

## STARTING A SCHOOL

So you want to start a school! Why? Are you convinced that you are some kind of miracle worker who can solve all those academic and social problems you read about in today's newspaper or a current magazine if you can just start the right kind of school? Are there parents who just know you are the answer to the community's present day public school problems that have asked you to be their children's mentor since you have been such a great teacher in school "x" or a great mentor in church or community? Have you the dream that there is money out there to be made in a good private school, and your entrepreneur talents are just right for making something like this a success? Is there no religious emphasis, no moral emphasis, no real value system in the schools, and you are the answer waiting to happen? Before you rush into battle "half-cocked" and get shot down by the enemy of confusion and despair, you really need to find out what is driving this desire, this motivation.

Not that there is anything wrong with having dreams and visions. The excitement of discovery, self-actualization, satisfaction, and pleasurable fulfillment that will come with the success of your venture is more than worth the frustrations, doubts, and negative, demeaning comments that will come your way. Remember change is always resisted. There will always be "crepe-hangers" who will prophecy failure, condemn your every act, and put every obstacle possible in your way.

Let's look at the most logical place to begin your search for information. In some states there is help available from the Department of Education or Department of Public Instruction. In Texas much of the information must be garnered from individual accrediting agencies under the umbrella of TEPSAC (Texas Private School Accreditation Commission) that have been approved by the Commissioner of Education or from the internet connection to the Texas Education Agency (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us>) where one can find curriculum and other information through the full text of the approved Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) manual. Here are listed all the requirements from kindergarten through high school as far as the public schools are concerned, and the private schools adhere to most of the daily curriculum requirements and days of instruction required. The variables are largely in the course material/textbooks used and in the fact that many private schools are religious in nature and wish to maintain their church-related instruction.

It is imperative that you begin your basic plans with an approach to one of the main accrediting groups that have been approved by the State of Texas. If you wish ties to a national entity that accredits schools for Texas and surrounding states inquiries should be directed to one of the accrediting bodies in the attached list and should begin at least a year in advance of the opening of a school. Additionally, before you involve most of these resources, an in depth study of all the local educational resources should be completed. Look to the current schools both public and "non-public" and examine the sources of their enrollments to determine whether or not another school in your area can be supported financially. In other words do a demographic research that will speak to the present need and the five and ten year need in a particular area. These are usually available in the statistical fact area of your main library or in the office of the Chamber of Commerce. Then contact one of the accrediting groups with TEPSAC for a self-study

guide that incorporates the expectations which you must ultimately attain in order to be recognized by them as accredited.

Have you entered the realm of determining whether the school will be a proprietary school, hoping to make money for its investors, or will it be an incorporated non-profit? Most proprietary or profit-sharing schools operated as businesses are usually under considerable scrutiny and are somewhat suspect. It seems highly doubtful to most people that a “for-profit” school could be working for the fullest betterment of its students while simultaneously seeking earnings for its proprietors (owners). In most “for-profit” schools, teachers and students often are being exploited. A tuition sufficient to give adequate salaries and benefits for the staff, and to provide the small class environment of a fine private school would be next to impossible in this kind of school. Of course, if there is someone with access to considerable funding from external sources, this might be a way to go. However, gifts to non-profit institutions are tax-deductible and provide incentives for generosity not found in the profit-making school.

By January a clearly stated “mission statement” should be the rallying philosophy of the school. It should state in very positive terms what the school stands for and perhaps what it is against. Herein will be what the school builds upon, what the parents expect, what draws the kind of leadership and faculty that makes an excellent institution, and what donors give to support. Without this, there is only a bland effort that simply says we want to become a school and a good one, but we are not sure why. From this mission statement a school should also be able to draw dedicated board members.

In that vein, a school should have a board of at least four members, a chair, a vice-chair, a secretary, and a treasurer. The school should incorporate with the help of an attorney who can draw up the Articles of Incorporation and the Bylaws of the Board. In these documents will be the school’s mission or purpose, the procedures for governance, and what will be the disposition of real property or funds in trust should the institution fail. These are most important in the case of non-profits since real estate can not be sold to the benefit of any one nor can the funds held be distributed like dividends. All assets must be transferred to another non-profit for use or for sale under the jurisdiction of some outside entity who likewise does not personally benefit. As a non-profit the school is a public trust as so proclaimed by the Secretary of State or the Attorney-General.

Next, find an excellent accounting firm that has experience with non-profits. On occasion, these can be found to donate *pro bono* services, i. e., services for the good of an institution without cost. Setting up the best bookkeeping methods possible can be in the best interest of both the institution and the accounting firm it will ultimately employ for yearly reports. It is a very good idea to include an accountant and a tax lawyer on your board.

The next item to look at is a projected budget. But how do you prepare a budget for a school that is itself a projection? At first it is a study in fantasy that includes a number of basic concepts. How many grades will the school encompass? How many children will there be in each grade? As you examine what is often called the Primary-Kindergarten unit, there will likely be grades K-1-2-3 with some twelve to fifteen children in each. This speaks to a range then of from forty-eight to sixty students. If plans call for the primary school to contain sixty students, there should be some contingency plans for variable numbers in the four grades if only ten third graders enroll

can the other grades absorb enough students to make up the difference? If your school contains only these grades, then the annual tuition must be based on the total number of children and will provide the funding for salaries and benefits, rent, utilities, food, telephone, indoor and outdoor equipment for play or exercise, furniture, books and supplies, maintenance, and upkeep. In your planning, insurance that includes errors and omissions to protect board, administration, faculty, and staff; general liability insurance on property; student accident insurance, and insurance against those current trends in our society such as accusations of sexual harassment and/or abuse must be included. They are costly but necessary.

This helps us to arrive at a projected tuition found by dividing the expenses planned by the number of children and adding another twenty-five to thirty percent to meet surprises head-on.

Begin with enough money based on enrollment projections to sustain the school for five years with a minimum enrollment. In their zeal to begin a school, some of the people involved have invested their own funds and others' personal bankrolls. The keeping of accurate records from the outset is most important. It is sometimes a single person who in his or her great desire to see the school begin, finances the entire operation without separating personal bank accounts from those of the school. Co-mingling of funds in this way can be extremely dangerous if the school should fail or if it is charged in a lawsuit with some neglect or failure to carry out its intended purpose or failure to follow the precepts of the mission statement, etc. An individual could then lose all personal finances and assets. There should be from the school's inception a plan for paying back all investors as funds become available.

Remember non-profit does not refer to a zero budget. Salaries and other expenses are included in the planned budget. Should there be excess funds, there will need to be a designated place for those funds like a scholarship fund or a building fund.

Plan to have fire department personnel inspect your proposed building or building plans to make suggestions for fire protection. There are also building inspectors usually in a city office who will examine the property for possible construction flaws that would help offset facility problems related to the structure--assuming you are planning on using a facility already built and in place. If you can't get them to come, call your insurance company to come look at the buildings and grounds. Check, in Texas, with the Department of Human Resources sub-department of Protective and Regulatory Services (DPRS) that issues licenses to pre-schools involved in early learning and child care, such as before and after school care. DPRS is listed among the county offices in most telephone directories. The health department should be asked to check the facilities for sufficient lighting, restroom facilities, space availability, playground safety, and just general aspects necessary for a child-safe environment. If you serve meals, there must be regular kitchen inspections not only of facilities but also of health cards for food handlers and others involved.

In selecting the school's location, zoning codes must be examined and adhered to. From community to community, there are distinct variations. Parking, playgrounds, setbacks from property lines and the planned use will be specifically examined as to hours, projected school population (Ages of students served will be a factor here), and perhaps how the planned architecture fits the neighborhood. Document everything and

file it as turnover in governmental offices is frequent. If you ask for information over the phone, be certain that you get the speaker's name and write a letter to them restating the information as you think you heard it. Send the letter to that department, keeping a copy for your files. This not only confirms the conversation, but, if not contradicted, it becomes a matter of official record.

Finally, plan on starting school when others are starting. If you do this as you should, enrollment should begin at least by January for the coming school year. To do this, all that has been discussed here has to be in place, i. e., site, board, incorporation, and staffing. Remember it "pays to advertise." Mailings and media coverage must be employed. In the area planned for the school, there will be people who will be willing to hear about the plans and invite others for a morning coffee or an evening dessert party. Printed materials such as catalogs with grade levels to be taught, curriculum to be used, school location, innovations such as computer use and increased foreign language training, reading clinics, etc. should be available for distribution. A student guide and parent handbook in outline form could also be included. Above all, be certain that all you hand to people is truly representative of what you plan to do, is spelled correctly, is written clearly, and contains the name of the person or persons to be contacted, the address, and the phone number in bold type. Let everyone know that the head of the school and anyone else who is capable of elaborating on the planned school is readily available for presentations. God bless you, keep you, and guide you as you enter a most precious time in the lives of the children who come under your care and teaching.

#### A PROJECTED TIME LINE

September & October..... (one year before)	Contact one or more of the listed accrediting bodies for self-study, or a local TEA Service Center for information on TEKS.
November.....	Prepare Mission Statement first draft.
December.....	Check possible sites; survey schools in the area; study demographics.
January.....	Start Board selection process: begin circulating information on the school; prepare enrollment procedures.
February.....	Ask selected Board members to assist in finalizing Mission Statement.

March.....Site search continues if building not already chosen or if not in construction process.

April.....Interview faculty and staff.

May.....Review enrollments with deposits.

June.....Scrounge up and/or purchase your furniture and equipment.

July.....Order phone service for school office; continue above efforts.

August.....Begin orientation meetings with faculty and staff; meet with board; Have evening meetings with parents and/or morning coffees also.

September.....SCHOOL BEGINS!!!!!!

MAKE SOME LISTS

Potential Board Members

Sites to Consider

Media Contacts

