Laura worried about being perfect. The mother thought that Jani, with her East Indian roots, would understand.

“It stayed with me that if the mothers couldn’t be strong role models for their daughters, maybe other women could,” Jani says, “and maybe it was true that I could understand and guide Laura and her family simply because our cultures were similar and I had overcome similar social barriers.”

The idea for SPEAK Mentorship was formed. Working with schools with large immigrant populations in three cities, the nonprofit now pairs high school girls (and more recently, boys) with three adult mentors each, including one who is culturally similar. Mentors offer support around college and career goals, as well as culture.

“Girls like Laura and I have so much incredible potential that never gets met because they’re constantly facing these conflicts as a result of straddling two cultures and questioning their own worth,” Jani says. “What we’re losing as a society when the little girl who wants to be a CEO, a doctor, or an artist doesn’t get encouraged to pursue a career because the cultures that their families come from still have extremely gendered expectations for their daughters? I want to take them in and teach them how to prove their goals and maybe have the people in their lives help them figure out how to get there while still acknowledging their own unique perspectives being from diverse cultural backgrounds.”

Most of SPEAK’s mentoring is done virtually at school, and now at home where school’s are closed (27 sessions in total), allowing for more flexibility and buy-in from parents.

“Parents put a lot of trust in the schools, especially parents from certain communities,” Jani says. “If the school is providing the program and the girls have to incur any additional cost of money or time, we found the sessions are more likely to occur.”

Jani says she didn’t have these kinds of opportunities growing up but wished she had.

“Having one woman who could understand my bicultural experiences, my career interests, and my strengths would definitely have set me up for success much earlier in life,” she says. “I had to make a lot of mistakes and U-turns and prove myself, even to myself, because I didn’t really know what I wanted, let alone how to pursue it. I realized how important social capital is to get ahead in life, and a lot of what I’ve accomplished has been because of who I know and how they’ve helped me along the way.”

SARAH TANTILLO, ED.M.’91, didn’t intend to write a book about charter schools. Her education consulting practice was going well, and she was already publishing books related to her field: literacy instruction. But after becoming involved in the charter school world, she knew there were many fascinating stories to tell about the movement. “I didn’t want those stories to be lost,” she says, so she wrote what would become Hit the Drum: An Insider’s Account of How the Charter School Idea Became a National Movement. Now managing director of the network of Great Oaks Legacy Charter Schools network in Newark, New Jersey, Tantillo talked to Ed. about her involvement and why she thinks charters have persisted.

You were a high school teacher who became involved with charters in 1996. Why? It was a combination of factors. Being a policy geek, I had been following the chartering idea obsessively. I was excited at the potential for innovation, and I believed that charter schools — by offering parents, students, and educators more options and autonomy in exchange for accountability — could help improve public education overall.

Also, I had reached a pain point in the district where I was teaching; the interdisciplinary humanities course I taught was going to be cut because of logistical problems, but even the superintendent could not solve. In 1996, when New Jersey’s charter school law passed, I was ready to get involved.

Why highlight individuals who have started charter schools? These charts reveal how challenging the work is and how important it is for people to be deeply committed to it. From the earliest days, I was very aware of how specific individuals were having a large impact on the field. Most of them were not household names; they kept their heads down and kept digging into the work. Over the course of several decades, their efforts have changed the lives of millions of children. I wanted people to feel inspired by them, to know the potential we all have to make a difference.

Charters were initially thought of as R&D labs, trying out new ideas that district schools could then implement. Why didn’t this way of thinking stick? I think the original analogy was not quite right. Companies set up research and development labs to help their own companies, not to help competitors. Because some portion of the per-pupil funding follows students into charters, districts have viewed charters as competitors, so they haven’t tended to ask charter leaders for their ideas, and some have been downright hostile to charters and have filed lawsuits in an effort to get rid of them.

Charter schools have a positive impact: In your opinion, charter schools have definitely had an impact on the field, as autistic children, for example, can have access to high-quality education where they might not have been able to find it. Charters have certainly added to the diversity in the school choice arena.

But charters have a negative impact, in your opinion. Charters have definitely had an impact on the field, and in Part IV of my book, I examine some of the ways in which their routes have taken hold. For example, the notion that schools should be held accountable for their performance, as charters are, has become widely accepted. I think the story of the impact of charter schools is still unfolding, and it’s exciting! It could be a sequel.

Your reaction when you hear people criticize charters? First, I listen to try to understand their perspective. Sometimes their concerns are based on misconceptions or misinformation, and I can help clarify the facts. I fully acknowledge that not all charter schools are great, and I support accountability as much as anyone. We should close some districts — or district charters — that are demonstrative failures. In this powerful country, there’s no reason why any child should receive an inadequate education. One thing that burns me up is when people who can afford not to live in struggling districts argue against charters: They already have choice, but they don’t want parents and children trapped in those districts to have it.”

KURT FISCHER 1943–2020

When Kurt Fischer, professor emeritus, passed away in March of this year, Professor Howard Gardner found a perfect word to describe his longtime friend and collaborator: visionary.

During Fischer’s long career in education, including nearly three decades at the Ed School before his retirement in 2015, he had become an internationally known expert in neuroscience and learning, and consulted extensively with schools around the world, as well as with the Children’s Television Workshop, UNICEF, the Social Science Research Council, and with various media outlets, such as Time and NPR’s All Things Considered.

But perhaps Fischer’s greatest gift in education came in 2002, when he pioneered the creation of a new master’s degree program focused on the brain and learning that was badly needed in the education world. “The problem was that educators have wanted to connect an understanding of the brain with learning, but they haven’t known how to — and scientists have tried to tell educators what to do without understanding what goes on in the classroom,” Fischer said in a 2014-05 Ed. story about why he helped create the Mind, Brain, and Education Program (MBE) at the Ed School, along with others such as Gardner and Professors David Rose, David Perkins, and Amy Brown. “We realized that we already had graduate students who were working in this area; in fact, it was clear that we’d already trained some of the leaders in the field, even though we didn’t call it that.”

It only made sense to formalize training between the lab and the classroom, he said. “If you take physics and leave out the engineers, you can’t build bridges,” he said. “In the same way, you can’t go from biology to education without the education researchers.”

KURT FISCHER AND HIS Long CAREER: HTTPS://HGSE.ME/REMEMBERS-KURT/}

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At times it feels like the sky is falling. We’re gonna be okay.

Dean BRIDGET LONG addressing the community virtually on March 11, about the coronavirus situation.

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A Charter Member

AN INSIDER’S LOOK AT THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT

STORY BY LORY HOUGH

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