

## **Harry Potter Saves the Moribund Town**

Jay Dewey, Metropolitan Schechter High School

The New England Town Meeting allowed every citizen an equal say in his or her own government.

Schechter Regional High School, founded in 1993 in Teaneck, New Jersey to prepare Jewish leaders, developed a multifaceted leadership program with Town Meeting at its center. Around this interactive trial and error process with real consequences for success or failure, students constructed habits of leadership reinforced then through courses and mentoring.

Not only every student but also every adult who worked there comprised the Town. All were dependent on the other and bound by majority decision. Each voter had to consider the affect on every aspect of the school; decision makers were forced to consider minority opinions, consequences and precedents. This was democracy at work. The Town's By Laws defined its authority within the policies established by the School Board and the Head of School. Around an Honor Code of values, a moral community was developed. (Sergiovanni). Adult leadership research was adapted to fit teenage development (Erickson).

An introductory course taught parliamentary procedures, budgeting, campaigning, public speaking, running meetings, vision planning, and power awareness. Town officers each had their own mentors to report back observations and offer pointers; both regularly retreated to the "balcony" to reflect on the larger picture (Heifetz and Linsky). Best practices were discussed (Kouzes and Posner; Sean Covey; Stephen Covey).

1993 saw 20 students enrolled with 8 teachers. The first moderator was the school director who modeled Robert's Rules and procedures. The first student moderator was elected in 1994; by that time the school had grown to 43 students. By its third year there were 64 students and 15 teachers. It took new students a full six months to feel confident with the Town process; by then they had taken a leadership course, attended many meetings, and served on Town committees. The Town successfully wrestled with issues from facility cleanliness to participation in political rallies, from going to help in New Orleans and raising money for Darfur and the Tsunami to organizing Town socials.

Rapid growth, brought about by the merger with another school, almost doomed this nascent process.

A much older New York City Jewish school was dying because it never reached critical size. The Schechter Regional board, watching its neighbor, determined to overcome its smallness quickly by agreeing to merge the two schools. Only upping enrollment, they argued, would draw more new students. The new school, bridging four counties in New Jersey and six in New York was renamed Metropolitan Schechter High School.

Merger discussion between the Boards began in late March 1996. The announcement of the merger onto the NJ campus, announced a few weeks later, was met not with the anticipated ecstasy, but rather with distress and anger from both sides of the Hudson. The New York City families grieved the death of their school and the forced move from their beloved city. New Jersey families feared that their small, liberal and constructivist approach would drown in the merger.

At great risk was the leadership program. Town Meeting, now grown to 150 members, functioned poorly; over 60% of the students and adults were brand new to Town meeting. The NY students were humiliated further by not knowing the lingo of parliamentary procedure. Students from both schools grew restless and rebellious. The New Yorkers were accustomed to a traditional representational student government designed to organize student events and negotiate with the administration over benefits. The few NY students who had been active felt stymied by the slowness of the process; the remaining NY students who had never taken part in real political debate were resentful of their time. NJ students felt snubbed by NY claims to superiority while simultaneously watching their beloved Town crumble.

The inherent strength of the Town was tested – but happily not found wanting. The moderator’s mentor helped her realize that a different model was needed and that she would be far more effective if she put this project in the hands of a competent Town Committee. A strong, former student moderator led the committee; someone with keen political know-how and social gravitas.

During the first year of the school, the concept of immutables and “mutables” was established. To reach a solution, a group needed first to determine the basic principles and policies that were immutable – and then within this framework make change. Immutables included: preserving the Town; providing increased leadership opportunities; organizing into smaller units each comprised of members drawn from the faculty and four grade levels. The committee researched a magnet public school organized around standing problem solving areas e.g. facility, arts, social activities, political action, or student life. They studied a private boarding school with a long standing large Town Meeting. Nothing seemed to fit. Out of desperation, or perhaps brilliance, one member from the NY school suggested breaking the Town into Harry Potter houses.

After jokes about quidditch matches and magic wands, members of the committee began taking the idea more seriously. An adult member of the committee pointed out that J. K. Rowling based her stories on a system that had worked in Britain for several centuries. Four houses, meant four more officers per house, 16 more leadership opportunities; membership from all the grades; an expanded executive committee; and more teachers serving as advisors and mentors.

Furthermore, whereas the Town was essentially a problem solving body, the House functioned also as a social unit. Inter-house competition meant more school spirit and more opportunities for students to be involved in sports who would not otherwise make varsity teams. Students not only experienced collaborative leadership within a group, they also learned how groups work together without giving up their own individuality. Harry Potter had saved a near to dead Town. Established American and British systems of secondary school leadership development need to be explored further as well as the role of popular culture on adolescent leadership constructs and the benefit of empowering students to really lead.

## Bibliography

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