How to Start an Independent School (and keep it going)

By Elaine Hopkins, the former director of an Ontario association of private schools

WHY?

Philosophy of Education

The first thing you need to do is articulate your vision of the ideal education environment. Share your dream with friends, colleagues, teachers, and other educators. Take your time. Your vision must be very clear to you and your team, so that it can be easily communicated it to other people, such as potential staff members and prospective parents.

WHO?

Staff

If you are already a teacher, then you need to partner with some other teachers. If you are not a teacher, it will be very helpful to involve professional teachers who will help you to articulate your vision and work out more of the details of your educational environment. The school's staff are your most important people, since they will be on the front line with your parents. Choose your staff carefully and treat them well.

Market Survey

You may have a vision, but does anyone share this vision? A market survey can assess the need for a specific kind of school in certain areas, but it is not essential. Other ways of identifying a need include general involvement in your community, as well as meetings with key community or church leaders.

Promotion/Advertising

You may need to spend a lot of money on promotion and advertising, but you should be aware that there are lots of less expensive approaches. For example, by being visible and involved in the community, you can spread the word. You might sponsor special events, such as information or parenting events. If you are a non-for-profit organization, you can promote your school free of charge through community notice boards. Mail drops in specific communities are useful and not too expensive. You need to get the name of the school in front of the public.

Brochures can take a lot of time and are expensive if done professionally. Good-quality printed material is just as good. Try to find a 'hook' for some media coverage through a special event. Later on, the best promotion is through your own satisfied parents.

Since websites are now used extensively by families when looking for a school, a good website is a great investment. If you join an association of independent schools, such as OFIS, you will also be listed on its website.

The Ministry of Education also produces a list of independent schools. The Ministry does not 'approve' or license' schools; it merely 'lists' them.

WHEN?

You need to give yourself at least a year, but preferably two years, to prepare.

WHERE?

There are many possibilities for the location of your school: churches; community halls; public/separate schools; malls; and converted homes. Your accommodation has to be approved by the fire and health departments, as well as have the appropriate zoning. The need for play areas, including a gymnasium, may be met by community facilities within walking distance.

Location! Location! Location! is of primary importance for any new business. A sizable percentage of your students will come from your immediate area; so you need to consider the economic level of the area, as well as the number of children available in the age range you wish to serve. As well, you need to consider accessibility from other parts of your community.

HOW?

Notice of Intention

There are currently very few requirements from the Ministry of Education. You will need a minimum of five children who are six years or older. The Ministry requires that you complete a Notice of Intention to Operate a School, a form that asks for basic statistical information. More statistical information is requested in the fall of each year. The ministry may visit your school to validate the Notice of Intention. You will also need fire and health inspections.

Secondary Schools

If you are opening a secondary school and wish to be able to issue a Ministry of Education Secondary School Graduation Diploma (OSSD), you must fulfill additional requirements, such as having your school inspected by the Ministry of Education and meeting course requirements. Of course, it is not necessary to issue an OSSD, but many parents want their child to have this diploma since it is difficult (but not impossible) to be admitted to Canadian universities without an OSSD.

Other Schools

Other independent schools in the area should be regarded not as threats, but as allies. In general, it is desirable to have good relations with other independent schools in the area you are considering. For one thing, you may get referrals from them when they cannot meet a potential student's needs (and vice versa). It is also useful to be aware of their tuition fees, salaries, and other policies so that your school can be competitive.

Other Organizations

It is very easy to isolate yourself from the support you can have from broader organizations. OFIS offers administrative support and workshops, and so do other groups. Explore provincial, Canadian, and North American school groups. Everyone has been where you are now at one point in his career. Most administrators are very willing to share their experiences or just chat.

WHAT?

Curriculum

This area can be very challenging, but just stick to your vision and try to find a curriculum that will help you achieve it. The Ministry of Education curriculum is available for your use, and it is a good starting point. The Internet is also very helpful. Be alert to hidden curricula that may not reinforce the values you wish to teach.

Values/Code of Behaviour

Clear behaviour guidelines are very important to some parents.

Structure

Regardless of whether you opt for-profit or not-for-profit schools, you should become incorporated. The process helps you to think through the details of your operation, and in addition it will protect you to some degree in the event of lawsuits. For-profit schools have the advantage of leaving the control in you hands, but it can also get very lonely at the top — although privately-owned schools often will have advisory boards.

Not-for-profit schools, on the other hand, *must* have a board of directors. It is necessary to be very careful about the make-up of such a board. Parent-run schools, for example, often lead to many problems because parents have a great deal of difficulty being objective. The best model seems to be two-thirds interested members of the community and one-third parents. It is critical that the board of directors understand their role as policy-makers, not management. If management support is desired, then it would be wise to establish a separate operating board that can be disbanded once there are more paid staff. Another advantage to having a non-profit school is that you can obtain federal charitable status which allows you to issue receipts for donations.

Planning

It is a good exercise to do some projections for enrolment, fees, and so on for three to five years. This will be difficult to do but essential for your own focus. Also, if you want to borrow money from financial institutions, they will definitely require this planning.

Budget

Budgets should include classroom supplies, insurance, bank interest, rent or mortgage payments, salaries, utilities, office expenses, telephone, and promotion.

Capital

As with any business, you will need start-up money. Banks and other financial institutions will lend you money but will want some collateral. A business generally takes three to five years to become established; so you will need to consider this in your budget projections. Money from individuals who share your vision, as well as other fundraising, is possible. Capital donations from parents is another possibility.

Salaries

Salaries will constitute 60% to 80% of your expenses. It is very common in independent schools to have dedicated staff who agree to take low salaries. If you start with lower salaries, however, it is also more difficult to increase them as time goes on. You should learn the salaries of the other independent schools in your area and plan to rise to that level over a period of two or three years. Eventually, health and other benefits should be added. Since your staff are your most precious asset, you should show them respect by paying them a reasonable salary.

Fees

The temptation is to set your fees low in order to make your school more attractive and accessible, but I do not recommend this. As with staff salaries, it is very difficult to raise fees as time goes on. In any case, parents sometimes assess quality in terms of how much they are paying.

Flexible payment schedules are good, although a monthly payment is standard. Ensure that you receive a non-refundable deposit of one month's tuition when a child is registered in your school. After all, there is no commitment until you have received their money. Paying in advance is also good practice, and a withdrawal policy should be articulated at the time of payment.

Some schools also require a capital or long-term development deposit to help with capital expenditures and long-range plans. Sometimes this is in the form of a donation or an amount that is returned interest-free to the family when they leave the school.

Bursaries and Family Discount

Down the road, you may wish to consider family discounts and bursaries to make your school more accessible.

Class Size

There is a general impression that independent schools mean small classes. This is not always the case, but you need to match your ideal class size with your philosophy of education.

Insurance

Depending on your facility, you will need property, fire, theft, and the usual liability insurance. If you are renting a facility, your landlord may have the basic insurance for you to supplement.

Uniforms

About 50% of Ontario independent schools have school uniforms. Uniforms limit competition and help with school identify. There are pros and cons.

YOU CAN DO IT! GOOD LUCK!