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Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

Failed Milwaukee charter school offers lessons

Milwaukee College Prep likely to take over the Academy of Learning and Leadership's buildings

Aug. 7, 2010 | [\(5\) Comments](#)

There's a concerted effort under way to improve life in the troubled north side neighborhood known as Lindsay Heights, with much of it modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone, where an array of services across every phase of childhood aims to make kids successful.

So here's a thought from Geoffrey Canada, the founder and leader of the New York-based effort:

During a visit to Madison last fall, Canada said that every year, he calls in a few teachers from charter schools that are part of the program. They are caring, hardworking people, he said. But their students haven't been achieving the levels of success the program demands.

He fires them. He can't settle for not succeeding.

Which brings us back to Lindsay Heights and the Academy of Learning and Leadership, an independent charter school that opened in 2003 with high hopes of sparking good things around its new building at N. 15th and W. Center streets.

Creating the school was a life ambition for Camille Mortimore, who had been a school principal and administrator in the Milwaukee Catholic Archdiocese. She wanted to build a school that would broaden the horizons of the students from this difficult neighborhood through "hands-on, experiential learning."

The dream became reality. She got permission (a charter) from the Milwaukee Common Council, which meant public funding for each student. An attractive building was constructed, attached to the LaVarney Boys & Girls Club branch, which meant easy access to after-school programs.

The kindergarten through eighth-grade school grew quickly to 200 students, and, after a second building adjacent to the first was built in 2007, enrollment topped 400.

The school has succeeded in many ways, Mortimore says. Students have learned a lot about the world, they've gained from the positive environment, a lot of good has been done for kids in ways that go beyond the classroom, including through a privately funded program to help meet health needs.

But the school has had really bad test scores, some of the lowest in the city. In the most recent state tests, fewer than a third of fourth- and eighth-graders were rated as proficient in either reading or math.

Education success comes hard in high-needs settings such as Lindsay Heights, but a chart compiled by city charter school leaders shows that the academy's scores were below those of neighbors such as MPS' Hopkins Elementary.

Why haven't the students gotten better test scores?

Is it the kids?

Yes, they are highly disadvantaged. However, believing in their capacity to achieve is a requirement for succeeding.

The program?

It certainly appears the staff cared and worked hard, but they generally did not use the demanding strategies that comparable schools with better scores use.

The flaws of testing itself?

Mortimore argues that students have gained a lot that doesn't show up on scores.

Given the scores, leaders of the charter school committee at City Hall, led by former MPS Superintendent Howard Fuller, grew increasingly impatient. In December 2008, they put the school on probation and set specific goals they wanted met. In a report a month ago, a consultant said the school fell short of seven of the eight goals.

"Does the charter school movement really mean it when it says freedom in exchange for accountability?" Fuller asks. "I believe we do mean it."

Fuller, a major leader of school choice efforts nationally, has changed his views in recent years, to emphasize quality and success over just about anything else.

"We need to set clear standards and then people (school operators) who don't meet them, they should be closed," he said.

He said that goes for MPS, for charter schools - and for the schools in Milwaukee's private school voucher program that he has championed.

In an intense series of events over recent months, the academy's leaders tried to hold on to the school. By early this month, when they lost a Common Council committee vote on continuing the charter, it was clear they were through.

In an interview clearly colored by a sense of sadness, Mortimore said the school has learned a lot about how to pursue success, "but someone else is going to have to do it."

In the least several weeks, a series of rapid - and continuing - events led to an answer for who is expected to be that someone else: Milwaukee College Preparatory School, a kindergarten through eighth-grade charter school at 2449 N. 36th St. that has compiled a terrific record of success, regularly exceeding statewide scores.

Chartered through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the school will seek permission from the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents on Aug. 20 to add the 15th and Center buildings as a second site.

Other thorny issues, such as what to do with \$11 million in bonds that funded the academy's construction, remain to be worked out.

But Robb Rauh, the leader of College Prep, is optimistic that things can be brought together in time to start school in just over three weeks.

In Milwaukee and nationwide, turning around the lowest-performing schools is a hot subject. Federal officials are making large grants to do that. MPS is in line to get more than \$40 million for such efforts, with its least successful high schools the lead target of change.

The Academy of Learning and Leadership story contains a lot of lessons. Here are two of them: Success in tough circumstances comes hard. So does halting failure.

But where are we going to be if that hard work on both ends of the equation isn't done?

There are big opportunities to push for much higher levels of success. But succeeding will require a lot of people to have a strong, positive answer to this question from Fuller:

"How serious are we in the city of Milwaukee about demanding quality?"

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