Haynes: No More School Daze

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No More School Daze

At a unique New York City high school run in collaboration with Syracuse University, students are expected not only to follow the system, but help create it.

BY KEVIN HAYNES

Does anyone know what public policy is?" Her question posed, Syracuse University senior Sarah Reich scans the blank faces of seven high school freshmen who have pulled their desks into a circle in the corner of a New York City classroom.

It's a Thursday morning in mid-September, the first week of classes in a school of many firsts—including the school itself.

Sarah Reich, a Syracuse University senior, leads a discussion at the High School for Leadership and Public Service in lower Manhattan. Students at the first-year school spent the fall semester defining policy issues to tackle.
The High School for Leadership and Public Service is in its rookie season. Conceived by SU graduate Donald Schupak and run with ample help from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, it is one of 30 small, theme-based public high schools to sprout in the city this academic year.

The school has 124 students, all ninth graders, and will add a similarly sized freshman class in September. They’re pursuing a traditional education with a twist. They’ll bone up four days a week on such basic academic fare as math, science, English, and Spanish. But for four years these students, mostly from the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, will fortify their studies with classes in leadership and public policy. They’ll learn how government and the business community operate, how leaders lead.

Best of all, they’ll apply these lessons every day in their own school—and, it is hoped, back home in their own communities.

For most students, that first step was taken when they applied for admission to the High School for Leadership and Public Service. Now, they’re setting the school’s agenda, putting their plans into action, and taking responsibility for the outcome. They are considered “stakeholders” in the new school, along with teachers, parents, and Syracuse University.

“What Syracuse brought to the table was that the University and alumni would extend themselves,” says school principal Helen Cohen. “SU made a commitment to be a partner to a small school that would develop this theme of leadership and public service.”

That theme is the main topic every Thursday, when public policy team meetings are held. The 20 groups meet separately, each headed by a teacher, volunteer, or intern from SU.

So, can any of Reich’s student “stakeholders” define public policy at the outset?

Jeanette, 13, ponders the question while tracing a spit curl with her forefinger. Christopher stares down at his gleaming white Fila high-tops.

“That’s okay,” says Reich, a policy...
Many students and parents hope the college-prep curriculum at the High School for Leadership and Public Service—as well as its affiliation with SU—will be a springboard to a college education. Others like its small size.

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Educational Aid
Donald Schupak helps his alma mater reach out to the community.

If the High School for Leadership and Public Service were Yankee Stadium, it would probably be nicknamed The House That Schupak Built.

For years, SU alumnus Donald Schupak harbored what he calls “a community-service interest” in improving public education in New York City. “I don’t think it’s fair for kids from the inner city to be excluded from opportunities because they’re not educated,” says Schupak, who believes many kids wallow in overcrowded mainstream schools. “It’s such a tremendous social drain to have a generation of uneducated kids who become angry, unproductive, and anti-social adults.”

When SU’s Metropolitan Advisory Board met a few years ago to develop a plan for enhancing the University’s presence in New York City, Schupak issued a challenge. “I suggested the University take its strongest asset, which is educational technology, and apply it to what I saw as the city’s biggest problem: the lack of educational opportunity.”

His proposal for a small school run in collaboration with the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs was eventually endorsed by Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw and embraced by a host of SU personnel, both on campus and at Lubin House, the University’s New York City home.

Education has been the cornerstone of Schupak’s robust career. He attended SU as an undergraduate, earning a bachelor’s degree from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1964, then completed SU’s law school, graduating in 1966. He subsequently picked up a master’s degree in taxation from New York University and worked for three different law firms before opening his own practice in 1970. Ten years later, he shifted to investment banking.

Ideally, says Schupak, the High School for Leadership and Public Service will establish itself as a model for small, theme-based high schools throughout the country that are “designed and nurtured” by private universities.

“It’s time for universities to step out of their ivory towers and become part of the solution rather than observers of the problem,” says Schupak. “Lots of schools are fighting to turn out presidents and senators. Well, we don’t need more presidents and senators. We need more good citizens and block captains, nurses, assistant county clerks, and sanitation department foremen.

“We need a citizenry educated in the principles of democracy who participate in the process and benefit from the system.”

—K.H.
The school also benefits from Friends of HSLAPS, a network of New York City-area SU alumni who have volunteered to help. Dozens of people have already offered to tutor students, speak to classes, chaperone field trips, and provide summer jobs and internships. The group's most ambitious project, a mentoring program that will match students with alumni in one-on-one relationships, will be launched in September.

"The mentoring program extends beyond academic counseling," says Ann Gilligan, the school's liaison with SU alumni. "It's like being a big brother or sister. It's as simple as being an adult friend to a student. It's only complicated in that you could get involved with someone for life.

The new school's link to the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs is especially vital. Maxwell professors are serving as consultants and three SU undergraduates spent the fall semester as interns. As the High School for Leadership and Public Service grows, as many as 10 internships are expected to be made available to SU students.

"Maxwell has national prestige," says Schupak. "I also thought Maxwell could bring a focus to the school by teaching inner-city kids the principles and skills of leadership and public service."

During their weekly policy team meetings, students focus on public service problems. In their freshman year, students work on projects relating to the school. As sophomores, they'll learn how to do a survey for a community agency. During their junior year, they will focus on city government, and as seniors, they will concentrate on projects involving state and federal government. The intent is to instill a desire to help society while exploring career possibilities in public service.

"If student interest is kindled, they can go back to their own neighborhoods and use those skills to take charge of the system," says Chancellor Shaw. "However, I can't imagine a better way to increase the strength of the nation's public service than by fostering its development at an early age."

Next to its affiliation with SU, the High School for Leadership and Public Service's biggest asset may well be its small size. Of course, that may also be its greatest handicap.

"Overall, small is better because a youngster can't get lost in the system," Cohen explains. "We can get on his or her case very quickly if there's a need for that. The disadvantage is that we can't offer the kinds of extracurricular activities a large school can.

There has been almost universal interest in after-school activities and field trips. Already, students have been to museums, to visit the AIDS quilt.
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whispered yeses, until one teacher explains the proposal would allow students to take a job in the community for class credit—and pay. The voices in the auditorium ring out in unison: "YES!"

That unity breaks up during the discussion of ensuing topics, such as lunch, sports, and after-school activities. A student suddenly objects that one group can kill a perfectly good proposal with one lousy veto.

It is 1:30, five minutes shy of Coplin’s deadline. There are 15 issues on the list that haven’t even been introduced.

“It seems to me the decision-making process has broken down,” Coplin announces. A roar fills the auditorium. “How can we do a better job?” he asks. “The reason this process isn’t working is because you’re not respecting one another’s opinions. You don’t listen. You’re not organized. There’s not enough time and too many complex issues.

“This is why you have to develop leadership skills. What we have to do at a school is figure out a process.”

A debate ensues. Should the students check off their five favorite topics and tally up the votes tomorrow? Or should team representatives get together and reach some kind of consensus?

As if on cue, the bell rings. The kids bolt toward the auditorium door like thoroughbreds sprung from the starting gate. The High School for Leadership and Public Service remains issuesless.

The faculty and group leaders retreat to the main office to review the proceedings. The bad news, of course, is that they didn’t accomplish much in the auditorium; the good news is that no one was surprised by the bad news.

"It went exactly as I expected," Coplin claims. "I wanted to raise their awareness of how difficult it is to make decisions. And I wanted them to feel empowered.

True, things may have gone smoother with a microphone ("I couldn’t shout loud enough," Coplin admits). "But now it’s in their minds that they have to come up with a way of making decisions," he says. "It would’ve been nice if they had agreed on a list, but they didn’t.

“I don’t think kids are asked to set the agenda in any normal high school. It’s a unique opportunity.”

Late October. After weeks of debate, the student body at the new High School for Leadership and Public Service, this young brood of prospective SU students, have finally reached a verdict.

They have weaved their way through the democratic process, discussed their options in work groups, and sought the guidance of counselors and educators. Now, they have agreed to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

Their No. 1 issue: Lunch.

Cohen smiles. "We knew it," she says. "In a way, we invited it because we asked ‘What do you want to see here? What do you want the school to be like?’ They began to focus on what they didn’t have and what they would like to see improved.”

The High School for Leadership and Public Service has no operating cafeteria. Only cold food was served for the first couple of weeks, until an arrangement was made for hot lunches to be delivered from another school. Alas, deliveries are often late and the food itself remains no one of home cooking.

Four policy groups want to do something about it.

"It’s a viable issue," says Valerie Spellman, a physical education teacher, health coordinator, and the school’s dean of students. "Some students are very unhappy with lunch as it is now. If they want to change it, they’ll have to come up with ideas and investigate all the options. They’ll learn something about making proposals and seeing them through in order to get what they want.”

Other groups are looking into establishing school sports, internships, and a performing arts program. Along the way, the High School for Leadership and Public Service is also zeroing in on the qualities inherent in born leaders.

"Some of them feel it’s okay to be shrewd and cunning," reports Susie Andrews, who teaches a class on leadership. "The only characteristics they feel are really negative are lying, dishonesty, or being self-centered.”

Asked to cite specific leaders they admire, students named politicians (the Clintons), athletes (Michael Jordan, Roberto Clemente), and civil rights leaders (Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.). But several kids picked folks closer to home: a deceased mother, a father who works as a scientist, a junior high school teacher.

"Everyone has some potential for leadership," says Andrews. "It’s just as important to be able to contribute as a part of working society, to get things done for yourself and other people.”

The four lunch groups, meanwhile, are divvy up the workload. One team is surveying students to determine menu preferences and asking parents if they’d allow their kids to leave the building for lunch.

Another group is contacting a number of small schools to find out how they handle lunch issues. Still another group is proposing a contract that would set terms for dining outside school. In exchange for the privilege, students would agree to be personally responsible for their conduct and promise to return in time for class. One violation would void the contract.

"Hopefully," says Spellman, "they’ll learn that changes can be made if they take responsibility and do the work.”

Already, an entire freshman class is learning there’s no such thing as a free lunch. At the High School for Leadership and Public Service, it’s now a matter of public policy.

Kevin Haynes, a 1979 SU graduate with a degree in magazine journalism, is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn, New York.
Student Teaching
Three SU interns learned more than they bargained for.

The prospect of spending a semester inside a New York City public school didn't exactly enthrall the three Syracuse University undergraduates who accepted fall internships at the High School for Leadership and Public Service.

"I came in with the expectation that these city kids were all going to be thugs," admits Sarah Reich, a native of St. Louis. "In fact, they're just like the kids I went to high school with in suburbia. They want to do well, they want to go to college. It's been an amazing learning experience."

In fact, Reich and two other SU senior interns—Kristen Miller and Stephanie Pasquale—claim they learned more during their out-of-town internships than they ever would have learned in a campus classroom.

All three major in policy studies in the College of Arts and Sciences. They were recruited to the High School for Leadership and Public Service by William Coplin, director of the public affairs program and the Maxwell School's liaison with the new high school. Coplin worked with the interns last summer while supervising University Reach, a community service program for Syracuse high school students who are at risk of dropping out.

The three interns worked 35 to 40 hours a week at the High School for Leadership and Public Service, sharing a variety of tasks. They headed public policy teams, conducted tutoring sessions three days a week before school and during lunch, and taught faculty members how to use computers.

They also visited six other alternative high schools—four in New York City, two in Washington, D.C.—to research curricula. In addition, they had coursework to complete.

"The great part was we got to integrate what we were learning with what we did at the high school," says Pasquale, who's from West Boylston, Massachusetts. "We got a well-rounded look at everything."

Especially the reaction of high school freshmen making the transition from overcrowded schools to a small school where they help shape the agenda.

"At the beginning, I don't think these students bought into it," says Miller, who's from Liverpool, New York. "Now, they see they're not slipping by. Somebody's hunting them down for tutoring, talking to them in the halls, calling them by their first names, asking about their cats. It encourages them to work harder because they know somebody is watching."

That includes SU. The interns believe the high school's connection with the University is paying early dividends. "It makes them more aware of college," says Reich. "They're only in ninth grade and they're already talking about college. Most of them are working hard now instead of waiting until they're juniors."

—K.H.