



Compositive Primary

The Birth of a 'Grand Experiment'

Alan Gottlieb and Heather Mock

**Compositive Primary:
The Birth of a Grand Experiment**

**Alan Gottlieb
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Preface

I'd like to go back in time to when I first became an educator. Right after college, I participated in a NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School) semester course in the Patagonia region of Chile. This experience shaped me in so many ways: I developed the capacity to reflect more deeply; the capacity to act based on what I knew; the capacity to connect meaningfully with my fellow coursemates and instructors, and the desire (and sense of responsibility) to engage in the world around me.

My experience on the trip made me want to be an educator myself. Given that we were in the outdoors, I originally assumed that meant I would need to be an outdoor educator, and I began

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to pursue that vocation. But then I started to wonder, could I take the lessons I'd learned during my program and teach those same lessons in a classroom setting? Maybe what I had learned was equally, if not more, important than the more traditional learning objectives we think of when we think of school.

And so, when I began my journey as an educator in a sixth grade classroom, while I spent a good deal of time on making sure my students could communicate effectively, knew their math facts, and understood our world through its history, I also focused on making sure they felt known, giving them time to reflect on their own learning, and developing in them a strong sense of self. I began each day with a class meeting (we called it "Openers"), where each member of our classroom community could share whatever they wanted. These contributions tended to be on the trivial side ("Last night I had pasta for dinner" or "I had soccer practice and then did homework"), but by sharing these small moments with each other, we grew to know each other in a way that was different than we might have had we just dived in to the curriculum. And because we had this base understanding of one another, the curriculum became that much richer. When we wrote memoirs, students felt more comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives. When we debated historical events, they were able to engage in civil discourse because they

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had developed an underlying respect for one another. When they went to the white board to explain a math problem, they felt safe with each other and so didn't mind making mistakes or looking foolish.

And thus began my journey as an educator. I knew that content was important in teaching, but more important was teaching the skills to work with that content, and even more important was helping students develop characteristics that would support their learning far into the future, regardless of content: things like resilience, optimism, drive, compassion, and empathy.

We need to be teaching our students to know what to do when they don't know what to do.

Over the twenty-plus years since I began teaching, this belief has remained constant. When people started talking about 21st Century Skills being important, I couldn't help but giggle since these skills have always been important. It is true, though, that as our access to information has changed dramatically, so has the import of these more intangible skills. We need to be teaching our students to know what to do when they don't know what to

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do.

All this is to say that when I learned about Compositive Primary and its focus on developing whole children with equal emphasis on cognition, character, health and well-being, and community engagement, I was beyond thrilled. To be able to start from scratch with hiring and developing curriculum, and to work with a founding team with such passion and enthusiasm, was a dream come true. And finally, to have a full year to develop the school was a wonderful bonus. We were able to be thoughtful and measured about our decisions, and it allowed us to face bumps in the road (there were many!) with more patience and grace than we might have otherwise been able to do. The year leading up to the school's opening was one of tireless work and many frustrations. But it was also a year filled with many joys, multiple opportunities for connection, and a great deal of laughter. We had the chance to work on and model the very capacities that we hope to develop in our students. I hope you enjoy reading about our journey as much as we enjoyed embarking upon it!

A quick note on style: Although Alan Gottlieb and I co-authored this book, I am referred to throughout in the third person, which should make for a smoother and clearer reading experience.

- Heather Mock, Head of Compositive Primary School

Introduction

Birth of an Idea

No one can recall the precise moment when the idea was first broached to open a school based on Compositive's Whole Education model, or from whose mind it sprung. It was a logical if daunting idea: taking a vision, a theory of what constitutes a superlative education and bringing it down from the realm of the abstract into the real world, with real kids.

The thought driving the idea was to create 'proof of concept' for the Compositive model, which had been developed by a board

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of academic experts from universities across the country. Norma Hafenstein, a member of that original Compositive board of advisors, recalls one board member suggesting an in-depth, peer reviewed study, costing well into six figures, that could deliver proof of concept. Someone else suggested, “Or we could open a school,” to which another board member exclaimed “Oh, that sounds way too hard!”

But the idea struck a nerve and gained momentum. By April of 2016, the board gave its blessing to begin exploring the opening of a charter school. Ultimately the charter route proved unworkable, and the idea of an independent Compositive Primary gained favor.

Despite the obvious challenges of creating a school from scratch, based on a rigorously research-based but never-before-implemented model, a group of dedicated educational professionals and visionaries set to work, and, lo and behold, Compositive Primary opened its doors on Aug. 20, 2019.

That bright, hot summer day, 47 children, ages 3-5, walked through the doors of the temporary facility on Ursula Street in Aurora, Colorado. Responding to a prompt during circle time, they told their teachers they were excited, nervous, and eager to see what came next. Their teachers felt exactly the same way.

This book will chronicle the Compositive Primary journey, from

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the seed of an idea planted a few years earlier, to the launch of a fully functioning independent preschool-5 elementary school.

The questions we will answer here include the following:

- Who were the people who pulled this together, and how did their experiences and areas of expertise mesh?
- How was the education model that drove Compositive translated into a curriculum, standards, scope and sequence, and all the other components that comprise a living, breathing school?
- How did the founders decide to open an independent school rather than a charter school?
- How did the founders find the school leader, and how did

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she winnow applications to build a strong faculty and staff that embraced the model?

- How were students selected to fill the classrooms with preschoolers and kindergartners?
- How was the decision made to build a school rather than renovate an existing building? What features of the building will be uniquely Compositive in nature?
- How will the school's progress be evaluated?

Read on to learn the answers to these questions. The story of Compositive is inspiring because it is about launching a school based on layers of innovation. The innovations meld creative best practices in hiring, curriculum development, tuition structure, building design, admissions process, and more.

Compositive Primary is in its early days. The school's leadership and staff is learning a great deal each and every day. The learning and experience will be shared with other educators, parents, and communities who might be seeking a school like ours.

We hope you enjoy learning about how Compositive Primary came to be.

Chapter One

From Model to School

Betsy Callaway Considine, Compositive's founder and chief benefactor, first assembled a group of leading education experts in 2012 to discuss taking her vision for transformative education and creating an educational model. The advisors had particular areas of expertise, for which they were nationally known. For example: On character, there was Marvin W. Berkowitz, a professor of character education at the University of Missouri St. Louis. On civics, there was Peter Levine, associate dean for

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research and Lincoln Filene professor of citizenship & public affairs at Tufts University. Taking the lead on youth development was Belle Liang, an associate professor at Boston College's Lynch School of Education. Focused on gifted education was Norma Hafenstein, head of the Institute for Development of Gifted Education at the University of Denver.¹

Over the course of two years, the board met regularly and collectively developed what became the Compositive model. It promotes what Compositive refers to as Whole Education. At

¹ Other Compositive board members were: Scott Hamilton, CEO of Circumventure, a firm pursuing ways to use digital learning technology to put the acquisition of knowledge and skills back in the hands of students and parents; Michael Murray, Executive Vice President, Programs at the John Templeton Foundation and Senior Visiting Scholar in Philosophy at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, PA; Cathryn R. Milkey, a lawyer in Denver, Colorado, and former General Counsel for a group of private investment companies, a golf course, and two foundations; and Betsy Callaway Considine.

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the heart of the model are four capacities. For people to grow and flourish as human beings, they must constantly reflect and learn, recognize and act, care and connect, and engage and serve. Schools and parents who help children develop those four capacities do so by simultaneously engaging their minds, hearts, bodies, and sense of belonging to a larger community — what Compositive calls the four domains.

In 2014, after two years of rigorous research conducted by Terese J. Lund, then a graduate student studying under Professor Liang at Boston College, (and now an assistant professor of psychology at Wingate University in North Carolina), the Compositive model for education was unveiled. It stresses what Compositive calls Whole Education. As described in our 2018 book “Compositive: Educating the Whole Child,”

Whole Education takes place everywhere: and at all times. It can happen in a classroom. It can happen on the walk or bus to and from school. It can happen in the backyard, at the dinner table, on a car trip. It can happen at a wedding, at a baseball game, or almost anywhere you could imagine.

The end result of such an education is adults who have a strong sense of purpose, and who contribute in meaningful ways to the societies in which they live.

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Initially, Betsy envisioned Compositive as a resource for parents who wanted their children to enjoy the kind of meaningful, transformative education her own children had enjoyed in Denver-area independent schools and in particular the Ricks Center for Gifted Children, a school on the University of Denver campus founded by Norma Hafenstein. Betsy imagined a day when that resource would create a movement of parents that would help transform education across the country (or the galaxy, as she is fond of saying, only half-jokingly).

It wasn't long after the model was developed, however, that Betsy and her board of advisors began seriously considering the idea of creating a school based on the Compositive model. What better way, after all, to demonstrate the model's efficacy than to have real teachers working with real students, incorporating the four domains in every lesson or inquiry to develop the four capacities in their young charges?

A Series of Decisions

In a memo drafted in April of 2016 for Compositive's advisors, Amy Slothower, the organization's executive director, laid out several decisions that had to be made before proceeding with planning for a "proof-of-concept" Compositive school. Slothower was eminently qualified to do this work. Among her varied professional roles, she had founded a charter school, as well

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as an organization that recruited and prepared charter school principals. She was an expert in organizational development with an MBA and knew how to get complex projects with many moving parts across the finish line.

First, Slothower wrote, advisors needed to decide on the purpose of the school. Was it primarily to serve as a testing ground for new ideas? To demonstrate the effectiveness of the Compositive model? To inspire the development of other, similar schools? To serve a small group of students exceptionally well?

***Advisors needed to decide on
the purpose of the new school.
Was it primarily to serve as a
testing ground for new ideas?
To demonstrate the
effectiveness of the
Compositive model?***

Next, who was the school aiming to serve? Kids most in need of better school options — at-risk kids? Middle class and wealthy kids who could benefit from a more holistic approach? Or was a demographically mixed school to be the driving factor?

Finally, what resources were available to launch and sustain

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the school?

Other pivotal decisions focused on governance and location. On governance, the key question centered on whether the school should be a public charter school or an independent school. That decision would have major implications for fundraising, autonomy, and admissions policies. Location would also play a



role in determining whether to apply for a charter or to go the independent school route. Denver was seen as charter-friendly; the suburban districts of Jefferson County, Douglas County, and Aurora decidedly less so.

The other key decision was the school's configuration. Should it serve preschoolers? Preschool and elementary-aged children? K-8? K-12? Each presented distinct advantages and challenges.

As is often the case in the world of education, there are contradictory studies that back a variety of grade-level configurations. One argument holds that it is best to keep the

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youngest children in school separate from pre-adolescents and adolescents because developmental differences can cause distractions and even safety concerns for younger kids. Another argument counters that children in grades 6-8 need the grounding of younger children and the sense of community often present in elementary schools to help shepherd them through an awkward phase of life. Yet another study says that kids in grades 6-8 are *sui generis* and should be contained in their own schools.

Amy's memo also laid out plusses and minuses of different configurations. PreK-5 schools are a common configuration for new schools but leave kids stranded after fifth grade, forced to find a new school that may not track closely with their elementary school's approach and philosophy. K-8s have become increasingly popular with philanthropic foundations but still leave middle school graduates adrift and forced to make a transition to a high school that might be very different from the school they attended since kindergarten (or Pre-K). K-12 schools "meet the full continuum of needs," but high schools are expensive and complex compared to other levels.

During the course of conversations among founders and advisors, it became clear that serving the youngest children — three- and four-year-olds — was a primary value of the Compositive model. Continuing up through fifth grade — the traditional

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elementary school configuration — seemed like a logical and manageable approach. And it didn't entirely close the door on extending to higher grades in the future. But for proof of concept, ECE-5 felt like the right configuration.

Once the board gave the go-ahead to explore opening a school, Betsy, Amy, and Norma took charge and became an advisory group that took a deep dive into figuring out how to make the idea of a school into a reality.



Chapter Two

Charter School vs. Independent School

Initially, the plan to open Compositive Primary as a public charter school seemed to make a great deal of sense. Charter schools enjoy budgetary and governance autonomy, which allows them, to a great extent, to chart their own course. While they're rated by the state and are subject to sanctions or being closed if they perform poorly on standardized state tests over an extended period, they can set their own curriculum, hiring practices, and budgets.

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And, most important, they are publicly funded. Charter schools face a major challenge in finding and paying for facilities in which to house their programs, but basic funding to run a school comes from taxpayers.

Deciding to locate the school on or near the Fitzsimons campus meant Compositive could go one of two routes: apply for a charter from the Aurora Public Schools, not known for its openness to charters, or, if Aurora rejected the application, from the Charter School Institute, a statewide charter school authorizer committed to creating and sustaining a portfolio of high-quality public-school options that meet the needs of all students.

Amy Slothower and others put a significant amount of effort into writing a charter application. Amy had drafted 40 pages and was still hard at work when, in November 2017, an election changed the composition of the Aurora school board, making it even less friendly to charters than it had been before.

Shortly thereafter, Betsy Considine and her team decided to abandon the charter route. Trying to get a charter approved in Aurora would be to expend great effort and a lot of time on what was in all likelihood a hopeless cause. The Charter School Institute wasn't a viable alternative because Compositive would have had to first apply to Aurora and get rejected, which would have delayed the school by a year.

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The more they thought about it, the more Betsy and her team concluded that it made sense to open an independent school. While funding would obviously be an issue, it required no one's approval and freed the planning team from constraints that bind all public schools.



A Workplace School

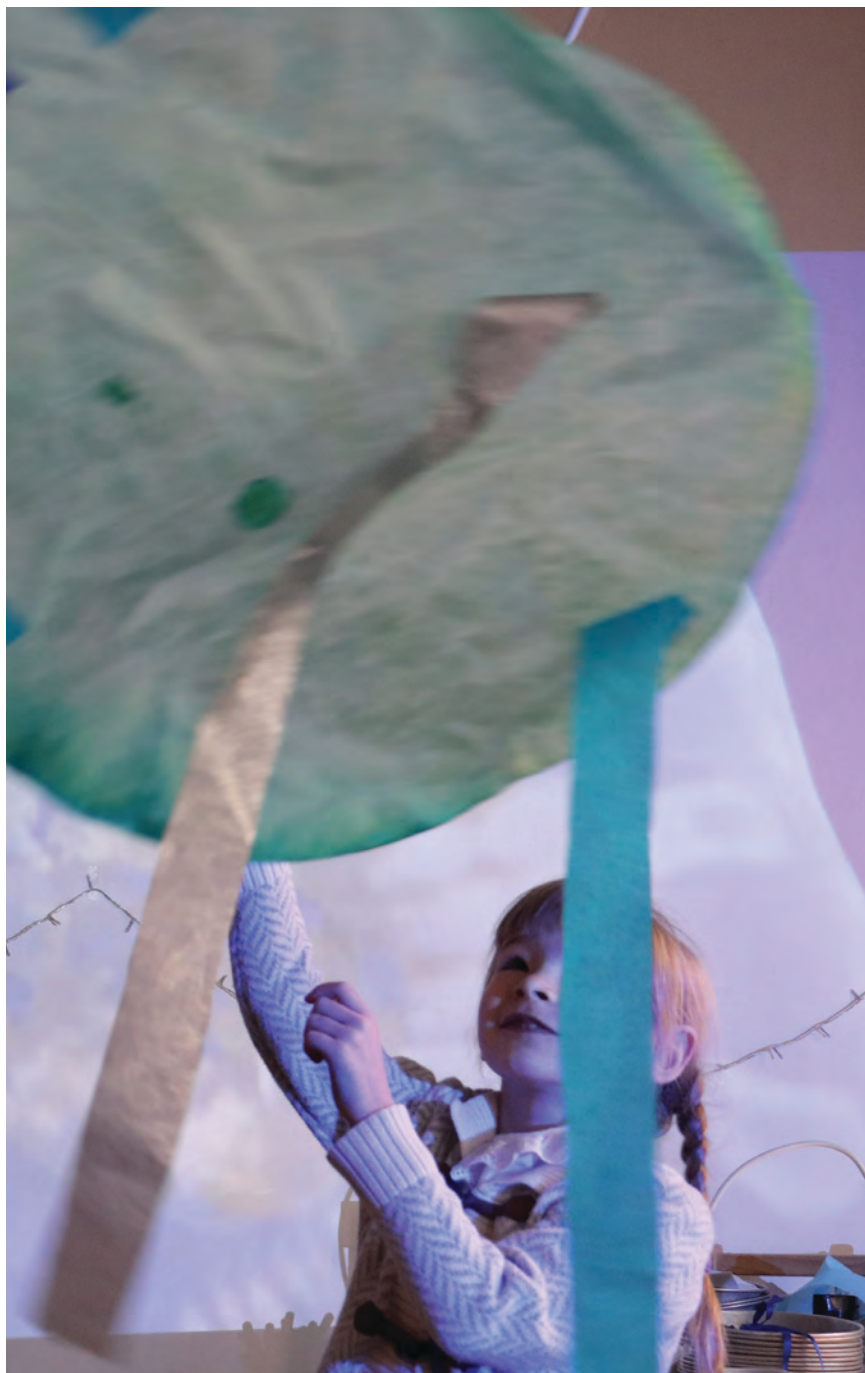
From the earliest conversations about opening a school, Betsy Considine held firm that she wanted Compositive Primary to be a workplace school. Her dream was to locate the school on or near the Fitzsimons Innovation Community, part of the University of Colorado's sprawling Anschutz Medical Campus. That way, the thousands of professional, clerical, and service employees who worked on the campus would have an opportunity to send their children to a top-notch school whose innovations mirrored those of the medical and biotech companies that populate the community. This held great appeal because the campus is a highly diverse microcosm of the larger community, with a wide

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variety of races, ethnicities, religions, and languages represented among the workers there.

“We believe the social capital has moved from the neighborhood to the workplace as more families have two parents working,” Betsy said. “As a result, workplace education will be the wave of the future. And we will be at the forefront of that and demonstrating that and validating that.”

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Chapter Three

Hiring a Director

Having decided to open an independent primary school, the next step was finding the right person to lead it. Compositive contracted with Carney Sandoe, a national search firm specializing in recruiting school leaders and faculty for independent schools and public charter schools. The hiring team and Carney Sandoe together developed a six-page job description seeking:

*A... distinguished educator with
demonstrated experience as a successful teacher
working with diverse student populations and a*

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leader of innovation. He or she should be committed to implementing a whole child educational approach, rigorous student assessment program aligned to state learning standards and assessments and possess a strong understanding and use of academic data to inform and improve instruction and student outcomes.

The successful candidate would also need to demonstrate “strong, decisive, and energetic” leadership for the school; strong community relations with parents and civic and business leaders, among others; an ability to be a “collaborative team member” with the school design and development team; and

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“have affirmatively demonstrated a strong commitment to cultural, racial and economic diversity.”

Finally, under personal characteristics, the job description said the search committee believed “Certain personal characteristics are essential for success as the Head of School for Compositive Academy:

- Possess the highest standards of integrity and a strong moral and ethical character
- Be a person who enjoys working “hard and smart.” Have the ability to bounce back after setbacks and achieve results even when circumstances are adverse and be prepared to serve as the primary role model in the school community.
- Genuinely enjoy meeting new people and listening to their points of view.
- Be approachable, accessible, and highly visible.
- Have a “deep keel” – a secure sense of self that results in steady, unflappable leadership.
- Be willing to be held accountable for the overall performance of the school.”

The job description also explained that the head of school would have a year at full salary to plan and develop the school.

Not surprisingly, applications poured in from across the

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country, as well as internationally. But finding the right fit proved challenging. In fact, it took two search processes to find the head of school. The first search, about six months prior to the search that yielded Compositive Primary's first head of school, ended without a hire. The second search had a better result.

Compositive Primary's Head of School

Barry Rowland, a senior search consultant at Carney Sandoe, narrowed the applicant pool to 20, and from there, Betsy Considine, Norma Hafenstein, veteran Denver educator Linnea Krizsan, and Amy Slothower closely examined the application packets separately and together.

***“It is crucial for a leader to have a clear vision for how best to implement a school’s mission and to be able to communicate that vision.”
-Heather Mock***

Ultimately, the decision came down to two finalists, one local and one from overseas. The local candidate was Heather Mock, who was serving as Associate Head of School and K-8 Director

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Head of School Heather Mock with a Compositive student.

at the Alexander Dawson School, a K-12 independent school in Lafayette, Colorado.

“It is crucial for a leader to have a clear vision for how best to implement a school’s mission and to be able to communicate this vision so that others want to come along,” Heather wrote in the cover letter accompanying her application. “...I believe strongly in the value of a whole child education and the power of social emotional learning as a foundation for transformational learning.”

Heather, a Princeton University graduate with a Master’s Degree in elementary education from Teachers College at

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Columbia University, also spent 11 years as a teacher and dean at Kent Denver, one of the Denver-area's premier independent schools.

Her four-hour final interview, which was preceded by two rounds of video interviews, took place at the University of Denver on February 2, 2018. Betsy Considine, Norma Hafenstein, Linnea Krizsan, and Amy Slothower comprised the interview team. It was a high-pressure atmosphere, and the process had multiple components that required Heather to demonstrate her ability to think on her feet, communicate effectively, and demonstrate her knowledge in a variety of areas, ranging from parent relationships to curriculum.

"It was intentionally a very rigorous process," Betsy said.

Heather impressed the group right away with her preparation and her evident grasp of the Compositive model. During the interview, she was able to take Compositive's domains and capacities and trace their roots back to seminal education thinkers like John Dewey and world leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. She displayed during an opening slide presentation a Dewey quote that foreshadowed a capacity: "We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience." And another from Gandhi that captured another capacity: "Find yourself in the service of others." Heather stressed to the hiring committee that

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being of service “can happen in your own backyard; it doesn’t require a trip to Costa Rica to build bridges.”

She also promoted inquiry arcs of learning, an approach favored by Composite leadership, who had viewed inquiry arcs in action during a 2017 visit to the New School in San Francisco, and had come away deeply impressed.

After Heather left the interview, the hiring committee gathered, and it was immediately clear. She would be Compositive Primary’s inaugural Head of School.

From Heather’s perspective, the interview and hiring processes were more rigorous and challenging than most she had been through. She had to prepare a variety of materials in advance and also had to ready herself for some on-the-spot assignments for which preparation wasn’t possible.

“I did a slide presentation about my vision for the school, I walked through a curriculum development process, faculty hiring and evaluation systems, and how we would handle admissions,” Heather said. “I remember afterwards thinking that if I didn’t get this job, this is the kind of preparation I would do for any interview. It made me more excited about the school as well because I became so invested in understanding the model.”

Chapter Four

Putting the Pieces Together

Now that Compositive Primary had a head of school onboard, it was time to get down to the nitty-gritty work of building a school. This meant both the physical plant (more on this later), and the standards that would undergird the curriculum and instructional model that would drive the school.

Heather was reassured to discover how much deep thinking and laying of groundwork had preceded her hiring. “It wasn’t a blank state, not at all,” she said. “There was a great deal of key stuff already in place — the standards, for example — so it was

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more finding a balance between what I thought we should be doing vs. doing what was already determined. The fact that I had a year from my hiring until we opened made me not so worried or stressed. It was really nice that there was supportive guidance. I never felt I was on my own and it was all on me.”

Reggio-Inspired

One overarching influence on Compositive Primary is the Reggio Emilia philosophy, developed in the eponymous village in Italy shortly after World War II. The Ricks Center at the University of Denver, founded by Compositive board member Norma Hafenstein, is also Reggio-inspired.

There are seven guiding principles of the Reggio Emilia approach that are critical in distinguishing Reggio Emilia from similar or competing child-centered approaches to education. These guiding principles are¹:

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1. Children are capable of constructing their own learning.
2. Children are collaborators and learn through interaction within their communities.
3. Children are natural communicators and should be encouraged to express themselves however they feel they can.
4. The classroom environment acts as the third teacher.
5. Teachers are partners, nurturers, and guides who help facilitate the exploration of children's interests as they work on short and long-term projects.
6. Documentation is a critical component of communication.
7. Parents are partners in education.

While Compositive Primary does not belong to any network of Reggio-inspired schools, Reggio's influence is evident in classrooms and in the school's educational philosophy.

Standards

Terese J. Lund, assistant professor of psychology at Wingate University in North Carolina (and co-author of the first Compositive book), had deep knowledge of the research-based underpinnings of the Compositive whole education model. As a graduate assistant for advisory board member Belle Liang of Boston College, Tracey was familiar with how the model

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developed from the early days of Compositive's existence. She conducted the intensive literature review and searches that provided the research base for development of the Compositive capacities and domains.

School founders were confident that melding Compositive's own standards with the Common Core would maintain fidelity to the Compositive model.

So it made good sense that Tracey would lead the process of developing academic standards for Compositive Primary, with support from Norma Hafenstein and Amy Slothower. It was also important that the Common Core State Standards be incorporated into the Compositive standards, to smooth the way for any future public-school replication efforts. School founders were confident that melding Compositive's own standards with the Common Core would maintain fidelity to the Compositive model.

"The standards were developed as a direct reflection of the Compositive domains and capacities," Norma said. "Tracey,

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Amy and I went back and forth on this, looking at what existed, and creating new things when they didn't exist. That way, the model — the integration of those domains and capacities — would be grounded in the literature and created in a way that its effectiveness could be measured.”

Indeed, examining the standards shows how closely they map to the model. Finalized in October of 2017, the standards were organized by the four domains (character, cognition, health, and engagement) and by grade level through fifth grade.

As school development progressed and Heather Mock began

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working on school planning, she and her team revised the standards to map to the capacities as well.

Let's take kindergarten standards for character as an example. As described in the first Compositive book, character as defined by Compositive, falls into two general categories: development of moral character and performance character.

Moral character provides the foundation for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior. Qualities of moral character include modesty/humility, spirituality (in this context that means having beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life that shapes conduct and provides comfort), authenticity, and a range of social and emotional abilities.

Kindergarten standards for moral character take each of those qualities and drill down into observable behaviors teachers should help a child develop.

Under authenticity (defined as demonstrating honest and genuine behavior), a kindergarten student meeting standards can

- Understand and identify lies.
- Understand that telling the truth is important.
- Tell the truth.

Identifying lies demonstrates the capacity to Recognize & Act. Understanding the importance of truth-telling shows the

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capacities to Recognize & Act as well as Care & Connect. And being a truth-teller shows a student can Recognize & Act and Care & Connect.

Performance character encompasses qualities an individual needs to realize his or her potential in academics, extra-curricular activities, the workplace, and other areas of endeavor. These qualities include self-control, creativity and curiosity, motivation, mindset, a sense of purpose, and resilience.

Under self-control (defined in the standards as demonstrating perseverance, focus, and responsibility), meeting standards means a kindergartener will be able to:

- Continue to work on tasks after failures.
- Take turns with classmates during interaction (e.g., playing, speaking, etc.).
- Follow directions.

Working after failures aligns with the capacity Recognize & Act. Taking turns connects to Recognize & Act and Care & Connect. Following directions demonstrates the ability to Reflect & Learn as well as Recognize & Act.

It's a lot to ask of teachers, busy dealing with a room of wiggling five-year-olds, to bear all the standards, as well as the domains and capacities, in mind. But that's what it means to be a Compositive Primary teacher.

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Following standards is made even more complicated at Compositive Primary by the overarching instructional model, which is co-creating inquiry arcs (more on this later) with students and then allowing the kids, to the extent possible, to set the direction of the inquiry.

“If the teachers follow the lead of the kids, then it’s hard to know precisely which standards you will cover at any given point

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in time,” Heather said. “You really have to look back retroactively several times each year to see what was covered and what wasn’t, and then figure out how to fill the gaps.”

Curriculum

In one of the school’s foundational curriculum documents, Heather wrote:

Compositive Primary believes that no one curriculum can meet the needs of every child. The staff strives to prepare students to be sophisticated thinkers who master content and have a sense of responsibility for their own learning and community. The school empowers students to think critically and creatively and to pursue answers to their own questions. This personalized approach creates a learning environment that differentiates content and instruction based on students’ interests, goals and learning preferences.

Early on, the Compositive team decided that inquiry-based learning would drive the curriculum. As described by the Exploratorium’s Institute for Inquiry², a San Francisco-based professional development program: “Inquiry is an approach to learning that involves a process of exploring the natural or

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material world, and that leads to asking questions, making discoveries, and testing those discoveries in the search for new understanding.”

The New School, a public charter elementary school in San Francisco, is a leading practitioner of using a structure called inquiry arcs to promote inquiry-based learning. Inquiry arcs are a series of student-driven investigations rooted in their questions, strengths, and passions. Ideally, they are student-driven and student led, with teachers acting as guides and resources.

Inquiry arcs are a series of student-driven investigations rooted in their questions, strengths, and passions.

Betsy, Norma, Amy, and Alan Gottlieb (co-author of this book) visited the New School in January 2017. The visit left a deep and positive impression, and inquiry arcs became a central focus of school planning.

At the New School, inquiry arcs are discrete units of learning that span eight to 12 weeks. Typically, a class will work through three inquiry arcs during a school year.

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Arcs begin with exploration, during which students launch the initial period of inquiry. It then moves to expression, in which students demonstrate their learning through “various forms of creation.” This can range from writing to artistic expression to teaching others, and beyond. Finally, the arc concludes with exposition, a final showcase of learning during which students reflect on their successes and challenges.

The New School has open-sourced its inquiry arc development methodology and posted templates on its website. The Compositive team used that template as a starting point for developing the school’s inaugural year inquiry arcs.

One challenge inquiry arcs pose at the youngest grades is that any given arc’s precise trajectory is supposed to be malleable, adjustable on the fly as students determine in which directions they’d like it to move. That’s obviously simpler and more straightforward with, say, fifth-graders than with preschoolers, who are three and four years old.

Heather and her team felt strongly that to be true to the Compositive model meant following children’s lead to the extent possible, even if that meant that arcs headed off in some unusual directions.

“We wrestled with how to provide a structure that is true to our model while also giving teachers the autonomy to do the

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arcs the way they want and the way the kids want, which is the whole idea,” Heather said. “We did it pretty successfully.” If teachers feel an arc is moving forward light on math, Heather said, they will figure out how to pose a challenge that requires measurement or calculation, all within the theme of the arc. “The arcs drive everything else.”

Even if the students, guided by teachers, were to determine how the arcs played out, for the first year at least, school leadership needed to determine what arcs students of various ages would pursue. Heather and Norma developed the overall structure of year one arcs, with the able assistance of veteran

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Denver educator Linnea Krizsan, who had many years of experience working in Expeditionary Learning schools, which hew to a version of project-based learning. Clare Hamoor, hired in January 2019 to be Compositive Primary's director of inquiry (see more on Clare in the following pages), played a key role after his hiring as well.

Ultimately, the idea is to have kids learning while immersed in a story. The learning can be deep, but it rarely feels like school the way adults educated more conventionally might conceive it.

A key distinction between other types of project-based learning and inquiry is that like inquiry, project-based learning uses real-life experiences to teach standards. But projects usually are pre-determined by educators. Under the inquiry model, though, a teacher might pose an essential question, but then follows students' natural curiosity to create real life experiences to teach standards.

When the curriculum team, consisting of Heather, Linnea, Norma, and Clare, sat down to create inquiry arcs for the first year, they were struck by a tension. They didn't want teachers to feel pressure to invent curriculum from scratch, but at the same time, they wanted teachers to have the autonomy to follow their own passions and those of their students. Additionally, they

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wanted to be sure that the Compositive standards were covered over the course of the year without being overly prescriptive about how this should be done. Finally, they wanted to align the arcs with the Compositive model, making sure that there would be learning in all of the four domains and across the four capacities.

As team members planned, they got increasingly excited by the possibilities. First, they thought about the big picture. What guiding questions could propel the learning? What enduring understandings did they want students to gain? What skills did they want students to develop? What kinds of assessments

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would help teachers ascertain and measure the learning that was occurring?

Once they had developed the answers to these questions, they divided each arc into three sections. The first, the Reflect and Learn section, would be the launching-off period for each arc. This was the time to immerse students in new ideas through provocations, questions, activities, and discussions. For instance, for an inquiry arc on Community Superheroes, some suggested ideas might be to explore the definition of a hero and a superhero or to bring in visitors who were perceived as heroes in their community.

***Under the inquiry model,
though, a teacher might
pose an essential question,
but then follows students'
natural curiosity to create
real life experiences to teach
standards.***

The second phase of the inquiry arc was the Recognize and Act phase. At this point, teachers would have noticed what areas were particularly interesting to their students and would help students dive deep into those areas. Sometimes this might

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be as a whole class, or perhaps individual students would go off in different directions. So for the Community Superheroes arc, this might mean writing myths about heroes that students have researched or invented, or it might mean conducting a survey among their classmates to determine what makes a hero.

Finally, the Engage and Serve portion of the arc involved two components. The first was a demonstration of learning—how could students show others what they had learned about their topic? They might create a gallery with portraits of heroes in their community, or they might put on a play that demonstrates the traits of a superhero. The other component of this phase is key to the Compositive model: now that students had an understanding of a particular topic, they would ask themselves how they could use their newfound knowledge and skills to make a difference in their community and in the world around them. Again, using the Community Superheroes arc as an example, students might brainstorm how they can be heroes in their own community - perhaps modeling certain school agreements and norms for younger classes or planting a community garden. This component of the arc is a defining feature of the school - students are not learning just for themselves but to be a part of something larger.

The fourth capacity, Care and Connect, would be woven

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throughout each arc in multiple ways. Rather than having a separate part of the day dedicated to character education or social emotional learning, these lessons would be taught throughout the day and throughout the arc, integrated seamlessly with the more traditional components.

The curriculum team then developed a series of questions for teachers to consider as they planned their arcs, and they divided these questions into different categories, making sure

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that teachers thought about each of these areas. Some of the questions involved how teachers would use space; others asked how movement might be incorporated. Still others explored possible home-school connections. The team then provided some possible examples and resources, again trying to find the balance between providing support and being overly prescriptive. The arcs were a great jumping off point, and the team was excited to see what teachers did with them.

Other schools that influenced Compositive Primary

While Reggio Emilia and the New School both exert influence over Compositive Primary, leaders drew inspiration from other schools as well during the planning year. Heather, in some cases accompanied by Clare, also visited several schools that she said helped set the direction she wanted to take Compositive Primary. Although she hadn't yet been hired when other members of the team visited the New School in San Francisco, she paid her own visit early in 2019. "I saw a lot I liked in how they implemented inquiry arcs, and I modeled some of our hiring processes after theirs (see the hiring section later in this book)," Heather said.

During that California swing, Heather also visited the

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Children's Center at Caltech³ in Pasadena. It serves children from six months to six years old. Its focus is on STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and math). "Within a STEM based program, each group provides developmentally appropriate materials and activities for the whole child in the areas of social/emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development, while fostering a positive self-concept," according to information on the school website.

Heather particularly liked how teachers promoted the "idea of letting kids tinker and try stuff out and have big ideas."

Later in the spring, Heather, Norma, and Clare traveled to the Opal School⁴ in Portland, Oregon, which is connected to the Portland Children's Museum. The Opal School includes Opal Beginning School, a preschool for children ages 3-5, and Opal Charter School, grades K-5.

Opal resonated with Heather and Clare as they thought about Compositive Primary, and it's easy to see why. Opal's website says the school "values the natural learning styles of children:

- Using the senses to look, touch, smell, listen and taste
- Engaging in play, imagination and games
- Using story to create meaning and see relationships
- Tinkering — staying open to what's possible in the

3

<https://ccc.caltech.edu/>

4

<https://www.portlandcm.org/teaching-and-learning/opal-school>

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moment

- Taking things apart, reassembling them, linking them together in new ways
- Using metaphor and poetic language to uncover and create meaning
- Engaging others in social interaction and collaboration
- Being willing to take risks and experimenting in the absence of fear”

“The natural materials they used and the overall aesthetic impressed me,” Heather said. “Also, the focus on student-led, emergent thinking. And the pace. It was slow. That’s something I want Compositive Primary teachers to understand. You are never in a rush. If the kids make a mess you all clean it up together. It is a learning opportunity. It might take a while but that is okay.”



Chapter Five

Hiring a Director of Inquiry and Instruction

After the head of school, the most important hiring decision would be Compositive Primary's Director of Inquiry and Instruction. This position would be the rough equivalent of a curriculum director in a more traditional school and would be responsible for teacher professional development as well as the development of the inquiry arcs that drive the school's instructional model.

From their first 'meeting' with Clare Hamoor over a video call in mid-December, the Compositive team knew they had found a

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unique talent.

“You have to have total trust in kids as people,” Clare said during the video session. “Take their art-making as seriously as you would adults. They are true collaborators with you in creating the classroom environment. Value them as whole people.”

Asked about how he would go about hiring a staff, Clare said “always hire people smarter than you, or at least better at one thing than you are. Hire people who are down to play, get messy with kids, be on their level in every possible way, whether that is getting covered in clay or sitting in a tiny chair to talk to them.”

At his in-person interview in late January, Clare brought in a bluetooth speaker and had banjo and bass jazz playing in the background while he read a book, *Sam and Dave Dig a Hole*, to Betsy, Linnea, Heather, and Norma.

He then led the group through a process of listing the qualities they’d want in books for classroom libraries. They came up with a long list. “This can be tricky,” he said, his voice rising theatrically. “I have to buy a book and there’s 42 things here! Can we create a hierarchy?”

As soon as Clare left, the four interviewers exhaled and broke into smiles. No doubt about it: They had found their director of inquiry and instruction.

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Clare remembers the interview process as “very extensive. I had to do a lot of work to prepare for it. I thought that was great because it gave me a clearer sense of what I wanted to talk about and how I wanted to talk about it. It forced me to do some deep thinking, and got me excited about the school and its incredible potential.”

Clare did not come to Compositive Primary from a traditional teaching background. He grew up in the country 20 minutes outside the town of Brookville, Indiana (pop. 2,500), which is 75 miles southeast of Indianapolis. He went to a Catholic high school staffed in part by Franciscan nuns, many of whom worked on death penalty abolition. He was involved in a production of the play “Dead Man Walking” in high school and



fell in love with theater. He attended Indiana University, where he got his BA in theater and religious studies. He then attended New York University, where he earned an MA in educational theater, and an EdD, focused on “the agencies of children and things in play.”¹

While in New York, Clare also became involved in directing plays inside prisons, a passion he has brought with him to Colorado, where he and his wife, Ashley Hamilton, have launched the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative.

While working on his doctorate, Clare worked at the Blue School as the theater specialist and director. He and Ashley

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moved to Colorado in 2017 when she was hired at DU as an assistant theater professor. Clare taught at Denver's South High School for a year before becoming Compositive Primary's Director of Inquiry and Instruction.

Clare said he was attracted to Compositive Primary because it is an independent school with an educational model similar in some respects to the Blue School. "The whole child, inquiry, crossover piece was really exciting to me. And, of course, getting to start from the beginning and help set the tone and culture, choose all the materials. It's a great aesthetic challenge."

Clare brought with him some of the philosophy and approach of the Blue School², an independent PreK-8 school in New York, where he taught before moving to Denver in 2017. The school, co-founded by members of the Blue Man Group, practices a "dynamically balanced education," focusing on academic mastery, self and social intelligence, and creative thinking.

On the school website, cofounder Matt Goldman describes the school this way:

"We have created an educational program where creativity is cherished and encouraged and where children fall in love with the joy of learning. We have created a healthy, warm, safe, nurturing environment where community is paramount and where children's interactions between classes is just as

2 <https://www.blueschool.org/>

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important as what happens during classes. We have created the kind of educational program we wish we'd had for ourselves and dreamed we'd have for our children -- a place where people feel like there is genuinely no better place to learn and to grow."

Clare said promoting "genuine inquiry" is one piece of Blue School he wanted to see become part of Compositive Primary. Genuine inquiry, he explained, means "actually following where kids want to go. There is a lot of inquiry curriculum that doesn't really give kids any space to wonder. It might say 'this is about wondering,' but doesn't show them how, or support them in whatever extraneous, outrageous ideas they have."

The other component of the Blue School approach Clare wants to bring to Compositive Primary is deeply integrating arts into the classroom "so that it feels seamless."

Chapter Six

Hiring a Staff

Once the basic underpinnings of the school were in place, it was time to hire a staff.

As with many aspects of Compositive Primary, hiring was done with a twist. First, candidates pursued positions in the more traditional way: sending in a cover letter and resume. The hiring team then selected candidates to interview by video. The interview included questions that got at the school's model: "Tell us about a time you made a mistake in your teaching. How did you handle it and what did you learn? What did your students learn?" By asking specific questions that encouraged

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candidates to show vulnerability, the hiring team was able to ascertain which candidates would be flexible and positive in a start-up environment.

From this group, the team chose a small number of candidates to submit additional materials. These included a video of their teaching and a sample lesson plan. Additionally, the team asked an open-ended question about curriculum development that candidates could take in many directions. These submissions further helped identify teachers who were willing to (and in fact thirsting to) be creative in developing curriculum.

Finally, a smaller group of these candidates were asked to come together for a day-long group interview. The day consisted of some icebreaker activities, a small group team-building activity, a writing assignment, and an interview. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, candidates were paired together in advance to plan a mock lesson they would teach the hiring committee. This meant that potential competitors were being thrust into a situation where they had to cooperate. And that was a big part of the idea.

“It was a pretty rigorous process compared to others I’ve been involved in,” Heather said. “We felt it was important to bring candidates together in a group to show right from the start

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that we valued collaboration. It's also important to demonstrate flexibility. Some teachers get pretty set in their ways, but to work here, you need to have a start-up mentality. It's not just a job where you show up at nine and go home at three."

On a February Thursday morning, seven teaching candidates, all young women, gathered at the shared working space in Lower Downtown Denver where Heather had her office. Each had previously learned who their teaching partner would be for the interview, and the pairs had worked together by phone and email to plan a lesson for the "class," which consisted of Heather and Linnea, and the other candidates.

One teaching pair consisted of Amira Ababio and Natalie Roth. Amira had several years of experience teaching in early childhood centers in the Denver area. Natalie had both elementary school and early childhood teaching experience.

As the 'class' settled on the floor in a carpeted hallway, Amira opened an illustrated book called "Shhh," and read through it, prompting the 'students' with gentle questions. Despite the fact that she was reading to a group of adults, Amira didn't hesitate to read in a sing-song voice designed to draw them into the story. "What does a ladder do? Can you stand up and show me how to climb a ladder? Good!"

Next, Natalie and Amira had the class split into pairs to

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construct bridges out of popsicle sticks, pipe-cleaners, and paper. The idea was to build something that would stand up and that was arched steeply enough for a small plastic tugboat to fit under.

***“Some teachers get pretty set in their ways, but to work here, you need to have a start-up mentality. It’s not just a job where you show up at nine and go home at three.”
-Heather Mock***

After the activities were complete, Heather and Linnea led first Natalie then Amira to a quiet part of the office for a debrief. “I’m not in a classroom right now, so that was super fun,” Natalie said. She said one of the things she and Amira wanted to stress was that “as you move through the basic structure of a lesson, transitions are important. They need to move their bodies, and it’s good to split them into small groups and then bring the whole group back together again. It helps develop both small and larger group skills. That’s probably the main point of the lesson.”

Natalie said she and Amira planned the lesson over email

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and Google Chat. “Amira was super easy to work with, and she had great ideas.”

For her part, Amira said the lesson would have been more cohesive if the book as well as the activity had been about bridges. She said to augment the lesson, she would seek out construction workers who could come into the classroom to talk to kids about the work they do building things like bridges, or, even better, take a field trip to where a bridge was under construction.

Amira also said one of her primary priorities was “communicating with parents every day.”

Within a couple of weeks of the interviews, both Amira

and Natalie were offered and accepted teaching positions at Compositive Primary.

Before- and After- School Care

When thinking about how to structure the before- and after-school care program Compositive Primary intended to offer, Heather thought back to her experience as a parent. Her children attended preschool at Montessori Children's House¹ in Denver, an independent PreK-8 school. "I always appreciated the fact that when I came and got the kids late one of their teachers was there, as opposed to someone hired just for daycare after the school day ended."

The Compositive team decided to go in a similar direction. Each classroom would have three teachers assigned to it: one lead teacher and two 'resident teachers,' who had teaching experience, but in most cases less than the lead teachers. The resident teachers would work on a staggered schedule. One would arrive early and help staff the before-school care program. That teacher's workday would end in the early afternoon. The other resident teacher would arrive mid-morning and stay to staff the after-school care program.

This meant there were always two, and often three, teachers in every classroom during the school day, and at least

1

<https://www.mchdenver.org>

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three resident teachers staffing the before- and after-school programs. Like Heather's experience as a parent, Compositive Primary parents would appreciate that teachers who knew their children well were with them for the before- and after-school programs.

Staff Bonding

An idea that took hold long before Heather or anyone else was hired to staff the school was that a staff retreat should precede the opening of Compositive Primary. The Considines own a sprawling ranch near Glenwood Springs, and Betsy wanted the staff to come out to spend a night and two days, absorbing the natural beauty and tranquility and getting their minds right before opening day.

The thirteen staff members carpooled up to the mountains, stopping for a steep, sweaty group hike to Hanging Lake, a spectacular, bright green lake above Glenwood Canyon. Following the hike, they drove to the Considine ranch, settled into their commodious lodgings, and gathered in an aspen grove with a commanding view of Mount Sopris to sip wine and hear a welcome talk from Betsy Considine.

"Each one of us is a composite of our history and experiences and our families and schooling and lots of other

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Composive teachers on their retreat, here on a hike to Hanging Lake.



Composive teachers on their retreat in Carbondale.

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things,” she said to the staff. “We are composites. This is a strength-based model. If anyone asks you what Compositive means, we are positive composites.”

Compositive, Betsy continued, emerged from years of robust research. “It is innovative at its core, and it is a grand experiment. And you guys are all founding members of it! What I often say, and I get chills thinking about it, is we are going to change the face of education intergalactically.”

***“It is innovative at its core,
and it’s a grad experiment...
We are goign to change
the face of education
intergalactially.”
-Betsy Considine***

The rest of the evening was dedicated to eating a healthy catered meal and enjoying excellent wine and a spectacular sunset that lit up the surrounding mountains.

After a long evening of group bonding over wine, the staff got down to work the next morning, getting to know one another and steeping themselves in the Compositive philosophy. A stack of papers with one word written on each was spread on the grass, and each staff member was asked to choose one that helped

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tell his or her story. “Here we have an opportunity to tell our stories,” Heather said. “So much of teaching is about stories.” She chose collaboration and talked about how it captures her approach to teaching.

Others chose connection, service, coaching, community, excitement, inclusion, mindfulness, challenge, courage, character, and creativity, and told a personal story that connected the word to their experiences. Having already bonded over food and drink the night before, the group seemed completely comfortable opening up and talking honestly about their strengths and challenges, as professionals and human beings.

The rest of the morning was spent in small groups, getting to know one another and reading articles on educational philosophy that they then discussed.

As the group gathered before lunch, Clare asked each of them to distill “everything from this morning into a mantra — a word or a very short sentence.” He gave them 30 seconds to come up with something, and each staff member stepped forward and spoke theirs:

- Willingness to be vulnerable
- Be curious
- Know the kids love the kids

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- Embrace
- Active participant not passive consumer
- Spot the gift
- Diversity of experience, diversity of thought
- Let go of expectations, be immersed in the story
- Curiosity, openness, acceptance and love.

The retreat built a reservoir of goodwill and affection among the staff. Being an educator is hard work, and there would be days in the coming year when individuals and the group as a whole would need to draw on that reservoir. They left the retreat fired up for the year to come, and knowing they had next year's retreat back at the ranch to look forward to.

Chapter Seven

Admissions

Marcie Prokupek came on board in mid-2018 as Compositive Primary's director of outreach. One of her early assignments was helping to build an admissions system for the school.

First, however, came outreach. A workplace school – where admissions are limited to families who work on the campus, and employers help promote the school – would undoubtedly be attractive to people who worked on the campus, but first they had to know the school existed, and would be opening in late August of 2019. Another huge selling point was the Considines'

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decision to subsidize tuition so that all families would pay \$1,200 per year — or \$100 per month. Families whose children entered the school in year one were guaranteed that tuition rate as long as they remained in the school — even if that was through fifth grade.

Together, Marcie and Heather organized several informational sessions at various places across the campus during the fall of 2018. Some of the larger employers on the campus ran articles about the school and the open houses in their newsletters, which helped drive interest and attendance.

The information sessions attracted well over one hundred prospective families, intrigued by the model and unquestionably attracted by the affordable tuition.

Shanelle Roquemore is an accounts receivable manager in the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center Office of Grants and Contracts. She's also the mother of five-year-old Kason. Shanelle first heard about Compositive Primary in an article in the health sciences center newsletter.

“It said something about workplace education and I thought that meant a convenient place for employees to go to take adult education classes. Something made me pull up the article and I immediately thought wow, the timing is perfect.” Kason would be turning five in the summer of 2019 and could slot into the

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kindergarten class.

The more Shanelle and her husband learned about Compositive the more enthused they became. “At first, when I started looking at where the funding came from, it didn’t make a lot of sense to me. Then I found information about Betsy Considine and her background and her commitment to working with impoverished communities and then it did make sense.” She researched Heather’s background as well and felt that this would be the right place for Kason.

As for the school itself, Shanelle was all in from the start. “Any educational philosophy that focuses on creating a positive feeling and desire in a child to learn, that’s where I want my child to be.”

Now that prospective parents were preparing to apply, Compositive Primary had to have application materials ready to go. Marcie contacted several local independent schools and asked to see their application materials, and adapted Compositive’s application from those. In addition to the boilerplate information about the child and his or her family, Marcie and Heather came up with a few open-ended questions:

- Please list three words that describe your child and explain why.
- What is your child really passionate or curious about?

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- Please describe how your child interacts with others.
- Why are you interested in having your child attend Compositive Primary?
- Is there anything else you would like us to know about your child?

Once they had applied and sent in a \$50 deposit, parents were asked to bring in their children on one of two February Saturdays so the staff could observe them in a school-like environment. The sessions were held in a community room in one of the new residential buildings on the Fitzsimons campus, just a couple of blocks from where the Compositive Primary

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Linnea, Norma, and teen volunteers.

building was rising out of the ground.

Parents brought their children upstairs in the community room, where Norma, Clare, and Linnea, and seven teenaged volunteers stood ready. Most parents deftly disengaged and left to head back downstairs to learn more about the school from Heather and Marcie. Others stayed with their children as they played with plastic manipulatives or looked at books. Soothing music — Beethoven’s *Für Elise* — played over a Bluetooth speaker. Norma, Clare, and Linnea alternated between interacting with the kids and taking notes.

After the 30-minute session, Norma, Clare and Linnea shared their evaluations, based on how the children interacted

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with one another, the materials, and the environment. “This is so hard. They are all amazing,” Linnea said. “How do you decide?” But decide they did, rating children on a scale of 1-3 in terms of likely fit with the Compositive model.

Ultimately, admissions decisions were based on a desire for gender balance in classrooms, racial, ethnic and socio-economic diversity, diversity of the employers and job positions on campus, and factors from the observations — readiness for school, the extent to which the children seemed engaged and curious, etc.

If you visit Compositive Primary, you will gain an appreciation for the work the admissions crew did. The classrooms are filled with engaged, animated children, from a variety of backgrounds. The diversity in evidence far exceeds what you’d see in most other schools.

That’s one of the major factors that made Maryam El-Bakry realize that Compositive Primary was where she wanted to send her son, Yousef, three. Maryam is a process engineer at Children’s Hospital Colorado, and her husband, a surgical resident, wanted to find a more diverse school than the one Yousef had been attending nearby.

“From a religious standpoint, I appreciate inclusion and diversity,” Maryam said. “And knowing that was something

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they were prioritizing and priding themselves on at Compositive Primary, that caught my attention in a really positive way.”

Chapter Eight

The Compositive Primary Building

Another unique and alluring aspect of Compositive Primary is its beautiful new building, which sits on a 3.6-acre plot adjacent to the Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora. Initially, thought was given to buying an existing school building and renovating it. But that proved more complex and arguably almost as expensive as new construction.

The Considines purchased the land and funded design and construction of the building. Betsy wanted to make sure the building embodied in its exterior and interior features the Compositive capacities and domains.

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Front entrance of the temporary Compositive space.

Tryba Architects was the firm chosen to design the school building. David Tryba, the firm's founder and lead design principal, said his team studied the Compositive model and thought long and hard about how to bring it to life in a school building.

"The last thing Betsy wanted was an international style, generic building," Tryba said. "So we decided to start with the notion of character as the foundation of the school." When Tryba and his team pondered the term character, they thought not only of the innate quality of human beings that is human character, but also the character of the piece of property on which the school sits.

Before the medical campus became the behemoth it is

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Inside the temporary Compositive space.



Inside the temporary Compositive space.

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today, it was the Fitzsimons Army Medical Center, built in the early 20th century, initially to treat soldiers infected with tuberculosis during World War I. The campus, Tryba said, was “smaller, more intimate, with Spanish mission-style buildings. We wanted to recreate that feeling of intimacy and of place in the Compositive Primary building.”

It was also important to the Tryba team and the Considines that the building embody the Compositive ethos in as many ways as possible. For that reason, Tryba designed the building to have intimate spaces as well as larger spaces where the community can gather. And he wanted the building to feel more like a home than an institution.

“We wanted it to be simple; a place where children feel comfortable because they can ‘read’ the building,” Tryba said. “We wanted it scaled to very small children, so that they would feel empowered to use the building. It had to be logical in a way that allowed them to read it and understand the space.”

Constant natural light was another important element of the building design and its placement on the property. Classrooms are oriented north-south so that they catch light from the east and west at different times of the day.

Emphasizing natural light also means the building’s interior is visible on all sides from outside, and is “therefore fully

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engaged with the community it serves.”

One of the standout features of the Compositive Primary building is its soaring bell tower. “Bell towers classically have signaled that this is a public or institutional building — most often a church or school,” Tryba said. “But we have gotten away from that over the past 100 years or so. We wanted to reach to the sky and have everyone looking up when they arrived. Subconsciously there is an importance to looking up, to ascending.”

***“We wanted it scaled to very small children, so that they would feel empowered to use the building. It had to be logical in a way that allowed them to read it and understand the space.”
-David Tryba***

The tower comes equipped with a real bell —not electronic chimes — that children can help ring.

Finally, the building is built on classical proportions, an element near and dear to Betsy Considine’s heart. Tryba described the design as “nine perfect squares and perfect

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Dan Richie at the Compositive Topping Off Ceremony with Betsy Considine and Heather Mock.

golden rectangles. The proportions were carefully considered and based on classical principles of a base, a middle, and a top — much like a classical column.”

But one need not be aware of the intricacy of thought that went into the building. It’s enough to walk in and to sense, almost intuitively, that the classrooms, the common spaces, every inch of the facility feels somehow...just right.

Topping Off!

On April 6, 2019, a cool, sunny Saturday morning, future Compositive Primary students and their parents streamed onto a construction site on the eastern edge of the Anschutz medical Campus in Aurora. The Compositive Primary building had been

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rising from the ground for several months, and today was the day workers would officially top off the building.

As kids and parents helped themselves to doughnuts and juice, construction workers prepared the crane to hoist the distinctive

Daniel L. Ritchie Bell

Tower to the building's roof.

But first, everyone gathered had an opportunity to immortalize their presence at this august event. Using finger paints and markers, kids planted hand prints or scrawled their names. Everyone from Heather, Clare, Betsy and Terry Considine and Daniel L. Richie himself signed their names on the sloping sides of the bell tower, under and around the swirling Compositive logo. It mattered little that those names would be covered as construction proceeded; everyone involved would remember that they were part of this small bit of history.

As the small house that would hold the bell swung into the

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blue sky, dangling from the crane, adults and kids alike oohed and ahhed, until the structure settled securely atop the tower.

Suddenly, the school, so long an idea, seemed very real. In just four months, it would open its doors, albeit in nearby temporary quarters.

Opening Day

August 20 was a classic hot Colorado summer day: brilliant sunshine and dry heat. The Compositive Primary staff arrived early to greet students as they arrived for their first day at a new school.

The permanent school building designed by Tryba Architects wouldn't be ready until January, so the school was opening in a temporary space two blocks south on Ulster Street on the Fitzsimons/Anschutz campus. As temporary space went, it exceeded parents' and staff's expectations. The classrooms were spacious, well-lit, and equipped with a full array of materials and equipment. It didn't, in fact, feel like temporary space at all.

Outside the front door, the scene was classic first-day-of-school: Some kids were beaming and jumping up and down. Others were a bit teary — as were a few moms and dads. “Keep walking, lady,” one dad said to his wife as their son disappeared inside the school door.

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Most adults had their phones out and were recording the moment for posterity. Clare Hamoor, wearing an orange and neon green vest, was helping families cross the street to the school. Kason Roquemore, arriving for his first day of kindergarten, threw his arms around Heather Mock's neck and gave her a big hug.

Inside, teachers herded students into their rooms, which many had visited the previous day during an open house.

In one of the early childhood rooms, lead teacher Jackie Hadd and resident teacher Natalie Roth settled their 16 students into a circle. "If you feel a little anxious, nothing is better than a yoga breath," Jackie said, instructing the students to breathe in through their noses and out through their mouths. Simultaneously she had them shake their hands, first fast, then slow.

Then she led them through a game, using a singing bowl, designed to help the children begin to learn their classmates' names. Each child rang the bowl and said their name. "Christopher," "Hi, Christopher," the class said in unison. And on around the circle.

In the kindergarten classroom, student names were written on yellow or blue paper starbursts affixed to the floor: Addie, Amelia, Becca, Emma, Henry, Jack, etc. Lead teacher Meaghan

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Exterior of the completed Composive Primary building.



Classroom inside the completed Composive Primary building.

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Students and staff on the first day of school.

Fitzgerald and resident teacher Nick Magles also had their charges sit in a circle.

“How are you feeling today?” Meaghan asked.

“Nervous,” said a girl named Sienna.

“Excited,” said Jack.

“I’m a little nervous too,” Meaghan confessed. “Teachers get nervous just like you do.”

By day’s end, however, everyone’s nervousness had faded. Tired children headed home and exhausted teachers slumped into kiddie chairs. Day one was over. The grand experiment had begun.

It was going to be a great year.

Epilogue

Stay Tuned!

If you've enjoyed learning about how Compositive Primary came to be, look for a sequel coming in 2021. The next book will focus on Compositive Primary's first 18 months of operation, and how the concept of a workplace school took hold.

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Appendix A

Teacher Hiring Process

The following was provided to all prospective Compositive teachers for the interview and hiring process.

Before applying for a teaching position, we recommend you review the school's website to familiarize yourself with our team and approach, including our vision, mission, and model of our school.

Hiring Process Overview and Timeline

Our hiring process generally runs 4-6 weeks depending on the timing of one's application and the responsiveness of candidates throughout the process. Our hiring team carefully reviews all candidate materials.

Here's our hiring process and timeline at a glance:

Step 1: Submit a cover letter and resume to careers@compositiveprimary.org.

Step 2: If invited, complete 30-minute phone/video interview.

Step 3: If asked, send documentation from your classroom and reflections on your learning and teaching philosophies. At this stage, a member of the hiring team will request three professional references. It's most helpful to receive feedback from supervisors and peers to get a well-rounded perspective on one's abilities related to the position being considered. The hiring team will also request lesson plans, a video of you teaching, and insight regarding your philosophy on curriculum development, teaching and learning.

Step 4: If invited, participate in final in-person interview day which includes a demo lesson, relevant exercises, and panel interviews with the educational and founding teams. Our final interview day generally runs about 4 hours.

Step 5: Offer letters sent following final interview day.



Appendix B

Example Inquiry Arc

To download a copy of the Example Inquiry Arc as a PDF with the original formatting, please visit [this link](#).

<i>K/1: COMMUNITY</i>		
Concept: Systems	Related Concepts: Connection, Interactions	Timeframe: 8-10 weeks
Guiding Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is a community? • What are the qualities of a superhero? • What is a community superhero? • How can we be community superheroes? 	
Enduring Understandings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities are networks. • We all are important members of our communities. • We each have an unsung hero inside us. 		Students Will be Able To: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discover their unique gifts and talents. • Express what makes them unique. • Demonstrate how they can make a difference in their community and/or for other communities.
<i>Assessment Evidence</i>		
Possible Performance Tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recorded stories/podcasts interviewing a personal hero. • Class quilt with different superheroes represented. • Write a story about superheroes/villains 		Other Evidence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class pledge about being a hero • Class-chosen community service project • Self-portrait as a superhero

Overview of each phase in the inquiry:

<p>Phase 1: Reflect and Learn Immersion; acquiring new knowledge; observing; questioning.</p> <p>This phase introduces the ideas through provocations, questions, activities, and discussions.</p>	<p>Possible ideas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it mean to be a hero? • What kinds of heroes are there? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peacekeeping • Literary • Sports • Military • Environmental • Teachers model by sharing stories about their heroes • As a group, explore the different types of heroes, creating places to share examples. • Bring in visitors who can be viewed as heroes in the community. • Body tracing - identifying parts of a hero • Survey other students about their heroes; survey other classes and teachers
<p>Phase 2: Recognize and Act Exploration and research.</p> <p>Based on reflect and learn phase, students will investigate questions that have arisen about superheroes. They will research these questions, conduct experiments, invite in experts, take field trips.</p>	<p>Possible ideas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The class may choose a hero to research together for modeling purposes, and students could choose individual heroes that they research. • Gather materials about topics - books, articles, pictures, music, videos • Research difference between hero and villain • Students will explore what their own's super-power is through journaling, playing with materials • Creative writing: stories about superheroes

<p>Phase 3: Engage and Serve Share learning; take action; reflect.</p> <p>Students will devise ways to share their understanding of heroes with their families, with the school, and with other communities.</p>	<p>Possible examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a quilt where each student's hero is represented • Publish information on personal superheroes on myhero.com • Self-portraits as superheroes • Class webpage that shares stories about heroes • Gallery walk with pieces created by students about their superheroes and the superheroes within themselves. <p>They will also investigate and land on ways to be heroes. Some ideas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create superhero pledge with class—using powers for good • Quilt could have each student and how they are a hero • Class brainstorms needs in the community and determines how they can be a hero (planting a garden, cleaning up trash...)
<p>Throughout: Care and Connect</p>	<p>There will be an emphasis on this capacity throughout the unit in a variety of ways. Some of these include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorming qualities of a superhero and discussing how we can have those qualities • Reflecting on our own superpowers and how we can be helpful to others • Interviewing their heroes and talking about them

Deepening Inquiry	
<p>Provocations/ Experiences:</p> <p><i>How are familiar and innovative provocations developing inquiry practices in students?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes a hero? Bulletin board created • What colors do you think of when you think of superheroes? • Spiderman can make webs; what do you wonder about spider webs? • Superheroes Can/Have/Are chart (can then do with villains, types of superheroes, community heroes....)
<p>Fieldwork/Experts:</p> <p><i>What's a provocation that could take place outside of the classroom or bring an outsider in?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heroes in the community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical Professionals • Security/police officers • Fire department
<p>Anchor Texts:</p> <p><i>What texts will guide the learning for content?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comics about superheroes • <u>The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man</u>, by Michael Chabon • <u>Diary of a Fly</u>, by Doreen Cronin
<p>Home/School Connections:</p> <p><i>How can you invite families into the challenge of the arc?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask your parents to share a story about one of their heroes • Interview family members about a time they were a hero • Find examples of heroes in your neighborhood

<p>Literacies:</p> <p><i>How can you integrate the development of multiple literacies into this exploration?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move like a superhero • Drama <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create superhero costumes • Superhero actions • Music <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of music makes you think of heroes? • What words are used in songs about heroes? • Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create superhero comics • Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare/contrast what different superheroes with can/have/are charts • Math <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Read Zero the Hero</u> and explore meaning of zero • Science <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aquaman: explore properties of water • Magneto: properties of magnets • Superman: how does flight work? • Ironman: powers of propulsion, exploring levers • Mindfulness/SEL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorm qualities of superheroes and discuss how we can strive to have those qualities • Possible opportunity to explore equity if you notice stereotypes about superheroes (most are white males)
<p>Community Connections:</p> <p><i>How can this exploration impact the Anschutz community?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My Hero project— www.myhero.com • Partner with different organizations on campus to share hero stories • Students can choose to be heroes for a particular organization

<p>Inquiry Station Ideas:</p> <p><i>What experiences might animate and sustain inquiry?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Painting: What colors represent superheroes? • Building: design a vehicle for a superhero • Blocks: How can you make superheroes fly without throwing them? (Supply string, tape, and other materials) • Create a superhero out of modeling clay • Make a spider web
<p>Mentor Texts:</p> <p><i>What texts will guide the learning for craft/format?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lego DC Superheroes Phonics Boxed Set • Phonics Boxed Set #2: DC Superheroes • Star Wars: Phonics Boxed Set • World of Reading Marvel Meet the Superheroes • <u>Even Superheroes Have Bad Days</u>, by Shelley Becker • <u>Ten Rules of Being a Superhero</u>, by Deb Pilutti
<p>Materials:</p> <p><i>What are new materials that you want to introduce?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling clay • Paints in primary colors • Tape • String • Material for making spider webs
<p>Space:</p> <p><i>How do you differentiate space for different tasks and ideas to facilitate inquiry?</i></p>	
<p>Agencies:</p> <p><i>What are new challenges you can integrate into this exploration to help students develop multiple agencies?</i></p>	

<p>Sharing:</p> <p><i>How might students share their understanding with the school and broader community?</i></p>	
<p>Taking Action:</p> <p><i>How will students use their expertise to impact their community and make a difference?</i></p>	
<p>Ongoing Reflection:</p> <p><i>How are students reflecting on the exploration? What experiences are designed to provoke reflection about the inquiry in self and others?</i></p>	<p>Daily and weekly small reflective tasks that can easily be shared with others.</p>
<p>Ongoing Documentation:</p> <p><i>How are students, parents, and teachers documenting different phases of the inquiry?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photos, video scripting, student interviews, multimedia arts • Interactive timelines • Written reflections • Audio recordings • Whole group collaborations • Portfolios

Arc Calendar

Use this calendar to plan out the big events of the arc (field trips, visitors, no-school days) as well as the big idea for each day's Inquiry block.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Week 1 Dates:					
Week 2 Dates:					
Week 3 Dates:					
Week 4 Dates:					
Week 5 Dates:					
Week 6 Dates:					
Week 7 Dates:					
Week 8 Dates:					
Week 9 Dates:					
Week 10 Dates:					

Weekly Planning

In each weekly planning session, begin with a reflection conversation with your team about the arc's progress, relating it back to both your students' knowledge and questions as well as your content standards.

Week 1

This week's question:

Intended outcomes:

Monday — Lesson Title/Big Idea

Lesson/Activity/Provocations:

Materials/Preparation:

Teacher's Roles:

Lesson Reflection:

What went well, what was a challenge, what will you change?

Tuesday — Lesson Title/Big Idea

Lesson/Activity/Provocations:

Materials/Preparation:

Teacher's Roles:

Lesson Reflection:

What went well, what was a challenge, what will you change?

Wednesday — Lesson Title/Big Idea

Lesson/Activity/Provocations:

Materials/Preparation:

Teacher's Roles:

Lesson Reflection:

What went well, what was a challenge, what will you change?

Thursday — Lesson Title/Big Idea

Lesson/Activity/Provocations:

Materials/Preparation:

Teacher's Roles:

Lesson Reflection:

What went well, what was a challenge, what will you change?

Friday — Lesson Title/Big Idea

Lesson/Activity/Provocations:

Materials/Preparation:

Teacher's Roles:

Lesson Reflection:

What went well, what was a challenge, what will you change?



Compositive Primary is a school like no other. Based on the Compositive model of whole-child education, the school provides the type of well-rounded, stimulating educational experience many parents dream about for their children but struggle to find.

How this innovative, low-tuition school came to exist is a story in itself. This book chronicles that journey: how some of the nation's brightest educational minds had spent years developing the Compositive model before they hatched the idea to design a school; how Compositive's founder and a close-knit group of advisors went out and found a school leader ideally suited to the model; how that leader assembled the strong inaugural faculty; how the state-of-the-art building that houses the school was designed and built on a sprawling medical campus in suburban Denver.

It's a unique origin story, but that's what you'd expect. Compositive Primary represents the future of American education.

