



From torts to teachers:
Lawyer Errol Stone and
principal Lisa Kenner at
Legacy Charter School.

Kindergarten Lawyers

A well-heeled Chicago law firm undertakes to discover whether charter schools can work for poor minority children | By Mary Ellen Egan

ANISSA SMITH, A 38-YEAR-old mother of three, has few good things to say about the public schools in North Lawndale, a poor, crime-ridden neighborhood 4 miles west of downtown Chicago. Her eldest son, Joe, 13, switched to North Lawndale's Mason Elementary in 1998 from a parochial school. Two years at Mason was enough to turn her son from a

good to an indifferent student, Smith says. "He's lazy now, and we have to fight to get him to do his homework," she says.

So when Smith's two youngest, Justin, 6, and Jazlynn, 4, were ready for school, she swore she'd move out of state before sending them to a neighborhood school. But last August a charter school opened, using classrooms in Mason's building. The kids enrolled, and Smith is ecstatic now.

The nation has 3,617 charter schools, that is, ones that get public funding but stand outside the established public school systems. They are usually run by nonprofits, church groups or universities and get to set their own rules. The one in North Lawndale has a most unusual operator—a law firm. To celebrate its hundredth anniversary, Chicago's Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal decided to open a school and will donate \$1 million, office equipment and professional talent over the next five years (the school's annual budget is \$1.2 million). It's quite likely the first law firm in the nation to run a charter school, and the firm's lawyers found the assignment no snap: They struggled to surmount hurdles thrown up by bureaucrats and politicians.

The school, called Legacy Charter School, was set up by Errol Stone, a 65-year-old real estate and securities lawyer. He hired Lisa Kenner, formerly principal at a South Side charter school, as Legacy's first principal.

The residents of North Lawndale were less than welcoming at first. Donald Lubin, a Sonnenschein partner and Legacy board member, recalls, "There were questions like, 'What is this big, white corporate law firm doing moving into our neighborhood?'"

To defuse the tension, Stone and Kenner held open houses where over dinner residents could talk about the project. Bit by bit the residents warmed to the idea of the school. Finding a location wasn't easy, either. Stone wanted to move into a public school that was closing, but objections by an alderman delayed the process. After a year of searching he worked out a deal to share a building with Mason Elementary.

Stone and Kenner originally wanted Legacy to hold full-day pre-K classes, a curriculum that can be funded in Illinois by one federal (Head Start) and two state government programs. Stone worked for months trying to reconcile the different requirements each program had for families as well as the school, before throwing his hands up and deciding instead to offer two half-day pre-K classes.

The law firm decided to start small—there are only four classes, prekindergarten through second grade—and plans to add a grade each year. Each class of 23 is taught by two full-time teachers (a public school would have one). The students were chosen by lot-

Creative Giving

tery out of 155 who had applied. Legacy's school day begins at 8:00 a.m. and runs until 3:30 p.m., 90 minutes longer than district schools. A free afterschool program is available Monday through Thursday, so 78% of eligible Legacy students spend up to nine and a half hours a day in school.

Legacy teachers are paid an average \$55,000 by the district, compared with \$47,500 in the Chicago public system. But Stone added an incentive: Sonnenschein will pay each teacher an additional 5% to 10% of their pay each year depending on the teacher's and the school's performance. The teachers have their work cut out for them: At the beginning of the school year only 12 of the 69 kindergartners through second graders could read at their grade level.

"One of the things we've discovered is that their vocabulary is very limited, so we're trying to add new words," says first-grade teacher Elizabeth Goss. One afternoon last fall Goss worked with five first graders on synonyms for the word "good," while coteacher Mary Helen Chappetto worked with another group of students on how to use "me" and "my" in writing sentences, a source of confusion for nearly all Legacy first graders.

By the Numbers

1991 Year the first charter school started, in Minnesota.

3,617 Number of charter schools nationally.

1 million Students in charter schools.

424 Schools opening 2005-06.

252 Number closed 1992-2004.

Source: Center for Education Reform.

In the pre-K class Karen Simak, a 44-year veteran of the Chicago school system, is focusing her efforts on a broader life lesson—planning ahead. "The problem for people in poverty is that they don't plan for the future, and this causes a lot of chaos in their lives,"

she says. Simak has divided her room into "centers"—a library, a math center, a building-block center—so the children have to ask her specifically which area they'd like to visit and what they'll do once they get there.

In a math session LaDonna Turner teaches second graders the concept of a data range, as seen in bar charts representing numbers of pets. Her questions elicit few answers and plenty of blank stares. The class had gone over this material the day before, but nearly all have forgotten the concept.

Legacy has been open for only seven months, so it's too early for any grand pronouncement on how its students will fare. The dropout rate in North Lawndale schools is 46%, but the problem doesn't really surface until the kids are well past the second grade. Vivian Hudson-Davis, principal of the Mason school, is a big fan of Legacy, yet she predicts that Legacy will face its share of challenges on this front. "As the students get older, the parents get less involved. And the older the students, the harder they are to control," she says.

Anissa Smith doesn't want to hear that quite yet: "The kids are reading and writing, and they're excited to get up and go to school," she says. **F**



Learning outside the traditional public system: a pre-K class at Legacy.