

OPINION

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Guest Opinion: School Where No Student is Anonymous

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Tucson Citizen

Great schools don't just happen. They are the product of years of dreaming and planning.

We had been "long-distance" dreaming since late 2000, while JoAnn taught at Catalina Foothills High in Tucson and Santo directed a reform initiative at Manual High School in Denver.

Our dream has been to create a combination education organization, learning community and school that would be all about powerful, transformative teaching and learning.

Between us, we had accumulated more than 25 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 locally and nationally.

(Santo was facilitating the first Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, large-to-small high school "conversion" in the country and was consulting and coaching on similar initiatives in Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio.)

We had seen what was working in public schools, the "best practices" of individual teachers and school communities, and we had observed close-up and first-hand the many failures within public schools.

We had read the research comparing large and small schools, and we were presenting at educational conferences nationally about our observations and lessons learned.

In late 2002, we decided to move forward with our dream.

Santo relocated to Tucson, and together we formed El Pueblo Integral Teaching and Learning Collaborative. The mission and purpose of this 501(c)3 not-for-profit education organization is twofold:

- Continue to provide professional development services to public schools and school districts, locally and nationally, that want to create small, powerful learning communities within their schools and among their students, teachers and parents.



Photos courtesy of SANTO NICOTERA

The Paulo Freire Freedom School will be in "The Historic Y" at 300 E. University Blvd, one block west of Fourth Avenue. The school, which opens in August, will have a student-teacher ration of no more than 20:1.

- Design and operate a small, K-12 public school that would be a laboratory and demonstration site for best instructional practices and innovative small school design.



Santo Nicotera and JoAnn Groh (above and below) take a short breather in the Lake Atitlan region of Guatemala, where they plan to establish a partner school for Paulo Freire Freedom School in Tucson.

We set out to design a school where powerful, transformative teaching and learning were the norm, not the exception; a school where the whole person - body, heart, mind and soul - and the whole community were supported and challenged.

We chose to devise a school dedicated to social justice and environmental sustainability; a school closely linked to a "sister" school in Guatemala.

We sought to create a school where diversity among individuals and within the collective would be honored and celebrated.

And we set out to design a school that would become an integral part of our work with public schools and school districts locally and nationally - providing a concrete example of a small, powerful learning community.



So after nearly five years of dreaming and planning, we announce the August opening of Paulo Freire Freedom School, with grades six and seven, in "The Historic Y" at 300 E. University Blvd., just a block west of Fourth Avenue.

We want to share the essential design components that we believe will make Paulo Freire Freedom School an amazing small school.

But first, a few words about "small schools." Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that small schools do a better job than large schools in every important category.

Commonsense dictates that school size cannot be the only variable at play here. We in the small schools movement know that "small size" is a necessary but insufficient condition for success.

For a school to succeed with all its students, it must not only be small, but also include certain components. The Gates Foundation calls them "rigor, relevance and relationships" - the kind of components essential to the Paulo Freire Freedom School design:

- At Paulo Freire, great teachers and great teaching will be the center. We are hiring four teachers who will be all about powerful teaching and learning.

Research tells us the traditional "lecture-practice-test" formula does not produce deep learning. Instead, instruction should primarily be hands-on and problem-based. Students collaboratively explore essential questions, work on authentic problems and projects, then demonstrate real learning.

Who among us ever learned to do anything important in the real world by reading a manual and taking a test? We get a drivers license this way, but this is not how we learn to drive a car.

We all know instinctively that we learn by doing: Given a problem to solve, we gather the necessary resources and solve the problem - many times through trial and error. We know we have mastered the problem when we accomplish the task we set out to do.

Young people learn the same way, and schools need to be designed with this in mind. Paulo Freire will depend on these kinds of powerful learning environments.

- Paulo Freire Freedom School will have a curricular focus on social justice and environment sustainability. We believe all human beings are entitled to a life of dignity, and every human being is responsible for stewardship of the planet.

But this does not mean we will tell our students what to think or believe. In the tradition of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, we will encourage students to be critical thinkers, to explore problems deeply, to ask questions like: Why are things the way they are and how could they be different?

Our core curriculum will include math, science and humanities, guided by the Arizona State Standards, but we will approach this content and these standards through the lens of justice and sustainability. And we will use Jane Goodall's "Roots & Shoots" service learning framework to support authentic engagement with our community, locally and globally, as an integral part of our educational program.

- Personalization will be paramount. Consider a typical middle school: 700 to 1,000 students passing through seven, 50-minute classes daily; teachers seeing as many as 150 students per day.

We will use the Carnegie-researched "Turning Points" middle grades model, designed especially for early adolescent learners. Our teachers will see no more than 60 students per day, will work with small groups of students for long blocks of time, and will have the same students for three years in a row.

With a student-teacher ratio of no more than 20:1, no student will be anonymous; everyone will be known well.

Students also will be part of an advisory group, where they develop study habits, life skills and tools for building community.

Advisers will work with each student and their families to create Individual Learning Plans identifying the student's strengths and challenges, goals and dreams and mapping out strategies for each student's development and success.

At the typical middle school, only the "superstar" and "problem" students are known well.

At Paulo Freire, every student will be known and celebrated as a unique human being.

Santo Nicotera and JoAnn Groh are co-directors of the Paulo Freire Freedom School.

INFORMATION

More information on Paulo Freire Freedom School or the work by this nonprofit can be obtained at www.elpueblointegral.org, at open houses from 1 to 2 p.m. Saturdays or by contacting us directly at 906-5157, snicotera@elpueblointegral.org or jgroh@elpueblointegral.org