



# "Words from the Woods"

By:  
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## Climbing Mount Everest: Achieving the Status of a High-Performing Charter

This past summer I attended a Charter School Leadership Institute at Harvard University. There is a reason why Harvard is Harvard and this experience is one that I would gladly repeat many times over.

Charter school leaders came from all over the country to attend this summer institute. After being immersed in such a high-quality learning experience, we all came away with a much clearer understanding of what, exactly, we must strive to do to ensure that we are both a high-performing school as well as a well-functioning non-profit organization.

The Institute was a rich blend of outstanding presenters from the Graduate School of Education, the School of Business, and the School of Policy and Government. Specifically designed for the charter school leader, Harvard recognizes that charter schools are not your typical public school but are, instead, a unique blend of both a non-profit business and a traditional school.

Therefore, successful charter school leaders must not only be well versed in local, state, and federal laws and regulations governing public schools, academic standards, and curriculum and instruction, but must also understand and engage in the often contentious arena of local and state-wide politics.

Charter school leaders must also understand, establish, and main-

tain sound business practices as they oversee the fiscal accountability necessary to support a well-functioning non-profit organization. Doing all of this well requires the wearing of many hats and a charter school leader must bring a well-rounded knowledge base to her work each day.



Most importantly, however, charter school leaders must recruit and maintain the best possible team members and ensure that necessary structures and systems are in place that will allow everyone to effectively support the school as a whole.

Guiding the way to success is the key role of any charter school leader. As the CEO of Green Woods, I do wear many different hats each day. But ensuring that we establish and maintain coherent systems and structures to support our students is imperative. Having the best team, as well as a team approach to problem solving, is critical to our success.

To help build that team spirit, just prior to the start of this school year, our team spent four days taking a

hard look at our systems and structures. Then, to better prepare our team for the year ahead, we went on an expedition to the summit of Mt. Everest. It was during our ascent that we truly came to understand the meaning of teamwork, the need for effective communication, and to plan for the unexpected.

For those of you who have read Jon Krakauer's book, "Into Thin Air" you know a bit more about the case study we read titled "**Mount Everest 1996.**" This case study is a detailed recounting of the great tragedy that unfolded on the slopes of Mount Everest in the spring of 1996.

Our Everest expedition centered on high-stakes, crisis decision-making in the context of a team. We read about and discussed what went wrong on Everest from a leadership, team, and organizational systems perspective.

We then used this case study to apply it to our own organizational dynamics as we discussed the implications of our analysis for educational organizations and, specifically, Green Woods Charter School.

This case study helped us to then identify those structures and systems that we needed to work on. Not surprisingly, the Green Woods team quickly came up with a plan to address the challenges we identified. Since then, we've been working hard to refine our current systems to ensure coherence.

***“The critical elements that make these institutions both outstanding schools and high-performing non-profit organizations include:***

***A clear sense of mission and a broadly shared institutional culture dedicated to the achievement of the school’s mission;***

***A set of organizational structures and systems that support student learning;***

***A collection of purposefully chosen teachers and administrators who “fit” the organization’s objectives and exhibit a passionate commitment to the school’s goals;***

***A family network that is aware of and willing to carry out their responsibilities in support of their children;***

***A set of classroom procedures that maximize time on task and tightly links content to state curriculum frameworks;***

***The essential thread is the notion of coherence. Without which these schools would be nothing more than a loose confederation of systems, people, and random objectives; the whole would be less than the sum of its parts. Without this degree of coherence, these schools would not qualify as high-performing nonprofit organizations.” ...Katherine K. Merseth, Harvard University***

***Author: Inside Urban Charter Schools: Promising Practices and Strategies for Five High-Performing Schools***

As we look ahead, an even greater and more challenging “ascent” lies ahead of us. As a public school and a non-profit organization our goal is to now develop a comprehensive and coherent business and academic plan so that Green Woods can grow and thrive to become an even greater success story for school reform.

While the Board of Trustees and I will be working with our newest expert guide and team member, Business Consultant Jerry Santilli, to establish a strategic business plan to support this growth, at the school level our instructional team will be working to refine our school-wide educational practices. This will ensure that our financial strategic plan and our academic plan for the future will meet the guidelines that must be in place for us to successfully reach the next leg of our exciting expedition.

At the state and local level, the support for charter schools is certainly inconsistent, at best. On a national level, Arne Duncan, Obama’s Secretary of Education, is a strong proponent and supporter of “high-performing” charter schools. He is also someone who, during his administration as the head of the Chicago School System, thought nothing of closing charter schools that were not performing to his expectations.

Our team has achieved great success in a very short time. We know we have a lot of work ahead of us as we plan for our future. And, as Katherine Merseth is quick to point out in her book, the success we want to achieve requires a systematic approach and coherence: ***“The structures and systems that high performing charter schools put together are the ones that everything is working in a coherent way. One of the factors that really makes these charter schools different is this element of coherence. Everyone recites the same mission. Everyone uses the same language, the same beliefs, all kids can learn.”***

So, while we have successfully scaled Mount Everest as a team, there are other mountains that we now must climb. Together we are sure to face additional challenges. But, in doing so, we will maintain effective communication, ensure we have the necessary resources, work as a cohesive team, and establish structures and systems that will help us overcome obstacles to better control our outcomes. As the person responsible for guiding this challenge, I am grateful to have such a competent team working with me. Through it all, I remain confident that the work ahead of us will be met with the same level of spirit and determination that has made Green Woods the amazing success story that it is today. As for our future? For us, the sky’s the limit!