



It helps to start small: Lessons on launching schools of choice in a pandemic

July 2021



“How are we going to [recruit students and families to] this school, because we can’t do anything in person?”

This question, which we heard expressed by one founder of a new-school-to-be in Washington State, is being asked by thousands of schools of choice across the country, ever since most of them closed their campuses last March.

It’s doubly urgent for the founders of new schools.

The founders of Catalyst Public Schools: Bremerton, in Washington, knew they had to get creative quickly if they were going to open school by August 31.

One thing they did was launch “Camp Catalyst,” a free virtual camp, in late spring to fill a void for families whose schools weren’t providing much support during the COVID-19 pandemic. This had the added benefit of giving the founders an opportunity to field test their project-based learning model and a chance to show families what it had to offer.

“When COVID hit, in addition to worrying about recruitment, we were just genuinely worried about our kids and families,” Amanda Gardner, one of Catalyst: Bremerton’s founders, said in an interview. Students who enrolled in Camp Catalyst received project boxes for camp, along with care packages and books.

The school kicked off its inaugural school year remotely on Monday for kindergarten and first grade in its elementary school, and fifth and sixth grades in its middle school. It is fully enrolled, with a wait list in all grades. Some of the students from Camp Catalyst have enrolled for the fall, so they are already familiar with how the school operates. School leaders will use understanding gained over the summer to support their youngest learners in Kindergarten and first grade.

Catalyst: Bremerton is just one of ten charter schools in Washington State at some stage of the opening process. We interviewed leaders from all ten of these schools, and found that each tackled the challenges of opening during a pandemic in different ways. Catalyst: Bremerton is one of several organizations that decided to pilot their school as a series of mini-programs, allowing them to test

their model with lower costs and fewer regulatory constraints than a full-blown school.

Whatcom Intergenerational High School in Bellingham and Cascade Midway Academy in Midway both delayed opening this fall. Even though they won't be opening a school, they are exploring ways to support student learning this year. Whatcom plans to use community-based partners and teachers who were hired for the year to teach interactive virtual courses in photography, film, and

other subjects. Cascade has plans underway to support a learning "hub" for secondary students who need help with school assignments and would benefit from having a space away from home. It also hopes to offer regular tutoring to students who need it.

Pinnacles Prep in Wenatchee, which is planning to open in fall 2021, will create local learning opportunities. The school's founders say they are looking to "test drive" their online learning platform or their project-based learning approach as a way to provide support for underserved families.

Here are some other important themes that emerged in our interviews:

Schools tapped community relationships to support COVID-19-related challenges.

Last spring, schools worked hard to help connect families with local services for food, housing, and employment challenges. Several of the new schools in the Washington charter sector used the summer to bring more support to their students. Impact Public Schools, a Puget Sound-area charter network preparing to open a second location, learned from the spring that, with schools closed, many of its families needed daycare. So it created a partnership with local daycare centers to train provider staff in its school model to better support its students during remote learning.

Schools had to overcome barriers to build new school cultures remotely.

School leaders worried about how they would create a strong school culture when newly hired teachers and recruited students had never met in person. As they prepared for their fall opening, both Catalyst: Bremerton and Impact teachers spent a month engaged in professional development, and families had intensive, one-to-one, socially distanced intake meetings with school staff. Students and families were at least able to meet their teachers face-to-face when they stopped by school campuses to pick up devices and materials for the school year. As a result, these schools are at least starting remote learning with some relationships and shared understanding of their values.

Funding uncertainty looms large.

Almost all the school leaders we interviewed expressed keen uncertainty regarding funding over the next few years—both state and philanthropic. Some of them sought supplemental funding from new sources. Last spring, Impact launched a large GoFundMe drive to help them carry the costs of laptops and internet access for every student. Each of the schools are now looking for ways they can secure new funding sources in anticipation of shortfalls that are likely to happen in the near future.

Implications

IMPLICATIONS

The challenges and successes of the schools we spoke to teed up some important lessons for anyone hoping to launch a new school amid the disruptions of the pandemic—and for policymakers and school system leaders who want to make sure these efforts succeed.

Give lots of lead time. It can take years to build an organizational culture, recruit and train teachers, and identify interested families. All of these take longer than usual during a pandemic. School authorizers and prospective leaders should adjust application timelines, charter school agreements, and opening plans accordingly.

Ask how to be of service to your community. Camp Catalyst helped fill gaps for families that emerged when schools shut down over the spring and summer. Schools planning on launching can offer supplemental virtual courses, virtual and in-person tutoring, or enrichment to supplement what local schools offer.

Budget for more contingencies than usual. It's unlikely that schools will receive sufficient funding to cover short-term costs, and a long-term economic downturn is likely to affect schools for years to come. School leaders must find new, creative avenues for fundraising. Impact Public Schools launched a highly successful GoFundMe initiative to purchase Chromebooks and help pay for internet access. Schools can also look at where they are currently saving money during remote learning to supplement the increased costs that will come when schools move to hybrid and in-person learning.

No school is an island. Charter school leaders hoping to open a school this fall joined meetings with districts in their Education Service District—regional bodies that support public schools in Washington State. This allowed them to trade pandemic response ideas and coordinate reopening announcements with district peers so families knew that all public schools in the region, not just some, would reopen virtually.

While these activities aren't a guarantee of success next fall, they can help new schools launch successfully despite the reality that the pandemic may continue to disrupt public education for months, if not years, to come.

Back to Publications →
(<https://crpe.wpengine.com/publications/the-lens/>)

AUTHORS



(<https://crpe.org/about/our-experts/robin-lake/>)

Robin Lake (<https://crpe.org/about/our-experts/robin-lake/>)

Director (<https://crpe.org/about/our-experts/robin-lake/>)