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CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Who Needs Charters When You Have Public Schools Like These?

Starting in kindergarten, the students in the Union Public Schools district in Tulsa, Okla., get a state-of-the-art education in science, technology, engineering and math.
ANDREA MORALES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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TULSA, Okla. — The class assignment: Design an iPad video game. For the player to win, a cow must cross a two-lane highway, dodging constant traffic. If she makes it, the sound of clapping is heard; if she's hit by a car, the game says, "Aw."

"Let me show you my notebook where I wrote the algorithm. An algorithm is like a recipe," Leila, one of the students in the class, explained to the school official who described the scene to me.

You might assume these were gifted students at an elite school. Instead they were 7-year-olds, second graders in the Union Public Schools district in the eastern part of Tulsa, Okla., where more than a third of the students are Latino, many of them English language learners, and 70 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. From kindergarten through high school, they get a state-of-the-art education in science, technology, engineering and math, the STEM subjects. When they're in high school, these students will design web pages and mobile apps, as well as tackle cybersecurity and artificial intelligence projects. And STEM-for-all is only one of the eye-opening opportunities in this district of around 16,000 students.

Betsy DeVos, book your plane ticket now.

Ms. DeVos, the new secretary of education, dismisses public schools as too slow-moving and difficult to reform. She's calling for the expansion of supposedly nimbler charters and vouchers that enable parents to send their children to private or parochial schools. But Union shows what can be achieved when a public school system takes the time to invest in a culture of high expectations, recruit top-flight professionals and develop ties between schools and the community.

Union has accomplished all this despite operating on a miserly budget. Oklahoma has the dubious distinction of being first in the nation in cutting funds for education, three years running, and Union spends just $7,605 a year in state and local funds on each student. That's about a third less than the national average; New York State spends three times more. Although contributions from the community modestly augment the budget, a Union teacher with two decades' experience and a doctorate earns less than $50,000. Her counterpart in Scarsdale, N.Y., earns more than $120,000.

"Our motto is: 'We are here for all the kids,' " Cathy Burden, who retired in 2013 after 19 years as superintendent, told me. That's not just a feel-good slogan. "About a decade ago I called a special principals' meeting — the schools were closed that day because of an ice storm — and ran down the list of student dropouts, name by name," she said. "No one knew the story of any kid on that list. It was humiliating — we hadn't done our job." It was also a wake-up call. "Since then," she

adds, “we tell the students, ‘We’re going to be the parent who shows you how you can go to college.’ ”

Last summer, Kirt Hartzler, the current superintendent, tracked down 64 seniors who had been on track to graduate but dropped out. He persuaded almost all of them to complete their coursework. “Too many educators give up on kids,” he told me. “They think that if an 18-year-old doesn’t have a diploma, he’s got to figure things out for himself. I hate that mind-set.”

This individual attention has paid off, as Union has defied the demographic odds. In 2016, the district had a high school graduation rate of 89 percent — 15 percentage points more than in 2007, when the community was wealthier, and 7 percentage points higher than the national average.

The school district also realized, as Ms. Burden put it, that “focusing entirely on academics wasn’t enough, especially for poor kids.” Beginning in 2004, Union started revamping its schools into what are generally known as community schools. These schools open early, so parents can drop off their kids on their way to work, and stay open late and during summers. They offer students the cornucopia of activities — art, music, science, sports, tutoring — that middle-class families routinely provide. They operate as neighborhood hubs, providing families with access to a health care clinic in the school or nearby; connecting parents to job-training opportunities; delivering clothing, food, furniture and bikes; and enabling teenage mothers to graduate by offering day care for their infants.

Two fifth graders guided me around one of these community schools, Christa McAuliffe Elementary, a sprawling brick building surrounded by acres of athletic fields. It was more than an hour after the school day ended, but the building buzzed, with choir practice, art classes, a soccer club, a student newspaper (the editors interviewed me) and a garden where students were growing corn and radishes. Tony, one of my young guides, performed in a folk dance troupe. The walls were festooned with family photos under a banner that said, “We Are All Family.”

This environment reaps big dividends — attendance and test scores have soared in the community schools, while suspensions have plummeted.

The district’s investment in science and math has paid off, too. According to Emily Lim, who runs Union’s STEM program, the district felt it was imperative to offer STEM classes to all students, not just those deemed gifted.

Students congregate at the start of the Global Gardens after school program at Union Public Schools district's Christa McAuliffe Elementary School in Oklahoma.
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In one class, I watched eighth graders create an orthotic brace for a child with cerebral palsy. The specs: The toe must be able to rise but cannot fall. Using software that's the industry standard, 20 students came up with designs and then plaster of Paris models of the brace.

"It's not unusual for students struggling in other subjects to find themselves in the STEM classes," Ms. Lim said. "Teachers are seeing kids who don't regard themselves as good readers back into reading because they care about the topic."

A fourth grader at Rosa Parks Elementary who had trouble reading and writing, for example, felt like a failure and sometimes vented his frustration with his fists. But he's thriving in the STEM class. When the class designed vehicles to safely transport an egg, he went further than anybody else by giving his car doors that opened upward, turning it into a little Lamborghini. Such small victories have changed the way he behaves in class, his teacher said — he works harder and acts out much less.

Superintendents and school boards often lust after the quick fix. The average urban school chief lasts around three years, and there's no shortage of shamans promising to "disrupt" the status quo.

The truth is that school systems improve not through flash and dazzle but by linking talented teachers, a challenging curriculum and engaged students. This is Union's not-so-secret sauce: Start out with an academically solid foundation, then look for ways to keep getting better.

Union's model begins with high-quality prekindergarten, which enrolls almost 80 percent of the 4-year-olds in the district. And it ends at the high school, which combines a collegiate atmosphere — lecture halls, student lounges and a cafeteria with nine food stations that dish up meals like fish tacos and pasta puttanesca — with the one-on-one attention that characterizes the district.

Counselors work with the same students throughout high school, and because they know their students well, they can guide them through their next steps. For many, going to community college can be a leap into anonymity, and they flounder — the three-year graduation rate at Tulsa Community College, typical of most urban community colleges, is a miserable 14 percent. But Union's college-in-high-school initiative enables students to start earning community college credits before they graduate, giving them a leg up.

The evidence-based pregnancy-prevention program doesn't lecture adolescents about chastity. Instead, by demonstrating that they have a real shot at success, it enables them to envision a future in which teenage pregnancy has no part.

"None of this happened overnight," Ms. Burden recalled. "We were very intentional — we started with a prototype program, like community schools, tested it out and gradually expanded it. The model was organic — it grew because it was the right thing to do."

Building relationships between students and teachers also takes time. "The curriculum can wait," Lisa Witcher, the head of secondary education for Union, told the high school's faculty last fall. "Chemistry and English will come — during the first week your job is to let your students know you care about them."

That message resonated with Ms. Lim, who left a job at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa School of Community Medicine and took a sizable pay cut to work for Union. "I measure how I'm doing by whether a girl who has been kicked out of her house by her mom's boyfriend trusts me enough to tell me she needs a place to live," she told me. "Union says, 'We can step up and help.' "

Under the radar, from Union City, N.J., and Montgomery County, Md., to Long Beach and Gardena, Calif., school systems with sizable numbers of students from poor families are doing

great work. These ordinary districts took the time they needed to lay the groundwork for extraordinary results.

Will Ms. DeVos and her education department appreciate the value of investing in high-quality public education and spread the word about school systems like Union? Or will the choice-and-vouchers ideology upstage the evidence?

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