

Rebranding

Told by Pablo Muñoz

No excuses. Just excellent results!

That was the rallying cry at the Elizabeth Public Schools (New Jersey) administrators' breakfast in August 2005, a training event hosted by the district's newly hired superintendent — me. I was a product of the school system I was now leading.

A video was queued that featured the “no excuses” theme, which I considered a central ethos within my educational career. The video was played to help provoke introspection on the larger question, “Why aren't kids learning?”

Historically, Elizabeth's school district veered back and forth between a board that was appointed by the mayor to one that was elected by the citizenry. This instability contributed to morass encapsulated in the common statement, “That's not the Elizabeth way.” The subtext was that having higher expectations about anything was just not the Elizabeth way.

For Elizabeth, some pockets of success had existed. Frustrated parents jockeyed to get their children into the district's Gifted and Talented program, as they had no other options to avoid the rest of the floundering system. The district had been unable to replicate the success of that program in other schools.

I decided my target would be the inherent inequities in the rest of the system. The question was: Could a unified board and young superintendent with a vision and mission remake the image of the institution into one of excellent experiences and services?

Numerous successful plans were developed and undertaken to redistrict: eliminate middle schools, create K-8 neighborhood schools, and redesign the high school system yielding six independently run high schools.

At first, the community-at-large was having a tough time believing that a vision to be one of the best urban school systems in New Jersey was possible. That was just not Elizabeth's “brand.”

Instead, some wrongly blamed “the kids,” offering excuses like “it's their homelife,” “it's their parents,” “it's their socio-economic status,” or they are “watching too much TV” or “eating too much sugar.”

Adopting a “no excuses, just excellent results” attitude, accepting accountability and responsibility, and aspiring for greatness required a whole new complex set of activities and ways of thinking.

The district went about changing its brand by “rebuilding the plane while it was still in flight,” tackling myriad issues at once, like strategic planning, professional development, and improving data systems.

George Bernard Shaw aptly stated, “The biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” Therefore, the district undertook a full communications effort to increase contact with stakeholders and create a new aspirational identity, helping to ultimately redefine the culture of the organization.

Dr. Martin Luther King’s own message was adopted to help highlight the need for change. The “I Have a Dream” speech provided a framework for the administrative team to discuss what the dream meant to them — and most importantly to the children of Elizabeth. The principles of equity, social justice, and the pursuit of excellence became a common thread in district presentations, parent and team member meetings, and communications. The Dr. King speech even became part of the interview process for prospective candidates, allowing them to describe their own principles.

One of our methods to turn the strategic plan into a living document included the introduction of a School District Pledge of Ethics, which was recited daily at meetings throughout the district:

As a member of the Elizabeth Public Schools Professional Learning Community, I wish to treat people as I wish to be treated. To do that, I pledge to:

- *Understand that the school community is a "special place."*
- *Listen respectfully when someone else is speaking by paying close attention and not interrupting.*
- *Speak in a calm voice and use proper language.*
- *Dress appropriately for teaching and learning.*
- *Inspire the best in myself and others by celebrating successes and learning from mistakes.*
- *Care about others by demonstrating acts of kindness.*
- *Be a life-long learner by taking every opportunity to learn from others.*

Understanding that the school was “a special place” was critical. In the community of learners, there would be compassion and collaboration. Providing “excellent experiences and services” was a hallmark of the strategic plan, to help everyone achieve excellence. But how could that happen, and

how do we display that belief system in our communications, our buildings, and our uniforms, to create a new identity?

Leap. That's How.

Focus groups were held to identify various logos and monikers that would be considered for the district. Then came Leap, the colloquial name given to an ascending stick figure standing on top of an opened book, being propelled upward by the pages, reaching the star. It represented the key messages which the district wanted to communicate. Leap became our new symbol, replacing the use of a prior old logo with a basic font and varying styles of letterheads. The old logo exemplified the fact that the district had no collaboration or coordination on communications, and it just didn't appear to matter. *Excellence News* became a branded newsletter sent out district-wide, spotlighting good news in the district. Leap became the brand on district uniforms and is now a part of the true fabric of the organization.

Creating the new "Elizabeth Way" brand took time, hard work, and more than just a logo, but the identity helped professionalize the organization, and helped lead to the contributions of some very high-quality national partners, such as the Broad Foundation, the Panasonic Foundation, the Harvard Data Project, the Disney Institute, and the Center for the Reform of School Systems.

Dr. King's Dream was for every child to leap for the stars. No excuses, just excellent results.

Published by Tim Quinn and Michelle Keith

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Tim Quinn and Michelle Keith