



TECH SCHOOL A DAZZLING OPTION

The other side of urban schools

January 9, 2005

Last week was a bad one for Denver Public Schools. The stabbing death of a 17-year-old student at Montbello High School was not only tragic in itself - the loss of a precious life of promise - it reinforced the image of urban schools as places of fear and intimidation.

Yet last week was also a hopeful week because of a much-less-well-publicized development. The Denver School of Science and Technology moved into its dazzling new building at Stapleton after several months in temporary quarters, providing proof that with enough energy and vision even the most ambitious educational plan can be brought to life.

Uninformed cynics might consider these contrasting stories unrelated. Why, of course Denver has its oases of serious learning, they'd say. Trouble is, most of them don't begin to reach the economically disadvantaged students that now constitute a majority of the district and a huge portion at Montbello. And yet this time the cynics would be wrong.

The Denver School of Science and Technology boasts as one of its founding purposes a commitment to educate low-income students who traditionally do not go to college. More than 40 percent of its freshman class (its first and only class at the moment) falls into that category, and more than two-thirds are minority. And because these students are chosen by lottery from among the charter-school's applicants, they are all by no means academic whizzes. Many enrolled with skills far below grade level. But head of school Bill Kurtz and his hand-picked staff are undeterred. Their goal is nothing less than to shepherd every student through a successful four years and launch them into college.

To that end, they've created a supercharged academic culture emphasizing the core values of respect, responsibility, integrity, courage, curiosity and "doing your best," while enforcing what Kurtz calls a "non-negotiable 'you-do-your-work-here' ethic." Kids who are late or otherwise misbehave must apologize to their classmates at a daily assembly; those who ignore a homework assignment stay after school to study; those who lag behind in achievement take an extra math or English seminar that in the case of math, for instance, results in their being immersed in the subject for an astounding 500 minutes a week (the weekly figure for the remaining students is an impressive 350).

Yet this is hardly an academic Sparta. It is every bit as nurturing and supportive as it is demanding. The whole point is no one is *allowed* to fall beside the road. And in some ways it grants students more freedom than at many traditional schools - entrusting each with a laptop computer, for example.

It's far too early to claim the school has succeeded, but four years from now when the evidence is clear that it has (we're betting on it), the naysayers will no doubt then claim the program is too expensive to be replicated elsewhere in Denver. They'll be wrong about that, too.

Yes, the School of Science and Technology raised millions for its facility from a variety of foundations and philanthropists, but the academic environment isn't dependent on a glitzy building. It is dependent on a staff dedicated to creating a culture of accountability and commitment, and who pay the price in hard work to get it done.

That culture is not for everyone. But if several hundred inner-city kids end up flourishing in it, DPS officials would be insane not to make sure that several thousand have a similar opportunity.

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