Does starting from scratch bypass the sticky problems of school change? Those who've tried it say they face the same issues older schools do—especially our stubborn inner picture of 'what school is.'

The sign in front of the school building in a recent New Yorker cartoon reads "The Knowledge Factor"—and in small print, beneath, "FORMERLY P.S. 102." It could be ribbing any one of the new schools springing up around the nation—whether through New York City's drive to break down large, comprehensive high schools into smaller, more personalized learning environments; through various states' efforts to encourage charter school start-ups; or through growing regions' moves to accommodate population overflow in schools that have new visions as well as new buildings.

Or it could intend, even more trenchantly, to skewer schools that simply put old wine in new, more sexy bottles—repackaging or even franchising the same dreary product to sell as today's fun new public schooling. Indeed, to avoid this fate by fundamentally rethinking the why and how of schooling has become a crucial and ongoing aim for the many new Essential schools across the country. Both large and small, these schools are taking advantage of their position to jump-start the change process—hiring staff who share a common outlook, redesigning their curricula and teaching methods, devising infrastructures that support new kinds of learning, and giving all concerned more say in how the school will run.

But new Essential schools from coast to coast have learned through hard experience that starting from scratch provides no exemptions from the arduous process of educational change. A new school's birth, in fact, seems to distill every truism of school restructuring into an object lesson in high hopes and hard realities.

"New schools underline the fact that if you don't move at a certain pace, it's hard to move at all," says Deborah Meier, who founded New York City's Central Park East Secondary School in 1986 as one of the charter members of the Coalition of Essential Schools. "We're creatures of habit. You have to change enough of the circumstances that people are forced to make changes in their habits—if you make it easy to fall back, you're soon just teaching the same lesson in a long block that we used to teach in 45 minutes. And you must move while there's enough enthusiasm that people don't get cynical."

Just how do new schools go about replacing deep-seated internal images of school with new habits and expectations? How do they create and sustain enthusiasm as the first flush of creation wears off? Can a new format alone change what goes on between teachers and students in the classroom? Do some strategies work better than others in introducing change to a
community? Essential school people involved in launch efforts of every nature and at every stage spoke to these questions in recent interviews, lending new perspective to the struggles that established schools encounter as they attempt to change.

How New Schools Start
Not all new schools begin with the same circumstances, and their variations may have a lot to do with how far and fast they move. One innovative reform scheme seeks to take huge comprehensive city high schools and break them into smaller units that share building facilities but operate independently in every other way. Meier, for instance, is now helping to oversee New York's Coalition Campus Project, which began in 1993 with the freshman class slated to enter Manhattan's 3,000-student Julia Richman High School. That school's decaying physical plant will be renovated eventually to house a "campus" of Essential schools serving no more than 400 students each. Six of these small schools have opened at various city sites, shaping a more personalized structure and curriculum.

"Change can't be done reasonably in the next generation unless the numbers are small enough," Deborah Meier declares. "You need no more than 25 people to be able to sit around and talk about their ideas. In a large school where the faculty is doing many different things, it's close to impossible for them to arrive at serious engagement around the issues of what they want and how to get to it. It becomes a big political negotiations process—politics, not ideas."

But faculties for these urban splinter schools often arrive inexperienced or unprepared for the new kinds of schooling they will be asked to offer. They may have smaller meetings than in their former schools, but they need at least as much support to develop new practices. "It's been a tremendous struggle," says principal Sylvia Rabiner of Landmark School, which opened this fall in a windowless rented space in Harlem while waiting for promised leased space, and which enrolls 80 ninth-graders who would otherwise have gone to Julia Richman. "Six of our eight teachers had no first-hand familiarity with Essential School ideas; several had no teaching experience; and none of us had ever started a new school before." Nonetheless, Rabiner says, a collegial hiring process led to an extraordinary level of staff commitment, which energized her faculty through the roughest winter in New York's memory; not only was Landmark's faculty attendance record 100 percent, but its students, known in the past for sky-high truancy rates, raised their attendance levels to roughly 90 percent.

Meanwhile, New York City schools chief Ramon Cortines has proposed the same plan for James Monroe High School in the South Bronx, calling for it to splinter into six smaller schools over the next four years. A similar strategy has begun in Philadelphia in recent years, where the district encourages like-minded teachers to carve out subsidiary programs (which they call "charter schools") from sprawling comprehensive high schools. The idea of granting a "charter"—the right to replace the local school board as an autonomous educational authority—to small groups of teachers, parents, or community members who want to start their own public school has gained popularity in recent years. Eight states have adopted legislation that permits such ventures, though in widely different forms. Though some critics argue they siphon funds and talent from other public schools and act as a thin disguise for voucher-style choice systems, charter school advocates say they aim to spark the creation of innovative new schools and seed large-scale reform.

Several new charter schools influenced by Essential School ideas—but authorized and funded quite differently—are beginning not only in Philadelphia but in Colorado, Massachusetts, California, and elsewhere. (See sidebar, page 4.)

Finally, many states and districts whose populations are burgeoning—largely in the Southeast, Southwest, and West Coast—have commissioned new schools simultaneously to accommodate more students and to rethink what and how they should be learning. Georgia's Salem High School, South Carolina's Dutch Fork High School, two new high schools in Arizona, a Southern California middle school, and New Hampshire's Souhegan High School all started with Essential School philosophies. Each drew up ambitious and idealistic reform plans; but because each is the main offering for area students they have run into many of the same challenges from their communities faced by established schools the midst of change.
What's a 'Real' School?

In an advisory session at Catalina Foothills High School in Tucson, Arizona, a dozen ninth- and tenth-graders confront the differences they perceive at the brand new school they inhabit. A dramatic, spacious structure overlooking this mountainous desert landscape, its halls still echo with fewer students than it will house at capacity in a few years—and its classrooms still echo with past voices of tradition, influencing what kids regard as a "real" high school.

"In some ways this place feels more like an elementary school, and in some ways it's more like a community college," says one girl. "You get more attention, like younger kids—"

"Too much attention!" broke in a boy. "They try to know your soul. It's none of their business.

"—but they make you take more responsibility for your own work, like in college."

Other kids put in their gripes: too much small-group work ("like babies"), no upperclassmen as yet, the house system ("you don't feel like you're in high school"), the disruption of having started in a local middle school. Community controversy over innovations in school schedule and classroom practices resulted in its first principal's reassignment during the school's first year, and Catalina Foothills now runs on a conventional five-period day, offering intensive honors classes on demand. But the uproar left students feeling ungrounded—uncertain what to expect from the initial group of idealistic teachers who came from all over the country with a firm commitment to Essential School ideas, and whose own expectations met immediate resistance.

At the heart of the dilemma is a fact that plagues every school attempting change, but especially those in more privileged districts that consider themselves successful by traditional measures like college admissions and standardized test scores. "Everyone is a quasi-expert on education, because we've all been through it," observes Bob Mackin, the principal of Souhegan High School in Amherst, New Hampshire, which began at the same time as Catalina Foothills. "For all of us—students, teachers, parents—what we've experienced gets superimposed over our ideas of what the new school should look like. No matter how committed you are, these outside forces are pulling at you. There's so much inertia in educational institutions."

Souhegan, unlike Catalina Foothills, began with a new building in move-in condition and a full complement of students in grades nine through twelve. Mackin met with prospective juniors and seniors often during the year before opening to define with them the primary values that would drive the new school. "Seniors especially drive the tone and ambience of a school," he says. "If you can win them over to the idea of a democratic community where they have a real voice, it goes a long way in creating role models for the culture we believe in." A transition team of fifteen students worked through and disciplinary codes, and wrote the school's first student handbook before Souhegan's doors opened.

Still, Mackin sees an advantage to "growing the school" grade by grade. Prepared in more traditional classrooms, juniors and seniors at

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**LET'S TALK:**

**How One Community Prepared for Its New School**

In the current planning year before Sedona Red Rock High School opens in Sedona, Arizona, principal Rick Lear has scheduled discussion groups with parents, students, and community members on fourteen topics. Each topic was scheduled for three alternative times of day, to maximize participation; and each session ended with the question, "What implications do our views have for the design and operation of our high school?" The subjects for discussion follow, roughly grouped into three areas:

**Goals, Values, Standards**
- What will make us most proud of our graduates? What will we expect of them?
- Powerful learning: What is it, and how can we build it into the school?
- Graduation and exhibitions, jobs and future opportunities
- Standards: How good is good enough?

**Sample Learning Activities**
- English and social studies: Socratic seminars
- Math and science: Complex problems
- Integrated curriculum
- Thinking and problem-solving

**Special Topics**
- Using the community: Field-based learning, mentorships, service learning, adult volunteers
- Parents, teachers, and personalization
- New technologies: Possibilities and realities
- Co-curricular activities: Clubs and sports
- School name, mascot, colors, etc.; governance and operation
- Curriculum design
Outside the System but with the System’s Blessing:  
Are Charter Schools a Force for Change?

Eight states have now made charter schools part of their education reform agendas, but the dust has not yet settled as to exactly what that means. In California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Wisconsin, legislators have authorized independent groups of educators, businesspeople, or parents to create publicly funded alternatives to their local schools—and a recent survey indicates that at least fourteen more states are considering such action.

Though state laws vary widely, in general a charter school functions under contract, outside the system but with its blessing. In many cases, such as Colorado and California, groups must apply to their local school boards for a charter, with the right to appeal to the state if turned down; waivers from regulations must be approved one by one. In others, such as Massachusetts, the state itself grants legal autonomy from the traditional local educational authority, usually including exemptions from district collective bargaining agreements. Some districts, such as Philadelphia and New York City, allow sections of public schools to splinter into independently managed entities; others prefer to charter totally new schools. Most of California’s charter proposals come from existing public schools wishing to convert to charters. No state authorizes public funding of a sectarian school.

Whatever form their ventures take, charter school advocates hope to duck an unwieldy educational bureaucracy in the interests of swift reform. Some, especially old-school conversions, focus more on retooling old management and governance than on changes in content, curriculum, or pedagogy. “We call these ‘breakaway schools,’” says Rexford Brown, a policy analyst at the Education Commission for the States who himself has received encouragement from the Denver, Colorado school board for a charter school proposal that reflects many Essential School ideas. “In contrast, the ‘breakthrough school’ aims to redesign the learning environment from scratch.”

In return for independence, however, charter schools must confront on their own a complex and expensive obstacle course of legal requirements for the health, safety, and civil rights of children—without the safety net of state and local capital and benefits. “A whole exoskeleton of supports that school people take for granted—buildings that meet code, liability insurance, general funds for special education—are not there for you,” says Brown. “Yet you don’t want to create around yourself the same set of strangling regulations that have made the existing system so regressive.” Though some states offer technical assistance to help charters solve such problems, only Massachusetts has mandated start-up funds for proposals the state approves.

In virtually all cases, tax dollars follow children who choose to attend a charter school, though formulas vary as to how much that amounts to. For this reason, many critics worry that charters will draw off funds from existing public schools, achieving a voucher-like system by the back door. Advocates counter that charters can contribute to systemic reform by creating a public laboratory in which to try out innovative ways.

“We have the same type of kids and 80 percent of the money,” says John Mikulas, who last fall enrolled 70 sixth- through eighth-graders in Pueblo County, Colorado in the new Connect School, a charter with an Essential School philosophy. “The district uses the other 20 percent to provide us with transportation and some bookkeeping services. Twice a year we report to the central office on our students’ progress and our finances. In return we get much more control of our management and of what and how we teach kids.”

Located in a low-rent building in downtown Pueblo, Connect School students use public and university libraries, science labs at a nearby community college, a district technology lab, the local Y for physical education, a city arts center, and an outdoor nature study facility at an area middle school. (“All our teachers also have a bus driver’s license,” Mikulas says wryly.) Students with a wide range of special needs learn alongside their classmates, though when their needs are too severe, they must go elsewhere in the district.

“There’s a lot you don’t know beforehand when you start a school,” says Rex Brown. “If you did, you’d be crazy to do it. Yet you’re constantly learning, and it’s exhilarating. For the most part, at least everyone coming to you is interested in change.”
Souhegan are less involved than younger students in full-scale Essential School practices, and less accustomed to an integrated curriculum, heterogeneously grouped classrooms, and performance-based assessments. This school makes up for the differences by hanging on to many of the familiar trappings of high school: football teams (an undefeated record in the first year went a long way toward school unity), school colors, traditional grading practices. Such conventions reassure the whole school community, many new school people have observed. "You need to keep some familiar things or you'll go crazy," comments Deborah Meier.

When Salem High School in Conyers, Georgia graduates its first class in 1995, those seniors will have been in their new school since ninth grade. "In our case community issues bonded us together," says principal Bob Cresswell, who faced a parental uproar over Salem's initial policy of de-tracking. Instead of eliminating its heterogeneous approach, Salem beefed up its offerings by twice-weekly "honors seminars," paid teachers extra to work with low-achieving students before and after regular classes, and invited critical parents into classes to observe them at any time. "For the last couple of years we have been well supported by the community," Cresswell says. "Every year, though, we have to change the schedule as we deal with different things—and that's fine. We can't know all the answers from the start.

Citizens in Sedona, Arizona voted to carve an entire new school district from the one they had shared with two others across county lines, issuing a bond to build a new high school and expand an elementary school. To help ease the transition for the first class of students (now in ninth grade at a large comprehensive high school in the next town) superintendent Nancy Alexander and the new high school principal, Rick Lear, hired their first teacher a full year before school opened, and negotiated her year-long placement teaching ninth-grade classes at the neighboring school. The athletic director at the new Sedona Red Rock High School is also a veteran from Sedona, and several of the first year's hires come from nearby districts.

The Uses of Involvement
"Parents and kids both have a lot of anxiety about anything that's different," observes Lear, who for ten years headed a Pennsylvania alternative school and who studied the progress of new Essential schools as a Coalition researcher before he signed on as Sedona's principal. "Parents are uncertain about having the kids deal with academic material that they themselves may not know. They're worried about whether kids will be disadvantaged in college admissions. And parents and kids both have a generation of memories—of their own experiences and those of older siblings who may still be in the old school—that go into their picture of high school. It's a major separation they're going through, and just as with any loss, we need to provide some kind of public ceremonies to go along with it."

Developing a shared language among staff and community about school change can go far toward reducing those anxieties, many new school leaders point out. The most successful often stay away from labels of any kind—even avoiding mention of the Coalition until after public forums have worked through and accepted its principles. Lear, for example, scheduled a year's worth of planning meetings at all times of day with parents and students, to hash out questions like, "What will make us most proud of our graduates?" (See sidebar, page 3.)

No subject is too small or large, it seems, to put on the table if students and parents are to feel invested in the new school early on. Lear will meet with students next month to pick a school mascot and colors and to work out a student governance system. In his regular mailing to the community last month he scrounged four circulating rumors—about school sports, cafeteria heating, metal detectors, and the band—with the facts on each. "The rumor that the new school wouldn't give letter grades made the rounds three times," he says wryly, "even though from the start we agreed that a traditional grading policy was not up for negotiation."

The most dramatic manifestation of Sedona's inclusive attitudes came with the hiring procedures for the 10.5 positions at the new high school. After his core staff culled 40 candidates from the 1,100 inquiries the initial ads brought in, Lear asked fifteen parent volunteers and twenty students to join committees that would interview half a dozen applicants in person. "For each of their allotted candidates, each committee decided only whether they very much wanted this person to teach in our school, or they would be comfortable with the person teaching here, or they would not want the person here," he says. "It took about eighteen hours of their time, but after we used that input to narrow down our final field, we had a very strong sense of what the community wanted."

"From day one, parents are going to be almost as interested as you are in what's happening in the high school," advised Yale University professor emeritus Seymour Sarason, the author of The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform, in a recent lunch meeting with the Sedona school board and superintendent. "When will you inform them?" Making sure the teaching staff welcomes parents into classrooms, he emphasized, should be a school priority; so should visiting each parent, if possible, before school starts for a conversation about the student's assets, vulnerabilities, and talents.
"Don't patronize them by presenting yourself as having solved every schooling problem from the start," said Sarason, who has written a new book to be titled Parental Involvement and the Political Principle. "And don't adopt the stance that only you take responsibility for what happens in schools. When parents feel trusted and involved in the school's decisions—including its disciplinary policies—they'll act as partners, not adversaries, if trouble comes up later."

Many new schools plan community involvement right into the school day, extending the functions of high school to include parent education, mentorships, service learning, and apprenticeships.

Long-time Coalition principal Judy Cunningham has just begun planning the new South Lake Middle School in Irvine, California, a district with an explicit commitment to Essential School principles. "We'd like to be a center for the adult community as well," she says. "I'm talking with parents about working in important support capacities in the classroom and using our technology center and fitness facilities after school hours."

Cunningham has visited every elementary school that will feed into the new school, scheduling meetings with parent leaders and principals to talk over their hopes and concerns.

When O'Farrell Community School entered its planning year in 1990, some five dozen people joined the initial teaching team for regular weekend retreats at which they hammered out key issues. By the time the school opened its doors, it had joined forces with the county's social services department to provide full family support services in a nine-room wing of the school. More than a third of O'Farrell's largely minority student population get some kind of attention from the agency there; and it also coordinates the school's extensive community service requirement for students.

Regular communication with the community through newsletters, local cable television, and newspapers appears critical to a new school's effort. Georgia's Salem High School responded to its first crisis over heterogeneous grouping by sending home reports to parents detailing what coursework their child would be doing that week, and inviting them to observe classes. Central Park East Secondary School's weekly newsletter contains information, student contributions, and a conversational but thoughtful letter from the principal about what the school is aiming for and how.

Finally, meaningful participation by students in their own democratic governance has proved its worth repeatedly in new ventures. "We have a 45-person governing council—25 students, fifteen staff members, and the rest community members," says Souhegan's Bob Mackin. "Democracy is unwieldy; it took us six to eight months just to get our procedures organized. But this year we're focusing more on policies like discipline and attendance, and we expect even more involvement in key issues like staffing and budget as time goes by."

The Start Is Just a Start

Even when a school is starting from scratch, those who have done it agree; it's hard to break out of the old patterns without continual attention to ongoing change. "Like any organization, schools have a growth curve we need to be concerned about," says Salem High School's Bob Cresswell. "People go through an inspiring early phase of excitement and energy, and then settle in, start managing more, get less involved. If after a certain period you don't try to realign and grow again you're back in the same old boat as you were before." In Salem's third year, Cresswell has asked his faculty to begin a new discussion series about the Essential School idea that "less is more" and about how to best exhibit and assess student work. "We can't afford to take these ideas for granted," he says. "They'll turn into mere rhetoric and public relations, and then we'll lose our connection with our mission and the organization will die."

In its second year of operation Dutch Fork High School, near Columbia, South Carolina, is pursuing a steady course of faculty meetings and professional development days to discuss Essential School principles. Parents known as "key communicators" join the discussions quarterly to share information and get it out into the community. And any teachers may take half a day's leave each year to read or talk through Coalition materials set aside in the media center. "'It's not much,'" says ninth-grade humanities teacher Susan Barron, "but it's the first formal recognition that we need time for reading and that the school should provide it."

Perhaps the most difficult challenge to new schools is the heightened expectation, among teachers and community both, that everything will work as well as the plans have called for. "You can't do it all at once," warns Deborah Meier. "New schools tend to communicate with parents in unrealistic ways, and then parents get impatient because you're not performing as fast as you're talking. Meanwhile, students expect the curriculum will be interesting, the homework meaningful and authentic, the grades different..."

Similarly, parents of high-achieving students will watch their students' experience like hawks if a new school makes important curricular or pedagogical departures from the status quo, like interdisciplinary classes or heterogeneous grouping. Even with the best of intentions, cautions Souhegan's Bob Mackin, a faculty must pay close attention to the merits of parental concerns in these controversial areas, and continually work toward higher quality in the classroom.

"Good will and good intentions don't necessarily make for signifi-
can change," he says. "Other factors play into real reform—issues of competence, experience, the ability to clearly plan and develop curriculum and put it into practice. Even the most capable person doesn't transform overnight from being an exceptional teacher in the old conventions to being an extraordinary Essential teacher." Despite the time it takes, he says, Souhegan has committed itself to continual professional growth, requiring after-school study groups and building team planning into its schedule. Year-long teaching interns from the University of New Hampshire help make this possible by stepping in to free teachers for professional development.

Many new schools also learn through hard experience that they must choose their battles if they want progress to take place. "We chose heterogeneous grouping as a hill to die on," says one weary veteran. "If we had been less rigid about grouping and more innovative about curriculum, we would have been able to do it." As he readsies Sedona Red Rock for opening, Rick Lear expresses the same feelings about the issue of grades. "It's not worth the fight," he says. "Grades are the coin of the realm when it comes to college admissions. And I don't believe we'll provoke systemic reform on the basis of individual schools coming to understandings with individual admissions offices—that relies too much on particular people being there. Better to think instead about making grades mean something."

Finally, those who start new schools should recognize at the start how hard it's going to be, says Deborah Mejer. "You have to acknowledge that tensions between community and staff are not conspiracies, but naturally difficult questions," she advises. "You have to work it out in practice, not in policy—it's a phony distinction between the two anyway. And if you run into a crisis, it's usually a signal that you have to move faster, not slower. Most of the time it indicates you're stuck between two worlds—maybe your grading policy and your assessment policy are out of sync with each other. It's just like courtship and marriage, in a way—you've got to take your foot out of the old world and move it into the next one."

The Knowledge Hut, in the end, works better as a joke than as a metaphor for school transformation—because the changes going on in new schools, just as in established ones, simply cannot be franchised. These new schools look different from each other in ways as various as their communities' environments, hopes, and needs. A fresh design and a united staff may give them a jump on their older cousins at the starting gate, but new schools do not escape the burden of deep-rooted cultural assumptions, or sidestep the toil of making the design into reality. Like everybody else who aims for school reform, they have to keep thinking it through. And like every other school attempting change, they need the support and community of like-minded schools to sustain their efforts.

In turn, established schools can learn much from the fundamental similarities between the new school experience and their own. "Every old school can be thought of as a new one, or a group of new ones," declares Deborah Mejer. "Even if the physical plant and faculty have been there for years, we've got to have the mindset that we're starting as a new school. Suppose we were starting from scratch, what would we want for our students? That question can free us to think about change in a whole new way."
No Deadwood Need Apply: A New School Advertises for Teachers

When Judy Cunningham was named principal of the new South Lake Middle School in Irvine, California (not far from where she has been principal of Rancho San Joaquin Middle School, a Coalition member), she wrote up a job description for district teachers applying for positions on the school's certificated team. ("Candidates only needed to walk on water and not get wet," Cunningham jokes.) The posted notice read as follows:

Specific focus areas are Humanities (includes Social Science and Language Arts), Physical Education, Mathematics, and Science. While each position will have a focus area, there are common elements which include:

- A love and understanding of the early adolescent.
- Knowledge, understanding, and successful exhibition of learning strategies to support all students in learning to use their minds well.
- Knowledge, understanding, and successful demonstration of integrating curriculum and providing connectedness for learners.
- Knowledge, understanding, and successful demonstration of providing a challenging learning experience in a heterogeneous setting.
- Knowledge, understanding, and successful demonstration of authentic assessment based on specific student outcomes.
- Successful demonstration of working as a flexible, contributing member of a team of professionals.
- Creative.
- Knowledgeable about national and state restructuring efforts.
- Comfortable working with the business community and parents.
- Energetic and thrives on change.
- Understands the use of technology to support learning.
- Actively pursues continual professional growth and is committed to support colleagues in their growth.