



New Orleans schools a study in contrasts

Posted by Alan Gottlieb Apr 7th, 2011



Attending school site visits is always an iffy proposition. I can think of no environment in which you are less likely to get a real sense of a school than the one created by having dozens of strange adults descend on a building en masse.

I'm in New Orleans for the Education Writers Association annual conference and I joined about 35 other journalists on visits to two schools that couldn't be more dissimilar.

One was Walter L. Cohen High School, a traditional public high school that has been infused with new energy thanks to a partnership with an organization called Diplomas Now, which joins three successful urban education models and support service programs into one program to help challenged inner-city kids graduate and pursue some sort of post-secondary opportunity.

The other school was the New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy (known as Sci Academy), a charter high school in its third year. The feel of the school is strikingly similar to West Denver Prep or KIPP; what Marc Waxman would call a paternalistic or "no excuses" model charter school that gets impressive results by obsessing over data and paying almost fanatical attention to the details of instruction and school culture.

It's hard to get a fair impression of schools during a short invasion. Cohen staff welcomed us, but acknowledged a wariness about the media. Principal Al Jones said a crew from National Geographic TV spent several weeks inside the school a few years ago, ostensibly to do a documentary series about a school bouncing back from the ravages of Hurricane Katrina.

Instead, Jones said, the network portrayed Cohen as "the most dangerous school in America." The documentary was more than that, but the school still feels stung by it.

If that 'most dangerous' label ever fit, it no longer does. Jones, a veteran New Orleans educator, and his administrative team arrived as the documentary was aired.

They brought in Diplomas Now to take advantage of the Johns Hopkins University Talent Development Secondary model, which has demonstrated some success with African American students. In addition, they had the support of City Year, an Americorps "near-peer" mentoring program, and Communities in Schools, which provides case management to students having extracurricular issues.

During the two hours we spent at Cohen, no one talked much about academics, which are still a major challenge at the school. Proficiency levels in many subjects languish in the teens on state tests. Still, there's a sense of hopefulness and purpose about the school.

Instead, they had us observe a team of teachers and administrators discussing students with the most pressing social, emotional and academic issues, demonstrating the level of detail with which they track their kids and design specific interventions. A few years ago, I observed a series of similar meetings at Denver Manual High School, which proved effective in helping some kids get on track and stay there.

School leaders also had us talk to some of their stronger students. I chatted with Wil'Nesha Johnson, a 17-year-old ninth-grader whose elementary school education was disrupted by Katrina. Johnson said she had a negative middle school experience but her attitude toward school has turned around since arriving this year at Cohen. "I love it. All the stuff I need is already here for me," she said.

Still, she epitomizes one of the school's great challenges: Many students are heading toward being overage and under-credited, making graduation a challenge.

A 20-minute bus ride away, Sci-Academy is a different world. The physical plant consists of mobile classrooms joined by treated lumber walkways. Everything is brand-spanking new, but the modulars feel sterile and temporary.

As is the case with many such charters, the staff is young, mostly white and the product of elite colleges. Demographically, the students are similar to those at Cohen, predominantly low-income and African American. And though the school has yet to graduate its first class, test results are off the charts – again reminiscent of West Denver Prep.

Principal Benjamin Marcovitz, 31, brims with confidence that his school will get all its students ready for college. Most “paternalistic” charter schools opt to start in elementary or middle schools, to give them more times to catch kids up before the clock begins to run out in high school. Marcovitz says he is out to prove those schools wrong.

“Thinking you have to start earlier is a failure of belief,” he told us. “Students can come into high school (several grade levels) behind and be as ready for college as I was.”

That’s a bold and possibly hubristic statement. Time will tell.

At a session late Thursday, Margaret Raymond, director of the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University, said New Orleans’ 60 charter schools (there are just 34 non-charters) are, in the aggregate, out-performing charters in other cities for a number of reasons, but one stands out:

“The threshold for entry (getting a charter approved) is high; the exit threshold (getting de-certified) is very low.”

Or, as outgoing Recovery School District Paul Vallas put it, districts elsewhere are “not rabid enough at the front door.”