
The Good, the Great, and the Struggling: An Up-Close Look at Charter Schools Across North Carolina

Exploris Middle School— Raleigh, N.C.

Ask any expert in North Carolina's charter school movement to name an exemplary charter school and one of those he or she will invariably point to is Raleigh's Exploris Middle School. The school was launched in the fall of 1997 as an outgrowth of Exploris—an interactive museum about the world. It has won a School of Excellence ranking for each of the four years it has been open and gladly opens its doors to anyone to come and see what the school is doing.

Exploris Middle School is located on Moore Square in Raleigh in the former education wing of the Tabernacle Baptist Church. Visitors are immediately struck by the informality. Teachers double as receptionists. In the classrooms, students lounge on the couches, tables, chairs, and even the floors.

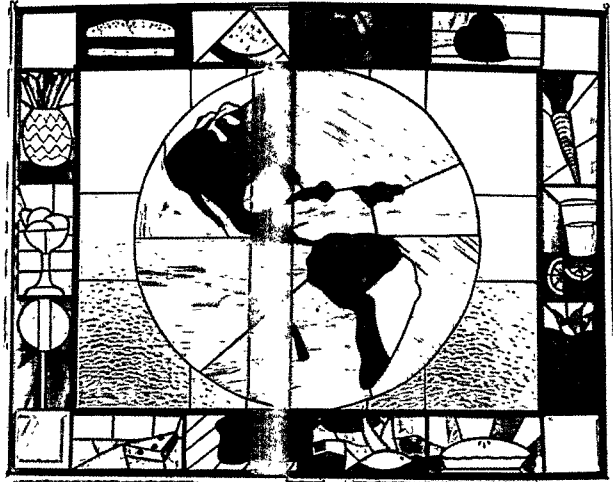
"We use everything as a classroom—the halls, the floors, the museum, the park," says Bonnie Farthing, algebra teacher and administrative coordinator. "We're very casual here, very nurturing."

While the approach to education may seem informal at Exploris, the students appear to be on task. In the computer room, kids pursue an assignment on how animals learn with the same enthusiasm they might devote to a video game. They talk excitedly as they call up websites, rushing back and forth to see what their classmate has found. The teacher stands off to one side, ready to answer any questions but otherwise leaving the students to their own devices. Next door, another class has divided into groups of four to compose a poem starting from a single word that the teacher has provided them. Working in groups, each student benefits from the vocabulary of the other. A third class is spread out on the floor reading to themselves, part of the daily DEAR time, short for "drop everything and read."

Asked why all of the students appear to be on task, Farthing says, "It's what we expect of them. Kids here understand it's not cool to act out. If you enjoy the process of learning, there's no reason to be doing anything else."

Students at Exploris set their own goals for what they want to learn. Goal setting is done on a quarterly basis with review sessions every two weeks to determine their progress. "Exploris students are in charge of their own education," says school director Anne Bryan. "The teachers are here to guide them."

No grades are given at Exploris. Instead, students and teachers rely primarily on evaluations of portfolios. "There's a whole different feeling about school work here," Farthing says. "You don't have kids asking, 'Can I get two more points on this test' or 'What if I fail?' They are focused on the work itself."



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With the exception of mathematics and foreign languages (Spanish and French), Exploris does not break out learning into separate classes. Rather, relevant subject matter is interwoven into the teaching in students' core classes. The teachers plan out a theme (such as "know thyself") and determine what the language arts, social studies, and science elements are.

Exploris' founders believe that firsthand experience is the greatest teacher. In keeping with that approach, children go on lots of field trips and take full advantage of their location in Raleigh. They visit Memorial Auditorium to watch the North Carolina Symphony Orchestra practice, tour the art galleries around Moore Square, and play in the Children's Museum next door. Exploris also places a strong emphasis on community service.

"Our eighth graders worked with the elderly at Glenwood Towers," Farthing says. "They built them a greenhouse and butterfly garden and showed them how to use computers. They even visited some of the tenants in the hospital when they got sick. The kids learned as much as they taught. I know their lives were forever changed by that experience."

Exploris also prides itself on parental involvement in the school. Parents frequently accompany the children on field trips. As part of a Friday afternoon electives course, parents come in and talk about their professions.

Asked which of Exploris' instructional methods are relevant to the public schools, director Anne Bryan says, "All of them. Not every school can or should emulate every practice, but we believe teachers and administrators will see a variety of things they can use. Schools need to decide what they believe they can do well and go after it."

SPARC Academy—Raleigh, N.C.

A few blocks east of Moore Square on the campus of St. Augustine's College, SPARC Academy presents a striking contrast to Exploris. The K-8 student body is 100 percent African-American compared to the racially and ethnically diverse student body at Exploris. The academy is housed in an ancient dormitory that is still in the process of being renovated. The school was relocated numerous times before settling in its current location in 1999.

Principal Jacki Mburu says the disruption of the early moves caused most of the better students to leave, and the school is now populated primarily by at-risk students. "Students here are in and out of the educational system," Mburu says.

"We get a lot of transfers, a lot of kids who've been bounced out of the regular schools. We have to accept everyone that applies."

To engender a sense of stability and feeling of self-respect among its students, SPARC has adopted a highly structured program based around African themes. Students wear navy blue and white batik uniforms imprinted with an African symbol that represents unity, cooperation, and interdependence. Each day starts with "unity drumming," which calls the



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children into the village. "The drums signify that you've awakened to education," Mburu says.

In class, traditional African folk tales illustrating character education—or village Kijiji—are incorporated into the teaching of the standard state social studies curriculum. Students are separated by gender for their core classes, a policy that Mburu says has done wonders to improve discipline. Teachers rely primarily on direct instruction to get their points across. "We've found that for at-risk students, direct instruction combined with a lot of close supervision is the best approach," Mburu says.

Students at SPARC haven't performed particularly well on end-of-grade tests. This is not surprising given the large at-risk population. However, the students are improving. The school had a composite score of 31.4 percent on end of grade tests in 1999–2000, but that number rose to 47.6 percent in 2000–2001. Mburu was relieved and excited when the school had its charter renewed for five more years in 2002, but acknowledges that the school needs to continue to improve. "You're not going to turn these kids around in a year or even two," she says. "You really need more time to get a school on its feet and carry a bunch of kids through. We need to be given that time to prove ourselves."

American Renaissance Charter—Statesville, N.C.

For Kate Alice Dunaway, a founding member and director of the American Renaissance Charter School (ARCS) in Statesville, the arts are key to a quality education. The failure of the public schools in Iredell County to place emphasis on the arts and on foreign languages were among the reasons she and others sought to open a charter school in Statesville.

"We know that children who participate in the arts are more successful in school," Dunaway says. "They have more self-esteem, and they relate better to others. For most of these kids, exposure to the arts is the first way they have broadened their horizons. I can promise you that every kindergartener here has been introduced to Picasso and Monet."

Located in an historic building that once housed the state's oldest Ford dealership, American Renaissance Charter provides a learning environment that is colorful, even fanciful. The former auto service area has been divided into classrooms through the use of pastel-colored partitions that define but do not isolate the spaces. The two floors are connected by means of a red tubular slide. Outside, classes are held in a Magic School bus, an old bus with wheels removed set in the midst of the Magic Garden.

Every child at this K–5 elementary school attends a visual and performing arts class every day. Local musicians, potters, and storytellers are constantly dropping by to give performances. The children regularly visit area museums and plays, and they put on their own Shakespeare performance each year.

Students follow a core block program in the manner of middle and high school, going first to arts class, and then rotating to research (a combination of



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social studies, technology, and communication), communication, and science/mathematics. The instructional program follows the state's Standard Course of Study, but teachers have restructured it using their own tools and methodologies. No letter grades are given. Rather, teachers evaluate students through a checklist of homework, anecdotal records, and portfolio reviews.

American Renaissance prides itself on the bonds it promotes between teachers and students' families. Dunaway requires that all of her teachers visit their students' homes at some point during the year. With an enrollment of 300 students, that is becoming difficult. But the teachers find it to be a rewarding experience for all concerned.

"It's incredibly informative to see the environment that each child is coming from," says Drew Fitzgerald, exceptional children team leader. "It also helps involve the families. It gives them an immediate connection with the school and makes a statement about who we are."

Parents get involved in ARCS in countless ways. Through the Renaissance Parents Association, parents volunteer as reading tutors, lunch supervisors, and field trip chaperones. Special celebrations are held four times a year to update parents on how their children have progressed and where they are going. Parents help supervise end-of-grade study sessions held each Saturday for five months beginning in January.

Dunaway feels American Renaissance's program is paying off in terms of academic performance. End-of-grade tests taken in June 2001 showed that 84 percent of students who had been at the school three years scored Level III or above in reading and 95 percent at Level III or above in math. This compares with a rate for first-year students of 63 percent in reading and 77 percent in math.

"This finding supports our belief that there is a close relationship between the number of years a student attends ARCS and the performance on the required end-of-grade tests," she says.

Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School—Hollister, N.C.

In the same way that SPARC Academy calls on African traditions to unite and motivate African-American children, the Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School in Hollister relies on American Indian themes to inspire its largely Native American students. The charter school is located in the former Haliwa-Saponi Indian School, which closed in 1969 due to integration (students were bused to



schools in Eastman and Roanoke Rapids). Some might consider the rebirth of this school as a retreat from integration. The founders consider it a return to community.

"The people of this area have long had the desire to reopen this place as a school," says Ogletree Richardson, principal of the Haliwa-Saponi School. "After the original school closed, children were forced to ride the bus either an hour to the middle school in Eastman or more than an hour to the high school in Roanoke Rapids. Parents were concerned that their

children were being exposed to violence and drugs. We felt a local school would be so much better.”

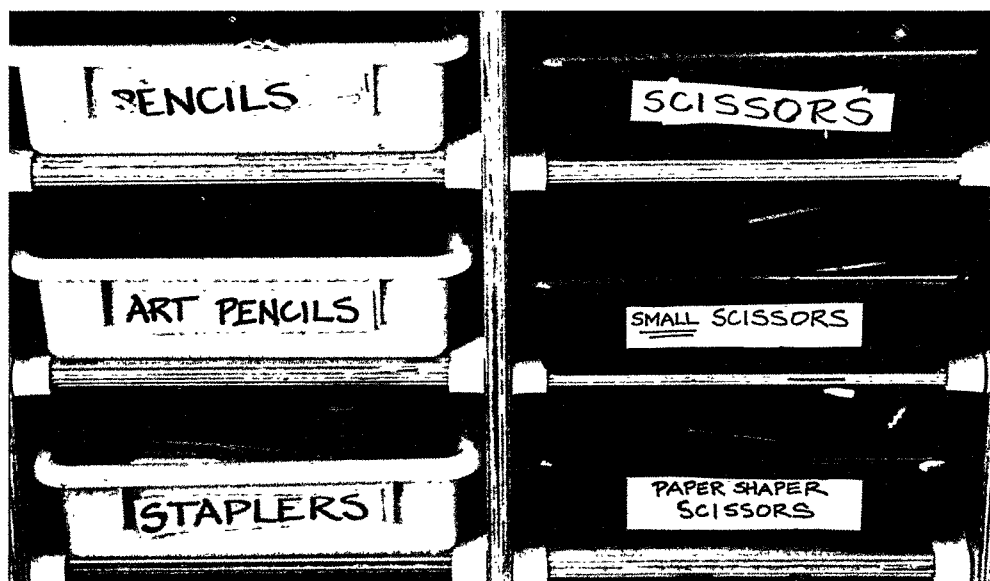
The wood frame school building had to undergo substantial renovations before it could reopen. These were paid for entirely by the Haliwa-Saponi Tribe. Ogletree asked the Halifax County School Board for assistance in providing food service, bus transportation, and access to local funds. The board agreed to provide free lunches (a parent volunteer picks them up at the Hollister School and delivers them) but declined to help with other measures. “We hoped to establish a partnership with the local school system, but that has not worked out so far,” Ogletree says.

The instructional program at this K-6 elementary school is much the same as in the public schools. Children sit at their desks in neat rows, while the teacher lectures in front of a blackboard. The key difference is the small class size, averaging 18 students. Education about Native American culture is interwoven into the standard state curriculum, primarily through special projects. For example, one class made a dream catcher, a hoop-shaped object cross-hatched with netting and hung with feathers. “The children engaged their reading skills in researching the project and math skills in designing the geometric shape,” Richardson says.

While maintaining an Indian focus, the Haliwa-Saponi charter school is open to all races. Half-a-dozen white and African-American students mingle with their neighbors, and Ogletree says she welcomes anyone who wants to come. Haliwa-Saponi Charter has increased its enrollment by 10 percent each year and has dreams of going K-12 within five years. That prospect rankles the local school board, which is afraid of losing students and funds. For 2000-2001, the first year the school was opened, 52.3 percent of students at Haliwa-Saponi scored at Level III or above in the combined (math and reading) end-of-grade tests—a less than stellar performance.

But many of the local citizens feel they deserve to have a choice in public education. “We felt our children’s needs were not being met in the public schools,” says Cynthia Silver, a parent and board member of the charter school. “They are happier and safer here.”

—John Manuel



Karen Tann