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 PRINT

How To Found Your Own School

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Whether you're seeking to reach an underserved student body or to execute a unique educational philosophy, starting your own school can be a worthy project. It's tough, but it's possible. And, when done right, a private school can become a vibrant community in which students can learn and thrive. The first step is to determine the demand for your proposed school by identifying prospective students and understanding how your school will fit in among competitors or potential feeder schools.

To find a likely niche, look at where local schools fall short. For example, one growth area is special needs, says Erik Heyer, who recently founded two schools for bright students with learning differences: [The Siena School](#), for students with language-based learning difficulties, in Silver Spring, Md., in 2006; and [The Auburn School](#), for autism-spectrum students, in Herndon, Va., in 2009.

"The need for specialized private schools is growing given the overall trends in public education, such as the mainstreaming that's migrating many students who were formerly served by special education programs into mainstream classrooms," Heyer says.

While hard data is often lacking, parents and educators in the community can usually point you to areas of greatest need. "Talk to anyone and everyone, because you never know where ideas and assistance will come from," Heyer says. For example, he learned that it made sense for Siena to start at the fourth grade, since that's when dyslexia tends to manifest.

Still, statistics can be helpful. When MetSchools, a New York education company, was looking to open

[Claremont Preparatory School](#) in Lower Manhattan, it looked at the numbers of students taking private school entrance tests, says Daniel Koffler, MetSchools' director of business development. Comparing prospective students to the number of seats available, the company could see demand for a new elite prep school was already in place.

The next, and often greatest challenge, is finding the right building and the educators to staff it. "You're trying to triangulate the community needs and interest with where you can find a building and where the educators are located," says Heyer.

Getting a building zoned and approved can be a tough process, one you may be able to sidestep by renting out spare classrooms in an existing school or church. Just as difficult is finding outstanding educators who are on board with your mission. To ease the process, many schools start small with just a few grades, growing upward with the students as they age. Claremont, for one, will open a high school in 2010 to expand on its primary and middle-grade offerings.

As for funding, schools are relying more than ever on tuition alone, Heyer says. "Fundraising is very difficult, time-consuming and unpredictable, and ultimately it's a non-core function that distracts from our educational [focus]," he says.

That, in turn, means parents' involvement and investment are more crucial than ever. "Getting parent buy-in is one of the most important things we've done," Koffler says.

The final key, says Heyer, is having a mission statement with staying power.

"One of the reasons we've been so successful is we've been very specific of the school's mission, who we're set up to serve, and who we're not set up to serve," Heyer says. "You have to bring something unique and different to the table."

COMMENTS

What can new private school administrators do to ensure success? Here's how [one Walden graduate made it happen](#).

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