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Charter school's launch far from boring

A day in the life of Paulo Freire Freedom School

By Jeff Commings

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If you're planning to start a charter school, the real work starts long before the doors are opened and the students take their desks.

A charter has to be written. A lease on a building must be obtained. And, of course, teachers and students need to be found.

Once the big day arrives, everything pretty much runs on autopilot, or so it seemed last Wednesday, the seventh day of classes at Paulo Freire Freedom School, housed in the basement of the former YMCA at 300 E. University Blvd. Co-director Santo Nicotera's to-do list is light enough to enable him to sit in on some classes, and the 22 students (one called in sick) and three teachers flow through the day with an established rapport.

Three girls have formed a clique. Teacher-generated inspirational messages fill classrooms. The battle for school brainiac has begun.

8 a.m.: The day starts by gathering students, teachers and interested parents into a circle, also called a kiva. It's modeled after such meetings in the Coalition of Essential Schools, of which Paulo Freire is a part. The coalition strives to restructure the educational process through teaching excellence and exceptional student achievement, among other concepts.

The kiva is a place for announcements of the day, and aims for open discussion. Today, the focus is on random acts of kindness. A teacher mentions a man buying a cup of coffee for him, and a student talks about another student who helps others without being asked. Student Trevor Cartwright ends the session by displaying his collection of rare rocks.

8:30 a.m.: Kristin Bloom's sixth-grade math class is quietly playing "The Factor Game," which helps them figure out how many factors certain numbers have. All of the students can do the multiplication without calculators. When it comes to tabulating scores at the end, Trevor tries to show off by adding in his head.

"But I can never seem to add 26 and 27 in my head," said the 11-year-old, finally relying on a calculator.

9:30 a.m.: A two-way mirror allows Nicotera to view Bloom's math class from his office. As he paces the cluttered room, he talks about how he hoped to have 60 students, but he's not too upset that only 23 sixth- and seventh-graders signed up. He notes that charter schools that want to renovate don't get money from the state School Facilities Board, as traditional schools do, but from funds based on their 100-day attendance. That number constantly plagues Nicotera.

"It (small class size) allows us to create a great learning environment," said Nicotera, a 23-year educator in the

More online

- Paulo Freire Freedom School is on the Web at www.elpueblointegral.org.

Denver Public Schools. "But I guess I'm always thinking about the financial part."

9:55 a.m.: The sixth grade has moved to the humanities classroom, while the seventh grade is studying mapmaking in science. Sixth-graders Delia Pepper, Malcolm Robinson and Hallie Wine are working on a skit they will perform about the landing of the Mayflower in 1620. Actually, the skit will be improvised, but the trio wants to at least understand the outline. Two other groups are practicing their skits - about the Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights - in another room.

"It's definitely not boring this way," says Delia, 11.

The class best exemplifies the mission statement of the school: to engage kids in aspects of social justice and get them involved in shaping their community. Today's homework has the students creating perfect communities.

"I wouldn't be teaching if it weren't for this charter school because of how it cares about children and social justice," said Garth Mackzum. "And it gives children an opportunity to question the world and act on their dreams."

12:45 p.m.: The beginning Spanish class has 18 students. Four others read Spanish on the Internet in a separate room with Mackzum. Elsa Flores, an administrative assistant asked to fill in after a teacher left, has help; the other teachers join the class, some of them to brush up on their Spanish. Others, such as Bloom, are learning the language. All wander the room to keep the antsy kids attentive.

"*Ya*," Flores says often to get the kids' attention as they play a vocabulary game.

2:15 p.m.: This is the time of the day most have been waiting for. After a 30-minute session of light yoga, in which some students participated more enthusiastically than others, the group is split in two. Seven will go to art class. The rest will spend time on the trapeze in the performance/practice space of dance group Zuzi, located one floor above the school. Zuzi works with the school twice a week, with the other days devoted to learning labs.

The goal of playing on the trapeze, said Zuzi member Nanette Robinson, is to allow students to take risks on a generally safe apparatus and work as a team.

"They don't realize they're getting exercise because it's so much fun," said Robinson, who has taught this class for various schools for eight years.

In addition to Zuzi, Nicotera said other organizations in the building will donate some educational time to the school, including the Audubon Society and Friends of Saguaro National Park.

"We can take field trips without leaving the building," he said.

3 p.m.: School's out, and some of the parents have arrived to take their kids home. Wade Sherbrooke, the father of two at Paulo Freire, watched the trapeze class because his sons raved about it when they came home Monday.

It's a far cry from the reservations he had when he first visited the school.

"We thought it was an iffy thing because they hadn't operated before," Sherbrooke said. "But after we met the teachers, everything dissipated. We felt they were committed and competent."

3:15 p.m.: Most of the students have left. The past seven hours have been a little trying for the staff at the school, but somehow they are still grinning through it, ready for whatever happens the next day.

"It's fun," said Mackzum, the teacher most likely to show a smile. "The students inspire us."

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