

Small Schools that Work ***Three Models — One Mission***

By Susan Olasky

Michael Klonsky, a professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, says, “A compelling body of research shows that when students are part of smaller and more intimate learning communities, they are more successful.”

There’s a movement afoot in the public school realm to return to small schools after decades of consolidation. The large schools of the past three decades, which were supposed to result in economies of scale and academic breadth, are now viewed as part of the problem with education. Large schools breed anonymity and a culture of misbehavior. Large schools don’t have a unified mission or vision, and communication between parents and school is often impersonal.

Researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago and other places say that small schools increase student morale and achievement, foster community, and increase graduation rates. Students at small schools don’t get lost in the cracks. “Anonymity is the greatest tool an adolescent can use against you,” Mary Butz, principal of Manhattan Village Academy, a 330-student high school in New York City, told *Education World*. “In small schools, students lose their anonymity and have to produce.”

Over the past year, I’ve traveled to three different small schools that have carved out unique niches. Although these schools are private, not public, they share the characteristics that make small schools work. Each of the schools has a clear mission and teachers and families who share that mission.

Christian Vision, Military Discipline

Chamberlain-Hunt Academy is a 125 year old military boarding school located in historic Port Gibson, Mississippi, a town U.S. Grant called “too beautiful to burn.” By the 1960s, though, CHA had lost its Christian mooring and become another “white flight” school. Eventually its student population dwindled to 22. It was on the verge of closing in 1998 when it was acquired.

French Camp Academy, a boarding school in northern Mississippi, invested several million dollars to restore the school’s physical plant. More importantly, it brought a renewed Christian vision to the school—“knowledge and wisdom in submission to God”—that it seeks to implement in all its programs. Although many military schools have a spiritual component, few lay out their beliefs so clearly: “We believe that God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, is the sole source of all knowledge... We believe that through discipline we learn humility. In humility we learn our own weakness. And in weakness we learn reliance on the sovereignty of God.”


CHA has experienced rapid growth since the French Camp purchase. The dorms are full and the school is in the midst of developing 70 acres of its campus into a wilderness camp with ropes courses and other facilities. School costs are \$10,500 a year, including uniforms, room and board.

Shane Blanton, executive director and principal of CHA, is a bowtie-wearing, professorial-looking man who doesn’t fit the stereotype of a military school headmaster. He’s been there for the past five years.

“We don’t have bad kids,” he says “We have kids who need a lot of structure. They tend to be leaders”—most have learned how to manipulate their parents. Many come from broken homes. Most have been kicked out of other schools and a few, especially in the first years after the French Camp takeover, were in trouble with the law. Some have learning disabilities. Most are on some kind of medication for behavior control when they first arrive. The school works closely with a doctor and has found that structure successfully replaces medication about 80% of the time.

That structure comes naturally in a military setting. Students wear uniforms and shoulder boards; they have ranks and drill. When they break the rules they learn to pay

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the consequences. The schools 121 boarding students, all male, live in dorms where house parents, called TAC officers (from the military “Tactical Officer”), play a crucial role. At some military schools these fellows would be retired military officers, but at Chamberlain-Hunt they are often former youth directors at churches. It’s their job to bring discipline and structure into the lives of the boys.

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Although girls may attend CHA as day students, two years ago the school stopped accepting them into the boarding program. Maintaining discipline was a major headache with a co-ed facility. “‘Struggle’ is not a strong enough word for it,” Mr. Blanton said.

He adds that the first months of a new student’s life at CHA “are interesting. They do a lot of hard work.” That phrase doesn’t just mean they work hard, although they do, but it means that they put in 30 minutes of Physical Training (often running or push-ups at 5:00 in the morning) for each demerit they earn—and they tend to earn lots of demerits. Although at first the discipline may focus on negative consequences for bad behavior, students also are rewarded for good behavior: good grades can yield weekends at home.

Although parents might choose Chamberlain-Hunt because of their kids’ behavior, the school has a rigorous academic program accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Since not all students are ready for AP level courses, CHA offers tutoring, one-on-one focus classes, and summer school to prepare in-coming students for the challenge of the college prep curriculum. Besides academic subjects, students attend daily chapel and take Bible classes. They also study ethics and Christian character in 7th grade, Old and New Testament in 8th-10th, the Westminster Confession (a classic reformation statement) in 11th, and take a capstone Biblical worldview class in 12th grade.

On one Sunday morning, the close-cropped students in their short sleeve white shirts and gray uniform pants file into the dining room for a meal of cold cereal, yogurt, toast and juice. Soon they will march down Main Street, under overhanging shade trees and past stately homes, until they reach the Presbyterian Church for services.

Before they leave the dining hall a handful agree to talk about their reasons for being at CHA. Most describe themselves as needing structure and discipline. Most say they

hated the school at first, and some even admitted to being the kind of kid who received lots of Physical Training. They describe a period of adjustment to dorm life as they tested the school’s limits and their TAC officers’ resolve.

But gradually the kids do adjust, especially as they realize this is a school they aren’t going to get kicked out of. According to Mr. Blanton, “The outside change happens very quickly. I’m not sure the heart change happens that quickly.”

The students laugh about the guys who are stubborn, describing their “constant PT and constant licks. They don’t care.” Sometimes they have to spend an hour doing PT at five in the morning, and sometimes their stubbornness results in PT for their friends as well. As one student put it, “They get everyone mad at them.”

One three-year veteran of the school said, “If I hadn’t come here I would have never reached anything close to my potential...I never had the structure to make myself do what I needed to do.” He remembers being more confused than angry when he first came: “I didn’t like it and made bad grades.” He chose to come back after attending another school for about nine weeks, and now sees CHA as useful because “It puts you in the adult world that you have to be in and succeed in. They push you to the limit so you can reach your full potential.”

Another student, now a graduate, said he attended the school for six years, although he left twice to try out other places. He was twelve years old when he arrived: “I wanted to come here. I wanted the structure and the discipline...School takes a lot of temptations away...If I was at home I’d be tempted with drinking and smoking. I’m not tempted by those things here.”

The boys fill up their outside time with sports and physical activities like shooting and paintball. Their life is organized into military units where they learn leadership skills and assume responsibility for those under them. What happens if a leader misuses his authority? A one-year veteran had a quick answer. “If he abuses his rank he knows he’ll be in more trouble than he can imagine—possibly stripped of his rank.”

Although the number of military schools has declined greatly over the past century, many of the survivors are prospering (28 are listed on the website of the Association of Military Colleges and Schools of the United States). Only a handful offer a strong academic and Christian education. For Chamberlain-Hunt, that combination has brought the school back from the verge of death.

Juan Diego Catholic High School

Fel Esia Rodriguez stands behind the reception desk in the marble-floored lobby of the Chancery of the Catholic Diocese of Austin, Texas. She answers the phone, greets

visitors, and answers questions from a couple of reporters as though she's been doing it for years. But she's only fourteen years old and a full-time high school student working towards a college prep diploma at Juan Diego Catholic High School.

On Thursdays Fel Esia doesn't attend classes. Instead, she arrives at school where she catches a van along with other students in the D work group who have jobs at Dell, the Austin Lyric Opera, law firms and advertising agencies. Each student puts in a full 8:30 to 5:00 workday before being dropped off at the school at the end of the day.

Combining work and school is not new. Students earning vocational degrees have often gone to school half days and worked in their chosen trades—hairdresser or auto mechanic—in the afternoon. Other high school students work after school to pay for clothes and entertainment. But the money the students at Juan Diego earn goes back to the school to cover more than 2/3 of the cost of their tuition.

Juan Diego is modeled after Cristo Rey Jesuit High

School in Chicago, which was founded in 1996 to provide affordable Catholic education to low-income students in a neighborhood where a third of the students don't even graduate from high school and most families qualify for free or reduced lunch. The school's design, which sprang from the need to answer the question—How do we make Catholic education affordable? — has been so successful that it has launched a nationwide movement and caught the eye of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

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Together with the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation, a California foundation that supports innovative Catholic schools, the Gates Foundation announced plans to give \$18.9 million to expand the number of schools modeled after Cristo Rey; about a half million dollars are going to Juan Diego. In its press release announcing the grant, the Gates Foundation said, "these schools offer a rigorous curriculum that prepares all students for college. The small setting enables individualized instruction and a personalized culture with a climate of respect and responsibility."

Currently five schools are open and six more are under development. Juan Diego was the third Cristo Rey school to open. All the schools share a rigorous, traditional Catholic school curriculum. But what sets them apart is the unique work-study program. The schools enlist participation from local businesses and non-profits that provide full-time entry level clerical jobs. Each job is split among four students, who each work one day a week and rotate on the fifth. A student works from 8:30 to 5:00 and is responsible for any task a regular employee in that position would perform. The company pays the school and the school handles all the paperwork.

Ed Doherty, the principal and president of Juan Diego, describes the work-study program: "We don't go to companies asking for contributions or charity. We're more like a temporary agency. We staff a job for them."

Now in its second year, Juan Diego has 103 students in ninth and tenth grade, which means it needs 26 jobs—a major commitment in a city hard hit by the high tech bust. As the school adds grades, it will need to locate up to 100 jobs for an expected enrollment of 400. Mr. Doherty worries a bit about the model's future in a time of economic downturn. But despite relatively high levels of unemployment in Austin over the past several years, all ten employers from last year recommitted this year and Dell increased its commitment to

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For more information on the schools in this issue contact:

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Austin, TX 78704

512 804 1935

www.juandiegoprep.org

Chamberlain-Hunt Academy

124 McComb Ave.

Port Gibson, MS 39150

601-437-4291

www.chamberlain-hunt.com

The Cornerstone Schools Association

6861 East Nevada

Detroit, Michigan 48234

313 892-1860

www.cornerstoneschools.com

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three jobs (or 12 students). Students work 10 months, from August to June, earning a combined salary of \$18,000, which offsets each student's tuition by \$4500, or about 70% of the annual cost.

That is a significant saving for the families at Juan Diego whose median income is \$30,000. The Austin school draws students from 32 different junior high schools throughout the city and suburbs. Students are predominantly His-

panic; 70% would be the first in their family to go to college.

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The school tries to find out during initial interviews whether a student has the right attitude to succeed at the school. According to Mr. Doherty, “The mission of our school is very attractive to parents, but the requirements are a little more demanding—not that attractive to all kids.” The school is on the lookout “for kids who say, ‘I don't want to be here, but my parents want me to be here.’”

Kids who go to Juan Diego know they are agreeing to random drug tests, dress codes, homework, and a standard college prep curriculum that doesn't leave room for many electives. Students who lack social skills necessary for work may be accepted provisionally and monitored for progress during the two and a half weeks of job training they undergo before beginning work.

During that training kids—preparing to work professionally for the first time—learn professional courtesy. They're told, for instance, that it's not polite to ask the professionals they're working with how much they make. They learn about handshakes, eye contact, and not taking advantage of the privileges

they have as employees. Mr. Doherty smiles when he describes what 14 and 15 year olds need to hear: If your employer stocks his refrigerator with sodas available for free to employees, that doesn't mean kids should stuff their backpacks full of sodas to hand out later to their friends.

The school's vision appeals not only to parents but also to highly motivated kids. Teachers, especially those in religious orders, want to teach there because the school has a clear mission to make Catholic education possible for all students. The school's ten teachers have a combined 140-150 years of experience between them. Classes are small and run like seminars.

Only in its second year, Juan Diego is still putting together a sports program and determining what other extracurricular activities to offer. The principal has made clear to coaches and students, however, that work comes first—and that means kids won't be able to attend after school practice on a workday. They may even miss some games. It may be a hard lesson for some teens and coaches to learn, but it's the bottom line at Juan Diego.

Cornerstone

Cornerstone Schools meet on three campuses in Detroit neighborhoods; each has an enrollment of about 800 students. Most are black, and many are from low-income, single-parent families.

Cornerstone's main campus is in a recently renovated boarding school for the deaf. A front addition gives the school a bright façade. A curving wall of windows shaded by

a pillared portico is part of a new addition that, along with renovations to the old building, cost the school about \$10 million. The school has large, bright classrooms, wide corridors, salmon and beige tile floors, and plenty of room on the walls for artwork, inspirational quotes, and huge photographs of students with mentors.

Cornerstone School is unique in that even with its Christ-centered vision it has garnered support from Detroit-area corpora-



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tions, including the Big Three automakers. Historically, corporations have been reluctant to support Christian schools, but Cornerstone has managed to attract a wide and generous following because corporate managers see the need to support an academically excellent alternative to Detroit's failing schools. Ernestine Sanders, president of Cornerstone, says executives "see the value of kids getting an excellent education."

The seeds that grew into Cornerstone were planted in 1990, when community leaders agreed that the city's schools were failing and a generation had been lost. The group agreed that the city didn't need another parochial school affiliated with a particular church but an independent "Christ-centered" school that could be supported by lots of different churches, businesses, community groups, and individuals. Ten months later, Cornerstone opened with 167 students.

Ms. Sanders, immaculately dressed in a suit and heels, manages to be at once imposing and warm. She pauses in a tour of the school to hug a former student and ask how she's doing at the magnet high school she now attends. Ms. Sanders also pauses to check on the reason some of the middle school students are dressed in t-shirts and jeans rather than their uniforms. The kids had earned the privilege of dressing in "spirit clothes" because their parents had attended certain school meetings.

On Halloween children in the elementary school are celebrating Saints and Angels Day as part of the school's "Christ-centered" mission. Cornerstone avoids sectarian issues and is not tied to a particular church, but large posters contain Scripture—"All your children shall be taught by the Lord and great shall be the peace of your children"—and hang in the halls and classrooms. The school, determined to expose young children to the teachings of Jesus, does that through weekly chapel and Bible-based character education. Mrs. Sanders says, "Our Christ-centeredness provides the mission for getting things done."

Before school each morning teachers in the primary school gather in a classroom for a short devotional and prayer. Although their principal is male, most of the teachers at the primary level are young and female. But walk across the school to the middle school wing and the room is full of men, who also gather to pray before school begins.

Before coming to Cornerstone in 1995, Ms. Sanders taught English in an affluent, all-white high school, a Friends school, and a school for gifted students, so she knew what excellent suburban education looked like. She brought the same expectations of excellence to Cornerstone; this is reflected in the building's immaculate appearance and the

first-rate materials she solicits for her students. She didn't beg for used violins, violas, and cellos for the school's music programs, but raised money for new instruments. "We need the same resources that you would provide anywhere you expect excellence," she says.

That desire for excellence requires a challenging curriculum that includes Spanish (beginning in kindergarten), art and music (beginning in pre-K), and instrumental music (beginning in third grade). Cornerstone graduates are sought

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after by the city's several good magnet high schools and other parochial high schools.

Since the school doesn't have admissions testing and is open to all kinds of students, it offers individualized curriculum at both ends of the academic spectrum, for both slow and gifted learners. To make sure kids have enough exposure to the material, the school runs eleven months a year and gives four nights of homework per week. The school chooses curriculum based on its objectives, and then tests annually to make sure the students are learning what they are supposed to.

Partnerships are central to helping Cornerstone achieve its objectives. The school has "community partners," who agree to donate \$2000 per student. Some also agree to come to Cornerstone four times a year to meet with their students and work together on a project. Some partners sponsor one child, some five, and one sponsored an entire class for \$50,000.

Although the true cost per child is \$8400, the sponsorships and other fund-raising enabled Cornerstone to set tuition this year at \$2,750 for an 11-month school year. Many students receive scholarships to help cover part of that cost, but all families pay something.

Corporate and philanthropic partnerships are responsible for the well-equipped science and computer labs that would make many private schools envious. But other partnerships are also important. When parents put their kids in the school they sign a covenant underscoring their responsibility to their child's education. They agree to volunteer at the school, attend conferences, cooperate on discipline, and get their kids to school on time. A partnership with St. Johns Health System enables Cornerstone to offer an on-site medical clinic, where families receive services from dentists,

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doctors, and social workers.

A partnership with a Lutheran special education ministry helps Cornerstone provide on-campus special education services in exchange for executive office space. Special education teachers provide pullout services for some students and testing for others. “We try to make sure that kids are appropriately placed,” Mrs. Sanders says, acknowledging that some students will be better served by extensive special education offerings in the public schools.

Cornerstone’s brochures boast of student achievement on standardized tests, impressive graduation rates, and the excellent high schools and colleges graduates have attended. But on Saints and Angels Day the benefits seem more tangible. In a city that used to be known for Devil’s Night, the night before Halloween when vandals and arson-

ists roamed Detroit, it’s a hopeful sign for Detroit to see little children begin a parade through the school’s wide corridors, their wings fluttering and halos slightly askew, singing “We will, we will love Him... we will, we will love Him.”

In some ways the three schools couldn’t be more different. Juan Diego looks for high school students who are hardworking and want to go to college. Chamberlain-Hunt gives second chances to kids who may have squandered past opportunities. Cornerstone directs its attention to younger students so they will be prepared to take advantage of high school and college opportunities. But all three have a clear faith-based mission that guides their expectations of their students and attracts teachers who believe in the mission.

As public schools search for ways to reform, they see the benefits of small schools and may even begin to adopt some of the characteristics that make them work. But unfortunately they won’t be able to replicate the faith component that is at the center of these schools’ success.

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Capital Research Center is a nonpartisan education and research organization
classified by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) public charity.

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