

Transcript – Episode 90 – [\\$0-\\$3 Million in under Five Years with Maurya Couvares](#)

Dolph Goldenburg: Welcome to the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast. I'm your host Dolph Goldenburg. Today, we're talking about a subject that might make your heart go pitter-pat with excitement or maybe make you faint dead away, overcome by grandeur. We're talking growth people, big growth, as in growing your organization from zero to over 3 million dollars in under five years. Nonprofits often strategize about growth and how to make that potential reality, but our guest, Maurya Couvares, is a leader who pulled off incredible growth in a remarkably short period of time. Maurya is CEO at ScriptEd, a nonprofit that teaches students and under-resourced schools had a code. Students don't just learn coding at ScriptEd. They work in paid summer internships with role models in the field. The cost to the students for this opportunity you may ask? Nothing. The opportunity is free for all students. ScriptEd was founded in 2012 April with 27 participating students.

As of the 2016-17 school year, that number rocketed 870 students. That program is now bicoastal, with a presence in 35 New York City high schools and three schools in the Bay area. ScriptEd's corporate sponsors include some names that you're probably going to be familiar with such as Google, Ebay, Gethub, and Accenture. Maurya and ScriptEd have been the recipients of numerous awards and recognition. Maurya was named a New York Business Journal's Woman of Influence and Ignite Good by Huffington post and Millennial Impact Fellow. She is one of seven millennials too busy changing the world to take selfies, and I think that's probably the best HuffPo award ever. Clearly, Maurya has a few things to teach us. Get ready to take notes, friends, as we are lucky to have such an accomplished guest with us today.

Dolph Goldenburg: Hey, welcome to the podcast, Maurya.

Maurya Couvares: Hi. Thank you so much for having me today.

Dolph Goldenburg: As you think back to April 2012 when you were launching ScriptEd, what were your expectations for the organization's trajectory?

Maurya Couvares: Yeah, I mean that's a great question. I think when we first started the organization, I think they put in place a plan to be with 5,000 students by a certain year. Actually, no, I take that back. We said we'd be with 1200 students by this year that we're in now, and we're actually with 1200 students this year. The way that we got there was a lot different than what was initially planned. I have to admit, back then it felt a little bit like we were just making things up because we had no idea if the idea was viable. We had no idea if it would really take off. In April 2012, we didn't actually launch the first program until September 2012. The idea kind of happened in April, but we launched programs in September, and I think we really needed to run that first program to start understanding how big it could actually be. Once we kind of got it off the ground, we really started to realize that it had a ton of potential for growth.

Dolph Goldenburg: How did you create that initial plan?

Maurya Couvares: I have a co-founder; her name is Liz. She's on our board now. She doesn't work with the organization full-time, but she and I worked on that first plan together. She and I are both former teachers, and that first plan was really around what the curriculum would be and how we would actually implement the program. What ScriptEd does is, and I think it's pretty unique, bring professionals from the tech industry into under-resourced high schools to teach foundational curriculum in computer science and web development. We had to both figure out what we would be teaching that first year, but also how we would get volunteers into the classroom and how we would train them to teach because we had no money whatsoever. We just kind of had this idea that we should be teaching students how to Code.

Everything we did in that plan was like on a shoestring budget. I think that is what helped us grow such a high-impact program at a relatively low cost. When we first created the program we were like, well, we can't pay for space. We can't pay teachers. We can't pay for computers. We kind of developed this program model where we were partnering with schools using schools' space, and we were using volunteers to teach the curriculum. So, everything was very, very low cost from the outset. If you innovate and you create with a lack of resources, you end up kind of being constrained in such a way that allows you to be a lot more creative with how you're getting resources together.

We were really resource constrained, and we made all of our decisions based on that. It was really also at the beginning more of a passion project than something that we've thought was going to turn into this big nonprofit. We were passionate about working with students. We were passionate about technology, and we wanted to just do something to fix a problem that we saw. We both saw a real lack of education in the technology space for both of us. Again, we were both teachers, and we both had students who were obsessed with technology but never expressing an interest in going into the field. We really just wanted to give our students more of an opportunity to access that career path.

Dolph Goldenburg: It sounds like your initial plan was kind of based on three P's: passion, partnerships and programs.

Maurya Couvares: Yes, that's right.

Dolph Goldenburg: As you think about that initial plan, how did money fit into that? Did you have a sense of, okay, here's the amount of money we're going to need and here's how we're going to raise it. How did that work for you?

Maurya Couvares: Yeah, it's really funny now that I think back on it and how I was so naive about money at that point. I was under the assumption that we just didn't need any money. I was doing it in addition to my full-time jobs. My co-founder was in a Grad School program getting her Ph.D. at that point, and we were like, well, we don't have to spend anything because we can recruit volunteers. We can work in schools, and we can get the technology from schools. We can just volunteer our time. We didn't really start making a budget until about the end of the first year

when we realized there was so much growth potential and needed to spend so much more time on it to make it a real thing. Therefore, we needed to be employed.

For that initial budget, there wasn't one. It was just kind of based on this idea that we were going to go forward with just volunteer labor. It wasn't until about a year afterward that we just realized it just wasn't very sustainable. That's when we started creating a budget. The first year I went full-time, it was 2013. I was like, "I need to pay for my salary, and I need to probably hire one more person to help me manage the volunteers." Maybe we both need computers, and that was kind of it. That's how that first budget came to be. I will say it's really funny looking back at the budgets. For our tax-exempt application, we had to do like three years of a projected budget for the IRS.

Now, we're now much further beyond those three years of predictions that we had initially mapped out. That was kind of the first budgeting process that we did. Our program is now much more robust. It has many more levels of programming now, and there are more expensive than we had at the beginning. I mean our long-term aim is that our students get into careers in tech, and that means supporting them for several years. Now, we have expenses related to all the different program areas that we didn't have at the beginning just because for the first cohort of students, it was just one year, but then they went on, and we had advanced courses in the second year. Then we added in an alumni program, and we have an internship program. And so, the expenses grew just because we really believe in deep impact. At the beginning, it was very, very shoestring.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, after your first year you said, okay, we need a budget. We need to figure out how to get money for staff. How did you make that case for funding when you approached foundations and corporations?

Maurya Couvares: Yeah, that's a good question. There are a few key things at the beginning that really helped us out with getting funding. I hustled a lot. I was 27 years old when it started, and I was an unproven entrepreneur. I'd never run anything before. I basically took any meeting I could get with anyone and kept telling people like, oh, this is a really low-cost model. There are all these jobs available in tech. We're doing this thing to teach students how to code, and we can get them internship ready. It was just really pounding the pavement to be quite honest. I think the other things that helped. Very early on, I met Josh Silverman who is our board chair now, but at the time he was a president at American Express.

Now, he's the CEO of Etsy, and I told him about the work we were doing. Again, I didn't have a full-time job. I was doing it on a volunteer basis and kind of met him through again, like just putting my name out there as much as I could. I applied for all these different awards for the program, and he was really taken by the idea and made an investment and got American Express to also contribute/ match him. That's the funding that provided me with, you know, something like six months of runway to do it full-time. Having someone like him really early on- He was a proven entrepreneur. He was the co-founder of Evite. Having his backing was a signal to other

people to say, oh, this person has been vetted by this person who has been a successful entrepreneur.

I found that a lot more doors opened for the organization after that. I'll also say there were a few key things that really helped us get into some of the funding opportunities that opened a lot of doors from the beginning. I met with the Robin Hood Foundation before I'd even gone full-time, and we had a pretty strong theory of change. We had really thought through how we were going to measure our effectiveness. We'd done a lot of deep thinking of like how our program model was really going to change economic outcomes for students. I think having done that deep thought from the outset and having a really strong theory was important and then having a low-cost model to do it. We're saying we're going to achieve these really great long-term things, and we're going to do it like in a high impact way but not at an expensive price. I think that was really compelling to foundation partners at the beginning.

Dolph Goldenburg: Obviously, you got some buy-in from a president at American Express. How did your board change from year one to year two to year three?

Maurya Couvares: It changed a lot. The first year it was just me and my co-founder and one of our friends. And we met in my apartment. Once Josh joined the board, it became a lot more formalized. We realized we couldn't just meet in my apartment.

Dolph Goldenburg: Was Josh the very next person to join the board?

Maurya Couvares: I think it was Josh. My co-founder and I both did Teach for America and were put in touch with somebody named Danielle Giles, who is one of the co-founders of Donors Choose. We asked him to join the board as well. I think they were the first two to join after that initial board. I was again put in touch with another woman, Sarah Mint, through a friend of a friend who joined our board. It was the six of us, the three original members and then Josh, Sarah and Danielle in that second year. At that point, that's when we started meeting at American Express, which is super fancy office space, a lot different than my apartment. There was just like a lot more rigor around the board meetings.

I felt like I was being held to a really, really high standard. It was always incredibly prepared and did a lot more work to make sure those board meetings ran well. Then after that, I think year three, we added on a few more board members again just through networking, and we continued to do them at American Express. I would say the board is still really good at strategic advice. I would say at the beginning, it was just like, okay, we just have to get a whole bunch of work done. And then as the years have gone on, they've become much more strategic and focused on fundraising.

Dolph Goldenburg: Maurya, we're gonna take a quick break, and when we come back, we're going to talk about the role of data in growing ScriptEd.

Maybe You're envisioning your nonprofit with quadruple-digit growth after listening to Maurya, or maybe you're wondering how in the world you will manage adding three more clients to your overworked staff's caseload. Well, as you may have heard, regardless of where you are, it all starts with a plan. If you're ready to begin a robust strategic planning process, let's have a conversation. You can reach out to me at www.successfulnonprofits.com

Dolph Goldenburg: Hey Maurya. Welcome back to the podcast.

Maurya Couvares: Thank you.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, I think one of the things that really set ScriptEd apart, whether it is working on building and growing programs, raising money reporting to its board is the way in which it collects, tracks and reports data. Can you say a little bit about this?

Maurya Couvares: Yeah, so I think I mentioned earlier that we developed a theory of change pretty early on. In that theory of change, the way that we think about it now is if you were to imagine a pyramid, at the very bottom level, we're trying to achieve exposure. That is really getting students the skills they need to be fluent in coding. For that tier, we have a metric that 80 percent of our students will achieve an 80 percent mastery on our end-of-year assessment. From there, if you imagine the next tier up on that pyramid, we want half of the students that have enrolled in our Foundations class to enroll in our Advanced classes, which are classes that take place at our company partners' offices, places like Google and Etsy and Barkbox. That's the next metric of success, have we leveled at least half of our students up to this advanced class?

Once they reach our advanced class level, that is when we start tracking them towards our long-term outcomes of careers in tech. The advanced course students have to do a summer experience that is a work-based experience, so either an internship or an internship like experience where they're getting paid to code over the summer. That's kind of the metric there—students getting that summer experience and passing the advanced class proficiency exam at the end of the year. Then from there after they exit our program, they become Alums of the program, and we hope that at least half of the students that have gone through the advanced class will then enter into a career in technology. So, we measure things like high school graduation, if they are enrolling in college, if they choose to major in a tech-related field. If they are not, are they going into a tech-related career? Are they going to like a coding bootcamp?

The final metric is six years out from high school graduations: Are they in a tech career? Right now, we have pretty compelling stats. It's something like less than one percent of the demographic that we serve will traditionally go onto a career in tech or majoring in CS related field in college. We're at 73 percent of students going on to careers in tech. If you think about that, the average a student we serve, comes from a family of four that's making around \$35,000 a year. The average software engineer makes 90 to \$100,000 a year. So, we're leveling up students into the middle class. We track all of those different kinds of touch points along the pipeline into the career. We do like, you know, the assessments, alumni surveys, pull from the clearinghouse data for colleges.

Then we have all that data that we then report back to funders but also helps us tell our story of who we are as an organization and the impact that we're making. I think it's also really powerful that we're able to translate our impact into dollars. We're a tech nonprofit with the VC community in Silicon Valley that's really looking for like the inputs, outputs, ROI, etc. To be able to speak in that kind of language is really helpful not only for our students but also for fundraising because we can really put a lot of metrics behind what we do.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, in year two, you did not have a lot of staff. How did you go about collecting such an intense level of data?

Maurya Couvares: I think in year two, we had maybe 100 students, and very few of those students had even left high school yet. We were really only collecting data around what was happening in our classrooms, and as former teachers, especially former Teach for America core members - where you learn that data is so important to the practice of teaching (not the only thing that's important for teaching, but it can help guide your lessons) - we were very used to the idea of doing assessments and collecting data on students and analyzing where students missed a lesson or missed a concept. That's something we've talked to our volunteers as well. When we implement the program, it's like part of the culture of our program is that students will take these checks for understanding and coding challenges and things like that. We're getting lots of data back all along the way. We've now gotten to a point where we're like using Salesforce and everything, but we didn't do that in year two.

Dolph Goldenburg: Now that you're a lot larger and you're serving a lot more students, do you have a data department? Just one data staff person? Who manages all that data for you now?

Maurya Couvares: I mean the bulk of our staff members are program managers, so they are typically former teachers who coach volunteers and lesson delivery and act as liaisons with schools. They have a portfolio of five to six schools or corporate partners for the advanced classes. They will continue to do this, but they do a lot of the data collection, so we use, like for our assessments, we use a tool called hacker rank, so students are like going online and taking coding challenges. There's not much to do other than collect it because we're getting reports back. Then we also do attendance, and that's all online, so we've done a lot of automation of collecting that data, but the program managers are ultimately responsible for validating it and making sure that it's correct and making sure it's in Salesforce. Everybody on the team contributes to it.

Dolph Goldenburg: Do you automate that online through Salesforce or how do you automate it?

Maurya Couvares: I'm getting a little bit out of my depth because I haven't built the Salesforce system myself. It's like a group of people on my team has, but I believe the attendance data automatically goes into Salesforce. I don't think our hacker rank data does, but we have like a way to upload it very easily. We recruit volunteers and we have to make sure that they're qualified. All of the volunteer information automatically goes into Salesforce for us.

Dolph Goldenburg: It sounds like you had a team that custom-coded Salesforce for you, like you did not just take it off the box, like the nonprofit starter pack or something like that.

Maurya Couvares: We did. We have a Salesforce consultant. We got a grant from one of our foundation partners originally to help us customize Salesforce, and now we have like a part-time consultant and then the person that I mentioned that's doing Salesforce part-time for her role next year has also been to a bunch of training. We have a few people on staff that are pretty savvy with Salesforce. We're a pretty young staff, a lot of millennials. There's just a lot of people that have, and we teach coding, so there's a lot of people with the tech expertise on staff, which has been helpful.

Dolph Goldenburg: Obviously, you've got great outcomes. If you had these great outcomes but did not have the data to demonstrate it, do you think you would have grown at the same rate that you have?

Maurya Couvares: Oh, that's a good question. Probably not. I'm thinking of were primarily funded at this point by foundations, and foundations demand data. I can't imagine how we would have ever gotten grants if it had we not had that data to back up the stories you were telling, and when we haven't gotten money from foundations, again, like the biggest individual donors that we've had have been from like the tech VC community, who are also very interested in data. So, no, I don't think so.

Dolph Goldenburg: That's kind of my sense. I just sort of feel like one of the reasons that you are so fundable is because you can prove the difference you make, and you can show the economic impact you have on people's lives.

Maurya Couvares: People like to see that.

Dolph Goldenburg: Right? Exactly. Yeah. Especially funders. It's really important for them. So, Maurya, what's next for ScriptEd?

Maurya Couvares: We're definitely in this kind of phase. I mean, I guess we've always been in a phase of rapid change, but I think at this point we spent the first five years really, really focused on our program. I did not have a whole-time development person until five years in. I did it all kind of on my own with some assistance from the person who is now our executive director in the Bay Area. In the last year or so, we've been building out a leadership team. So now we have like a Finance and Operations person. We have a very early stage development department that we're hoping to grow. We have a communications person. We have a corporate partnerships director. We're kind of in this space of, in the next year or two, really building that infrastructure of making sure we have a really solid foundation.

We want to get a lot better at telling our story. Because we've been so focused on the program, we've not figured out like how to take advantage of social media, and sometimes we don't send out newsletters as regularly as we should. We're trying to get on top of that. We have to think

about our HR systems. I think we're predicted to have 40 people on staff as of the end of next fiscal year. There's just a whole other range of things to think about. We're really working on that infrastructure. Our goal five years out from that now is to be with 5,000 students. We want to serve 5,000 students a year...

Dolph Goldenburg: You're going to grow by 400 percent over the next five years?

Maurya Couvares: We're with 1,200 this year, and the intention is to get to 5,000, and we've been doing a lot of research on, you know, how can we grow in the cities we're already in? What other cities should we be going to? How do we do this in a way that's really smart? Right now, the intention is at least for next school year, that 2019-2020 school year, we're not growing to another city, but we are strongly exploring a city. It's Chicago. We're going to be looking at Chicago as our next place. In order to really reach that 5,000, we're probably going to need to start thinking about some other cities. New York City is one. One of my favorite stats about them is that one out of every 310 or 320 students in the United States is in New York City public school students.

We have a really big opportunity to continue expanding here. I think we have a lot of work to do here and potentially in some other places. Once we kind of get a little bit more of a solid ground on our HR functions, finance, operations, fundraising, and communications, we really wanted to take, you know, the work that we've done in an expanded it to as many students as we can.

Dolph Goldenburg: I love the fact that you are able to clearly say here's what we're going to do over the next year, and we're doing it because here's our five-year goal. Here's where we're headed, and here's how we're going to get there. I think if there's one takeaway from this episode, it's that organizations that are able to do that are better able to grow and get the funding necessary to grow.

Maurya Couvares: I think when you put out a big goal, people want to help you get there. That's what I've discovered. If you put out a big goal and you say, this is the path we're going to take to get there, and this is how much impact we can make, then it becomes really easy for people to want to get on board with that. When you just asked for money, but you don't have like a clear path or clear goal, it becomes a lot harder to get people excited about what you're doing. We have, we have a program model that we really believe in and that we think should be with as many students as possible. The world is changing super rapidly. The future of work is like a big conversation people are having now, and educating our young people to be ready for the workforce is a really important thing to do. I think people are excited about helping us get there.

Dolph Goldenburg: Maurya, I've got to switch gears really quickly so that I can fit in the Off-the-Map question, and listeners may not fully know that, while this is an audio podcast, we can see each other. We do it on Skype, and it's kind of like the Jetsons. I can see you on a screen. You can see me on a screen, and every time you lift your arm, I keep seeing a garment on your wrist. For listeners that don't know, a garment is a really, really cool watch that is much better than a

Fitbit, way more accurate than a Fitbit. They can track you when you swim, run, and bike. A lot of triathletes have them. So, I've got to ask you, what's (when's) your next race?

Maurya Couvares: Oh, I'm going to do the New York City triathlon. July 1st is my next one. I've done two half iron mans this year so far.

Dolph Goldenburg: What's the distance of the New York City Tri?

Maurya Couvares: It's an Olympic Tri. So that's a mile swim. Twenty-five-mile bike. 6.2-mile run.

Dolph Goldenburg: What boroughs. Is it only in one borough? What boroughs, plural does it go?

Maurya Couvares: Yeah, we swim in the Hudson River.

Dolph Goldenburg: I just have to say that's the one reason I would never do that Tri. Okay. Sorry. Go ahead.

Maurya Couvares: Then we bike up the west side highway into the Bronx and then back down. Then we'd run from the West Side into Central Park and do a full loop, six miles worth of running to kind of the middle of Central Park.

Dolph Goldenburg: Oh my gosh. That sounds like an awesome. Other than having to swim in the Hudson, that sounds like an awesome, awesome Tri to do.

Maurya Couvares: Yeah, it's a lot of fun, and we use it as a fundraising event for ScriptEd, too. So, the New York City Tri is like the local race. I've been doing Tris forever.

Dolph Goldenburg: It's interesting you say that because I've actually suggested that to other organizations where for example, if an organization says, oh, we really want to put on a 5k, I'm always like, hold on, putting on a 5k is expensive and a lot of work. Why don't you use someone else's 5k? So, it sounds like that's what ScriptEd does with the Tri.

Maurya Couvares: Yeah, that's what we do.

Dolph Goldenburg: How many people are our fundraising on behalf of ScriptEd in this Tri this year?

Maurya Couvares: We don't have as many people as we've had in the past, and the New York City triathlon is actually had trouble selling out their spots this year. Usually, like it's a lottery, and they sell out immediately, and this year they still have spots for sale. Therefore, people who would normally get a charity entry or now just buying on the website. So, we have three people this year, so it's not really that big, but we've had up to 10 in the past. For me, it's more of just like it's my passion. I just thought why not marry my two passions and make a charity event.

We'll see if we'll continue. I don't know what the future of the New York City Tri is, just because if we can't sell the spots, then it's harder for. Yeah. Yeah.

Dolph Goldenburg: Maurya, thank you so much for joining us today. I hope your Tri on July 1st is an amazing experience and that you hit your own new personal record.

Maurya Couvares: Thank you.

Dolph Goldenburg: I'm also just completely honored that you have taken the time to be with us today. It has been an enlightening experience, and I want to let listeners know how they can find out more about ScriptEd information about ScriptEd's mission growth, accolades and opportunities can be www.scripted.org. Now, while you're there, take some time to look at the annual reports which are an inspiration for any nonprofit that really wants to offer good, data-driven annual reports for their donors, for their funders, and for their community. Hey, Maurya, thank you so much again.

Maurya Couvares: Thank you for having me. It was a lot of fun.

Dolph Goldenburg: If while I was sharing and ScriptEd's URL, you were busy cursing your database and wishing you had a student intern to code for you, all is not lost. You will find the information from today's podcast on our website, www.successfulnonprofits.com. Thank you for joining Maurya and me today. If this was your first listen, welcome and do come back. If you've been here before, thanks for returning. Either way though, do me a solid and take a minute to rate and review us on iTunes, Stitcher, Libsyn, or your favorite podcast listening app. That's our show for this week. I hope you've gained some insight to help your nonprofit thrive in a competitive environment.

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