"No Good Deed . . ."

Looking Back at Boston University's Chelsea Experiment

DOUGLAS SEARS

The most important date in the Boston University Chelsea Partnership was not the day in 1989 when the initial partnership agreement was signed. Nor was it the date in 1997 when the School Committee voted unanimously (to resounding media silence) to renew the partnership for five additional years.

If an objective history of the Boston University-Chelsea Partnership were written, Sept. 12, 1991 would be the date that would loom largest. This was the day the Commonwealth gave up on half measures and placed the City of Chelsea in receivership because deep, widespread corruption and mismanagement had produced a fiscal meltdown.

The Commonwealth appointed a receiver with broad powers to cut budgets, modify labor agreements and impose stringent financial controls. Boston University, facing the reality of drastic reductions in an already modest school budget, had the contractual option to walk away from the mess. Boston University stayed. Boston University stayed to manage massive layoffs and to cut programs to the bone. An education reform initiative begun with enthusiasm and optimism (and a flurry of controversy) became, of necessity, an exercise in crisis management. And from 1991 to 2001, with metronomic regularity, a local demagogue has reminded Chelsea residents that Boston University came into Chelsea and laid off the teachers.

Accomplished demagogues can use a kernel of truth to spin a tale. In retrospect, it is easy to see that the university—by staying in Chelsea to pick up the pieces—made itself all too useful to those who had steered the city into a tailspin. It would be a rare politician who didn't breathe a sigh of relief that an outside entity was available to implement (and take the heat for) painful program cuts and layoffs.

In retrospect, it is also easy to see that the next few years would necessarily entail arduous rebuilding. After the economic crash of 1991, there was no prospect for headline-grabbing successes, only the serious, unglamorous work of piecing things together responsibly while instituting basic procedures and controls that would allow for responsible use of resources after the state's Education Reform Act of 1993 equilibrated funding, and Chelsea began to receive significant Chapter 70 aid. Boston University stayed to do the work. And take the heat.

This confirmation of Boston University's commitment to meet the real needs of Chelsea's children and young people was studiously ignored by the loose coalition of activists, mid-level regulators and reporters that had bitterly opposed the partnership from its inception. A school system that had been allowed to implode through years of regulatory neglect continued, despite the clear evidence of Boston University's seriousness of purpose, to absorb the impact of a regular "gotcha" routine (begun in 1989) in which it was "discovered"—with much fanfare and affected concern—that Boston University hadn't fixed everything on Day One.

As the district was gradually drawn into compliance, with careful day-to-day attention to detail, the "gotcha" setups became more fanciful. Hundreds of precious man-hours went into defending the partnership against a civil rights complaint in which Boston University was held accountable for shortcomings (real or imagined) at the regional vocational school in Wakefield, over which the university had absolutely no jurisdiction. (The Office of Civil Rights could, of course, have dismissed this summarily and allowed serious staff members to get back to the real work of improving teaching and learning. But it didn't.) Hundreds of hours went into the effort to correct falsehoods knowingly memorialized and broadcast by a crudely stacked state oversight panel. Thousands of staff hours went into responses to frequent regulatory fishing expeditions, which, if conducted with the same zeal and frequency in the decades preceding the partnership, would have turned up abysmal record-keeping and comprehensive neglect of basic laws and regulations. Boston University, committed to fixing the schools and having shown its seriousness in Chelsea's hour of greatest need, had to engage in constant self-defense.

And yet it was in the years of scarcity and manufactured controversy that sound financial controls were designed and implemented, that plans were laid (with seed money from Boston University) for the construction of seven new schools and the renovation of an eighth, that initial approaches were made to prospective donors, and that many professional development programs for teachers were instituted.

Today, educators, diplomats and even journalists who actually visit the Chelsea schools marvel at the programs, the materials, the staffing levels, the crispness of daily operations, the facilities and the concentrated, daily focus on instruction. Those close enough to know the realities of the early years recognize that

a small group of indefatigable Chelsea administrators and Boston University staff members transformed a school district within a decade, and that this was done in the wake of a huge fiscal setback and in the face of constant challenge and changing circumstances (enrollment has increased by a nearly a third since the mid-1990s). And while conventional measures of achievement do, in fact, confirm that academic progress has been significant (SAT and AP scores, for example have risen dramatically), there are other compelling and instructive indices of transformation.

As recently as 1995, music and art programs were virtually non-existent (children used cue cards to sing the national anthem at public events). A $2 million Annenberg Challenge Grant fueled the revitalization of choral music and the introduction of instrumental music instruction. School and district-wide concerts now draw standing-room-only crowds. In the fall of 1999, the girls' basketball team went to the championship round at the Fleet Center. Every girl on the team met an academic eligibility standard significantly higher than the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association's derisory two "F" standard. In one of the poorest cities in Massachusetts, school-based open houses draw large turnouts of parents and guardians—as much as 50 percent of the total parent population. The central administration fights a constant battle to prevent non-residents from faking residency in Chelsea in order to enroll children in the Chelsea schools. Outspoken public opponents of Boston University lobby intensely, privately (and unsuccessfully) to induce the administration to bend residency rules so someone can enroll his or her children in the Chelsea schools (presumably to be neglected and oppressed).

One of the rarely mentioned, but extraordinary achievements of the partnership was the move from old to new buildings. This was not a simple matter of moving existing schools from old to new facilities. Idiosyncratic and overlapping grade and program arrangements had evolved over the years. The construction project offered an opportunity to rationalize and reconfigure the district. In the space of a year, the district was redesigned so that all staff and students were reassigned. When new schools opened in September 1996, every single student and staff member was in a new location. The logistical challenges alone were staggering. And the human relations challenge of gracefully re-assigning nearly 4,000 students and hundreds of staff members was substantial. Yet the move was pulled off without a hitch. And it was organized by people already deeply engaged in improving student services, re-writing curricula, refining fiscal controls, fund-raising, labor relations, and parrying the chronic "gotcha" thrusts. There is no other instance I know of where a school district was completely reconfigured and relocated in so short a span of time.

During the decade in which Chelsea has occupied much or all of my work-day (and work-night) energies, it has often seemed to me that I was living in parallel universes, one real, one surreal.

The real world of the Chelsea Partnership was the world in which real live parents worried about real problems and asked tough questions. *Is Johnny safe? Are the bathrooms clean? Are the teachers kind and caring? Is there enough homework? Is there too much homework? Johnny is bright, shouldn't he have extra work? Johnny is challenged, shouldn't his Individual Education Plan be rewritten? Why did the bus driver let my child off at the wrong stop?* The real world of the Chelsea Partnership was the world in which real live teachers—holding a variety of strong opinions on the educational policy issues of the day—worked hard and with good will (while coping with frustration and disappointment) to crack the code of teaching reading and writing in a district where three-fourths of the students speak a language other than English at home. The real world of the Chelsea Partnership was the world in which elementary school children would hold onto caring teachers in tearful, desperate embraces on the last day of school. The real world of Chelsea was also a world in which deeply embedded habits of corruption called for the waging of a long, quiet cold war. And as with the layoffs of 1991, there was heat to be taken in consequence.

The surreal world was one whose inhabitants seemed to have read too much Alinsky and too little Madison. Controversy was a narcotic and invective more satisfying than the fixing of real problems. Over in the real world, the assistant superintendent for pupil personnel (now the superintendent) earned a solid reputation for responding promptly and fairly to legitimate complaints—and answering questions in Spanish or French if necessary. Her promptness and thoroughness made it easy for parents to go directly to City Hall, rather than be captured and used by storefront activists. Because of this, much of the fun went out of trying to surprise the superintendent at a public meeting. In the surreal world, the reality of direct accessibility for parents and concomitant seriousness in addressing real complaints did not induce the activists and demagogues to rewrite (or eschew) the mantra that Boston University was authoritarian, unapproachable and overbearing. It simply made them exceedingly—sometimes comically—careful to avoid contact with school officials.

One local activist held monthly meetings in which there were endless discussions about how to approach an unapproachable School Department. In my four-and-a-half years as superintendent, this individual never once called me directly to solicit information,

lodge a complaint or to propose a discussion of the issues raised in her meetings. Back in the real world of schooling, real live parents showed no such reticence, calling or walking into my office regularly and often under an impressive head of steam. (It sounds masochistic, but I came to appreciate—if not enjoy—the genuine anger of a parent whose frustration at something that isn't right boils over. *You idiots put my kid on the wrong bus.* This anger has a fuller, richer tone than the calibrated—and artificial—moral outrage of the staged controversy.)

Yet, more often than not, it was the surreal world that was the stuff of newspaper stories, oversight panel reports and the grave clucking of experts. And sadly, the surreal has nurtured the not uncommon perception of the Chelsea Partnership as a well-intentioned effort which made some gains but which was marred by controversy and the University's insensitivity and "top-down" management style. The real story is very different.

In my pre-Boston University life I was a foreign service officer. Despite much earnest pleading on my part for an assignment in Eastern Europe, I was sent to Manila for my first posting. I arrived in January of 1985, in the wake of the Aquino assassination. Having watched too much *Nightline*, I imagined I was moving to a country awash in anti-American sentiment. On television, the demonstrations looked huge and menacing. After getting over the shock of moving to a steaming metropolis with poverty and squalor beyond what I had hitherto imagined, I found I was living in a country where most residents were fascinated with all things American and were consistently friendly. (In those days, as perhaps now, a majority of voters would have chosen American statehood in a cleanly-conducted referendum.) And the anti-American demonstrations were highly localized, often orchestrated events that took place directly in front of the U.S. Embassy. More often than not, these served Ferdinand Marcos's purposes and had virtually nothing to do with the fears, hopes and dreams of most Filipinos.

Beyond the immediate range of the cameras the world was very different. There's a lesson in that.

Douglas Sears *is associate dean of the Boston University School of Education and former superintendent of the Chelsea, Mass., Public Schools.*