

HOW SHOULD WE TEACH? SMALL TRIUMPHS A RAY OF HOPE AN EDUCATION CEO PERSPECTIVES ON REFORM CHARTING SUCCESS

CHARTING SUCCESS

JAMES VERRILLI '83 FASHIONS A SCHOOL FOR INNER-CITY NEWARK

By Gerry Boyle '78

Photos by Brian Speer

James Verrilli '83 has heard it many times before.

The suggestion is that students at North Star Academy in Newark, N.J., do so well on assessment tests because they've been "creamed," skimmed from the top of the pool of thousands of kids in the city's conventional--and troubled--public schools. When the suggestion was made yet again during a recent interview, Verrilli tried not to bristle.

"I would disagree," he said. "I think people say that because poor folks have never had a choice. Rich folks get choices all the time. They choose where they want to live, they choose what community they want their house in. They choose what private school or public school they want their kids to go to. Poor folks don't get a choice. We give them a choice and we automatically say, 'Oh, well, only the best ones will take the choice.' I say, 'Garbage.' I say every parent cares about their kid."

North Star Academy, founded by Verrilli and colleague Norman Atkins, is just three years old and already one of the two top performers on standardized assessment tests among Newark's more than 40 public schools. While Verrilli is quick to acknowledge problems with standardized tests, he also accepts that they are "the coin of the realm" in today's public schools. His bottom line is this: North Star gives poor urban families a choice. When they snap it up, Verrilli couldn't be less surprised.

His respect and empathy for disadvantaged kids has grown over the more than 20 years since he first arrived at Colby from suburban Connecticut. At Colby, faculty members soon raised his awareness of social issues, he said. He volunteered as a Big Brother in Waterville and saw the impact of poverty on his young friend and the boy's family. A Sea-Mester program took Verrilli to the Caribbean, where he was confronted by the poverty there. After graduation, he went back to work on a Sea-Mester ship and saw deplorable living conditions in Haiti. From that experience his course was set: two years in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, working as a tenant organizer in the Bronx and Newark; a stint as a teacher in a private community school in Newark; a graduate degree in education from Brown, where he worked in tough city schools in Providence; back to Newark, where he was principal of Project Link community school.

Then, with Atkins, Verrilli founded North Star, an amalgam of what he had learned in years in inner-city education. "We have a long mission statement," he said, "but if I had to boil it down to one or two sentences, it's to provide a high quality, world-class education to kids in Newark by building a strong sense of community and providing rigorous academics, in hopes that those two things will give them the foundation to make them the masters of their own destiny."

That may seem a bit high flown on the page; it isn't when you hear it from Verrilli. He and his colleagues are absolutely, 70-hours-a-week serious about giving students from Newark a sanctuary where they can thrive, a refuge from the violence and dysfunction that is part of their world outside of school. Verrilli calls it their "educational justice."

North Star Academy is a public school option very different from the big urban schools from which it accepts students. This charter school is marked by order and discipline, rigorous teaching standards and equally rigorous expectations for learning. On a Tuesday morning in February, it looked like this:

Students gathered in the cafeteria. With one exception--that student would be asked to apologize to the group--they wore the North Star uniform of dark green school polo shirt and khakis. The school's core values were posted on the wall: caring, respect, responsibility, justice. Students introduced themselves by name with the same greeting: "Welcome to North Star." If they sounded a bit blasé, it could be because the school attracts about 1,000 visitors a year. Recent drop-ins included George W. Bush. New Jersey Gov. Christine Whitman has stopped in several times.

This morning, the sound of West African drums called students into a circle, with Verrilli at the center. He told a Vietnamese folktale about a rice farmer who went into debt to send his son to school. The moral, picked out by one student, was that education made the son clever so he could outsmart the evil moneylender. With that reinforcement, classes began.

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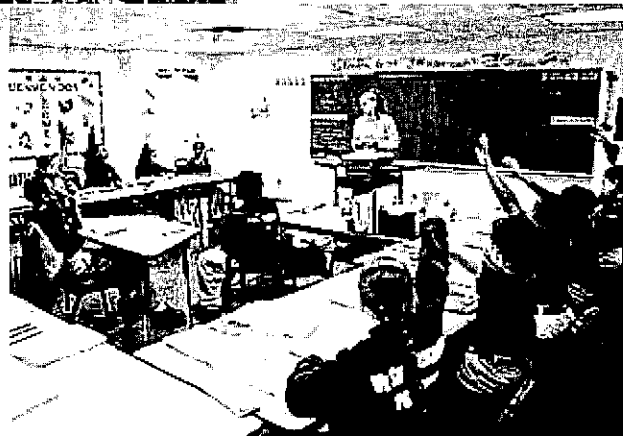
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The school's disciplined approach to learning has increased achievements and aspirations of students, including those in Julie Jackson's math class. Ms. Jackson's fifth grade students answer a series of rapid-fire questions, an unrelenting pace that continues for much of the period.

In North Star classes, there is no dead air. Fifth grade math was rhythmic recitation of multiplication tables punctuated by questions from the teacher, Julie Jackson. Hands shot into the air. The correct answer was rewarded with a ticket to be added to the pot for a drawing at the end of the week. Then the next table began. "Twelve, twenty-four, thirty-six, forty-eight . . ."

The pace of the class was relentless. Jackson, charged with bringing lagging students up to grade level, had the peripheral vision of a hawk--not to spot transgressions but to ensure that nobody is left behind. "She holds them in the very highest esteem," Verrilli said in the doorway.

A tour of classes in the upper grades showed less recitation but equally intense interaction between teachers and students. There was no fidgeting, much less misbehavior. Earlier, Verrilli had explained the stages of discipline at the school, but it seemed these students would never step out of line. That, Verrilli said, was the result of weeks and months of very hard work. "It's a little bit like a boot camp experience when they first come," he said. "They've had a lot of experience with adults who say things they don't mean. And we mean what we say."

They say there is no fighting. No disrespect toward teachers or peers. And no place to hide. "We know everything they do, we watch everything they do," Verrilli said. "The standards of behavior here, it's a much higher bar than it is in the schools they come from. In the schools they come from there's a lot of chaos, a lot of violence. It varies from teacher to teacher. You might have a good teacher, there might be a lot of order in the room. You don't have a good teacher, it's chaotic."

Because of its small size, North Star's teachers are observed frequently. Because of the longer school day and school year (September to late July), they tend to be dedicated by nature. They gauge their effectiveness not only by assessment tests but by students' aspirations. "They told me I can do anything I want to," said ninth grader Marron Pickett, "so I want to go to Harvard. None of my family members went to college so that's something I definitely want to do."

Verrilli said the job won't be done until North Star places its first class of students in colleges three years from now. And though he's pleased with the school's performance, he is the first to admit that the North Star model isn't the solution to all of the problems facing the nation's schools.

"I think we have one of many answers," he said, "a piece of the puzzle here. The problem is people are looking for simple answers. There's no simple answer. The problem is poverty. And until we solve that, we're not going to solve the educational problems of this country."