teachers, one of whom is generally dual-certified in special education. Under the close supervision of the Principal, Teaching Practices will have substantial autonomy within a set of mandated structures to organize their classrooms and class times, as well as the allocation of resources that the school provides to each team. We believe that this will help us to recruit and retain skilled teachers who are considering instructional leadership roles in traditional middle schools, but would prefer to remain in the classroom if they had the opportunity for true professional autonomy.

**Give Early-Career Teachers More Effective Pathways**
- Prime will have a range of support programs for new teachers as well as specified pathways, based on proven results shown by student growth, to progress through a continuum of roles, each with greater autonomy, responsibility, and compensation as it is earned. The most accomplished teachers are **Partners**, who co-lead a Teaching Practice and have substantial responsibility for curriculum development and new teacher development. **In our first year we will only hire Partners. Fellows** work within an existing Practice, sometimes in preparation to open their own Practice. They learn how to coach new teachers in preparation to become Partners. A **Resident** is a relatively new teacher who works within an existing Practice and is coached by both the Partner and the Principal.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Partner</th>
<th>Fellow</th>
<th>Resident</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>A Partner starts a new Practice with a co-Partner. They have significant responsibility for curriculum development and new teacher development. If successful, these teachers can add students to their Practice, hire new Residents, and earn more over time.</td>
<td>Fellows work within an existing Practice, sometimes in preparation to open their own Practice. They learn how to coach new teachers in preparation to become Partners.</td>
<td>A resident is a relatively new teacher who works within an existing Practice and is coached by both the Partner and the Principal. They teach under the supervision of a Partner or Fellow.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of Experience and Achievement</td>
<td>All Partners have at least three (and usually more) years of teaching experience and demonstrated ability both to improve student</td>
<td>All Fellows have at least two years of teaching experience and demonstrated ability to significantly improve student</td>
<td>All residents have at least one year of teaching or relevant experience and demonstrated potential to</td>
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learning and to coach/mento new teachers.

significantly improve student learning.

Provide High-Quality Teacher Support
- To ensure that teachers develop as professionals, we provide them with significant support: six weeks per year, in addition to daily planning time and weekly workshops, as well as Instructional Rounds to share what works across Teaching Practices. Prime will hold teachers accountable to high standards in three areas: Performance, Pedagogy, and Personal Development (See Professional Development for additional details). Performance is assessed through student work products, student surveys, and student test score growth. Pedagogy is assessed through frequent administrative and peer classroom observations. Teachers will also maintain a portfolio of unit and lesson plans and showcase knowledge of key teaching concepts. Personal development is assessed through twice-yearly 360 reviews from students, peers, and families, as well as a personal reflection process detailing the ways in which teachers demonstrate personal growth.

Appendix 2: Round 1 Feedback from NYSED on Prime’s Charter Application

2015 Round 1 Review Panel Summary of Significant Findings

Prime Public Charter School
The following summary of reviewer findings is intended to provide the applicant group with a better understanding of the rigorous criteria and expectations for approval to establish a high quality charter school. The findings presented are highlights of specific deficiencies that were noted by the review panel, but should not be viewed as a complete compilation of changes that should be made to the proposal. If the applicant group seeks to submit an application to establish a Regents-authorized charter school in the future, the group should review these findings and consider appropriate modifications to the school design plan in view of the evaluation criteria published in the 2015 Request for Proposals to Establish Charter Schools Authorized by the Board of Regents (RFP).

Summary of Findings
§ _Section I (A) Mission: The mission, which defines the core purpose and key values of the school, was not clearly reflected throughout all sections of the full application.

§ _Section I (C) Enrollment: The applicant group failed to address all criteria, including a rationale for how the proposed school would be able to meet or exceed enrollment targets and the school’s plan to address student attrition.

§ _Section I (E) Public Outreach: The applicant group failed to address four of the seven evaluation criteria. The description of the public outreach conducted to date to solicit community input regarding the proposed school is general, and does not include sufficient information and/or dates of public meetings held, discussions with community
parents, stakeholders or organizations, public awareness campaigns, media coverage or results from surveys conducted.

§ _Section II (B) School Schedule and Calendar: The information provided in the narrative and related attachments describing the student and teacher schedules and the school calendar was incomplete and did not present a clear picture of how teachers and students would engage in the teaching and learning process. For example, how and when teachers would deliver the proposed intervention program is not clearly articulated or aligned with Attachment 3a. It is also unclear when teachers would have an opportunity to plan. Additionally, having three 58-minute periods per week in each of the core content areas is of shorter duration as compared to schools in NYC that serve similar student populations.

§ _Section II (C) Curriculum and Instruction: The narrative states that the curriculum will be developed by the proposed school. A viable plan, including a timeline, and a clear framework supported by sound research, experience or a theoretical base along with foundational materials to guide the development of curricula, is not clearly presented. In addition, this section did not clearly articulate all program components nor is it aligned with the described assessment and professional development plans.

§ _Section II (E) Performance, Promotion and Graduation Standards: The applicant group did not describe the proposed school’s policies and standards for promoting students to the next grade level. The application does not describe the policies and standards in a way that promotes student and parent understanding.

§ _Section III (C) Management and Staffing and Section III (D) Evaluation: The applicant group identified three founding members for school leadership positions; the Executive Director, School Principal, and Chief Operating Officer. However, the applicant group did not provide any information regarding the process used to determine that these individuals were the most qualified for the leadership positions. The application does not address how the evaluations of the Executive Director and the board of trustees will evaluate their effectiveness. Although the School Principal will report directly to the Executive Director, the Board will evaluate the School Leader’s position.

§ _Section III (F) Facilities: The facility plan is for private space; however, the possible fiscal implications of the plan are not considered.

§ _Section III (K) Budget and Cash Flow: The budget is not aligned with the intended mission or key design elements, including, technology, staffing, professional development, and facilities. Additionally, the budget shows a 30% increase in the Executive Director’s salary while teachers’ salary increases are approximately 5%.

**Overall**

The applicant group presented a conceptually innovative application that was lacking in sufficient detail. As a result, the applicant group did not provide a cohesive and aligned
implementation plan that demonstrates the readiness required to launch and operate a high quality charter school.

Appendix 3: Round 2 Feedback from NYSED on Prime’s Charter Application

Summary of Findings

§ Section I (B) Key Design Elements: The application requires a description of the key features that are core to the overall design of the school. Although the applicant group provided a description of the key features, cogency is lacking. In addition, the presentation of a unique school design requires either sufficient evidence of success, if drawing on existing school models, or if the design does not have a precedent, sufficient research or other information that supports its efficacy; the narrative fails to meet this criterion.

§ Section I (D) Community to be served: The applicant group failed to address all evaluation criteria. Missing in the rationale is how Prime will enhance or expand the educational options and how the educational program or innovative methods differs from those of CSD 13 schools. Additionally, the applicant group failed to clearly articulate or provide evidence to support how the applicant group assessed family and community support within the district for the proposed school.

§ Section I (E) Public Outreach: The applicant group provided evidence of its public outreach efforts, including a meeting with the leadership of CSD 13. However, but the applicant group failed to present evidence of parent or community input regarding the proposed charter school and how that input shaped the application. For example, little evidence is provided to support having talked with “hundreds of parents.”

§ Section I (F) Programmatic and Fiscal Impact: The applicant group failed to respond to the evaluation criteria. Specifically, the applicant group did not identify the number or type of public and non-public schools in the area or discuss the projected programmatic impact of the proposed school on other public and non-public schools in the area.

§ Section II (A) Achievement Goals: The applicant group stated their belief in setting SMART (specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and time-bound) achievement goals. Four goals with several metrics have been articulated. Some metric statements, however, are not specific to their measures. Some metrics were not provided for several of the proposed achievement goals.

§ Section II (C) Curriculum and Instruction: The applicant group has failed to present a clear and coherent framework for effective implementation of both "already developed" and "to be developed" curricula in the differing Teaching Practices.

§ Section III (C) Management and Staffing: The applicant group failed to attach Attachment 8a to the application. The applicant group also failed to present a staffing plan that is viable and adequate for effective implementation of the proposed educational
program and strategies for recruiting and retaining effective teachers that are realistic and reasonably likely to be effective.

Overall, the application does not present a cohesive and aligned plan to launch and operate a new high-quality public charter school. The applicant group did not address all evaluation criteria particularly in Section I and Section II. Although a great deal of information is provided, the content is often not focused and specific in response to the criteria.

Appendix 4: Round 3 Feedback from NYSED on Prime’s Charter Application – Summary of Findings

Summary of Findings

- Section I (B) Key Design Elements: The applicant group describes the innovative key features that are core to the school’s overall design; however, specificity is lacking throughout the application to fully understand the model presented. The narrative does not provide evidence the model has been successful or sufficient research to support its efficacy.

- Section II (C) Curriculum and Instruction: The applicant group fails to present a viable plan for the development of curriculum. Although a foundational curriculum has been described, the narrative states that the special education teacher and studio specialists will work over the summer to study the existing framework and make appropriate modifications. It is not a clear plan. The described curriculum and instructional methods are not aligned with the assessment plan, professional development or the pre-opening plan.

- Section II (D) Assessment: The narrative fails to fully describe how the processes of administering assessments, analyzing assessment information and developing resultant action plans will be managed within the school. As described, teachers will be responsible for creating formative and summative tools, which requires a high level of teacher expertise and guidance. The professional development plan does not sufficiently address teacher training in this area.

- Section II (E) Performance, Promotion and Graduation Standards: The applicant group fails to describe a fully developed plan for promoting students to the next grade, achievement level, or grouping level.

- Section II (G) Special Student Populations and Related Services: The application did not describe how the proposed school will provide all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs), with meaningful access to participate and progress in the general education curriculum. For example, the narrative states that at least one teacher will be a licensed ESL teacher; however, the staffing chart indicates some teachers will be dually certification in special education.

- Section III (C) Management and Staffing: The applicant group did not present a
staffing plan that is viable and adequate for effective implementation of the proposed educational program and strategies for recruiting and retaining effective teachers that are realistic and reasonably likely to be effective. For example, the described recruitment and retention efforts are not likely to attract the seasoned educators the applicant group is seeking.

· Section III (E) Professional Development: The professional development plan is not fully aligned with the educational plan and missing key components of teacher and administrator training need to successfully launch a new school.

· Section III (L) Pre-Opening Plan: The applicant group did not demonstrate an understanding of key pre-opening responsibilities consistent with the school’s education, organizational and financial plans. For instance, the chart does not include the hiring of a school principal or time devoted to curriculum development.

**Overall**
The application does not present a cohesive and aligned plan to launch and operate a new high-quality public charter school. Broad areas of concern include the key design elements.

**Appendix 5: Initial List of NewSchools Catapult Grantees**

**Catapult: Invent 2015**

$100,000 planning investment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Location / Grades Served</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+ Unlimited Potential</td>
<td>Houston, TX / 6th-8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn Laboratory Charter High School</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NY / 6th-12th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caliber: Vallejo</td>
<td>Vallejo, CA / Transitional K-8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit Prep</td>
<td>Detroit, MI / PreK-8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gem Prep: Nampa</td>
<td>Nampa, ID / K-12th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic Schools</td>
<td>Chicago, IL / 7th-12th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Solar Preparatory School for Girls | Dallas, TX / K-8th
---|---
Thrive High School | San Diego, CA / 9th-12th

Appendix 6: Samples of Final Work from A305

I engaged a team of four students in A305 at HGSE to help us get more detailed about Prime’s model. Below I share a sample email from the team where they send updates, as well as three quick samples from one student’s final work product, in which he attempted to show how our website might communicate different Teaching Practices.

Email Update from A305 Team

Team Member 1
Update
I have been in touch with several area organizations that I think might make good partnerships. The most promising appears to be City Growers, a youth organization working with a for profit farms in the Brooklyn area. They offer both programs for students to work at the farm, and will bring urban agriculture (including beehives) to schools. My next step is to get in touch with the teacher who ran a similar program through a public school in Clinton Hill to learn more about how they set things up, and how the work turned out. I’ve also been in touch with an administration member of a new charter school that opened this fall in Brooklyn to learn about their process of establishing community partnerships, and he made a good suggestion of trying to link with local theaters to invite an artist-in-residence into the school.

Questions

1. One of the comments that has come up in all my interviews is the struggle of both school and community organizations in finding the other. Have you given any thought into who will be working to establish connections with partner organizations? Is this a job for teachers, admin, a totally separate position?

2. For Prime Studio, are there any partner organizations you know of that you’d like me to look into and establish initial contact?

3. How long do you see “apprenticeships” occurring? Full year, semester/trimester/quarter, other?

Team Member 2
Update
My part of the Prime project focuses on support systems for incoming teachers who may not be as familiar with some of the pedagogical approaches that will be housed at Prime. My plan is to create the framework for a series of professional development trainings for new (and returning) teachers that will occur before students arrive, in addition to a suggested framework for continued support and training that would occur throughout the school year. I imagine the PD to address different pedagogies, as well as co-teaching and cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness. As I’ve been imagining what this would look like, I’ve come across a few unknowns, which I’ve posed as questions below.

Questions

1. Because of the high-autonomy given to practices I imagine that each practice will have a strong culture cultivated by its teaching team. How are you envisioning creating a coherent school culture and how does this interact with the high autonomy given to the practices? Also, do you envision times during the day or week where practices can collaborate?

2. I’m envisioning part of the PD to occur before school starts (is this reasonable? what do you envision the summer timeline to look like?), and having teachers learn best practices from those with more experience by having different types of teaching and learning modeled such that the new teachers are put in the role of learner. What teaching styles or skill sets do your current team members have that could be an asset during these trainings (e.g. Natalia is skilled at creating experiential learning experiences for students)?

Team Member 3

Update

My component of the Prime Public project focuses on teacher recruitment and selection. I am exploring options for how to recruit teachers who have a track record of designing and implementing high-quality “Prime-style” classroom environments AND who have personal and/or professional experience within the community Prime will be serving. Based on other schools’ experiences with hiring, feedback from potential recruits, and the specific needs of Prime, I will generate an initial recruitment plan for Prime’s first group of Core teachers. A newly hired principal can adapt this as necessary in order to recruit teachers for school year 16-17.

This is a particularly challenging problem due to the limited number of teachers who have well-documented success in each of the following areas:

- design and implementation of classroom instruction in a highly autonomous environment
- co-teaching
- content knowledge and pedagogical expertise across the STEM subjects or across the humanities subjects
experience working in a school context made up of predominantly low-income students and predominantly students of color

There are relatively few teachers who have any specific one of those qualifications, and very few who have all of those qualifications AND will be available next fall to start a new school in Brooklyn, NY.

Thus, there is a need to find teachers who meet at least most of these qualifications (which is a challenge), and to decide which of these qualifications is most critical, and then to design an interview process to determine which teachers actually meet those requirements and which will be most successful in this school environment.

Team Member 4

Update

I interviewed teachers from different types of scenarios – one from a traditional public school, one in a charter school, and one in a private school – in order to see if their needs and wants in terms of autonomy would be different than what you had mentioned in the email. I wanted to survey teachers from a variety of teaching backgrounds to collect a wide range of desired autonomies. From these interviews I found that in addition to the initial set of four characteristics assessment/grading format, curriculum materials (i.e. textbooks), physical environment (desks, classrooms, etc.), and parent communication are also factors that teachers want control over because they greatly impact teacher instruction. With these additional factors, a solid set of at least eight traits will help define one practice from another. I am in the process of connecting education research to these characteristics to understand how they affect student learning. I am also going to speak with parents to understand what their concerns are, so that I can then represent this practice to them effectively.

Questions

1. One of the teachers commented that while autonomy is great from the teacher's point of view, how would teachers be held accountable? Would it be related to the popularity of the practice from parents and students or through some other mechanism?

2. With autonomy over grading and content materials, how would the school ensure accountability to state standards?

3. Initially I was going to put together a visual representation, but with the prototype due by November 16th, I won’t be able to put together a full wireframe. What do you feel are the most vital components of the visual representation that I should focus on?
Defining Different Instructional Styles: Figure 2

Appendix H: Letter to Prime Board of Trustees
Memo to Prime Board Regarding Options Following Round 3

Context:
Prime Public Charter School applied three times with the New York State Education Department to open a new middle school in 2016 in District 13. At this point, barring unforeseen circumstances, we cannot open as a charter school in New York State in the 2016-17 school year. Given the Board and the proposed Executive Director’s commitment to Prime’s unique model for achieving both professionalized teaching and personalized learning, we want to explore potential options that will allow us to continue to achieve our mission.

Initial Assessment of Executive Director: Based on the initial exploration of benefits and challenges of each option below, the Executive Director recommends that we continue to explore the feasibility of Option 1 (start in 2017), but it requires that we identify a strong founding team, a facilities path, and keep the momentum up. At the same time, it is also worth discussing the extent to which we can truly innovate and explore the edges of school design in a charter context. In the event that Option 1 does not seem feasible, option 2 (independent school) or 3 (service provider) are worth considering. Option 4 (start in a different state) simply has too many challenges and too few benefits to provide a realistic path forward.

Option 1: Prime applies to SUNY in December, with intention to open in 2017

Benefits:
(1) SUNY is the preferred authorizer among charters in New York State (better-staffed/more capable); SUNY has shown it is still interested in authorizing, and is interested in authorizing independent, non-CMO charters as well. There is a good chance we can gain approval through SUNY.
(2) More time will provide the team with more time to put together a founding team that is truly committed to the school and has the right experience to make it a success. It also provides the organization with more time to find a facility or raise appropriate funds to find a space.

Challenges:
(1) Keeping the momentum for another year. This would have to become a back-burner project for the time being, given the difficulty in funding any full-time staff beyond April 2015. The time between April 2015 and October 2015 may be difficult; after that, funding for an approved charter may enable us to hire some staff.
(2) Gaining approval, perhaps particularly in CSD 13, is another challenge. There is still significant local backlash against charters.
(3) Do we need to build a brand-new charter, with all the back-office challenges, to test and build this new model? How much of our time will be spent on issues that all schools deal with versus the unique parts of Prime that we want to spread across the education sector?
(4) The restrictions placed on charters is a third, and in some ways critical, challenge. Given what we know now about the process and the challenges of innovation in public schools and political support in the district, should we instead opt for a different route that will allow us to explore a truly innovative model?

**Option 2: Prime opens an independent school, either in 2016 or 2017.**

Benefits:
(1) Freedom and flexibility. As an independent school, we would have much more freedom to innovate, both in terms of staffing as well as curriculum and scheduling. We can work on more flexible timelines to create a school that we think truly meets the needs of students, rather than the mandates of the state.
(2) Greater potential for investment: Given that we may need to build new technologies to support a radically different model, it is possible that an independent school will give us the ability to attract investment to make such products.

Challenges:
(1) How can we ensure that we serve, either short-term, medium-term, or long-term, the students who need us the most?
(2) Can the idea spread widely through the education sector if we are an independent school?
(3) Can we raise initial funds to support this kind of school? We have not tested the demand for this, though anecdotally many parents in NYC are considering private school options and are interested in low-cost (<15k) private school options.

**Option 3:** Prime becomes a service provider that helps a wide range of schools to implement a particular “Prime” model. This is similar in some ways to what NewClassrooms has done – take a particular way of doing talent, technology, time, and curriculum – and help interested districts or CMOs to implement it.

Benefits:
(1) Alignment to mission/expertise: This helps us focus on our core value: a new way to organize school around professionalizing teaching and personalizing learning. In that sense, it is the model that lets us do the work that is most aligned to our mission, while letting others do what they do best.
(2) Flexible implementation: We can actually see what works without the stresses associated with seeing what works while running an entire school.
(3) Flexible timing: We can run pilots and small-scale versions of the model to see what works well under which conditions.
(4) Wide Network/Scale: Jonathan knows schools around NYC as well as nationally, including national school networks. This means lots of potential
customers as well as the ability to quickly change the conversation across the education sector nationally.

Challenges:
(1) Fidelity to Implementation: If we are simply helping other schools, they have the option to veer from the model, preventing us from ever seeing the “pure” version of the model in action. This was a challenge that confronted Kunskapsskolan, which tried to consult in the U.S. and U.K. and had less success than when they simply ran their own schools. Others (New Tech Network, RISC, etc.) have faced similar issues. But some might be able to do it successfully (New Classrooms, Envision Learning Partners, etc.). It’s unclear how the challenges differ from orgs that started with a school then tried to consult versus consulting from the start.
(2) Passion/Dedication: There is something about “owning” a school, along with its students, its culture, and so forth, that attracts a level of dedication that may be more difficult in a service provider.
(3) Financial Model: We have not yet determined whether there is sufficient demand for Prime’s model that it would garner enough demand to support even a not-for-profit organization. But other similar organizations (such as Transcend) are starting to explore this, and several schools have expressed interest.

Option 4: Prime opens in another state, aiming for 2016 or 2017 opening.

Benefits:
(1) Other states may be more welcoming to charters and place fewer restrictions on how we operate.

Challenges:
(1) Timeline: Could we open in 2016? If not, is there a real benefit to switching states now?
(2) Legitimacy: Do we have deep enough connections in any other state to make us feel like legitimate charter operators there?
(3) Board: We have a strong Board right now that lives in Brooklyn and Manhattan. We would likely need to add or change the Board significantly to switch states.
(4) Funding: Some of the states that are most flexible regarding charters also have low per-pupil funding models. Without additional private donations, our model, particularly in the early years, might be difficult to implement.
(5) Leadership: The right state might not be one where Jonathan or other team members want to move. 😊