

**The Changing Context of School Choice:
One Educator's Experience**

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2003-Present

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1997-2002

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The papers presented by this panel have attempted to address ‘the impact of school choice options on the educational system’ and hopefully to contribute to ‘a deeper understanding’ of this complex issue. This paper will attempt to put a human face on the issue by recounting two of the author’s own experiences creating small learning communities of choice; one within an existing public school system and the other within the public charter school arena. Both experiences illustrate the tremendous human struggle such endeavors represent within these very different contexts.

The author is currently the co-director of a public charter school in Tucson, Arizona (the Paulo Freire Freedom School) which opened in 2005-2006 with 6th and 7th grade. He was the Assistant Director of the Manual High School ‘Reform Initiative’ in Denver, Colorado from 1997-2002. In January 2003 after retiring from Denver Public Schools and moving to Tucson he formed El Pueblo Integral – Teaching and Learning Collaborative; a 501(c)3 educational nonprofit organization that supports the creation of small, powerful learning communities of choice within public schools and school districts nationally. EPI-TLC opened Paulo Freire Freedom School in August 2005 to be a demonstration site/laboratory school for best instructional practices and innovative school design.

Experience #1: The Manual High School ‘Reform Initiative’

As Assistant Director of the Manual ‘Reform Initiative’ the author helped design a lower and upper house system at a Denver high school - phased in over a four year period. The lower ‘Foundations House’ consisted of 9th and 10th grade interdisciplinary teams and a program that included student portfolios, grade level student advisories, and ‘Rites of Passage’ - a public exhibition of student work at the end of sophomore year. The upper house ‘Programs of

Excellence' were designed as four career pathways that included regular upper level core curriculum and student portfolios/advisories, as well as, signature courses in the career pathways, job shadowing and internships, and a final public exhibition of student work called 'Graduation by Exhibition' – required of all seniors.

The entire initiative represented a comprehensive effort to transform a failing urban high school into small, powerful learning communities of choice. Students were prepared in the Foundations House (through participation in exploratory experiences) to choose one of the four Programs of Excellence (career academies) at the end of sophomore year and during Rites of Passage they not only presented their portfolio of 9th and 10th grade work but were also required to defend their choice of an 11th/12th grade academy.

This initiative was also about creating learning communities of choice for faculty. From 1997-2002 the author helped design a building-wide professional development program that included yearly summer institutes and bimonthly 'Critical Friends Groups' to empower and support teachers and administrators through the comprehensive restructuring taking place at the school. The Critical Friends model was created by the National School Reform Faculty out of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform to support peer coaching and the public examination of student and teacher work. Two faculty members were trained by NSRF to facilitate CFGs in 1997. During the initiative a total of ten faculty members were trained as coaches and facilitated ongoing CFGs at the school.

Unfortunately, almost two years into the initiative it became apparent that the 'Reform Initiative' was not producing the student achievement results that the school had hoped for at the outset. The following excerpt from a summary of the initiative written by the author in February 2001 captures both the sense of urgency and the growing sense of the nature of the problem:

What did we need to be doing differently? What were we missing? The design model we had created using the CES ‘Ten Common Principles’ was supposed to produce the kind of student outcomes we could all be proud of. Why weren’t we getting the better results?

The neighborhoods feeding into Manual are the poorest neighborhoods in Denver. According to 2000 census data the average household income in the neighborhoods where most of our students reside was approximately \$26,000 (Denver was \$42,000). When broken further the data reveals even deeper poverty: per capita income in these three neighborhoods was approximately \$7,000 compared with \$19,000 Denver-wide. The free/reduced lunch rate at Manual has been over 80% throughout the years of school reform. That rate, however, does not reflect the numbers who truly qualified - only those who applied. Our principal feeder schools (elementary and middle) reported free/reduced lunch rates of 93% or higher.

High poverty has gone hand in hand with high student mobility. The mobility rate at Manual during the years of school reform has averaged 100% per year. For a school like Manual with a population of about 1,100 students that means that in a given year there has been on average, 1,100 total moves by students (new enrollments and withdrawals). The stability rate at Manual has averaged 78% during that same time period, so 22% of the total student body was accounting for 1,100 moves. For the average teacher at Manual this meant that the occupants of one-fifth of the student desks in their classroom were changing regularly.

The reform initiative had been designed to negate the impact of high poverty and high mobility by creating building-wide structures that supported academic rigor through increased personalization and accountability. We talked about personalization and accountability throughout the reform initiative’s implementation, however, everything implemented was implemented building-wide and was managed as such from the top down. The substance of the reform was not the problem. Student advisories, exhibitions of student work, and teacher ‘Critical Friends Groups’ were not the problem. The problem was the ‘scale’ of implementation.¹

The Manual leadership team was becoming aware that in the end this building-wide initiative was not producing small, autonomous learning communities of choice that could operate at a scale that would generate better results and could be held accountable for these results. State-wide standardized testing and the accompanying sanctions for low performance were slated to begin in spring of the next year (2000-2001) and the leadership team was ready to

¹ Three Small Schools at the Manual Educational Complex (2002), pages 4-5.

take the 'Reform Initiative' to deeper, more radical level and the school district was pushing back.

The following extended excerpt from a report written by the author in October 2000 to the Colorado Department of Education describes the steps Manual was preparing to take in its effort to better serve its student population. It also illustrates the growing tension between the school and the school district:

In February 2000 Manual presented to the DPS Board of Education a report on our Reform Initiative with a request for permission to look seriously into the reconstitution of Manual High School as several small schools within one educational complex. Included in that report were several possible waivers, which we thought at the time would allow us room to maneuver so as to accomplish this task. The Board applauded the work we had accomplished thus far, gave their blessing to the piloting of small schools at the ninth grade, and promised to consider any waivers we would propose in the future. Since that time, however, we have encountered much resistance to even our most simple requests with the argument that allowing Manual special consideration would be unfair to the other schools within the system or worse, would encourage similar requests from other schools.

Recently Nancy Sutton was instructed to appear at 900 Grant to make an account of reports that we were meeting with CDE to discuss conversion to a charter school. After taking her to task for all of the times/ways she have not been a district team player over the last four years the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent made it very clear that the district would never support any effort to convert a DPS school to charter school status. The meeting ended with the two of them proposing that perhaps a program for the highly gifted (HDT) could be housed at Manual next year. Whereas this would be a tremendous plus for the school (we had asked for something like this four years ago and were turned down) and we are working diligently to make it a reality - this program alone will never get us to where we want to go.

We have decided, therefore, to vigorously pursue a bundle of waivers from DPS that would allow us to successfully implement the remainder of our Reform Initiative. If DPS refuses to grant these waivers, then we are prepared to pursue conversion to charter school status. This decision was not an easy one to make. The benefits to the Manual community, however, are so great compared with the costs of staying fettered to the system that it was the only decision we could make. It will take a tremendous collaborative effort during this school year to ensure that we have buy-in from all of our stakeholders (Manual staff, parents, students, and community members, as well as, private sector/educational

foundations) concerning these waivers and the possible conversion to charter school status. The following represents our initial thinking about the benefits of going in such a direction:

Time: The high stakes environment Manual finds itself within (e.g. CSAP, school report cards, probation, and the eventual take-over of low performing schools) does not allow us time to wait around for one-size-fits-all district responses to the problems we encounter. We believe that the Reform Initiative we have begun to implement at Manual will positively impact student achievement and engagement. However, we do not have time to wait for DPS to conduct an impact-on-the-district analysis every time we want to move forward on our initiative. Charter school status will allow us to use the little time we have left to complete the implementation of our reform. Conversion to charter school status will also buy us two extra years before a possible CDE takeover under 186.

Internal Resources: Our per-pupil allocation of funding would be used much more effectively and equitably if it were given to us up front to be allocated according to building priorities instead of the current practice of district formulas determining FTE allotments, prescribed budget allocations, and the extent of district services. The most glaring example of the inequity of district formulas relates to staffing. Since the end of busing and the return to neighborhood schools we have hired and trained many new teachers, replacing veteran teachers who chose to teach elsewhere because of the changes. Because of the number of new teachers at Manual whose salaries are at the front end of the pay scale, if we were given our per-pupil allocation as a lump sum, we could afford to hire additional teaching staff and drastically reduce class size. It is extremely inequitable for Manual to be constrained to a certain number of teacher allotments and to divert our staffing dollars to schools with a higher number of veteran teachers. As a charter school we will be able to choose how much of our per-pupil funding is allocated for staffing, building maintenance, and all other services now prescribed by the district.

External Resources: If Manual becomes a charter school it will be one of the few urban, public high schools to be converted to charter status in the nation. Moreover, increasing numbers of urban school districts are returning to neighborhood schools and are serving populations much like Manual. Manual High, as both a neighborhood school and a charter with a comprehensive reform plan, can offer a model to the nation. We therefore believe we will be able to attract foundation and private sector partners who may have been unwilling before to support our efforts because of our dependence upon a school system so unwilling to enact fundamental change. This kind of partnership is critical for our successful implementation of the last phase of the Reform Initiative in which 11th/12th grade Programs of Excellence, supported by a strong collaboration with local post secondary educational institutions and private sector partners, are established. Manual High School as a charter will provide a very important opportunity for the private sector and post secondary educational institutions to

collaborate with a highly impacted urban high school to create post secondary options for urban students.

Also, if a program for highly gifted students is housed at Manual next year, as the district has recently proposed, it could prove attractive to these prospective partners. The whole idea of working with a highly impacted population would appear less daunting if they were assured of access to this HDT population.

Local Control: During this past year we have made great strides toward building an empowered CDM and a community educational council comprised of the leaders of all the neighborhood organizations around Manual. The latter group met monthly to discuss the issues we are facing and to provide sound local advice. We believe these two groups and the network within the community they represent provide Manual with the foundation for forming a viable governing charter school council. A person or a school cannot serve two masters well. Trying to serve the both the interests of our community and our school district has been very difficult. If Manual became a charter school our Reform Initiative could focus on the interests and needs of the Manual community.

Population Served: Charter schools in the State tend to serve populations that have higher socioeconomic status and higher academic skills than the state norm. A Manual charter, however, would continue to serve the population living in the Manual community. The only Manual admission requirement would be regular school attendance. Currently our Reform Initiative requires all students and parents to sign a pact with Manual when students register at the beginning of the year. In the pact students, with parent support, agree to attend Manual regularly. However, we are unable to enforce this pact and poor attendance continues to undermine student achievement. With regular attendance being our only admission requirement, Manual High School as a charter school would serve every student in the community who is committed to earning a quality education.²

This extended excerpt provides a glimpse into the tension around autonomy and choice that had developed between the district and Manual - at least as perceived by the Manual leadership team. Not mentioned in this report is the fact that the DPS superintendent was so angry with the principal (Nancy Sutton) and the author of this paper for having had the conversation with the state about the conversion of Manual to a charter school that she threatened dismissal for insubordination if she obtained evidence of any further conversation. The author believes that the only reason she did not seek immediate dismissal was because

² Colorado Department of Education, Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Project, Final Progress Report, October 13, 2000, First Year 1999-2000 Evaluation Study (2000), pages 12-14.

Manual had many influential friends within the Denver foundation community, the private sector community, the mayor was a Manual alumni and supporter, and (perhaps most importantly) the president of the school board was an ardent Manual supporter. In early February 2001 the Denver Post ran an article on the front page describing Sutton's plan to convert Manual (based on the report, excerpted above).³ Two days later DPS put out a press release refuting the article that included statements from Sutton saying that the school had never seriously considered charter conversion.⁴

Two weeks after the Denver Post article and the district response, Manual made a presentation to Tom Vander Ark of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to convert Manual into three, small autonomous schools. Vander Ark called the proposal the best plan for conversion of a large high school to small schools he had ever seen and agreed to provide all necessary funding. The DPS Board of Education unanimously approved the proposal in April. Manual High School opened as three schools within the Manual Educational Complex at the beginning of the subsequent school year (2001-2002) – in what was called the transition year. During the summer after that transition year, when the results of the state tests were being reported, the governor of Colorado called Manual the most improved school in the state. Nancy Sutton and this author resigned from the school district (both moved out of state to work on other projects) during the summer of 2002. In school year 2002-2003, Leadership High School, Millennium Quest High School, and Arts and Cultural Studies High School at the Manual Educational Complex were functioning as completely autonomous small schools – each with its own principal, staff, student body, independent student data base, and unique school locator number (so as to receive its own state school report card).

³ Eric Hubler, "Manual's Attempt Just One Answer," Denver Post, February 4, 2001.

⁴ "Manual High School Principal Refutes Denver Post Story," Denver Public Schools, Press Release, February 6, 2001.

Unfortunately, all did not go well for Manual in subsequent years and Denver Public Schools announced in February 2006 the imminent closure of the three small schools because of low student enrollment and performance.⁵ The announced plan is to reopen Manual as one comprehensive high school in 2007-2008.

The recent district announcement has created quite a stir within the local Denver community, as well as, the larger school reform community nation-wide. Manual was the first Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation conversion of a large school to small schools in the country and many within and outside the Gates small schools initiative are asking, “What happened?” and many have already begun positing explanations. There are indications that the district had not provided much support for the initiative (they never really owned it) and that a complete breakdown of the relationships between many key stakeholders had occurred. This author believes, however, that extensive research on the Manual ‘Reform Initiative’ from 1997-2006 needs to be conducted before any definitive explanation can be put forth. The lessons learned through such a study could contribute to a much deeper understanding of the impact on system schools and school systems of school choice options and how they are implemented. Subsequent research on the Manual initiative should include deep analysis of the following:

- The key players and stakeholder groups and their relationships to one another during each important juncture of the initiative
- The relationship between Manual and the school district throughout each important juncture of the initiative

⁵Nancy Mitchell, “DPS board votes to close Manual; students stunned,” Rocky Mountain News, February 17, 2006.

- District policy and practice regarding Manual and high school transformation district-wide during each important juncture of the initiative

Experience #2: Paulo Freire Freedom School

During the period of intense negotiations (noted above) between Manual and the school district regarding the future of Manual (2000-2001), the author was also having conversations with a colleague in Tucson, Arizona about the possibility of starting a small school together. His research on school choice and charter conversion, as well as, the subsequent conversations with representatives from CDE had fueled his desire to ‘think out of the box’ and to imagine a school free from the constraints of school district bureaucracy. The following is an extended excerpt from the Charter between the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools and El Pueblo Integral – Teaching and Learning Collaborative:

We had been ‘long-distance’ dreaming (JoAnn Groh lived in Tucson and I lived in Denver) since December 2000 about starting a school together. Between us we had accumulated more than twenty-five years of experience in public education; we had received awards for outstanding teaching and teacher leadership; we had become national facilitators in a movement to establish professional learning communities in schools across the country; and we had actively participated in comprehensive school reform both locally and nationally. We had seen what was working in these settings (‘best practices’ of individual teachers and schools throughout the country) and we had seen (close-up and first-hand) the many failures of public education. And we had read extensively. We felt that we were ready to pool together everything we had learned and start a school of our own.

We dreamed of a school where powerful and transformative teaching and learning were the norm and not the exception; a school where the whole person (body, heart, mind and soul) and the whole community were supported and challenged. We dreamed of a school that would be dedicated to social justice and environmental sustainability; a school closely linked to a ‘sister’ school in Guatemala - where young people and adults from two very different cultures could know each other, learn together and form lasting relationships. We dreamed of a school where diversity among individuals and communities and the unique developmental journey of each would be honored and celebrated. In August 2002 Santo moved to Tucson from Denver to join with JoAnn in making

their dream of an ‘amazing small school’ a reality. We immediately began together to form El Pueblo Integral – Teaching and Learning Collaborative (EPI-TLC).

Mission/Beliefs of EPI-TLC: “El Pueblo Integral – Teaching and Learning Collaborative is a non-profit organization seeking to promote powerful, transformative teaching and learning within appropriately structure learning environments dedicated to the integral development of individuals and communities for a more just and sustainable world.” This mission statement grew out of all of our dreaming together and represents our best effort to distil our vision into a concise statement of purpose. We have also attempted to articulate a concise set of organizational beliefs. “EPI-TLC believes that:

- To be powerful and transformative, teaching and learning must be deep, authentic, and developmentally appropriate;
- Integral development must address the whole person (body, heart, mind, and soul) and the whole community (the social, cultural, political, and economic structures) both locally and globally;
- Individuals and their communities are vitally connected to each other, to all living beings, and to the earth itself and these relationships must be sustainable and just;
- To be sustainable and just these relationships must be characterized by the sharing of resources and power, open discourse, appropriate decision-making strategies, constructive conflict resolution, and mutual positive regard;
- Diversity among individuals and communities and the unique developmental journey of each must be honored and celebrated.”

Mission of the School/Special Emphasis: Paulo Freire Freedom School is being designed to carry out the EPI-TLC mission statement and embody its core beliefs. In a brochure that we developed in January 2004 to promote the idea of the school, we have attempted to unpack the school’s mission under the tagline “*to know, to dream, to rise.*” An explanation of these three components of the school’s mission should also make clear the special emphasis of our school.

To Know: Real knowledge comes from experiences that are authentic and engaging. Young people learn when learning is connected to the real world they live in, to the other things they are studying throughout the day, and to issues they care about. At Paulo Freire Freedom School we will create learning environments that support powerful teaching and learning. Learning environments produce powerful teaching and learning when they are aligned with the following principles of best instructional practice; when they are "student-centered, experiential, holistic, authentic, expressive, reflective, social, collaborative, democratic, cognitive, developmental, constructivist, and challenging" (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 1998). Learning can be hard work, but at Paulo Freire Freedom School we believe that learning can also be a joyful experience. Our students will be encouraged to pursue individual passions, to explore their

issues with peers, and to experience the satisfaction of knowing how to navigate through complex ideas and problems. To know is freedom. To know is to have power.

To Dream: At Paulo Freire Freedom School we will not shy away from thinking about the environmental and social problems facing the world - instead we will immerse our young people in thinking about them. Our curricular focus on social justice and environmental sustainability will be reality-based, but grounded in hope. Students will not only learn about issues and problems, but will be encouraged to think about solutions. Students will be required to act on these solutions through an integrated service learning program. And participation in the democratic structures of the school will help students\ develop leadership, conflict resolution, and peace-building skills. Paulo Freire Freedom School will be partnered with a school in the Lake Atitlan region of Guatemala. Through the development of personal relationships, our students will gain an intimate understanding of the social, economic, and political circumstances of another culture. At Paulo Freire we will not only learn about the world as it is today, we will also dream about it as it can be and work towards the fulfillment of that dream together.

To Rise: At Paulo Freire Freedom School we believe that children grow not only academically and physically, but emotionally, socially, and spiritually as well. The growth they experience in these areas is interconnected with their academic success and with their health and happiness as a whole person. We are committed to supporting and challenging every child to rise to their full potential. Paulo Freire Freedom School will be separated into developmentally appropriate learning environments – each designed to support students’ unique developmental needs and capacities. Within these carefully designed learning environments individual students will be supported and challenged to grow and become...to rise and transform...to develop into integrally whole human beings (body, heart, mind, and soul).⁶

The above extended excerpt from the charter document authorizing El Pueblo Integral to operate a free, public school in the state of Arizona captures the extent to which the author’s and his partner’s thinking had left ‘the box’ during four years of dreaming and planning. Paulo Freire Freedom School opened in August 2005 as an open enrollment/choice option for 6th and 7th graders in Tucson. However, this school’s journey towards opening and its continued struggle to stay open, provide an important glimpse of a different set of constraints with which

⁶ Charter Agreement Between Arizona State Board for Charter Schools and El Pueblo Integral – Teaching and Learning Collaborative (2004), pages 4-5.

public schools, authorized to operate outside of public school systems, must deal. Public charter schools are free from public school system bureaucracies but they have entered a new and dangerous territory governed by the invisible hand of a sometimes volatile and unpredictable market, lump sum delivery of state funding but at a reduced level compared with public school systems funding, compliance with the most of the same state and federal requirements that system schools must comply with but with much fewer resources (economies of scale), all of the building operation costs (including building leasing/purchasing), and the smaller but sometimes very constraining bureaucracy of the charter authorizer itself. Here is a glimpse into part of our journey towards opening - again taken from the charter document itself:

In August 2002 when Santo moved to Tucson from Denver to join with JoAnn to make their dream of an 'amazing small school' a reality, we immediately began designing an umbrella organization that would not only be responsible for the charter school project but would also provide professional development services to schools and school districts (locally and nationally). On January 23, 2003 El Pueblo Integral - Teaching and Learning Collaborative (EPI-TLC) was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization with the State of Arizona. In the Articles of Incorporation JoAnn Groh was listed as the EPI-TLC statutory agent and JoAnn Groh and Santo Nicotera were listed as members of an initial two-person board of directors.

The first official meeting of the board was held September 2, 2003 at which time the organization's by-laws were adopted and the election of officers was held. JoAnn Groh became president of the organization and Santo Nicotera became secretary/treasurer. In October 2003 EPI-TLC filed an application for 501(c) 3 status with the Internal Revenue Service. And on May 26, 2004, we received written determination that EPI-TLC was "exempt from federal income tax under section 501(a) of the Internal Revenue Code as an organization described in section 501(c) 3." The EIN # for El Pueblo Integral is 36-4539244. The board was expanded to six directors in June 2004. EPI-TLC applied for a pre-charter "Planning, Program Design, and Implementation" grant from the Charter Schools Program of the US Department of Education in February 2004. The Department of Education will announce in mid-August the recipients of this next round of the grant. If received the grant will provide \$150,000 per year over three years beginning in FY 2004-2005 and will assist EPI-TLC in the opening of its public charter school.

JoAnn and Santo participated in the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools 'Workshop for Prospective Applicants' in February 2004 and the follow-up 'Roundtable Discussions' in June 2004 also sponsored by ASBCS. In May 2004 JoAnn and two other members of the expanded EPI-TLC board participated in an all-day workshop, 'Charter School 101', sponsored by the Arizona Charter School Association. This past year JoAnn and Santo have begun to get involved in the work of the Association: Santo attended the ACSA annual fall conference in October 2003 and presented a workshop on 'Professional Learning Communities in Small Schools'. Both JoAnn and Santo have attended (though not as regularly as they would have liked) the Southern Arizona Charter Schools monthly luncheons in Tucson during the past year.

Throughout 2003 and during the first seven months of 2004 we have worked diligently to bring together partners locally and nationally to discuss EPI-TLC's vision and the design possibilities for the school. We created an El Pueblo Integral website where we have posted the mission, beliefs, and objectives of the organization (<http://www.elpueblointegral.org>) and we have linked the website to an online EPI-TLC discussion forum listserv (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/elpueblointegral>) where eighty plus members from around the country and from Tucson have participated and continue to participate.

We have also had many offline conversations with interested parties including several discussions with higher education folks at Vanderbilt, ASU, UCLA, and the University of Arizona (including Luis Moll, Associate Dean, College of Education, U of A) about possible university partnerships. In May 2004 EPI-TLC held its first public community forum in Tucson to discuss the project. At that meeting participants joined us for a four-hour, structured interaction and guided inquiry into the question: What would a school focused on social justice and environmental sustainability - look like, feel like, sound like?

One other very important part of the organizational history of El Pueblo Integral – Teaching and Learning Collaborative relates to the professional development services provided by the organization that were mentioned earlier. Very early on (at the October 2003 board meeting) we decided that the organization would not only operate a public charter school but it would also provide professional development services to schools and school districts (locally and nationally) and that the revenue from these services would provide another funding stream to support the small school project. We believed that the salaries of the co-directors of the project could be paid out of this funding stream and not out of state or federal funds.

On July 1, 2004 JoAnn and Santo became employees of El Pueblo Integral - Teaching and Learning Collaborative. Co-directing all projects undertaken by the organization (including the operation of the small school in 2005) we are each paid \$40,000 a year plus benefits. Part of our responsibilities includes providing

professional development and consulting services to individual teachers, schools and school districts. Revenue from these services will bring in @ \$110,000 in FY 2004-2005. EPI-TLC provides the following services:

- Critical Friends Group training and support to schools and school districts wanting to create powerful and transformative learning communities within their faculties and among their students. EPI-TLC staff have designed and facilitated CFG 'new coaches' trainings in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Ohio, Tennessee, and Utah. EPI-TLC staff are members of the National School Reform Faculty (originators of the CFG professional development model) and EPI-TLC is a partner within the NSRF Arizona Center of Activity.
- Middle school restructuring support and staff development using the New American School Design 'Turning Points' model. EPI-TLC is the southwestern US regional center for Turning Points. EPI-TLC provides middle schools with structured support for improving teaching, learning and assessment; building leadership and a professional collaborative culture; data-based inquiry and decision-making; creating a school culture to support high achievement and personal development; networking with like-minded schools; and developing district capacity to support school change. The Paulo Freire Freedom School will be a demonstration site for this powerful middle school reform model.
- Staff development to districts and schools to support the conversion of large comprehensive high schools into small, autonomous schools and learning communities. EPI-TLC is an affiliate member of the Coalition of Essential Skills and uses the CES Ten Common Principles in its work with schools and districts. EPI-TLC staff helped facilitate the first Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 'large high school' conversion nationally and have since provided structured support (coaching/consulting) to schools that are undertaking conversion in Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Texas.

The primary objective of the organization remains, however, to open and operate the Paulo Freire Freedom School. The name for the school emerged sometime in December 2003 when we were attempting to describe to the participants of the online discussion forum the currents of thought that had most influenced our thinking about education. The late Paulo Freire, considered by many Latin Americans (and many north of the 'border' as well) to be the most influential educator of the twentieth century (the father of 'critical pedagogy' and 'student-centered' teaching and learning) - seemed a logical choice to be included in the school name. Once it was suggested to add Freedom to Freire in honor of the 'Freedom School' movement in this country during the Sixty's - the school's name was set. We could not resist the lyrical sound of the name Paulo Freire Freedom School or its implied emphasis on social justice.⁷

Of course, the story told in this extended excerpt from the charter agreement document between the charter operator and the charter authorizer (a document written by the operator to

⁷ Charter Agreement Between Arizona State Board for Charter Schools and El Pueblo Integral – Teaching and Learning Collaborative (2004), pages 57-59.

convince the authorizer to authorize) does not include all of the details of the effort/struggle to open the charter school. Suffice it to say that during the year leading up to the approval of our charter in November 2004 the two directors worked full-time on this project without compensation and when compensation was set to begin in July 2004 the directors chose to defer payment of their salaries for that entire fiscal year (2004-2005) to insure that there would be funding for building renovation. Those salaries have yet to be paid because of the funding crisis created by low initial enrollment and compounded by unfinanced building costs for renovation. The author will address building costs and its impact on budget viability and project revenues/expenditures later in this paper but first he will address the very difficult time table created by the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools (currently the only charter authorizer in the state of Arizona) to open a charter school.

To open a charter school in Arizona in the 2005-2006 school year, the application for charter had to be submitted during a short time frame that closed at the end of June 2004. The earliest that a charter application could then be approved in that cycle was mid-November 2004. Luckily the charter application submitted by El Pueblo Integral was one of only two (out of eleven) that were approved in November; the other applications submitted during that cycle were not approved until January 2005. Even given the relatively early charter approval for Paulo Freire Freedom School there were still only eight months remaining to locate a building, secure a lease, complete any necessary renovations, and be ready to open school on August 23, 2005. Most charter operators do not have the ability to purchase/build a building in the first year of operation and so, will lease a building for the first few years of operation, creating a credit history over time that a lending institution will find credible. El Pueblo Integral was no different. EPI-TLC was very fortunate, however, to locate a building in November and an owner that was

willing to sign a lease option agreement contingent upon zoning approval and acceptable estimates of renovation costs. It took three months of negotiations with Tucson Development Services (zoning) to get approval to operate a school on the site. During this period the online listserv El Pueblo Integral had created, as a partnership forum in support of the project, provided much solace to the directors. Here is an extended excerpt from that forum regarding some of these zoning issues which also includes a letter to TDS from the directors:

As mentioned in an earlier post we have been in a process of late to get a favorable ruling from the Tucson zoning administration to operate Paulo Freire Freedom School in the Historic YWCA building at 300 East University Blvd (1/2 block East of 4th Ave on University) in the West University neighborhood of Tucson.

Our request for a ruling of 'legal nonconformance for educational use' for the building was turned down by the Zoning Administrator on December 16. Monday, January 24 was the deadline for us to apply for an appeal to this ruling to the Board of Adjustment if we wanted to get on the agenda for their February meeting. All of us (the architect we hired to represent us in this process, the owner, and JoAnn and I) were prepared to appeal the ruling but we had been told by folks within zoning that all of this could end up taking as much as a six months before we would know, one way or the other – because there was a Mayor/City Council approved plan for the neighborhood and anyone seeking a zoning variance would have to ask Mayor/Council to amend the plan.

To make a nerve-racking, long story short our architect submitted a letter on Monday requesting the zoning administrator to reconsider his original ruling accompanied by supporting evidence of prior educational use (but really not a whole lot more compelling than the original set of evidence that was submitted) and letters from the owner and JoAnn and I (I have copied our letter below). We also filled-out and submitted an application to appeal - just in case.

Last night our architect called to say that the Zoning Administrator had reversed his original decision and had APPROVED the building for educational use.

We are not out of the woods yet - he also said we had to seek and get a 'special exception' regarding the drop-off/pick-up of students (but that is a much easier process) and the actual feasibility study on the building needs to be completed. But we are rejoicing here at this little victory on the way to opening our school.

Oh and those of you who have been chanting 'legal non-conformance' - you can stop already! Below is our letter submitted to the Zoning Administrator on Monday:

January 24, 2005

Mr. Walter Tellez
City of Tucson Development Services
Zoning Administration Division, 2nd Floor
201 North Stone Avenue
Tucson, AZ 85701

RE: Paulo Freire Freedom School
300 East University Boulevard (also addressed 738 N. 5th Ave)

Dear Mr. Tellez:

Thank you so much for meeting with us last week to review the status of our request for approval of legal non-conforming status for the building at 300 East University Blvd. so that we might open the Paulo Freire Freedom School there in August 2005. It is our sincere hope that the argument presented by David Shambach today and the additional artifacts and supporting evidence of educational use that he has attached – will prove adequate to persuade you that in fact a school may operate legally at this site. Given our timetable for opening the school, if you are unable to grant this request, it will be imperative for us to submit an application for appeal immediately, and so, we would appreciate a ruling on this matter at your earliest convenience. If you are unable, even with this additional documentation and restatement of our argument for approval, we would appreciate a detailed response as to the reasons for this rejection.

We have to trust the architects and the planners when it comes to these matters, for our expertise is in education. The school we are opening is expected to be an amazing school; a school standing head and shoulders above most of the schools in Tucson. Our non-profit organization, El Pueblo Integral – Teaching and Learning

Collaborative, is the southwest regional center for Turning Points (a New American Schools Design model) and our school will be a demonstration site/laboratory middle school for 'best instructional practices'. By design (and mandated by our state charter) Paulo Freire will always be a small, middle grades school; never more than 90 students at the site and always less than a 20:1 student-teacher ratio. Because of our credibility in educational circles we were recently awarded \$450,000 by the US Department of Education to support the design and implementation of the school.

We have presented our intentions to open the Paulo Freire Freedom School in the basement of the Historic YWCA to the West University Neighborhood Association (WUNA) and at a neighborhood open house at the site (both in November) and have received very favorable receptions. We are conducting another public, informational meeting at the site this week on Saturday, January 29. Neighbors continue to voice excitement about the positive impact this kind of school (a well run, highly supervised, laboratory school) will have on the neighborhood.

Again Mr. Tellez, our expertise is in education – not in planning, architecture, or in zoning administration. But we have studied the documents Mr. Shambach and Mr. Shawn Burke (the owner) have gathered together regarding the prior and continued use of this property, as well as, the decisions that have been made by your office and the Board of Adjustment – and we cannot find a compelling reason for not granting legal conforming status for the use of the building for educational purposes and legal, non-conforming status (with perhaps special exceptions re: certain performance criteria) for the site itself. We are looking forward, therefore, to hearing from you soon with a favorable ruling regarding our request. Thank you so much for your time and for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

Santo Nicotera and JoAnn Groh, Co-Directors
El Pueblo Integral – Teaching & Learning Collaborative⁸

After the issues with TDS were finally worked out it took another two months to get an estimate of renovation costs that was acceptable to both the property owner and El Pueblo Integral and three more months to complete an initial renovation phase so that city building/fire inspectors could approve the space allowing a Certificate of Occupancy for the school. A second phase of renovation was completed the week prior to the opening of school - making the space ready for students. All of these building-related outcomes, however, unfolded in the timeliest way possible, given the date for the opening of the school. A glitch in any one of the components of this process would have set back significantly the opening of Paulo Freire

⁸ “Paulo Freire vs. Zoning Commission,” <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EIPuebloIntegral/message/152> (2005).

Freedom School. In the end, El Pueblo Integral's costs for phase one and two of the renovation of the space had reached \$75,000 with phase three (the cost of the installation of a lift) yet to be completed.

During the period leading up to the opening of school the co-directors were in negotiations with Raza Development Fund to secure a \$100,000 loan to cover the cost of renovation. El Pueblo Integral had submitted a budget estimate for 2005-2006 to the state department of education in August 2005 that included this loan amount, estimated revenue from a projected enrollment of forty students, the grant from the federal government, and estimated revenue from consulting services provided by El Pueblo Integral. By mid-August actual enrollment had only reached 18 students. Raza Development Fund told the directors in late August that unless EPI-TLC terminated one of the three teachers or moved one of the teachers into a solitary director position allowing the current co-directors to consult full time, they would not be able to provide the \$100,000 loan to the school. The directors determined that neither of those options was feasible and RDF withdrew its loan offer.

Therefore El Pueblo Integral opened and is running Paulo Freire Freedom School in 2005-2006 with a significantly smaller operating budget than anticipated (less the \$100,000 from RDF and at about one-half the state revenue originally anticipated - due to low student ADM on student count day). EPI-TLC has been able to pay its bills, however, because of reductions to portions of the academic program, a \$20,000 short-term loan from the co-directors, and increased consulting services provided by the directors - which has meant that they are away from the school more often than planned originally (though very rarely at the same time) and are much more stretched than anyone should have to be.

The effort/struggle to open Paulo Freire Freedom School and keep it open has been greater than what is mentioned here. These pieces have been mentioned to provide a glimpse into the struggles faced by many great educators determined to open new charter schools of choice; the author's experience is not unique. He has heard similar stories of hardships encountered by charter operators; personal hardships that would be absolutely unthinkable to educators within public school systems. He shares this story to illustrate how difficult the process is for most new charter schools. Has it been worth it? Yes! Is it fair? No! But the amazing little community (PFFS is currently at 45 students) that has come together this year would probably not have been possible had the school been much larger than 22 at the outset; school culture is such a fragile thing to create well. The freedom the school has experienced from bureaucratic constraints, the freedom to create and implement a vision for schooling and to market that vision to the community, the flexibility to change course if for some reason the implementation of that vision fails to meet the needs of students – all of these and more are reasons the author would answer yes to the question, “Has it been worth it?”

However, research needs to be conducted to assess the impact of these kinds of hardships on the educational environments charter operators are trying to create. Possible research questions might include:

- Why do public charter schools (in Arizona at least) receive less funding than public school systems to operate their schools?
- Why are they forced to use per pupil funding to acquire and maintain buildings for their schools when school systems receive additional capital improvement funds to for this purpose?

- Why does it have to be so difficult to create small, powerful schools of choice outside of the public school systems?

Concluding Remarks:

It is the opinion of this author that public school systems continue to be public education's best hope for creating (especially in urban centers) small, powerful learning communities of choice. Charter schools at their best can only provide a glimpse of how these choice options might look - but the charter school movement (at least in its present configuration) cannot match the economy of scale that school systems bring to bear on this endeavor and they certainly cannot match the sheer numbers of students served by public system schools. Questions remain: Can public school systems get free of their bureaucratic stranglehold on the education process? Can they be transformed into networks of support for small, powerful schools of vision, innovation, and choice? The case of Manual continues to weigh heavily on this author. Manual's students deserved to receive the same kind of education that students at Paulo Freire Freedom School experience. Yes, the creation of PFFS has been an extremely difficult process. Yes, it is unfair that the process of creating small, powerful charter schools of choice is so hard. But not as unfair as what has happened to the students of Manual. They deserved better.