

The Un-Making of an Extraordinary School

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The Making of an Extraordinary School: The Work of Ordinary People is a book I wrote about the Graham & Parks Alternative Public School. It told the story of this truly remarkable, K-8 school in Cambridge, MA, from its founding in 1972 by a group of parents through the early 2000's. I was principal of the school from 1974 to 2001.

This essay is about the un-making of that school, about the internal and external failures that led to its diminution. The school is still quite a good school with teachers doing some really amazing things with and for children. I continue to visit the school and to talk with people there so I know this from personal experience. To tell this revised story, I will need to go over some of the school's history and its main features.

Graham & Parks had about 360 students in multi-graded, open classrooms in grades K-6 and a flexible, student-centered grades 7-8 program. G & P was the first citywide school of choice and it was open to all students. Students needed to apply to the school and admissions were done by lottery since more students always applied than we had space for. We believed that the best starting point for learning was a heterogeneous group of students and we actualized this idea by admitting students through a lottery process that balanced the school by race/ethnicity (50% white, 50% non-white), socio-economic background (50 middle class, 50% working class), gender (50% males, 50% females) and all areas of Cambridge (as equally as possible from each area). About 35 percent of our students were on individual special education plans. We also had a fairly large Haitian Bilingual Program, with most of the 90 or so children being new immigrants to America until a statewide referendum dismantled all such programs in the early 2000's. The school was called "alternative" because it was a city wide-school and not a neighborhood school as were all other public schools, because it was the only school then with a progressive education philosophy and because of its unusual decision-making practices (which are explained below).

Our school had a non-standard curriculum devised by staff, with on-going revisions. We were a progressive school with classrooms having various learning areas such as math, science, computers, reading-writing, lofts and the like stocked with a great deal of hands-on learning materials. Students *actively* engaged in their learning with these materials and with extended projects. We personalized children's learning while developing strong communities in the

classrooms and in the school as a whole since we knew that making a strong academic program rested on the base of a strong community.

All staff members worked constantly to establish a tone of high expectations—expecting children and adults to work hard and to do high quality work. This combination of hard work, high expectations, student active involvement, a more-than-interesting curriculum, personalized learning and the development of community led to high achievement for students, usually matching the best performing schools in the state year after year. Graham & Parks was chosen as the Disney Spotlight School of the Year 2000 based on these achievements.

We developed a sophisticated, democratic decision-making process that involved parents and staff equally. The main decision-making body was the Steering Committee which was composed of equal numbers of parents elected by parents and staff elected by staff, plus the principal. All major decisions were made by this group. The principal had one vote on the committee and could not over-rule its decisions.

To help in its work and as a way of actively involving more parents and staff, the Steering Committee created a number of standing and ad hoc committees, which included curriculum, admissions, evaluation, funding, building and grounds, social, newsletter, creative magazine, room parents and the like. During most years, we had about an 80 percent or higher participation rate on the part of parents and staff.

Because of the fragility of a progressive school in a traditional setting and because of the nature of how things got done in the Cambridge School Department and in the city, we had to develop a strong political presence both in the department and in the city. Parents knew and were often friends of politicians. A fair number of our parents worked on the campaigns for those running for school committee and city council. At one point, 3 out of the 7-member school committee were parents from our school.

Because parents were so involved in the school, they, of course, wanted to help keep it going and growing, getting all of the support and resources it needed. So, they and I would lobby school committee and city council members. We would do this one-on-one and, if needed, in large groups. A significant presence from our school would turn out for meetings that involved important issues such as budget, a new building and personnel matters. We more often than not were able to influence decisions in our favor.

Our alternative school was considered special in the city from its very beginning. When it was founded in 1972, the school was given a “charter” (based on a formal proposal) by the school committee to be a city-wide school of choice with a progressive education philosophy and a democratic decision-making process which included parents on an equal footing with staff. At this time, as noted above, all other Cambridge elementary schools were neighborhood-based and all were quite traditional, with top-down decision-making in the hands of administrators.

In the mid-1970’s, Massachusetts adopted a very strong law that required schools to be racially balanced. A few years later, the Cambridge Public Schools were found to be in violation

of the law and were required to develop a remedial plan to balance its schools. This was immediately after the turmoil in Boston when it began to implement its remedial plan.

Under the leadership of Bill Lannon (Superintendent) and Mary Lou McGrath (then, the Director of Elementary Ed.), the school department involved hundreds of staff, parents and community people through a large number of committees to develop a solution to the problem. They crafted a desegregation plan, known widely now as the Cambridge Controlled Choice Plan. It was mostly based on our school's structures. (I chaired the committee which recommended the basic elements of the plan.) The plan did away with neighborhood elementary schools and designated all of them as "magnets." Each elementary school was then to develop a special approach to learning as a way of attracting students. Instead of registering at a particular school as was done in the past, parents now would go to a central Parent Information Center where they would list their top three school choices for their children. They were guaranteed admission to one of these three choices, based on racial balance and space availability.

Graham & Parks lost some control of its student body from this plan since the plan did not include gender, socio-economic background or area of Cambridge as important criteria. The plan was modified in the mid-1990's to include both race and socio-economic background. We were able, though, through the years to maintain a fairly balanced, heterogeneous student body. When we did our own admissions prior to this new plan, we would get to personally know the applying families and children and they were able to get to know the school and the staff in some detail—which, of course, was a real plus for everyone involved. Some of this was also lost under the new plan.

The school sailed along fairly smoothly from the mid-1980's through the mid-to-late 1990's, getting better and better each year. It was recognized nationally and internationally as an outstanding school, with hundreds of visitors each year from all over the country and from at least a dozen other countries.

Then, I had a visit from a school committee member, a person who had always been a supporter of the school and someone I considered a friend. This person informed me, in private, that the committee and the administration were going to take away the school's special status and it would be treated like all of the other Cambridge schools.

I was shocked and surprised and was not sure how to respond. The information was, I thought, given to me in confidence. When this happened, I was also trying to deal with another issue, one that seemed to be recognized only by me. We had become complacent, I thought. We had had many external and internal challenges to deal with—growing a different kind of school in a quite conservative and even hostile environment, finding a permanent home for the school, incorporating an underperforming, traditional school and doubling our size, going through a city-wide funding crisis with reductions in personnel while having the youngest staff, developing

both Greek and Haitian bilingual programs and, after several years of trying, creating a truly student-centered, flexible grades 7-8 program.

I sensed that teachers and other staff members were tired of dealing with such big issues and they were also maturing. Many had families and so had more demands on their time and energy. Through it all, we provided a first-rate education for our children. Yet, I sensed a reluctance on the part of some staff to take on new challenges, to continue to be the experimenting group that we had been. Parents, seeing the success of the school and no external threats, slackened their involvement.

So, I tried to deal with these two issues and tried to combine them in one solution. I did most of this privately, not sharing my thoughts and concerns as I always had done. I developed a plan to make the school into an educational service center, one that would operate from around 6:30 am to about 8:00 pm. It would provide meals for children, physical and mental health services, recreation, tutoring, and other services. We would continue with our progressive education approach but would have a much more flexible schedule by being able to spread out the academics, arts, music, physical education, language and other offerings throughout the day. I wanted to take this idea to the administration and school committee and get our school designated as either a special “pilot” school or as a charter school.

Staff members were either lukewarm or not supportive of the idea. The Steering Committee reacted in the same manner but agreed to let me take the idea to Bobbie D’Alessandro (the superintendent) and the school committee. The superintendent said she would support the idea, but she was not enthusiastic about it. I lobbied each of the school committee members individually, but they would not vote for the plan (which should have been obvious to me).

It is clear to me now that I made a number of strategic mistakes. Instead of treating the information as a confidential matter, I should have gone to the staff and parents when I found out that the school was going to lose its special status.

Also, to confound matters by hitting staff and parents with such a large, involved plan to re-organize the school was the opposite of what was needed. Doing this mostly on my own was not the way I had functioned in the past: whenever we had an issue, we always dealt with it as a group. Parents and staff would discuss the issue in separate groups and then bring their ideas to the Steering Committee where we’d discuss the problem in detail, hash it out until we had agreement on a solution. In this manner, we would usually make wise decisions, ones that would be implemented with the weight of more than one person. Our school had been set up that way, not for an administrator to make such large decisions on his/her own.

The school committee did not immediately move to take away Graham & Parks’ special status, probably because there was still a strong sense of our political power.

By 2000, after being the school's principal for over 25 years, I knew that I was going to retire soon. I wanted the school to be in as good a shape as I could get it before I left, especially its decision-making processes and parent and staff involvement. If these were as solid as our academic program, then the school would have a good chance of staying alive well into the future. This meant that I had to make sure that parents and staff were still strongly committed to our democratic processes. I talked about this constantly with everyone in the school and, along with Ann Bolger, our Parent Coordinator, tried to ensure that all of the committees were functioning well, actively involving many parents and staff, especially the Steering Committee.

In the midst of this, the school suffered a deep, personal loss. Ann Bolger died. Ann had been the heart and soul of the school. She was the person primarily responsible for the high-level of parent involvement. She not only helped organize all of our parent-staff committees, she supported parents on the committees with time and advice, she attended just about every committee meeting and she wrote up and distributed their minutes. Ann also was a constant voice for parents in the school with staff. She was a voice for individual parents, supporting them when they had an issue concerning a child or an issue with a teacher. She talked individually with staff about individual children she was concerned about and she pushed us all to be better at our jobs.

Ann seemed to know just about everybody in Cambridge, including the politicians, and got along well with them. When we needed a parent to contact a politician, Ann would arrange it. If we needed a large group to turn out for a school committee meeting, Ann would arrange it. It was she who had primarily made and kept us politically strong. So, her death was a huge blow to the school.

Then I retired in 2001.

There were other internal mistakes or mis-steps that hurt the school after I retired. There were four principals in the years from 2001 to 2014, and each of them contributed in various degrees to the school's decline. I was not directly involved with the school after I retired, but I kept in touch with parents and staff.

The first principal ran into great difficulties with both staff and parents, alienating them in her first year and causing turmoil. That's when the school committee decided to act. They announced that the school would be moved to another site--to the most up-scale neighborhood in the city. The reason given was that the school's old building was in need of too many repairs to remain viable. That was an outright lie, which many of us knew, and it was exposed within a year when the school department moved an alternative high school into the old building without doing any repairs. Later, that building became the home of the Amigos Two-Way Bilingual School.

Some of us knew the actual reason: two school committee members had been pressured for a number of years by white, middle class families to have their kids admitted to the school

since their access was limited by our admissions policy and because the school was relatively small.

The new building was larger, so the number of students attending the school was increased. The system's admissions policy had a stipulation favoring parents who lived within a certain area of a school, so a larger number of whites were able to apply since the neighborhood was mostly white and middle/upper middle class. The school's previous site had been in an area of Cambridge that was fairly well balanced by race and socio-economic factors, so in its earlier years the school had been able to draw a balanced mix of students from its immediate neighborhood.

Moving the school was a fairly dramatic blow to the Graham & Parks School. It became harder to personalize learning with the increased number of children. It was not easy to find teachers who not only understood our type of education but were skilled at doing it. The school's basic belief in having a balanced student body as the basis for learning was also dealt a blow.

Over the years, having a balanced student population became more difficult as the city's demographics changed. The biggest changes occurred when rent control was eliminated by a state-wide referendum. Rents skyrocketed and properties became very expensive. The white, working class population virtually disappeared, Greek families left the city so that bilingual program disappeared, the Haitian bilingual program was dismantled after the state-wide referendum passed, and the small African-American middle class population also declined as the influx into the city of upper middle class whites dramatically increased from the late '90's through 2014. Also, over 20 percent of school-age children attended local private schools. Cambridge's school population became bifurcated between white, middle and upper middle class students and of-color working class and poor students.

The second principal, a former school staff member, had a cynical view of parent involvement, believing that I had used our democratic processes to actually manipulate and control decisions. This principal had an authoritarian bent and so the shared decision-making processes withered. Her knowledge and background in progressive education was limited but, for the most part, she did not interfere in how teachers ran their classrooms and she had a deep concern for children. She did, though, support Massachusetts' education "reform" agenda with its mandated standards and increased testing. This principal transferred to become principal of another Cambridge public school.

During this time, the parent coordinator who replaced Ann Bolger worked hard to keep parents involved in the school. But she did not have the same understanding about the need for political strength as Ann Bolger and I had. Actually, she was openly critical of any criticism of central administration's direction and authority. Nor did the succeeding principals expect her to be politically involved. So, this key source for organizing parents was lost to the school.

The third principal had scant background in progressive education and even less with democratic decision-making, but she seemed to understand what the school was about and respected its processes and practices. The school continued on, but with its shared decision-making of no great import and with the state's education policies increasing in importance, along with the increasing intrusion of No Child Left Behind.

Massachusetts "reformed" its educational structure and policies for K-12 education in the mid-1990's. From its beginnings, education in the state had been a local affair, under the control of local boards of education. This changed dramatically with the new law and new regulations, with much more power and control in the hands of the state's board of education and its commissioner. The state began to implement curriculum guidelines and curriculum standards, with the clear expectation that all schools and all teachers would use these guidelines and standards. This took several years and then, in the late '90's and early 2000's, the state began to mandate tests to make sure that these guidelines and standards were being implemented and to see if the students were learning them. It soon implemented a "high-stakes" exam for all 10th graders. If a student did not pass this state exam, then the student was not allowed to receive a diploma, even if s/he passed all of a school's required courses.

It is important to understand that this way of approaching education is the opposite of what progressive educators believe. It is a one-shoe fits all approach; it comes down from the top in an authoritarian manner with decisions made by isolated bureaucrats instead of decisions being made at the school level; it takes most curriculum decisions out of the hands of the school and of the teachers; it is not based on any understanding of how children learn; it tells children "Learn or we will hurt you" rather than "What do you need to learn and how can we help you?" It focuses on coverage of curriculum materials versus digging down deeply to understand a limited number of topics. It wants the simplicity of homogeneity instead of the complexity of heterogeneity and diversity. It disparages creativity at a time when it is in great demand. The educational path that Massachusetts and the country took—standardized teaching and learning, competition, choice, teaching a limited, prescribed curriculum, using market-oriented reform ideas, test-based accountability and control, and performance-based pay—is leading to a dead end.(See my book, *Education: Back to the Future*, for a detailed discussion of this issue.)

I was still principal when this push for state standardization began and when the testing started. We understood the state's curriculum guidelines and standards, actually agreeing with some of them, but we did little to change how we functioned, trying as much as possible to keep the practices we had established while constantly trying to improve them, using the state's materials when we saw that they were helpful to us. We knew that our students were achieving at high levels and that they did fairly well on tests, but this is not what worried us. We knew that the state's agenda, coupled with the new No Child Left Behind, were a serious, long-term threat. They were not only a great threat to us: they threatened all schools. I can illustrate this from my personal experiences with the following story that jumps ahead a bit in time:

After retiring from the Cambridge schools, I worked for a consulting company which had a contract with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. We developed a series of teams throughout the state to support schools in which students were not doing well on the state's MCAS tests. These tests scores and NCLB rankings were used to determine the levels of performance of schools. Just about all of the schools initially in trouble were those with students who were poor and non-white. (This was no surprise to me and to others in progressive education who saw standardized tests as biased in favor of white, middle class children.) NCLB ratcheted up the scores needed to pass each year, as did Massachusetts. So, by 2009, about 50 percent of the schools in the state were in trouble based on these test scores. But, eventually, even middle class schools were falling into trouble with the state. That's when middle class parents began to grumble at administrators and school board members about their kids' schools. In turn, these administrators screamed—literally—at us, to the state's education commissioner, to the State Board of Education and to legislators.

What happened? The department of education changed how schools were scored, declaring that they wanted only 20 percent to be failing or to be on watch. So, overnight, literally, schools that had been deemed weak were no longer so. Of those bottom 20 percent, none were middle class. It was really amazing: one day our teams across the state were working with hundreds of schools and the next day we were working with much less than half of them. That's when I quit, because it was all so cynical. I had been quite leery about working on the project, yet we were really helping teachers and principals in some of the needy schools. But, all along, every school that our teams visited the mantra was "The kids have to pass the tests." Principals and teachers analyzed the tests, children's scores and how to take the tests—everything was focused on getting the children to pass the reading and math state MCAS tests. It was a complete perversion of what teaching and learning should be about.

So, what happened in the late 1990's when our students were confronted with these new, higher-stakes tests from the state? Our students boycotted the tests! Many of our parents organized a protest, which soon mushroomed into a statewide effort. When the tests were given, over half of our students refused to take them. Parents were supported by the city's school committee, which refused to follow the state's desire to punish the students who boycotted. This kept up for two years and then the state department of education put the screws on school committees across the state forcing all students had to take the mandated tests.

For those first two years when our students boycotted, our students' scores on the tests were about average since many of the higher-achieving students did not take the tests. When they all took the tests in the third year, our scores went up significantly. Over that time period, we had continued to do what we had been doing, using what we thought was worthwhile from the state's mandates while ignoring large chunks of it. We received a letter from the state's commissioner

of education congratulating us on the hard work we had done to improve our student's scores—which I showed to the parents and staff and then threw in the garbage.

I retired as principal of the school in 2001. That's when the state's "reform" efforts, joined with NCLB, became more intrusive and demanding with increased testing and increased curricular demands. Some teachers at Graham & Parks felt more and more pressure—especially because they taught multi-graded classrooms and so had to implement two sets of increasingly demanding curriculum. New and non-tenured teachers felt the pressure to conform to the state's standards because they feared losing their jobs.

The school discussed this situation and decided to keep only its grades 1-2 classes multi-graded, while the rest became single-graded, but with "looping". Looping is the practice of having a teacher with a single-graded classroom one year, staying with that class as its next-year's teacher and then looping back to teach a new group of students in the lower grade the third year. Again, this was another large change to one of the school's basic beliefs and practices—that is, the idea that the best starting point for learning is a heterogeneous group of students, a heterogeneity not only by race, gender and social class, but of age. We all know that people learn at different rates, with some children at times learning some things rapidly and other things more slowly, so that, at times, a 2nd grader is learning at a 3rd-grade or higher rate and a 3rd grader is learning at a 2nd grade speed. We believed that a multi-graded classroom could best accommodate this reality. Plus, we focused on trying to develop communities in our classrooms and this was best done when there was a wide mixture of children.

The state's requirements changed other things at the school. For example, teachers at the upper grades had an integrated instructional program that included having the students learning in the community, a project called City Sites. It was an intense program that took students out into businesses and service providers in Cambridge to learn how our larger community worked, doing activities that were tied to all areas of the curriculum. It was a program which students repeatedly said was one of the highlights of their schooling. This program had to be eliminated because of the state's increased testing demands.

The federal and state guidelines emphasized language arts and mathematics and, more recently, science. Teachers at other grade levels experienced the same pressures as the upper grades teachers and so cut back on social studies, the arts and music. In language arts, the emphasis now was on expository reading and essay writing so the more creative aspects of the subject had to be cut back. Extended learning projects and the use of hands-on activities were also affected. Previously, almost every teacher in the school was involved in learning projects with universities and businesses but there is no longer time for these types of initiatives which had brought the school many learning projects in addition to invaluable staff development.

The fourth principal was an improvement in some ways—she had a solid teaching background in another progressive school in Cambridge. She was focused on children's learning and especially

concerned with the achievement gap between white and of-color children. She was also focused on teachers improving their practice and on them working together. The “older” teachers in the school had continued teaching the way they had in the 1990’s, developing their own curriculum to fit the needs of their students. The newer teachers did not have that same spirit nor did they have a strong sense of the school’s history and its mission. From the middle-2000’s onward, the achievement of poor children and children of color lessened, showing gaps as in other Cambridge schools.

As with other schools in the city and the country, Graham & Parks struggled at times with the achievement gap between poor black and brown children and white middle class children, especially when it was a new school. Over the years, we focused on this issue and thought we had many successes with our children who were poor and/or of color, a significant number of whom went on to higher education after high school.

The principal paid close attention to No Child Left Behind and to the state’s guidelines and testing, using the data the tests provided, trying to make them work together with the school’s progressive practices instead of seeing them as a threat to the very nature of the school.

When she became principal, a small group of parents tried to revive the Steering Committee. They were somewhat successful but they did not build it back to where it became an effective force in the school department or city. The principal seemed to believe in fitting into the system rather than opposing or questioning its initiatives.

This came home to roost in 2010 when a new superintendent of schools was exploring the idea of Cambridge changing from a K-8 system to one that had K-5 elementary schools and grades 6-8 middle schools. He came to that conclusion because he thought it was probably the best way to deal with the continuing under-performance of students in the middle grades in most of the schools after years of trying to improve them. The gap between higher achieving white middle class children and children of color was especially wide and had been so for many years. Additionally, a number of Cambridge schools had quite small numbers of students in the upper grades, which also meant that teachers had no peers in their disciplines to consult with or to learn from.

When I heard that the superintendent was thinking about this issue, I met with him twice to explain why it was important to keep the K-8 structure for the Graham & Parks Alternative Public School. I explained that the two ideas on which academic success is built are personalization and community. One of Graham & Parks’ *key* structures for doing this was the K-8 design. Along with other ways, it allowed the school to know each child in depth and to know the parents well because we had children for 9 years. K-8 allowed the children’s education to be continuous. It was one of the major ways the staff used for academic and social-emotional planning. We determined what we expected a child to know by the end of 8th grade and then we planned backwards to get there, starting in kindergarten. We used the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards on which we built our K-8 math program. We used the standards from other organizations but we were unable to develop a completely articulated

curriculum in other disciplines. But teachers talked to each other constantly about curriculum, in formal team meetings and informally. The staff was able to do this because the staff (and children and parents) *lived* in the school—knew each other well because of the school’s small size and the way education was personalized, associated daily with each other and discussed children, learning, materials and curriculum daily. The grades 7-8 team worked really closely with each other, meeting daily to discuss kids, the curriculum and the program which they had almost complete control of. When there was an issue with a student, teachers could easily talk with the child’s teachers in the early grades.

Like the K-6 teachers, it was the grades 7-8 staff who developed its non-standard curriculum, they who brought children to high levels of learning and they who explored all sorts of resources inside and outside of the school to improve their teaching and the students’ learning. It was their school and their program and they worked hard to make it better and better, even meeting voluntarily in the summer for several weeks to review the previous year’s work and to plan for the year ahead. That’s why it became one of the models that the Carnegie Corporation used in developing its Turning Points recommendations which set the tone for all current middle school education in America. The staff members throughout the school frequently commented on how they had found a home at Graham & Parks and that they did not see their work as a job.

Personalization and community can be developed with other grade arrangements, but those are not as strong, deep, comprehensive and lasting as in a K-8 structure. The 7th and 8th graders had “reading buddies” with children in the grades 1-2 classes whom they met with once a week. Children at lower grade levels had lunch and recess together with the upper grades children every day. Many of the older children were role models for the younger kids and this arrangement allowed these older children to keep in touch with their younger selves. That is the power of the K-8 structure when used well.

In these discussions, the superintendent asked me what was so special about Graham & Parks. My explanation included the following:

- It was the first school of choice in the city. That, along with the way students were admitted by lottery within categories became the basis for the entire system under the city’s Controlled Choice plan (which was used as a model, then, in every city in the state).
- Graham & Parks was the first school in the city with a progressive education philosophy. Over time, this approach became the way that many other classrooms functioned in the school department.
- The school was successful academically—for its entire history!—and was recognized with a number of national awards.
- Graham & Parks spun off two other schools—the King Open School and the Cambridgeport School—plus an open program at the Tobin School.
- G & P changed how K-2 education happened in Cambridge.
- It created the two-year kindergarten program.

- It brought algebra for everyone to the system.
- It brought high levels of parent involvement, parent and staff involvement in decision-making, and the idea of parent coordinators, which were all taken up by the system.
- It created the best middle school program in the district and influenced the national movement of the Turning Points ideas sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, which studied our “model” carefully.
- The school initiated the idea of staff developers which was adopted by all schools in the district.
- G & P started teacher teaming.
- It developed a wide variety of authentic assessment and reporting methods not based on standardized testing which were utilized by other schools.
- It was the first to have all hiring done at the school level and to involve staff and parents (and, at times, students) in the process, which became the norm in the city.
- Grant writing barely existed before G & P brought it to high levels in the school and in the system.
- Graham & Parks developed a large number of relationships with businesses and universities which brought a variety of resources into the school, including funds, materials, learning and research projects and people. It led the way for other Cambridge schools to follow suit.
- In many ways, the Graham and Parks Alternative Public School had been the system’s R&D center, constantly trying out new ideas and then spreading them throughout the system. It actually was a school that influenced many throughout the world since it had several hundred visitors each year from the local area, the state and other states and from countries around the world who came to learn from the school.
- There were many other accomplishments but these are the major ones.

Finally, I pointed out to the superintendent that he was basically re-arranging the chairs on the deck since he was going to just move the teachers who currently taught grades 6-8 from their current schools into the newly designated middle schools. What would he do with them that he could not do in their current K-8 schools? Also, how could diminishing one of the district’s highest achieving schools be a help in raising up other schools? Many staff and parents at the school thought the school department said to Graham & Parks, “We’re going to punish you because of your success,” though this was not the superintendent’s stated intent.

I also met with some school committee members and with one of the major committees that was set up to gather data and offer advice about separate middle schools. At the same time, Graham & Park’s principal sided with the superintendent, believing that the system’s need to better deal with its inequalities over-rode the school’s needs. From its founding, the school operated on the belief that making an outstanding school for everyone should always be the goal

because a great school gets all children to high levels of achievement, including poor children and children of color.

A group of the school's parents met with the superintendent in an intense meeting. They were opposed to the middle school plan and more than strongly supportive of keeping G & P as a K-8 school. Their efforts, the opposition of a considerable group of others from various schools and my efforts were of no avail because the school committee agreed with the superintendent. So, all but one of the elementary schools (the Amigos School, a two-way bilingual school) became K-5, including Graham & Parks.

The Steering Committee did not take any action because they perceived that the school's parents were divided on the issue. This was so ironic, given that the school was moved there to enable more white middle class parents to get into the school. They did, but not for the right reason: they wanted their children in the best performing school in the district, not really understanding what made it stay alive and function at high levels, and not getting involved in its politics. From about 2005, the school was viewed by many Cambridge residents as elitist.

Eliminating the upper grades was another major blow to the school, in addition to the ones which I noted earlier that affected admission and balancing, its democratic decision-making practices, its multi-grading of classrooms, its control of the curriculum and the learning environment.

There is one other important matter that I wrote about in *The Making of an Extraordinary School* and one that I re-iterated with the superintendent. The idea is the dis-junction between how decision-making is viewed and practiced by progressive educators and how it is practiced by traditional educators. This was and remains a critical matter for Graham and Parks.

Progressive education is a from-the-bottom-up approach to decision-making because of the way it understands how children learn. If children's learning is the focus of schooling, then teachers are primarily the ones who must decide what children will study and the school's administrator is there to work in conjunction with the teachers, supporting, guiding and serving them. That is the principal's first and primary priority and everything else, including the school system, is secondary. Central office, then, should be there to serve the principal. A diagram of this structure would be a triangle on its sharp point, with the superintendent at the bottom. A progressive approach does not eliminate anyone from helping all children to learn, it puts their roles and their authority in a very different relationship than is traditionally done in American schools.

Public school systems are top-down organizations. Authority flows down from an elected school board to the superintendent, to assistant superintendents and, eventually, to the principal and, lastly, to the teachers. A diagram of this structure is the well-known triangle on its long base with the sharp point of the superintendent at the top.

Obviously, there is a profound difference in how these two systems operate. This conflict was often central in the dealings between Graham & Parks and the Cambridge School Department's central office. I can illustrate this with the following examples.

The school department's admission policy stipulated that a child had to be at least 5 years old by Oct. 1 to enter kindergarten. Graham & Parks had K classes and grades 1-2 classes. After the school had been operating for several years, we saw that some children were not doing well in its 1-2 classes. Almost all of these kids were the younger ones who had come into kindergarten at age 5, while the ones who came in at age 6 were fine.

So, the staff pondered this and tried to figure out what to do about it. We did not have an answer. I brought the issue to central office and no one there could figure out how to deal with it. I came back to the school and took up the problem with our parents and staff until we hit upon the idea of having a two-year kindergarten experience for some children, with 6-year olds eligible for first grade. I took this idea to central office personnel, including the superintendent, and their responses were: "You cannot unilaterally change our admissions policy." So, once again I went back to the staff and parents and we carefully thought through the issue and decided we were going to do the two-year kindergarten program. We did.

Mary Lou McGrath, the superintendent at that time, understandably hit the roof. I was called to a school committee meeting and a very large contingent of staff and parents decided to attend, also. (I had not organized this.) I explained to the committee what we had done and why. I also pointed out that we were not technically violating any policy because our plan dealt with the age of students entering first grade and not with the kindergarten entrance age. It was a raucous meeting and the superintendent was really angry and accused me of being insubordinate. The committee disagreed and decided to let the program proceed since it benefited the children. It was a decision that most school committees would not make because they will support the superintendent's decisions almost all of the time as a matter of course in disputes like this. None of us at the school were happy about opposing the superintendent but we also knew that our plan would make for a better learning experience for our children and we had to do it. Mary Lou and I met later and talked this through and we went back to having respect for each other and working well together. In a short period of time, all other Cambridge schools adopted our 2-year kindergarten program.

In the 1990's, Superintendent Bobbie D'Alessandro introduced Reading Recovery as a way to support young children's reading and as a way of cutting down on special needs referrals. Schools were offered the program along with a few staff and a staff developer to support this new initiative. We did not want the program.

We had conversations with Bobbie to help her understand that we had a really strong phonics and literacy program already plus a special education team that was highly trained and skilled in the Orton-Gillingham approach. We had also done our homework and showed her the weaknesses of Reading Recovery. She mulled it over and decided not to push the issue with us. We then told her that we needed some additional staff development support in the school and it

was only fair for us to have the funds that would have supported the program if we had accepted it. Bobbie took a while, but she agreed. In the long run, we were right about Reading Recovery.

This kind of thing happened over and over again between our school and central office (and, sometimes, with the system's curriculum coordinators), more so with superintendents who did not fully understand what G & P was about and how the system should interact with its schools. It even occurred with the originators of the department's Controlled Choice plan, Bill Lannon and Mary Lou McGrath, who understood but also had various pressures and were feeling their way on how the system would implement Controlled Choice because administrators seem to only know one way to administer a school system and that way was not appropriate.

My understanding of Controlled Choice is that it needs a central office to recognize the centrality of the schools over the centrality of the system most of the time. In most circumstances, the superintendent should not mandate a one-shoe fits all approach. Each school is meant to be individual and unique and so has to be treated in that fashion. It's only when each school is strong that the "system" is strong and functioning well. Schools do not need the same math program, the same reading program and the like. Standardization is often a death knell in education. A top-down control that minimizes empowering schools and teachers rarely, if ever, inspires greatness. I have seen few superintendents in Cambridge or anywhere else who understand schools in this manner.

In point of fact, there is one place that understands and practices a progressive approach: Finland. The Finns borrowed John Dewey and the constructivists' ideas of education as the basis for learning and teaching for all schools, focusing on having students actively involved in learning, personalizing education, problem-solving, promoting equity and developing community. Within that framework, authority is vested in each school's staff to determine how each child will be educated. Central authority provides suggested guidelines but does not mandate curriculum, methods, materials, standards, objectives or outcomes. There is no required state testing and achievement testing at the local level for K-6 is highly discouraged.

Schooling begins at age 7 and most students stay in the same school for 9 years. Schools are small, averaging about 200 pupils. In classes, students are heterogeneously grouped, which means there is no tracking or grouping by ability. Finnish students attend school for less hours than students in the U. S. and they have minimum homework requirements, usually less than half-an-hour a day. There is early intervention and support for learning problems and by the time students graduate from secondary education almost half will have received some sort of special support.

Teacher education is rigorous and the profession is highly regarded. Many of the country's "best and brightest" chose to be teachers and most make it a life commitment. Teachers are fairly well paid, but the cost of education per pupil in Finland is significantly less than in America. As a result, *Finland ranked as having one of the world's top education systems* in 2000, 2003, 2006, based on the Programme for International Student Assessment. (Pasi

Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons*) Achievement levels do not vary much within schools and from school to school.

In a system designed like Cambridge's with each school a magnet, schools like Graham & Parks are like peninsulas, sort of hanging out there, but still attached to the mainland. Other schools in the system are metaphorically scattered about the mainland, some close to the outer borders and some in close to the middle. Each is unique and needs to be treated as such. All schools need attention but some can be mostly left alone out there on the borders while others need close watching and a great deal of support.

Each school needs to be seen like the earlier Graham & Parks or schools in Finland: as special, each a research and development center in its own right. One job, then, of the central office is to support each school in its unique development, especially with teacher and administrative development since most teacher preparation programs are weak and few teachers have been prepared to think and act in non-standard ways.

Yet, there are commonalities even among disparate schools and being a part of the main allows them to interact, sharing and learning from each other, including from their differences. Jim Coady, when he was principal of the Morse School and its very conservative approach to education, was astounded when he picked up on our idea of a staff developer and was so glad that he and I talked and shared about what was happening in our two schools. His line became, "Len is so far left and I'm so far right that we meet."

In choice districts, schools sometime compete with one another, especially for students. But, if central office can help over-see a process of collaboration with teachers and administrators, both in and among schools, as I've just noted, the schools can learn to work together, sharing their best practices and insights, spurring each other on to get better and better.

At critical times, it may be necessary for a school department like this to act as a system, to be concerned about the whole. For example, there may be a significant decline in the number of students in the district which could necessitate the closing of one or more schools, which happened in Cambridge in the early 2000's.

I think the Graham & Parks Alternative Public School could have survived mostly intact from its internal mistakes. The fourth principal was able to get the school back on a fairly strong academic track. The democratic decision-making processes can be made whole again. Yet, appropriate teachers are still difficult to find. The state's educational controls and mandates continue to be a serious threat, though they can be overcome. But the external decisions made by superintendents and school committees led to serious harm for the school, harm that may never be healed.

From my experiences in Cambridge and from what I know about the histories of public schools like Graham & Parks in districts across the country, it is clear to me that such schools are more vulnerable than traditional schools. Because they are different, they can fail for a number of reasons: new teachers are not easy to find since they have not been trained for these types of schools; the teachers burn out because working in such schools is often intense and demanding; schools can lose their way, becoming progressive in word but not in deed; and they are done in by superintendents and school boards for a number of reasons—a new superintendent who does not understand or support this philosophy, a changed school board that is not supportive and the like. Schools like Graham & Parks must be clear about this reality and must plan carefully to deal with it.

I do not see school departments changing to a progressive view of education, at least in the short run, though there is a rising chorus to do so. This means that progressive schools must maintain a strong political presence in the school department and in the district. It does not mean schools should consider central office and the school committee to be enemies. A progressive school within a traditional school department needs to work cooperatively with the superintendent and school committee, educating them to the workings of the school and its needs *and* to each of the other schools and their unique needs, trying to have them understand how working from the bottom up, empowering principals and teachers, has the best chance of creating a truly strong group of schools and, simultaneously, a sound school system.

At the same time, they need to carefully guard themselves and be prepared to aggressively deal with possible threats to their continued existence as viable schools.

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