The Tried, the True, and the New: Profiles of Four North Carolina Charter Schools

Gaston College Preparatory

Is it possible to take a group of school children, only 49 percent of whom read at grade level, and raise that to 93 percent in a single year? Gaston College Preparatory School has done that and more in the most unlikely of locations.

Gaston College Preparatory is a middle school (grades 5–8) located in Northampton County, one of the poorest counties in the state. The school was founded by Caleb Dolan and Tammy Sutton, both veterans of Teach for America, a nonprofit organization modeled after the Peace Corps that places teachers in schools needing help. In 1996, Teach for America sent Dolan and Sutton to Gaston Middle School, a low-performing school serving primarily African-American students. During that time, Dolan learned of KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), an educational strategy emphasizing long school days, high expectations, and a college track that has been successfully employed in two middle schools in Houston and the Bronx (the latter featured on the CBS television news program *60 Minutes*). The pair decided to start a similar school in Northampton County, and with the blessings of the KIPP Foundation, opened Gaston College Preparatory in the fall of 2001.

"The idea of school choice was alien down here, and they'd never heard of a school like ours," says Dolan. "We said you will be expected to wear uniforms, stay late, and work hard."

The school enrolled 80 fifth graders, only 49 percent of whom were reading at grade level. By the end of the first year, that figure had risen to 93 percent. In 2004, Gaston College Prep's ABCs performance composite was 94.8 percent, seventh highest amongst all charter schools in North Carolina, and in 2005–06, it was 86.7 percent and 13th highest. The school has won the ABC's School of Distinction Award four times and Most Improved award once.

The school day at Gaston College Preparatory begins at 8:00 a.m. and lasts until 5:00 p.m. Teachers are required to stay after school to help any children that need it and are available by cell phone until 8:30 p.m. Classes are held two Saturdays a month. Parents sign a form saying they will agree to check their children's homework every night.

Discipline at the school is strict. A system called "paycheck" rewards well-behaved students with trips to places like Boston, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Those who misbehave lose checks and travel privileges. Yet the atmosphere is upbeat. Bright colors reign in the halls. Teachers and students are enthusiastic.

"You can be one of the top students in the class or one of the bottom and the teachers will go out of their way to help you," says Chevron Boone, an eighth grader. "They make you believe you will receive what you work for."

Every student at Gaston College Preparatory expects to go to college, and their aim is high. The eighth grade has collectively visited Duke, UNC, Yale, Harvard, and Columbia, among others.

Gaston College Preparatory received an initial loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Self-Help Credit Union in Durham, N.C., to purchase the land for the school and construct modular classrooms and a gymnasium. All other expenses are covered by the state per-pupil average daily membership appropriation awarded to all school systems for operating expenses.

Quest Academy

Quest Academy, a K–8 school in North Raleigh, has been ranked a School of Excellence every year it's been open except the first, when it was considered "too small" to be eligible for that ranking. For the 2003–04 school year, Quest was the top ranked school in the state on the end-of-grade test with a 100 percent passing rate. Asked what is responsible for the school's success, principal Charles Watson replies, "I wish I could tell you I've come up with a secret, but I haven't."

Watson, a veteran of 30 years in teaching and administration in the North Carolina public schools, goes on to cite Quest's defining features, which may not be revolutionary, but have yielded impressive results. Classes are small, limited to 15 students per classroom. All teachers are licensed, certified, and teaching in their area of expertise. They average 11 years of experience, and 40 percent hold advanced degrees.

"Most important, they are asked to perform only one job—teach," Watson says. "They have no other meetings, no nights, no weekends, and no teacher workdays. I treat them all professionally. They have keys to the door. They have no limits on instructional supplies. We pay them comparable salaries to the [traditional] public schools."

Contrary to schools like Gaston College Prep that demand long hours of their students, Quest's school day runs only from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. This allows students time to pursue extracurricular activities of their own choosing. "We tend to attract kids who are very accomplished at a particular sport or hobby," Watson says. "We've had gymnasts, skaters, swimmers, and even Broadway performers."

Quest has made maximum use of its 6,800 square feet of space. Rooms are small but brightly lit. Rather than having a separate computer lab, the 126 students have access to 15 wireless laptop computers connected with a single high-speed printer. Lunch is served in the front entry three days a week. Kids shoot baskets in the parking lot.

Watson apologizes for not having more to show. "All we have is instruction and lunch," he says. "But we take our responsibility to teach our children very seriously."

In 2005–06, Quest Academy had a performance composite of 99.1 percent, the second highest among charter schools.

Children's Community School

Opened in August 2004, Children's Community School in Davidson, N.C., might be said to represent the new and improved generation of charter schools approved by the state. The school was launched with a strong business plan put together by its board. That board secured a $1.7 million loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Davidson is considered a rural community), which allowed for the renovation of a 40,000 square-foot office/industrial building to house the school. Top flight teachers were recruited, some with master's degrees and the rest with bachelor's degrees. Some 650 students applied for 35 open slots.

Principal Joy Warner talks enthusiastically about the school's approach of looking at children as individuals and designing the curriculum appropriately. "Parents want a school that respects and honors children as individuals," Warner says. "They want a place where kids are not just regurgitating what the teacher tells them."

She touts the school's "whole child" approach, focusing on the child's social, emotional, and physical, as well as cognitive development. "You'll see kids doing the crabwalk or the wheelbarrow down the hall as a way of building upper body strength, which helps with handwriting, and calming them down if they've got a lot of excess energy," Warner says.

Children's Community School employs the arts as a method of instruction. For example, the third grade is studying Charlotte's history. The students are researching

famous people associated with the city, creating likenesses of them out of wax, and publishing a book about them in a writing class.

Children's Community follows The Basic School approach developed by Dr. Ernest Boyer, past president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Boyer researched elementary schools for 25 years to determine what teaching practices were most effective. His conclusion, published in *The Basic School,* was that education needed to return to "basic" values, focusing on neighborhood schools and the first years of formal learning.

"It's time to stop pretending there's some magic innovation we have yet to discover and start concentrating on what good teachers already know and do," Boyer wrote.

The Basic School is focused on four priorities—community, curriculum, climate, and character. All members of the school community are expected to hold a shared vision of learning. Teachers are considered leaders and parents as partners. The curriculum focuses on literacy as the first and most essential goal, with all children expected to become proficient in the written and spoken word, as well as in mathematics and the arts. The school seeks to enhance the climate for learning through small class sizes, ample learning resources from building blocks to computers, and support services ranging from academics to health to counseling. Finally, the basic school teaches a commitment to character centered around seven core virtues—honesty, respect, responsibility, compassion, self-discipline, perseverance, and giving.

Children's Community currently serves grades K–3, with plans to add grades 4 and 5 in the next two years. Classes range in size from 18 to 22 students with a full-time teacher and assistant in every classroom. A literary coach also assists reading classes.

Though only about 10 percent of students are racial minorities, Warner says the school is "working double time to get diversity into our lottery." Warner says the school enrolls a high percentage of special needs children (she estimates 60 out of 350 students), including those with Downs syndrome, severe physical handicaps, and speech and language disabilities. "We try to include these students in the regular classrooms, but we also have breakout classes where needed," Warner says.

Children's Community opened in the fall of 2004, and in 2005–06, its performance composite was 87 percent, 12th highest among charter schools.

Carolina International School

Carolina International School occupies 16 modular units on 34 acres in the fast developing countryside of southern Cabarrus County, an area known as University City due to its proximity to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Cabarrus County needs 15 new schools; a recently passed bond measure approved money for five. So any school, even a K–7 charter enrolling 320 students, is welcomed.

Carolina International School (CIS) was founded in 2004 by director Richard Beall, who felt the need for a charter school with a strong multi-cultural focus. "International education is essential to prepare U.S. citizens of the 21st century," Beall says. "Not only is our world increasingly interconnected and interdependent, our local communities are growing in multicultural diversity. Our students must develop a broad awareness of other cultures and the differences that distinguish them. But they must simultaneously acquire a deep understanding of all that we share in common as human beings and occupants of a single planet."

CIS follows the *North Carolina Standard Course of Study,* but international education is interwoven thoughout the curriculum and the life of the school. CIS is collaborating with the Charlotte and Concord Sister Cities Programs to align each grade with one of seven international cities for the duration of the students' years at CIS.

"This will enable our students to develop *sustained* relationships with their peers

in other countries through pen pal and Internet correspondence and through visiting delegations from these countries," Beall says. Guests from more than 20 countries have visited the campus in collaboration with Charlotte's International House and the U.S. Department of State.

Faculty at CIS come from seven different countries. Two teachers hail from Uganda, representing the UNITE program (Uganda and North Carolina International Teaching for the Environment), sponsored by the N.C. Zoological Park. CIS is the first charter school to be a partner with World View, the prestigious center in Chapel Hill that provides international education programs, seminars, workshops, and travel experiences for K–12 educators worldwide.

CIS follows the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program, an international, transdisciplinary program designed to foster development of the "whole child," including social, physical, emotional, and cultural as well as academic needs. The Primary Years Program employs six transdisciplinary themes school-wide for each six-week term: who we are, where we are in place and time, how we express ourselves, how the world works, how we organize ourselves, and sharing the planet.

The teaching follows units of inquiry. "The 4th grade might be studying North Carolina history, which has involved a tremendous growth in population from in-migration," Beall states. "A unit of inquiry might ask, what are the deeper events going on? Why do people move? Students might develop a project on migration and movement."

CIS also places a strong emphasis on environmental education. Beall hopes the 34-acre campus with its forest and wetlands will become an outdoor classroom for various activities that promote environmental awareness and stewardship. Plans for permanent buildings call for energy and water-saving features such as daylighting (clerestory windows that replace the need for artificial lights) and cisterns to gather rainwater for use in flushing toilets. Teachers and students work together on environmental service projects "to cultivate respect, learn responsibility, develop solutions and offer service while having fun." In 2005–06, CIS had a performance composite of 85.9 percent, 15th highest among charter schools.

—John Manuel

(continued from page 28) growth of charter school choice," the authors conclude. "Read alongside the results of studies based on student-level data, they suggest that even a little bit of competition can force schools to appear to be improving, but that policymakers need to take care to ensure that translates into real gains for the average student."[8]

In 2004, SRI International conducted a study for the U.S. Department of Education entitled "Evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program." The federal government supports charter schools through the Public Charter Schools Program (PCSP). PCSP funds the state grant program, supports charter school research and demonstration programs, and underwrites national charter school conferences. The SRI report was designed to: (1) provide the public and education policymakers with the findings from a descriptive examination of how the PCSP operates, and (2) continue documentation of the evolution of the charter school movement.

"Charter school students exhibit 'considerably smaller achievement gains' in reading and math, on average, than they would have in traditional public schools."

— Study by Helen Ladd and Robert Bifulco