

# **A Vision for Urban Christ-centered Education: The Mustard Seed Model**

For 30 years, Mustard Seed School has invested in the lives of the children from Hudson County and beyond, welcoming students from preschool to eighth grade into a community that nurtures a life-long love of learning. The school of 200 students is known for its unique integration of strong academics, the arts, faith and service. We are dedicated to knowing and honoring each child. Diversity, including socioeconomic, ethnic, religious and academic, is our hallmark as we strive to reflect and celebrate the Kingdom of God.

At the request of other educational institutions and individuals, the faculty and staff at Mustard Seed are working to document and share the Mustard Seed program in order to assist others who wish to build similar schools.

The project focuses on leveraging the strengths of our unique program by offering:

1. Partnerships to share the model of urban Christ-centered education.
2. Professional development initiatives.
3. Web-based resources.

The desired outcome is to provide a vision for creative urban Christian education, beyond traditional models, to help bring renewal to cities. The long-term vision is to create an “urban school-planting center.”

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## ***Description of school***

Mustard Seed School (MSS) is a school where children flourish; where they grow well because the conditions are right. For 30 years, we've invested in the lives of the children from Hudson County and beyond, welcoming students from preschool to eighth grade into to a community that nurtures a life-long love of learning. The school of 200 students is known for a unique integration of strong academics, the arts, faith and service. We are dedicated to knowing and honoring each child. Diversity, including socioeconomic, ethnic, religious and academic, is our hallmark as we strive to reflect and celebrate the Kingdom of God.

Mustard Seed is a school that others seek to emulate. Guests, educators, investors, and idealists frequent the hallways, finding a successful model of urban education that brings renewal back to cities.

In 1995, Mustard Seed School helped initiate The Hoboken Group, which bi-annually brings diverse leaders together from across the country that share a passion to meet the needs of urban students through Christ-centered schools. Novice and experienced administrators share their experiences and expertise to encourage each other. The hosting responsibility is shared so gatherings occur in different regions. Local school visits are intentionally included so leaders can learn from other models. Mustard Seed School continues to be a leader in this organization.

The focus of this Van Lunen project is an outgrowth of recognizing the strengths of Mustard Seed School today, a consideration of the needs shared by Hoboken Group participants over the last 13 years and a vision of Christ-centered schools in urban areas nation-wide.

## **Summary of project**

Inspire, equip and support urban school leaders, planters and educators in Christ-centered schools by developing:

1. Partnerships.
2. Professional Development Initiatives.
3. Web-based Resources.

The desired outcome is two-fold: To provide vision for creative urban Christ-centered education and to help bring renewal to cities (with an ultimate vision of creating an "urban school planting center").

## Highlights of the project:

### *Partnerships to share the model*

Invitation—We continue to welcome educators, leaders and entrepreneurs to come visit and catch the vision. This year school planters visited from: Washington DC, San Antonio, TX and Chattanooga, TN. In particular, conversations with Alvin Chu from Urban Bridge Builders in DC were quite promising. Plans are underway for Alvin and his board to host the next Hoboken Group meeting in the fall of 2008. The meeting would focus on sharing strategic initiatives and resources to replicate the MSS model in Washington DC.

Outreach—MSS Head of School participated in a NY Entrepreneur Business Plan Competition and had the opportunity to share the MSS vision with business leaders and ministry-minded entrepreneurs from the NY metropolitan area and beyond. Continued support is being offered for training and networking through an entrepreneur fellowship group and online community hosted by Redeemer New York Church.

Teacher Exchange Program—Discussions are proceeding toward developing a teacher exchange program with another urban Christ-centered school to expand experiences of seasoned MSS teachers abroad and to enrich our own growth through the service of guest teachers.

Partnerships:

#### *Covenant College*

In the spring of 2008, we hosted seven interns from the teacher education program at Covenant College in Georgia. This is a continuing partnership with the education department at Covenant College and was the third group of interns at Mustard Seed in the last six years. They come on an every-other year cycle. As the program develops, the MSS faculty becomes more integral in leading after-school seminar sessions for the interns. Because of the success of the intern program and the strong relationship with the head of the education department who comes to MSS with the interns, student teaching placements at MSS are being considered.

#### *University of Heidelberg*

In the spring of 2008, we hosted an intern from Germany. Katharina Seibel was our third intern from Germany. Past interns and visitors from Germany were affiliated with a Christian school in Munich and a Christian Community in Gnadenal, outside of Frankfurt.

### *Kuyers Institute:*

In March 2008, we hosted the Director of the Kuyers Institute from Michigan and began plans for possible partnerships. We want to deepen our understanding and practices of integrating faith and learning so we can communicate and share the example with others.

### 12 Affirmations, Steve Vryhof

MSS Faculty will partner with Steve Vryhof and others to help update and revise the *12 Affirmations: Reformed Christian Schooling for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. MSS leaders participated in the Chicago conference that wrote the original affirmations. When the affirmations were published in 1989, The MSS Board of Trustees adopted these as the 12 guiding goals (principles) of the school. The leadership continues to highlight and uphold these principles annually with faculty, staff and parents.

### *Calvin Institute of Christian Worship*

Mustard Seed teachers are currently contributing to an article that will become a posted web resource for other schools and churches. Our model of daily worship and its significance to our broader mission as a Christian school will be highlighted in the article. [www.calvin.edu/worship](http://www.calvin.edu/worship)

## ***Professional Development Initiatives***

One reality Christian schools need to face is the more transient lifestyle of people, including Christian schoolteachers. This may be even more of a factor in urban versus suburban areas. We're seeing an increase in the new teacher orientation and training needed on an annual basis. Instead of lamenting this new trend, MSS leadership has embraced the opportunity to develop a strong new teacher orientation program. So strong in fact, that we can meet the needs for our school, but also be a training ground for other educators as well.

In that spirit, research was conducted in October 2007 at the Fall Hoboken Group conference held in Chicago. The MSS Head of School led 20 urban Christian school leaders in a sectional on professional growth, specifically seeking input on specific training needs and successful professional development training models. In addition, leaders were also surveyed regarding strengths of the professional development expertise on their faculty. This information was compiled as research for a feasibility study for teacher training at MSS.

"Mini-Conference @ MSS" is another professional development initiative which leverages the strengths of the Mustard Seed faculty and model. Two successful mini-conferences have been held with the faculty of two Hoboken Group schools: one from Philadelphia and one from Grand Rapids. Hosted on site, these one- or

two-day visits consist of a school tour, observation, breakout focus groups led by MSS faculty and a combined faculty meeting after school. Our goal: sharing what we have learned and engaging visiting teachers to collaborate on these topics. Mini-conferences will be ongoing as we identify and invite other schools to come, visit, learn and collaborate.

Along with inviting educators “in” to Mustard Seed, we encourage our faculty to go “out” to share their expertise in a wider arena. Two MSS teachers completed proposals to lead sectionals on the significant connection between mathematics education and service learning for the 2009 annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Our lower school director, who is one of the school’s founders, continues to consult with other schools on building community, teaching about the first six weeks of school and leading worship. She also has spoken regionally and nationally, including Christian Schools International (CSI), Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) and Inter Varsity affiliated conferences.

## **Web-based Resources**

This year, Mustard Seed School began redesigning our school’s website in order to create a resource for other teachers that provides content about our unique programs and ways of teaching. This updated site will also share the expertise of our teachers and staff through best practice papers and documented projects that others can replicate. A third goal of the updated website is to provide a communication and resource tool for parents in Hudson County and beyond.

Related to the MSS website is an outreach strategy to share the Mustard Seed model and encourage Christ-centered schools through the development of an online community. Plans have been initiated to develop an online social networking community for the Hoboken Group to be able to interact more frequently, allow for interested people to initiate contact and keep their contact information current and to provide a database for distribution of information.

This year MSS began compiling information on a document-sharing website, [www.mustardseedinfo.org](http://www.mustardseedinfo.org), which was designed by a MSS Board member. This login/password protected information sharing site allows board members, advisory members and teachers remote access to curriculum, shared reference documents and website content updates. Besides giving the ability to post board minutes, reports and schedules, this site offers a central place to work on shared projects, including strategic planning documents and accreditation documentation.

## **What I learned:**

### **The Need for Capacity Building.**

Since our lack of space limits our progress, we must build our capacity so that we might soon overcome this obstacle. In February 2008, we began working with John Cissel from Cornerstone Advisory Services to consider real estate needs and options for the future.

### **Interested Educators and School Planters Desire Access**

*People are interested in this model school concept. We have noted lots of energy and interest from guests. People who visit MSS agree this is a worthy goal. They want access to more information about the structure, programs and design of Mustard Seed School.*

### ***Vision increases energy and momentum of growth***

Financial support follows vision. Since we have begun sharing the vision for *Strengthening The Seed and Sharing The Seed*, our funding support has almost doubled. Developing an Advisory Council was instrumental in this growth.

### ***Christian College Education Departments Appreciate the MSS Model***

Several colleges use MSS as a case study in urban Christian education. Phone interviews with education classes, discussions with interns and online sharing of the MSS award winning integrated arts program (Shared Space) are a few examples.

### ***Teachers are Motivated by Sharing What They Know***

Bringing other educators to the school for a mini-conference boosted the morale of all the teachers, increased collegiality, boosted professional dialog and affirmed value of programs and methodology.

### ***Word of Mouth Strong Promotion***

Most educators and leaders who visited the school this year came based on recommendations from others. Hospitality is a much-practiced value at MSS.