

# Metro Business College—The Little School Group That Could

with George Holske

**O**ur philosophy at Metro Education Group revolves around helping people, which benefits our staff, students and the bottom line.

We don't strive to have the most campuses or the largest corporate headquarters. We have a close-knit group of employees and a family atmosphere, and we want our students to feel like they're part of that family.

I try to teach people the golden rule and how to live by it. With all the rules and laws, and everything that governs business and life in this country, I think we can be successful if we truly believe in behaving toward others the way we would have them behave toward us.

Years ago people in the school business tried to help others, and while they made money, the most important thing to them was not just money but taking care of people.

If you take care of people, you'll end up making money.

## School Loan Brings Ownership

I didn't plan to go into the school business, and the opportunity presented itself in an unusual way.

While I was waiting to be drafted in 1968, I met the owner of an auto body repair school in St. Louis. While I was in the military I loaned the owner some money, and when I returned from the service I ended up going to work to try to protect my loan.

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Once I got involved with the school I became very active in running it. To this day I micromanage the spending of money, looking over every penny and dollar spent.

I started expanding the technical school in the 1970s, adding upholstery and then machine shop training. Next came auto mechanics training and the secretarial program.



**GEORGE HOLSKE** is the owner of Metro Education Group in St. Louis, Missouri. He served in the U.S. Army from 1968 to 1969, and has been a school owner since 1969.

We really emphasized those programs in St. Louis, and then bought an accredited business school in Cape Girardeau, Mo., in 1981. It was called Cape Business College, but was changed when I bought it. The St. Louis school, as a branch of the school in Cape Girardeau, became accredited also.

I opened a branch in Rolla, Mo., in 1984 and one in Jefferson City, Mo., in

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1985. I was going to open schools in other smaller communities in Missouri, but the Jefferson City campus started very slowly and I couldn't afford to go on with those plans.

The equipment for the St. Louis school was getting way too expensive to maintain, and the default issues were also becoming a problem, so I closed the St. Louis school and all of its technical programs at the end of 1990. Since then I have been concentrating on the three business colleges.

### **Three's the Charm**

We've been successful with our three small schools because we manage them carefully.

The average school size is about 125, and to make it work we spend money on certain things and save money on other things.

We realize that we can't build monuments to me or to the staff. We need to be in fairly low-rent places.

We do get new computers constantly and have a very high computer-to-student ratio, better than one computer for every two students.

As the school owner, I manage all the advertising and marketing. The vice president handles the accounting, financial aid, and incoming money, while I pay the bills.

Each campus has a director, an education director, financial aid person and one or two admissions people. There are five corporate staff members working with me in St. Louis, and we communicate with the schools and visit them constantly to make sure they're living up to the proper standards and keeping the right atmosphere.

The three schools are in very small communities, one has only 16,000 people, and running them is not always easy. The Missouri floods in 1993 and 1994 set the schools back to such a degree that it took me several years to get out of debt.

While I'm considering the possibility of putting a few more schools out there, I'm still happy with the three we have.

There's something about having been up and down in the business that makes you not want to gamble everything. At the moment I'm rather content to enjoy my three schools.

### **Attracting an Exceptional Staff**

The small size of our organization makes it very close-knit, and I consider the people who work with me to be like family. I don't consider that they work *for* me, they work *with* me.

This feeling gets passed onto the students, and enables them to be successful because they quite often need more than just job skills.

Our students need personal relationship skills and people who believe in them, because quite often they don't have family members who believe in them.

They need us—they need people who believe in their abilities to do things. We seem to find ways to bring out the best in people just because of the way we look at them.

We also try to laugh as much as possible, and the laughter carries through to our students. It helps get their attention and then we just try to have fun with it.

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The people who work with me have a lot of flexibility, and they like that. In these small communities, I give them a lot of leeway. They like not being told how to breathe every second.

I'm told that I'm relatively easy to work for. I don't rant and rave, or yell and scream at people. I don't deal with terrible punitive punishments. I just care about whether they succeed or not.

An owner has to try as hard as possible to take care of the people who work for the school, because if you take care of your people they'll take care of their students.

### Bringing Students Into the Family

Our family atmosphere also helps us attract students. Some learn about us through mailings, newspaper ads and radio, but more than 60 percent come to us through referrals.

We've been around long enough that we're getting family members and second-generation students.

Many people tell us that they want to go to Metro because their mother went to Metro. It's part of the family feel of our school.

We've been around and proven ourselves for long enough that most people understand our quality, and understand the role of private schools in the market.

### It's Getting Easier

There are still detractors who don't believe in what we're doing, and don't believe you're supposed to make a profit from education.

They don't understand that this can and should be a business. Quite often the public sector would be better off if they treated education more like a business.

However, as the years go by, the school business seems to be getting easier. We're not looking over our shoulder quite as much as we were.

The climate in Washington, D.C., has eased, and it's not like they want to give you the death penalty for one little mistake. That's one of the biggest improvements that CCA has helped develop for schools.

In addition, it seems that there are very few schools that are not doing things the right way. That makes it much easier for all of us.

### Small-Community Niche

We operate in small markets, where there is quite a bit of public education

available. However, there aren't many other private schools because these small communities just don't appeal to most companies.

It's very difficult to consistently make money in these markets.

The fact that we're part of these small communities is one of our niches. We're the only school in these communities to offer medical assisting, and some of the other medical programs, so every hospital and clinic in that area has at least one of our graduates.

We're sort of unusual in this era where the perception seems to be that bigger is better. I have seen a movement toward more corporate schools, with too much emphasis on taking care of the shareholders and driving the stock price as opposed to dealing with the student and trying to help the student be a better person.

This has a potential to hurt our business. I don't see that yet, and I hope I never do see it, but I fear that a little bit. I think it does have the potential to be very negative for the business.

The strategy of many school owners seems to be to try to put together groups of schools and bring them to a

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certain dollar value. They want to be a target for the bigger school chains, and make a profit by selling that small group of schools or get large enough to take that company public themselves.

There is a tendency to look at the stock as a commodity, as

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opposed to the education that's being sold to the student.

Many other business sectors have gone through something similar.

In the banking industry, small banks were set up to be sold to bigger banks, which were then set up to be sold to bigger and bigger banks.

This often led to more small banks being started, many times by officers who were with those bigger banks and couldn't buy into that philosophy. They came back around and started their own specialized or neighborhood banks.

Exactly the same thing will happen in the school business. People want personal service and they want to know the person who is giving them that service, not just the big corporate entity.

There is a market for small schools like ours, who just want to do their own thing. Many of our students would not be successful in a larger school.

Career  
Education  
REVIEW

Written by Terri Dougherty.