

School's Success Rooted in Order

By: Lisa Coryell

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NEWARK- It's early morning at the North Star Academy Charter School, and students are preparing themselves for a day of learning, a process that begins not with pencils and books but with drums and chants.

Forming a circle in the school's all purpose room, the 180 students in grades five through nine stand at attention as several of their peers begin pounding bongo drums.

James Verrilli, one of the school's co-founders, begins a drill the students know by heart.

"Who are you?" Verrilli bellows with the force of a Marine drill sergeant.

"A star! I shine brightly for others," the students shout back, their words clipped with military precision.

"Why are you here?" Verrilli continues.

"To get an education."

The calls and responses go on, with students pledging, among other things, to "work, work, work hard" and exercise self-discipline. The youngsters muster deep breaths for each response, trying to match Verrilli's bravado.

Finally, Verrilli orders his soldiers "at ease."

As they relax their posture, Verrilli puts one more question to them.

"What are we?" he asks.

"A community," they reply without hesitation.

Visitors inclined to view the morning rituals as overly regimented for a group of youngsters not serving time for criminal acts should think again. The school's unique culture of order and discipline has helped make it one of the most successful charter schools in New Jersey. By all accounts, North Star Academy, located in the heart of downtown Newark, serves as a shining example of how charter schools are supposed to work.

One of the first New Jersey schools to receive a charter in 1996, North Star has made great strides in its first four years. The school has shown marked improvements in student test scores, outpacing traditional public schools in its sending area and many other charter schools statewide. Its daily student attendance rate is one of the

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highest in the state and its annual student dropout rate is near zero. Nearly 900 students are on a waiting list to get in.

"It's one of the most successful charter schools," said Anne O'Dea, the director overseeing charter schools for the state Department of Education. "North Star has had significant student achievement results on the (state standardized Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment.) In fact, they've outscored all the traditional public schools in Newark."

A trip to the school reveals an atmosphere quite unlike any other. Students, dressed in the school uniform of khakis and a green or white shirt, immediately approach visitors to extend a hand in greeting.

"Welcome to North Star Academy," they say, before identifying themselves by name.

Inside the classroom, North Star students are all business. Fifth-grade classes begin each day with fact drills. Standing at attention, math students reel off multiplication tables rapid-fire with virtually no mistakes. English students in unison recite the academic disciplines of ancient Greece. As with the morning circle, there is no giggling, no fooling around, no refusals to participate. Regimentation is a key part of North Star's training process, explained Shannon Downey, a fifth-grade English teacher.

"We do a lot of organization and reinforcement with the fifth grade," she said. "We reinforce every rule. We keep things strictly in line. As the kids get older, there's less structure because there's not so much of a need for it. The kids have already learned it."

North Star's success has made it one of the most visited charter schools in New Jersey. To date, more than 3,000 visitors have toured the facility, including President Bush, who stopped by during his presidential campaign last spring. The Clinton-Gore administration, in a report on education, touted North Star as a model of the charter school reform it supported.

Norman Atkins, the school's co-founder, said it is North Star's teachers who deserve the credit.

"The success of the school is totally bound up in the quality of teachers we're able to attract," he said. "Most of the teachers here have a strong desire to work in an urban area and found out about us from word of mouth. The people who work here are spreading the word."

Eleven of North Star's 18 teachers hold masters degrees. Many are veterans of Teach for America, a

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national program that places recent college graduates of all academic majors into teaching positions in poor urban and rural areas. North Star teachers have an average of seven years in the classroom and earn about \$40,000 a year. "It's fairly comparable to salaries statewide," Atkins said.

But by all accounts, North Star teachers work longer and harder than many others in their field. Besides the 11-month school year, the academy boasts a longer school day, from 8:15 a.m. to 3:35 p.m.

Teachers say their days are even longer than that. "I get here at 7 a.m. and the kids are already waiting for me," said Downey. "Mostly they just want to talk, not about school work but about what's going on at home or in other classes. Most evenings I leave around 5:30 and I'm one of the ones who leaves kind of early. Some teachers stay until 7 or 7:30 working with the kids."

Teachers do not earn overtime pay but are awarded up to \$3,000 in bonus stipends for volunteering for after-school activities, Atkins said. Downey said most teachers are not motivated by the pay.

"We do it for the kids," she said. "We sacrifice and do what we have to do to get the kids where they need to be academically."

The extra effort is not lost on the students. It's one of the first things students mention when asked about the North Star experience.

"At my old school, teachers were out the door at 2:45 no matter what," said Tiamoyah Terrell, an eighth-grader. "Here, if you don't understand something, they'll stay with you and help, no matter how long it takes."

Fifth-grader Terrell White said North Star is much stricter than the Newark public school he attended last year.

"If you fight at the old school, you never get in trouble," he said. "At this school you can't run in the halls. The teachers watch you all the time."

But that's not a bad thing, he said.

"The teachers show they care about us," he said. "The kids feel they have someone to talk to, and they can have help whenever they need it so they act the way they're supposed to act."

Anyone looking to uncover a secret formula to North Star's success will be disappointed.

"Our success isn't based on any one magic bullet," said Atkins. "There are a lot of things together that make this work. There are a lot of moving parts and you have to

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be attentive to all of them. I think we worked really hard at covering all the bases."

Besides North Star's strong teaching staff and commitment to discipline and community, Atkins said the leadership experience of the school's founders is a key ingredient. Verrilli, a former teacher and principal at a low-income private school in Newark, was well-versed in the science and art of teaching as well as meeting the special needs of children coming from poor, urban homes.

Atkins, a former journalist and director of a nonprofit charity who holds a master's degree in educational administration, has vast experience in implementing and evaluating nonprofit educational programs for under-privileged children. And knowing his way around the nonprofit, philanthropic sector was invaluable when it came time to raising start-up funds for the school.

The pair, who knew each other professionally, discovered they shared a dream of opening up a charter school and decided to collaborate.

"We realized we agreed on 80 percent of the core issues of what a school should look like," Atkins said. "The beauty of our model is that our skills complement each other."

Keeping their school under their own management is absolutely crucial, Atkins said.

"I don't know how many other charter school founders are involved in the day-to-day running of the schools," he said. "I think that's really important. We're here every day. I guess (Verrilli) looks a lot more like a principal and I look a lot more like a superintendent."

Choosing a curriculum that worked for North Star's student body was also important. Before opening the school, the pair spent months traversing the country in search of innovative teaching methods.

"We visited a lot of schools to see what worked and what didn't work and we picked up ideas for our school," said Atkins. "I wouldn't say we modeled ourselves after one particular school. We chose practices from many schools we felt would fit here and would meet the particular needs of our students."

Among those practices were longer school days, a longer school year (200 days) and small classes with no more than 18 students.

After designing their curriculum, finding a suitable site was the next hurdle. After months of scouring the streets of Newark, the pair settled on a defunct bank on Washington Place and raised \$450,000 to transform the first

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two floors into a school. Verrilli and Atkins then held a lottery to select their student body—72 students in grades five and six.

When they opened the doors to North Star in the fall of 1997, the pair's main objective was to lay the foundation for a good learning environment.

"We spent a lot of time during the first year working with the students on establishing a culture of discipline and order," said Atkins. "We started small so we really had an opportunity to help incubate that culture and get parents and students to buy into it."

The pair originally planned to keep their students until the eighth grade but that changed as the original sixth-grade class moved toward graduation.

"We thought we'd get the kids through middle school and steer them to good high schools, but the parents were worried about where they'd send their children after eighth grade," Atkins explained. "We applied for and got an amendment to our charter that allowed us to add a high school curriculum."

Raising another \$650,000 in private funds, Atkins and Verrilli expanded and renovated the building's third floor to house upper grades. By 2003, North Star will house 288 students in grades five to 12. Atkins and Verrilli are "seriously considering" including a kindergarten to fourth grade curriculum by 2006.

One thing the school will not do, Atkins said, is admit new students to the upper school. He said high school students will all have gone through the rigors of North Star's underclass curriculum and be indoctrinated into North Star's educational regimen.

Indeed, the effects of such early regimentation appear to be long-lasting. North Star's eighth grade students, now in their fourth year at the school, are a serious focused group.

In one history class, eighth graders debated whether the defeat of Hitler and the Japanese was worth the lives lost in World War II. Throughout the discussion, the students remained focused and alert. There was no slouching in their seats, no stares into space, no doodling, no whispering.

Even between classes students remained focused. The hallways were oddly quiet as youngsters moved from room to room. Students whose voices rose above the hushed chatter were quickly reprimanded by any teacher on hand.

There seems to be little rebellion against the school's strict policies. Since opening its doors, North

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Star has expelled one student for bringing a knife to class, Atkins said. Another student transferred out of the school because his parents felt it was too strict.

"Parents are happy with the discipline policies," Atkins said. "We point out to them that we're holding the students to the same standards parents hold them to at home. The behavior we won't tolerate is the same behavior they wouldn't tolerate either."

When a rather benign four-letter word was penciled on a hallway wall, Verrilli called an emergency meeting of the student body.

"Mr. V started pacing with his hands behind his back," recalled Michael Mann, an English teacher. "That usually precedes an explosion of some sort. Then he says, 'Somebody here does not belong with the rest of us. Somebody here wants to live amidst trash.' He gets louder and louder and his face gets redder and redder and eventually he's shouting."

"The kids are stunned. They don't like it. He leads the kids past the wall (where the word was written) and they're totally silent. He's very quiet. Then he says, 'We'll go back to class now.' You should have seen the kids run around scrambling to find a cleaning solution to clean the wall."

Mann said the incident illustrates the school's approach to discipline.

"He made a big deal out of a small thing to prevent the larger problems from happening," he said. "That's how we deal with discipline here."

Students who misbehave are kept after school that very day, Mann explained. Each classroom has a telephone to allow teachers to call parents the minute students act up.

"Parents who complain they are being called too often or who don't like their children being kept after school are reminded that they signed a contract," Mann said. "They agreed to abide by the rules here."

Realizing that strong parental support was absolutely necessary for the school's success, Verrilli and Atkins designed a contract, or parent-school covenant, outlining what is expected of North Star parents.

In signing the 10-point document, parents pledge, among other things, to send their child to school on time each day in the required uniform, abide by the 11-month North Star calendar and actively participate in the school community. Most important, they promise to "support the North Star Academy Code of Conduct and its disciplinary consequences, including detention and suspension."

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Parents are not required to sign the covenant as a condition of their child's admission to North Star, but all of them have done so voluntarily, Atkins said.

To make sure parents know what they are getting into before they enroll their children, Atkins and Verrilli hold a meeting for prospective parents during which they explain the school's rules and philosophies.

"They tell parents that this is a very different type of school, and standards are high," Mann said. "They said if that's not what (parents) want, that's fine, but then they don't belong in this building and they shouldn't put their children's names in the lottery."

Parents take their responsibilities seriously.

"They expect us to participate and to support what they are doing," said Michael Lytle, father of a sixth-grader. "This is a collaboration between administrators, teachers, parents and students. We all have roles to play. Our job goes beyond being parents. It's almost like we're all counselors. I know almost all the kids in this school, and I help out as much as I can. I feel as much a part of this school as Mr. Atkins. This is ours."

Atkins is quick to point out that North Star's success is not dependent on big money from private donors. With the exception of the \$1.1 million in private funds to renovate the bank, North Star's operating budget is subsidized entirely by local, state and federal funds.

I'd rather do this with the public dime because we're showing that it can be done by others too," said Atkins.

"Our goal is not just to provide an excellent education for the kids you see here today but to provide a pathway for reform for kids all over the city. If we can do it with public money, we're proving that you don't have to know a bunch of folks in the philanthropic sector to provide kids with a first-rate education."