

A Community in Search of a School

In June 2013, a group of neighbors and I formed the Midtown Community School Initiative, a grassroots group of parents from the midtown neighborhoods of Kansas City, Missouri. Our mission was simple: We wanted a public school that would serve our community's needs. Yes, there were a number of district, charter, and private schools already in or around the city, but none of them seemed to have our small corner of the world in mind.

The unaccredited district schools seemed to always be on the brink of failing or closing their doors. The charter schools all seemed to have a special curricular focus, or target a certain demographic, rather than simply serving the full diverse population of the midtown area. The handful of successful district or charter schools had wait lists and competitive lotteries every year, leaving many families with no choice but to move to the suburbs or take a risk on a struggling school. Very few school buildings actually remained in our midtown neighborhoods – most had either fallen into disrepair, or had been sold to housing developers. And as for private schools, there are several options but financially out of reach for many of our middle-class peers. After many conversations on playground and in coffee shops, we realized that we were a community in search of a school.

So we tried something different – we wrote a Request for Proposals.

Yes, typically a RFP is used in the business world to solicit potential vendors and compare bids. What were we thinking in using this in our search for a school?

We had spent the summer of 2013 hosting conversations with neighbors, parents, and friends throughout Midtown. We had met with school district representatives and charter school leaders. We spoke with many administrators and teachers in the education community in order to understand what makes a good school worthy of support from a community of parents. In our first two months we conducted a Google survey, created a Facebook group that grew within a month to over 200 people, and hosted a meeting of 80 community members. Based on the rapid momentum of our small initiative and the outpouring of support we started to receive, it became clear we had found a critical mass of parents ready to support a midtown school, one we could call our own.

There was only one problem: we were not educators. Yes, of course, we were dedicated parents and committed citizens, but we didn't feel like we had the expertise and experience to start a school. We were also torn by the ongoing political battles between the

school district and the growing number of charter schools in Kansas City. As young parents who had professional careers outside of education, this landscape of urban education at first seemed more like a wilderness to us.

On the one hand, the school district continued to struggle financially and academically across the board, always promising they were turning a corner, only to quickly trip once again. But we also saw promise in a new superintendent and his administration. We wanted to seriously consider throwing our community's support behind Kansas City's only urban school district, which had spent decades and millions of dollars trying to attract families just like us – white, educated, and middle class – because, we were told, we possessed resources and skills that would only strengthen the struggling district. We knew we were a desirable demographic in urban education.

But we were also intrigued by some of the charter schools in the city. To be fair, there are many charter schools that are failing children, and even some charter organizations that fail children while also turning a profit. But there are also charter schools that, because they are free of restraints placed on urban districts struggling to simply regain accreditation and financial solvency, are educating children in the ways that many modern parents know are not only desirable but necessary for our children and their future. (I'm not talking only about college readiness and financial success. I'm talking about schools that clearly understand that 21st century America will be very different from the society we grew up in, and our systems must adapt and paradigms must shift if our democracy and our planet are to have a viable future.)

So it's in that context, within that tension, that our little band of parents was struggling by the end of the summer to decide what to do with this newly formed social capital we had discovered in the Midtown Community School Initiative.

One of the other parents on our team, Jacob Littrell, sought out the advice of an educator we had come to admire in Kansas City—Dean Johnson, co-founder and director of Crossroads Academy.

Dean told Jacob he had an idea: “What if you wrote a RFP?”

Dean's idea sounded crazy at first. He explained that our group of parents needed to lead with our strengths. “You're not educators,” he said. “And you're not philanthropists who have millions of dollars to invest in a new school. But what you do have is this community of parents offering a collective voice to demand something better. Why not use that to your advantage, tell your story, and simply put a request out for a partner to provide the school our community is searching for?”

We loved the idea. Whether it's the school district or a charter organization that responds – or both! – we would have a seat at the table, and the ability to make the decision based on what we believe is best for our children and their futures.

There were five parents initially who spent the next few weeks writing, drafting, and revising, finding census statistics and asking neighbors to create maps, plucking quotes and data from our survey and Facebook group, and combining all of the questions we wanted a potential school leader to answer. We gathered it all into a 19-page document that articulated the story and vision of one community of parents. It wasn't a manifesto; it was our story. It didn't include a list of demands; it offered a series of questions. We sent it out into the wide world on October 7, emailing it to everyone we knew, sharing it on social media, and posting it on a simple Wordpress website.

We had no idea if anyone would read it, let alone respond. And frankly, we were nervous that we had spent all of this time and energy convincing our neighbors to trust this process, and what if nothing came of it? Our web guru, Danica Lyons, was tracking views of the RFP, and we were all shocked when she told us that within two days, the RFP had been viewed 129 by people in 17 different states. So people were reading it. But that didn't matter much if no responses came in. We had set a deadline of November 8th. As each day ticked closer, we wondered if we had just wasted our time altogether.

The deadline arrived. I opened our inbox. Sitting right there, glowing on the screen, were three emails we received in response to the RFP.

The first response came from the Kansas City school district: a one page letter signed by the superintendent, saying the district would be pleased to continue conversations with our group and looked forward to the possibilities of working with a dedicated group of parents on a Midtown school. Unfortunately, he wrote, they did not have the capacity to respond to all of our questions.

The second response surprisingly came from Dean Johnson at Crossroads Academy. It turned out that Dean was so encouraged by the enthusiasm and dedication of our group, it made him wonder if this might be the right time for Crossroads Academy to consider expanding its school model beyond its current downtown location. So he submitted a letter requesting that we meet to discuss potential collaboration, and he included an attachment of 20 pages articulating Crossroad's mission and explaining Dean's vision for 21st century schools.

The third response was an even bigger surprise, sent to us from an organization named Citizens of the World Charter Schools, based in Los Angeles, California. At first, I was nothing but a typical Midwesterner, leery of anything arriving here from California. Who is this West Coast charter organization? Are they trying to simply grow and looking for the next best market? Are they for-profit? Why would we want to partner with a national organization when we don't know the risks that would involve?

But then I began reading through their proposal. It was 200 pages long. They had taken the time to answer every single one of our questions, everything ranging from deep dives into pedagogical theory and practical classroom application, to potential ways for the community of parents to directly partner with the school, to hard numbers on academic performance and facility needs.

Our Midtown Community School Initiative core team of five parents spent the next few months having conference calls, meetings, and email exchanges with all three respondents, and we worked through a simple evaluation process to help us compare – because, let's be honest, we were comparing three very different options, each with a unique set of opportunities and challenges.

Just before the New Year arrived, Jacob sent our team an email to tell us that Dean's board of directors at Crossroads had decided to hold off on considering expansion for another year or so. Unfortunately, Dean had to withdraw his proposal. That left us with two choices: the first was to partner with the school district, becoming for them that critical mass of middle-class parent support that they pined after for so long, but without a lot of guarantees either of their future or of their current vision for teaching children. The second choice was to partner with a national charter organization, bringing their incredibly thoughtful and exciting model of public education to Kansas City, but also bringing

unknowns around what one more charter in Kansas City might do to the overall system. Which was the best path forward?

Our conversations with the district went well. We asked very clearly that we would expect the same arrangement as what the Hale Cook parents had worked out – a written agreement between the district and the group of parents, allowing parents to be involved with the hiring of the principal and other key decisions impacting the school. We also said that at as a starting point, the district needed to redraw the school boundaries so that they made sense for the communities they were intending to serve, rather than continue to be sliced and diced and gerrymandered with no regard for neighborhoods. The district said this was already in the works as part of their ongoing “Master Plan” which was the comprehensive assessment of facilities and boundaries that Dr. Covington had failed to do a few years before. Our main trouble was that the district staff we were meeting with—the Chief Operating Officer and the staffers in charge of selling or repurposing closed schools—were not able to answer our questions about curriculum and school culture. I remember one meeting where the answer to several questions was not “Let me get back to you with an answer,” but instead, “That would be a question for our curriculum department.” It grew more and more discouraging that we were in a room with the leaders of the largest institution in the city whose sole mission it was to educate children, and yet at the administrative level they couldn’t offer basic descriptions of what their classrooms looked like on a daily basis.

Compare that with the proposal we received from Citizens of the World, and the conversations that followed, and it became more and more clear exactly what it was we were comparing. Citizens of the World based its model on one small school in Hollywood, Larchmont School, where a team of school leaders developed a curriculum around project-based learning and social-emotional development, both of which have recently become much-researched subjects of child development. In addition to their well-defined curriculum, they have a strong record of academic performance at their California schools, performing at _____. Finally, in our conversations with them, it became clear that their approach to community engagement was more than just lip service, and at their schools it looked like more than bake sales. Yes, there would be fundraising. But more importantly, they were interested in developing partnerships in the community that would work directly in tandem with the project-based curriculum, ensuring that the children would know that their learning also takes place outside of the classroom, out in the community where they live.

We were trying to make a decision, getting input from our fellow parents who had been involved with the Midtown Community School Initiative from the beginning, and seeking out the advice of many others who we thought should weigh in. We even spent time trying to figure out how to partner with both organizations. Could we support two schools? Would the district be willing to share a building with Citizens of the World in exchange for curriculum development? What other ways might we explore to simultaneously support our district while also bringing in an incredible model like Citizens of the World to Kansas City?

Then came the straw that broke the camel’s back. We received an email from the school district, informing the public that the Master Plan would be put on hold for the foreseeable future. While redrawing boundaries was necessary, they told us, the district needed to devote all of its attention for the rest of the school year on bringing up state test

scores in order to regain provisional accreditation and avoid a looming state takeover if improvements weren't made. If they couldn't bring up test scores, there might be no district left in the coming year, so a Master Plan was a moot point for the time being.

We wrote the administration a letter telling them that we did see promise and potential ahead for the school district, but we would need to resume our conversations only after they regained accreditation. In the meantime, we were thrilled to be partnering with Citizens of the World, a charter organization with a mission and model we were ready to embrace for our community.

.....