A large, stylized graphic of a house in shades of blue and red. The house has a red roof, a blue chimney, and three windows with blue frames. The text 'YOU CAN START YOUR OWN SCHOOL!' is written in white on the red side of the house. The background is a light blue gradient with faint outlines of the house and a window.

What do you do when you're a teacher with entrepreneurial spirit? Open your own place. Meet five teachers who did.

By Caralee Adams

YOU CAN  
START YOUR  
OWN SCHOOL!

**D**o you have your own vision of what a school could be? Want something better for students? For these and other reasons, many teachers, fueled by their passion, classroom experience, and entrepreneurial verve, start their own schools. With the needs of children driving their every decision, teachers can create successful schools where students thrive. Here, teachers who established their own schools—from public charters to private enterprises—share a glimpse of their journeys.

**Kevin Sved**, cofounder and codirector, *The Accelerated School, Los Angeles*

Back in the early 1990s, when they were teaching elementary school in South Central Los Angeles, Kevin Sved and Jonathan Williams walked to their cars together at the end of the day to talk about the challenges their school faced. And there were many: The classes were overcrowded, the building sweltering. There was no continuity among grades or accountability for teachers. Often the two men ended up talking in the deserted parking lot long after their colleagues had left.

In time, Sved and Williams realized they shared a vision to bring about change. So 1993, when California passed a law allowing charter schools, the two sketched out what kind of place they wanted their school, the 99th Street Accelerated School, to be. When that didn't pan out, Sved and Williams decided to strike out on their own. "We were both idealistic, and still are to a large degree—just not as naive," says Sved.

To start their new charter school, Sved and Williams raised money, leased space in a church, and recruited 50 kids in kindergarten through fourth grade to attend. As they went door to door through the neighborhood, people didn't know what to think of them, because they weren't police and they weren't carrying Bibles, recalls Sved. "It was a risky area to walk around at night with a shirt and tie," he says. "But there were parents who were longing to have their kids

in a school that would nurture them, and they did not see that in public schools.”

In the fall of 1994, Sved and Williams opened The Accelerated School. Today, the new and expanded campus serves 1,300 students in PreK through high school. Being teachers helped them establish the school, says Sved. “You have an understanding of the most important work on the school campus,” he says. “Eventually, I want to go back to the classroom. To me, that is where all the magic happens.”

## Ron Clark, cofounder, Ron Clark Academy, Atlanta

When the Ron Clark Academy opens this fall, every student and teacher will zoom down a 20-foot indoor electric-blue slide. “We’re going down the slide on the first day to show that we dare to be different, to be innovative, and to think outside of the box,” says Ron Clark, the 2000 Disney Teacher of the Year.

And the school *will* be different. The academy, designed for kids with untapped potential in grades five through eight, will have a recording studio and an organic garden. It will also serve as a model for dynamic teaching. Some 3,000 teachers are already signed up to visit the school.

Clark began to pursue the establishment of the academy full-time approximately two years ago, along with Kim Bearden, another award-winning teacher. “If I thought that on a scale of one to 100 the difficulty level would be 100, then it’s been a million!” says Ron with a hearty laugh. “I always wondered why more people didn’t start schools, and now I know.”

Royalties from his book, *The Essential 55* (Hyperion, 2004), endorsed by Oprah Winfrey, gave Clark seed money. Then he relied on networking and persistence to solicit big-name Atlanta businesspeople to financially support the school. As a private, non-profit venture serving the disadvantaged, the school will supply 57 of its 60 students with scholarships this year.

After all the hard work, Clark finally

## A Visit on Opening Day



The Ron Clark Academy, in Atlanta, opened its doors for its debut in June. The first crop of students to start this fall were on hand to show off their school to government officials and the media.



# teacher leaders

met his students and felt reenergized. “There is so much work that goes into building a school like this, and for the longest time you don’t see a child’s face,” says Clark. “Once we met and interviewed our students, we got excited all over again.”

## **Mercedes Ricon, founder of Killian Oaks Academy, Miami**

Mercedes Ricon feels that all students deserve preferential seating. So, at her school, the students—no more than 10 per class—sit in a semicircle with the teacher in the center. In this set-up, the teacher can closely monitor the students’ work, provide feedback, and revisit skills students might be struggling with.

Providing this individualized approach is what motivated Ricon

serve 130 students in PreK, middle school, and high school.

“I have a passion for what I do and a clear vision and understanding of an educational model that really works,” says Ricon. “If a teacher is doing something so innovative in the classroom, that should inspire her to start her own program. If you have something truly unique to offer, you can transform the lives of children.”

## **Allen Blau, founder of Barnstable Academy, Sage Day Schools, and Cornerstone Day School, New Jersey**

At age 65, Allan Blau is not thinking about collecting his Social Security check. Instead, he wants to start his fourth school. The new school would serve kids with special needs like his



I have a passion for what I do and a clear vision and understanding of an educational model that really works,” says Mercedes Ricon.

to start her own school. Early in her career, which began in New York in 1978, Ricon found that if she modified her instruction, all of her students could truly learn. “When a child did not do well on a test, it demonstrated that my presentation wasn’t sufficient for them to get the material,” she says.

Ricon wanted to develop a program that focused on differentiated instruction, continuity among classes, and nurturing self-esteem. As a result, teachers at The Killian Oaks Academy—which opened in 1994 with 40 students in grades one through six—begin each day by teaching a value, such as compassion or respect. The structure of the instruction is also the same from class to class. “Because of the strong patterning, the students know they are going to receive feedback from the teacher, and they trust that their needs are being met,” says Ricon.

Today the school has expanded to

previous ventures (Barnstable Academy, Sage Day School, and Cornerstone Day School), but this one would focus on kids with serious psychiatric problems in grades one through five.

“When you are ready to go to the big school in the sky, you want to have a feeling that you have made a difference,” says Blau. He knows he has when he encounters former students who have named their children after him or have invited him to be in their weddings. “You really are, in a sense, saving a life. I would like to say I’m an altruist, but I’m not. It’s one of the most selfish things I do, because it feels so good.”

Blau started out as an art teacher and soon became discontent with the school bureaucracy that he felt stood in the way of helping kids. In 1978, he used all of his savings, cashed out his life insurance, and took out a second mortgage on his home to launch his first school, Barnstable Academy, a middle and sec-

1/3 Vertical  
Left

ondary school in Oakland, New Jersey. He has since sold the private school, which enrolled 160 students.

In 1997, Blau saw a need for a specialized school for functional but emotionally fragile adolescents and established the Sage Day School. The school is now comprised of three campuses and 200 students. Blau describes his third school, Cornerstone Day School, as his masterpiece, serving 40 students with major psychiatric problems in grades nine through 12.

Blau says thinking as a parent and working with parents contributes to the success of his schools. "I always had the belief that nobody knows a kid as well as a parent," says Blau. "You have to listen, and parents can give you the keys to helping the kid."

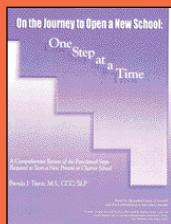
**Josh Zoia, principal,  
KIPP Academy, Lynn, Massachusetts**

Like KIPP founders Mike Feinberg and David Levin, Josh Zoia got into the

## A HOW-TO GUIDE

*On the Journey to Open a New School: One Step at a Time*, by Brenda Travis

In 1998, when Brenda Travis decided to start a school, she couldn't find a book to guide her through what can be an overwhelming process. So, after Travis successfully opened an elementary school in Prince George's County, Maryland, in 2002, she decided to write her own. It is a comprehensive workbook that walks readers through launching a new private or charter school. With sample surveys, mission statements, and business plans, this book is useful for teachers who are ready to strike out on their own.



# 2/3 Vertical Right



# 5 Essential Elements of a New School

“To start a school, you have to be truly multitalented,” says Robert Barr, a senior analyst at the Center for School Improvement at Boise State University and coauthor with William Parrett of *The Kids Left Behind* (Solution Tree, 2007). Here are his recommendations.

**1 Don't start too small.** You will need at least four teachers to cover the basic, core areas of knowledge. With fewer than four, the school is too small, too fragile, and probably won't make it.

**2 Prepare to manage money and details.** Starting a school requires the ability to raise money, monitor a budget, manage a school and faculty, do public relations, work with a school council, and understand fine-print regulations of special education, finances, and building codes.

**3 Rigorously assess and evaluate.** Much of what is being done may be experimental, so it must be carefully evaluated. It is also important to do internal evaluations and get feedback from parents about the effectiveness of programs.

**4 Don't reinvent the wheel.** There are models out there to learn from. Identify alternative models that reflect the kind of school you envision, and use their experience as a guide.

**5 Share your dream.** The teachers, staff, and families need to believe in your philosophy. Set up shared decision-making. Schools are most effective when parents, teachers, and students work together on a council to give direction.

classroom through Teach for America. Assigned to a school in the Bronx, Zoia knew he was in for a rough ride when he had a chair thrown at him on the first day. Although he felt he went on to make a difference there, he realized that once his students left his class, there were no guarantees their next teacher would care as deeply as he had.

What he found at the nearby KIPP Academy was a community of like-minded teachers who worked weekends and gave out their home phone numbers to students. “There was excellence all around me,” he recalls. “Teachers were building strong relationships with kids.”

After four years of teaching at KIPP in New York, Zoia received a fellowship year for principal training. Then he started his own KIPP Academy in Lynn, Massachusetts, near where he grew up. “It’s a small city with big-city problems,” says Zoia. At first, the power structure of the community did not want a new charter school. “There was a lot of negativity,” says Zoia. “We came in, and they resisted.”

But some community groups and students did show interest, and Zoia pressed on with blind faith. Despite legislation that put a moratorium on charter schools, which was vetoed by the governor, KIPP Academy opened in the fall of 2004 with 80 students in the fifth grade. Now the school enrolls 230 students through grade seven. Next year, the school will add eighth grade and reach its full capacity with 320 students. Meanwhile, students are succeeding academically and receiving accolades in the community.

“Everything I do, every decision I make is about the students—what’s best for the kids,” says Zoia. “Being a teacher gives me an element of credibility and trust, because I have an understanding of what’s going on in the classroom. [But] I don’t have any great gifts that most other teachers have. I just have the determination and will.” □