



THE XQ EXPERT SERIES

School Mission & Culture

All great schools are mission-driven.

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The XQ Expert Series: School Mission & Culture

Michele Cahill: Hello, I'm Michele Cahill. And this is Expert Q&A, a conversation series focused on rethinking the American high school. Today we're talking about school mission and culture and the challenge of articulating the shared goals and values that sit at the center of a high-performing school, where everyone understands and buys into the mission, where every feature of the design supports a productive student-centered culture.

00:00:28 Here in the studio today we have with us three wonderful guests to share their insights on creating a mission-driven school. Ron Chalusán began his career teaching high-school English and dance in Los Angeles. In 1993, Ron co-founded the New York City Museum School. With the nonprofit New Visions for Public Schools, he led the development of more than 80 innovative new public high schools across the city. In the past five years, Ron has led New Visions's expansion into the charter world, creating seven new charter high schools that are showing early but very real success.

00:01:03 Tanya Ennis began her career as an engineer, working in the telecommunications industry. After her company downsized, Tanya began volunteering at a local high school. Seeing that she could make a big impact as a math teacher, Tanya decided to join Denver School of Science and Technology -- or DSST -- in 2005, the year

after it was founded. Tanya played a big role developing the math curriculum that supports DSST's college-for-all mission.

00:01:33 Today she directs the Gold Shirt Program at the University of Colorado, which provides underrepresented students access to engineering. JoEllen Lynch is a national expert on school design, youth development, and accelerated learning for underprepared adolescents. In the 1980s at Good Shepherd Services, JoEllen led a pathbreaking community high school that integrated youth development and rigorous instruction.

00:02:00 She went on to district leadership in New York City, where she oversaw the creation of dozens of new high schools. Today she is executive director of Springpoint Partners in School Design. Springpoint is working with teams of educators and partners through Opportunity By Design, a growing network of schools providing personalized, mastery-based learning experiences for high-school students supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York.

00:02:26 Ron, at XQ we believe that a school's mission is grounded in values and beliefs about what constitutes effective education. In your experience, how does articulating a mission play into the larger picture of rethinking high school?

Ron Chalusán: In the work that I've done, I've worked to have people really study the students that they're about to take on -- to learn about them, to understand what they need and what

they want, and what's expected of a school to provide to them.

00:02:55 And in essence, it feels like the mission ultimately becomes a contract with the family. It becomes a contract with the students. It becomes a contract with the state. It becomes a contract with all of the constituents that play a part in education. And so we really strive to help people articulate what ultimately are very simple sentences but things that are very difficult to make real.

Michele Cahill: JoEllen, over the years you've supported dozens of teams as they start new schools. What does it mean for a school to have a unifying mission?

00:03:26 JoEllen Lynch: As Ron just stated, starting with who the students are is always the primary understanding in building your mission. Your vision is how the world will see you in five years -- when they know your graduates, when they understand what you do, when they can see your approaches and your outcomes and their impact on students' ability to stay in college. The vision is a core part of your mission, but the mission begins to say: "This is how we're going to reach that goal.

00:03:58 These are how we see the way we're going to lead our instructional model, how we're going to really embed youth development in every aspect of the design." They're a statement of your values, your approaches, and how as a school community you will continue to both implement that and use that guiding concept to iterate on your model over time.

Michele Cahill: Tanya, you left a career in engineering to work as a math teacher. Can you tell us a little about the mission of DSST and what attracted you to make this move?

00:04:31 Tanya Ennis: I think for me the main point was I had identified that we were in a crisis in our country. With the students that I had been volunteering with, they did not know basic math. There was lots of gaps. And so I couldn't just turn my back on students. The mission of DSST is to basically close the inequity in education for the students that have been underserved, and that's exactly what I wanted to do.

00:04:58 I just jumped in full throttle with helping students to meet their goal of 100 percent acceptance into college after graduation.

Michele Cahill: I was wondering about the notion of idea. When you begin designing a school, what comes first: the great ideas or the mission statement? Ron?

Ron Chalusán: I find that to be a tremendously difficult question both personally, as I started my own school, and trying to coach groups of people to start their schools.

00:05:27 I think it's an interplay between and among the people who are designing the school of throwing out the ideas that they feel are really important. And then I like to go to the place where we keep on asking "Why?" to get to the core reason for a particular idea. Oftentimes when we

start to think about a school, we think about all of the research. We think about what's out there. We think about things that people have said are important to build into the school. And we have to be a little careful in that process because it can quickly become a laundry list.

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By continuously asking "Why do you want to do that? What do you hope to accomplish?" you get the team to start to go from this big idea to some very, very concrete ways of thinking about educating young people and, more importantly, understanding why those young people need those particular practices or that particular pedagogy or that particular approach.

Michele Cahill:

JoEllen, when you think about that notion of idea, how does that square with knowing your students first?

JoEllen Lynch:

We begin to be involved in this work because we have great ideas. And it motivates folks to become part of your design team and the team that will start to build the school to know that you're a person of vision. But we also need to begin with the essential question of: Who are we going to serve? How can we best serve them? How are we going to learn about what their needs are, what their assets are, what this community holds for us, what this district or city may entertain for us?

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And what are the best ways to meet their needs? When we begin to think about what's real for the students, we have to of course find ways to meet them -- to develop focus groups, to interview, to engage them if possible.

You may have rising eighth graders that [you] have a relationship with the school. In one instance, I built a leadership team of young people from the community prior to the opening of the school.

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And they surveyed other young people to understand what either kept them going, motivated them, helped them learn, or what held them back from being part of the local school and what would help them engage as part of the community. It's those kinds of experiences that will begin to inform your great ideas and see whether or not they fit.

Michele Cahill:

Tanya, can you tell us more about how, as a teacher, you came to more deeply understand the mission of the school? How did the school leader and other teachers build affiliation with the mission?

Tanya Ennis:

Before school, the head of school took us to the mountains to have a retreat. It was a bonding experience where we had challenges and we got to know one another, prepare meals together, and talk about the objective of what we were getting ready to encounter for that year. The other structures that we had in place were advisories. The advisory groups were assigned by gender, and we could really get to know our students and were responsible for them, and we would talk all the time.

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And we had departmental groups that -- we'd discuss how we would move the curriculum forward to be successful for all students. We had something called "houses," where

certain groups of students would be assigned to certain teachers in different departments so that we were all teaching those same students and we built an affiliation with one another so that we can meet the needs of those students.

Ron Chalusán: I find it really interesting, what Tanya is speaking about: how, once the school is up and running, there are so many elements that are embedded in the structure that allow the mission to come to life.

00:09:04 I think I would really push hard on thinking about that as a design team. Oftentimes applications for schools become a process that need to get done. Everyone knows that they need to write something, and there's a deadline. It needs to be submitted. And that takes on a life of its own. In the work that we did, we tried to really create opportunities for the design team to engage in scenarios that came out of actual experiences in schools that tested their ideas about how they thought they would work.

00:09:38 One of the scenarios we would run would be: You are a young teacher in the middle of a class with an assessment that is about to happen in two days, and two students stand up and say: "We don't want to do this anymore. We don't find it relevant." What do you do? What was fascinating was to really hear the teams grapple with how they would approach that.

00:10:07 Even though there [has] been no tension around "We believe in youth development and we believe in student

decision making. We believe in youth voice," in that particular scenario, getting the group around the table to agree to a set of strategies that they would help that teacher with became a very long discussion.

JoEllen Lynch: The key thing is that the mission is not the piece of paper you create to do your application, but that becomes a founding document of principles that you use in a variety of ways.

00:10:41 For example, every year at South Brooklyn we had new-student orientation. The previous students led that. They first shared the mission and the vision for the school with the new students. They discussed the implications. They played out what happens day to day and how things are handled between each other, what's expected of the staff, what's expected of the students, and how they resolve differences within the school community.

00:11:11 It becomes a constant way to improve that school community and all the relationships within the community.

Michele Cahill: Can you give a couple of examples that might tell us how somebody would use a mission to understand whether they've started making a mistake?

JoEllen Lynch: Many schools in urban centers, high schools, may assume that students are starting high school fully skilled at the ninth-grade level.

00:11:37 And when the new teacher team -- and many of them are really new teachers -- come onboard, they may see themselves as content experts. Often the challenge, as you begin to integrate your thoughts about the mission and instructional model, is that they will then meet some students who are way below grade level. And often the first impulse then is to separate, where low-level readers -- for all good reasons -- are separated into different groups and away from the common population.

00:12:12 If your goal in building all students to college readiness is to give them that opportunity, and that's embedded in your mission, what will be the impact on their reading if they're separated with only low-level materials? It's a guide for you to question your decisions continually. Do you keep students out of school because they're late a lot, or do you seek to engage them and understand what's happening

00:12:39 If your mission is that you are going to help young people develop the habits, the skills, the competencies to grow up into healthy adults, you've [got to] help them learn to do that and not lock them out at the door when they're 40 minutes late.

Michele Cahill: Tanya, I wonder if you could speak to DSST and the particular challenge that JoEllen raised about students coming in at different levels of academic preparedness?

Tanya Ennis: We made a commitment early on to not remediate. We felt like we wanted students to stay on track and to be

pushed. So we would encourage students in the Math Department -- well, not even encourage -- we would tell them: "You're not at the level where we want you in terms of math proficiency, so you'll stay in the algebra-and-geometry-integrated course, but you will also have another math course that you'll be expected to pass at 80 percent proficiency of all the standards and the work that we've designed for you."

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So one of the things we had to do was say: "How do we teach students algebra and geometry when they don't have basic understanding of middle-school math?" And so that was a challenge for us. It cost us extra effort to figure out: How do you design algebra and geometry so that when students are solving problems they come out with whole-number answers, they come out with something that's understandable for them, and it can be done while they're learning about fractions and decimals and all the other things that they missed?

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And then when they get to the point where they were able to demonstrate proficiency, then we could stretch them further and have them challenge themselves in the algebra/geometry so that they could see how it all came together. So we have the mindset of catch up.

Michele Cahill:

Ron, can you give us examples of how schools have embedded their mission in their school culture and practices?

Ron Chalusán: What's been interesting in moving from being a school leader to working at a network level is the fact that there are so many different schools that have very different missions, which is important especially in a large urban area.

00:14:50 Matching a student's need to a school that can address that need is a really important element of just overall education. And in each case, the team that's designing the school we encourage to really list out those four to five key elements that would describe the behaviors that the particular mission is talking to, and then think about how they embed those four or five elements across the multiple constituencies that make up the school.

00:15:21 At the Museum School we talked about having students engage with the artifacts/objects/documents that were the basis for knowledge generation. That was part of our mission. So having the students actually be in the galleries for substantial amounts of time -- in our case, half of their week was spent in the galleries -- and then thinking about: What did it mean to engage with a particular object? Did they actually look at the object?

00:15:50 Were they able to describe the object? Were they able to make connections to the core content that they were supposed to be studying? Really building out that pedagogical approach that would allow the students to become knowledge generators by engaging with objects was important, but then the professional development for our teachers was not done in a classroom. The entire

professional-development package for our teachers was done in the galleries of the museums, also.

00:16:18 When we had parent conferences, we had parent conferences in the museum, where they picked objects, where their children led them through a process of understanding what that object meant. So that deep embedding: Think of three, four or five very, very particular actions that embody the mission, and then use those practices across all of the constituencies.

Michele Cahill: JoEllen, building on your South Brooklyn example, can you talk to us about what kinds of structures you had there that helped embed the mission in the practice every day?

JoEllen Lynch: As the mission grows and you begin to have students enter your lives, the first way you're going to use that as a tool is to say: "As a planning team throughout our year -- or our years -- how are we going to develop regular rituals where we know if this mission is in place, is effective, is helping improve student outcomes, and is given voice in a variety of settings for both students and teachers?"

00:17:26 What is your process where students have a regular place to have a voice and to share on that level to reassert your mission and to discuss it? Where do you have those issues talked about as a full school community?" We had monthly community meetings, where students and teachers prepared together to talk about both common problems, common successes, and things they needed to

work on as a school community. Students can lead that process; adults can lead that process.

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The key thing, when we talk about tools like having an advisory or using community meetings or . . . Some schools call them "[TNGS]." Whatever you might call it, where are the places, where are the structures for the adults as well as the young people and the parents that they can address those issues that may be getting in the way of really living out the mission?

Michele Cahill:

You have also, all three, spoken to the challenge of really challenging students to build a mindset that they can do the kind of academic work that many of them have never done, given the opportunities that they've had. How does a school handle feedback from students?

Tanya Ennis:

I think it's important to hear students out. So students may be feeling a certain way about "This is too difficult," and, "Why are you expecting me to do that?"

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And then we would have an opportunity to talk about our core values. Those were "curiosity," "courage," "respect," "responsibility," "doing your best," and "integrity. Whenever the students would come back to me and say "You're challenging me too much," or, "We don't like this policy," we would have them informal-dialogue. We could point back to: "Well, what do our core values represent? And how do you see the core values in this situation?"

00:19:13 When you trust students to engage in that conversation and really give them an opportunity to think about it, the students are pretty resilient and they get it.

Michele Cahill: How do you assess, at the end, whether the students have then made enough academic progress?

Tanya Ennis: In the Math Department, we identified early that the math standards for the state and the nation were not adequate enough for us to know where our students were.

00:19:39 So we worked collaboratively as a department to develop a really detailed list of standards that for every week, every unit that we measured, we had standards. We have standard trackers. So not only were we tracking, but the students were tracking, as well. At the end of a unit, we would see that "Okay, here are some standards that the students did not master. We have to move on because we can't stay stuck in this unit."

00:20:04 But we used a process called "spiraling," which means we moved on and then, throughout our lessons, we would sprinkle that lesson into the day. It might be an oral drill. It might be a mini lesson. It might be something that required students to get up and move. We would spiral that back until we would see that students had gained proficiency with that particular skill.

Michele Cahill: Ron, you've been a believer since your first years as a teacher that schools need to give students experiences

that build academic strengths on positive identity and socioemotional skills.

00:20:41 How does that play out in the classroom?

Ron Chalusán: I think that we sometimes define success somewhat narrowly. When I think about what we have come to believe is important for young people, we often integrate these concepts in a natural way. We talk about a student's ability to question. We talk about a student's ability to research, to construct an answer, to defend his or her answer, to present that answer publicly.

00:21:13 Those are all really key elements. Thinking about what it takes to give the student both the tools and the confidence to do that, you have to be equally diligent in designing experiences that help a student build his or her confidence. You have to be equally diligent in building experiences that help students to present their material and to take critique. And you have to be able, through the design of the classroom or the school, [to] create opportunities for feedback in those areas.

00:21:46 I think a bit about my very, very, very early experiences teaching. I was teaching at a very large high school. Students really were not known. I was expected to teach them English grammar. I was also teaching them math, and I was teaching them dance. It was an amazing opportunity for me because I had the same set of students across those various areas.

00:22:10 What I learned very quickly was that the student who was in the dance class excelling but really struggling in math -- there was a bridge that I could link into to help that student understand what they needed to do in math, not necessarily the content that they need to master in math. I would see that student come to dance practice. I would see that student warm up. I would see that student practice over and over a certain routine.

00:22:37 And I could use that language in math class to say: "You got better in dance because you did this, this and this. I can help you do those same things in math and you, I believe, will get better."

Michele Cahill: All of these really bring up the tension that we often hear in education these days. JoEllen, I'm sure you've seen situations where schools felt some tension about what to put first: student achievement or youth development.

00:23:07 Is it a false dichotomy? Can a mission be structured in a way that it accomplishes both?

JoEllen Lynch: We think about youth development, really, as a scaffold around all the other facets of the school. When you're thinking about instruction, does your instruction -- does the rigor reflect high expectations? Will the students know what those expectations are? Do they know what the standards are, why they're engaged in the work they're doing, what they can learn, what they're expected to know?

00:23:40 Can they tell the adults about that? All of that is youth development -- building the opportunities for them to build those competencies, those experiences so that they can really own and be their own agent in their education. Can they show that mastery in several different ways, whether that's through exposition or through writing, through presentation? What are our expectations? And how do we communicate that so that's owned and known and giving voice to students to talk about how their learning trajectory is happening?

00:24:17 In that way, they can begin to choose and to move forward in their work beyond what they may have previously been expected to just show: basically what they know, but not that they know and can apply it in multiple contexts across time and across experience.

Michele Cahill: As we come to a conclusion, I'd love to hear your advice about how to build a strong community within a school, how to create a culture of challenge and support so that all students succeed. JoEllen?

JoEllen Lynch: It's a couple of lessons that took many, many years to learn. The first was to remain elegant. And I say that because the simplest of thoughts communicated well are much more powerfully implemented than anything else. Keep your ideas in the simplest and most direct terms: things that you know you can actually measure, things that you know you can see outcomes in.

00:25:16 Understand how you're going to communicate. Engage others in the same process. It's difficult as the adult in the room with young people to say that student voice is important, that student role is key, without also understanding developmentally where those young people are and where they fall in the matrix of decision making.

00:25:43 It's incumbent on us adults to both understand our own needs in that regard and to understand the needs of young people as they grow from age 14 to 19 or 18 or 20, when they might complete their education with you. But as long as you continue to keep your mission at the center of the work; you have consistent and constant ways to get feedback, accept feedback, discuss feedback; and begin to change what needs to be changed in small, incremental, measurable steps that's transparent to everyone, the leader in this process is the key to making sure that always transparency is at the center of the work in all the way the school is moving forward.

Tanya Ennis: This is our last chance to get it right before they go out to college, before they're adults. I'm a big sports fan, and an all-out blitz is what high school has to be. We can't just sit around and let stuff slide. We have to say: "We're going to pour everything we can into the students. We're going to be clear about what's not excellent. We're going to be clear about what our expectations are." If I say there's 20 homework problems and you do 18, you have not met my expectation.

00:27:07 I think we need to be as clear as possible with what we expect not only academically but in terms of socially and in terms of character -- as clear as we can. And I think one of the things that we can do is live that, if we are models. We see them eight hours a day. They're watching us. What are we communicating as a teacher? If you want a school with high expectations for students, you have to have high expectations for the adults in the building, as well, and hold each other accountable.

Ron Chaluísán: Educators are professionals, and professionals constantly are looking for growth. We work with young people, and young people are the people with whom we engage in that process of growing. And if we remember that -- that we're not doing something to students; we're working with students so that each of us, student and professional, gets better at where they are -- it's a very sobering stance. And so I think about listening to students.

00:28:11 You cannot teach if you don't listen to students, and sometimes that is one of the most difficult things to do. When a student says to you, either through action or through words, "I am not understanding this. I am not engaged," it is incumbent to really hear that and not take it as a personal assault but to say: "What else can I do? How can I grow in my craft, in my profession to help this student come? What haven't I done?"

00:28:42 When I think about the structures that are in place about improving a school, it's the student who sits in the school eight hours a day, seven hours a day. And so if we don't

have a structure that really says to the student "We honor what you're experiencing" within the context of what we have to do . . . I think that that's a really important clause because we do have a responsibility. We cannot just say: "The student feels good in our school."

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We have to make our decisions on the basis of: Will these opportunities help the student engage in this learning activity that ultimately is going to help them meet the requirements that we, as a school, have taken on and have promised?

Michele Cahill: With that, I'd like to thank Tanya, JoEllen and Ron for their rich insights, the practical information they've given us, and the challenge that they've given all of us to live out the kinds of values that we put into our mission statements.

Michele Cahill: Thanks for tuning in to our discussion on mission and culture. We hope you've found some inspiration from our experts. Visit XQSuperSchool.org for more information on XQ, the Super School Project.