

One school's lesson

The Village charter school in Chester has turned itself around in the last year by getting serious about academics. Educators should take note.



Robert Maranto
By Robert Maranto

When I visited Chester last September, the Chester Upland public schools were in crisis. Flubbed scheduling changes, broken public address systems, and student fights led Superintendent Gloria Grantham to close the high school and middle schools until order could be restored.

What a way to start a school year! Unfortunately, in Chester, chaos is nothing new. For decades, the Chester Upland schools have been among the worst in the state, with low test scores, high dropout rates, and unsafe conditions.

And many Chester Upland School District (CUSD) administrators have given up on the students, believing that Chester schools can never improve until drugs and violence go away, broken families are mended, and unemployment goes down - in other words, never.

But luckily, not all Chester public schools work that way. For years I've visited the Village charter school and liked a lot of what I saw. With a secure building, security cameras, and administrators who constantly patrolled the halls, the Village always felt safe - no small thing in Chester. Ten feet outside the school building, students looked straight ahead and refused to talk to me. Once inside

the building, those same children laughed, smiled, and told me whatever I wanted to know. The Village was their safety zone.

Unfortunately, academically the Village was no better than other CUSD schools. Academic officers never stayed long enough to implement curricula or lead the teachers.

But last year things changed. Under threat of losing the school, the Village board got serious about academics. They persuaded John Linder, one of the school's founders who had left years before, to come back to turn things around. Linder had extensive management experience, and is an award-winning professor at Delaware County Community College. Quiet, authoritative, and a Chester native, Linder knew how to lead.

As his chief academic officer, Linder chose Dale Kelly, an experienced urban teacher and assistant principal who really believes that all students can learn. Together they did things neither the Village nor CUSD had ever done before. They evaluated all the teachers and replaced the 25 percent who simply were not up to the job. As Kelly put it, she wanted teachers who had "the belief that the kids can learn even if they came from the street or from the projects. Even with no father and that mother, they can learn."

Linder and Kelly required teachers to show up two weeks before school started for training in new curricula, and in how to test children regularly to see who needed extra work. Finally, they linked up new teachers with veterans to show them the ropes.

As a result, all of the new teachers I talked with at the start of school said they felt supported at the Village, not the norm in public schools. A veteran teacher remarked that the new leadership team "is different. They tell you the goals; the test scores will tell whether we have met the goals."

Last month the scores came in, and, for the first time in years, the Village made Adequate Yearly Progress on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment tests - something only one of Chester Upland's eight schools achieved - even though the Village spends 20 percent less per child.

As Linder put it, when he and Kelly arrived, Village teachers "were questioning our leadership, and rightly so, but they found that we will support them and that we were serious about our goals. We're safer, better, and cheaper."

The Village will celebrate its success with an all-school party, something its hardworking children and teachers have earned.

The Chester Upland School District now has a new superintendent, its 11th since 1990, former Philadelphia public schools administrator Gregory Thornton. If

Thornton is smart, he'll pay a visit to the Village to get ideas about how to run other Chester schools. If he can copy what works, all the children of Chester might benefit.

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