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Small L.A. Unified campus showing large gains

The success of the Student Empowerment Academy, which provides discipline and personalized attention, could mean more children will get such opportunities.
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The sound of the Los Angeles Unified School District's preferred future comes from the north end of Jefferson High School's campus. It's loud.

Students at one end of a warehouse-sized classroom mill around computers, their voices reverberating off the concrete floor as they compare notes. At the other end, a math teacher practically shouts to her students.

Although chaos seems to be the order of the day at the Student Empowerment Academy, the small campus has produced some of the biggest academic gains in the district. The school, which is housed on Jefferson's campus but has its own administration and teachers, scored a 638 on the most recent state Academic Performance Index, which measures schools and districts on student test scores in math, English and other subjects. Jefferson scored a 457. The state target for 2007 was 800.

That 181-point difference between Jefferson and the academy has captivated school board members, especially because all the students at the academy would otherwise have attended Jefferson.

Like many large districts throughout the nation, L.A. Unified has been trying to increase the number of smaller learning communities, hoping that personalized instruction would boost student achievement and offer an alternative to charter schools, including the five Green Dot campuses near Jefferson.

The academy, one of four Los Angeles Unified campuses that opened almost two years ago, is partially funded through the New Tech Foundation, a Napa, Calif.-based nonprofit that supports 35 schools throughout the country. Two of the others, Arleta High School of Science, Math and Related Technologies and the Los Angeles High School for Global Studies, have increased their test scores dramatically. However, at Jordan New Tech High School, the API score was 25 points lower than that on the regular Jordan High campus.

Unlike charters, which are publicly funded but are not regulated by L.A. Unified, New Tech schools are run by district administrators. "We're under a lot of pressure: pressure from parents, pressure from the public, to find results that work," said Monica Garcia, president of the Los Angeles Board of Education, adding that New Tech "clearly works."

At many L.A. Unified schools, the computers are older than the students, so teachers often use their own laptops for presentations. At the Student Empowerment Academy, however, this was the message that greeted students at an English class: "Please go to your individual computers and answer the following questions based on yesterday's reading."

The students filed in, sat at their new computers and began taking a multiple-choice test about "To Kill a Mockingbird." Despite the test, the 266 academy students rarely have traditional homework. Instead, they are assigned group projects, often requiring a multimedia approach.

For example, freshman Arturo Guzman and his friends were working on an art project about the war in Iraq. They toggled between PowerPoint and flash drives, checked media reports on the Internet as they researched materials they hoped to include in a sculpture.

Arturo said the work was more interesting than listening to a lecture and doing his homework solo. "It really seems more like a job than school," he said.

The schedule at the South L.A. school can be demanding. First period begins at 7:40 a.m. and the day doesn't end until 4:30 p.m. for some students. Ninth- and 10th-graders have afternoon cram sessions for the high school exit exam. Twenty-one percent of the ninth-graders passed the English-Language Arts component of the test, more than three times Jefferson's pass rate.

Discipline is tough. Some Algebra 1 students continued talking in a mixture of Spanish and English after the bell rang. When teacher Amada Lazaro asked a question, most stared blankly at their computer screens. "Only two people answered! Most of you are taking your time, like you have all the time in the world. No, you don't," she said as students quickly turned to their work.

Ninth-grader Tiffany Avila attended St. Odelia School before enrolling at the Student Empowerment Academy. "Catholic school was easier than this," she said.

Even students who are used to the demands say it's not easy. Jacqueline Gomez, a junior who enrolled in the academy as a sophomore, said she used to get straight A's at Jefferson. Now she gets a few Bs. "It's OK because I'm learning more," she said.

Despite the new computers, conditions are spartan. Several of the rooms are converted shop rooms shared by two classes.

Midway through the period, students pick up their belongings and move from one side to the other as their teachers stay put.

But most academy teachers say they prefer that to dealing with overcrowded classrooms. Sasha Guzman, who teaches geography and history at the academy, used to teach at Jefferson.

"I'd have 40 to 45 students in my class. I'd have to count on kids to be absent to fit everyone in," she said.

The academy is making supporters out of skeptics.

When Jefferson's principal, Juan Flecha, had to give up several classrooms to the New Tech school, "it didn't create the best will" among his own staff, he said.

It's unlikely that Los Angeles Unified will be able to buy each of its students a computer, especially because the district is facing a \$460-million budget shortfall next year, but Flecha believes the New Tech teaching methods can bring great benefits to his campus.

"Technology is the least important aspect to it," he said. "It's the methodology and teaching that's the most important thing."

Some of his own staff recently asked if they could visit schools in Seattle that had increased their test scores.

"Hey, we have a great model that's working with our youngsters in our own backyard. All you have to do is go down the hall," Flecha told his staff.

Former L.A. Unified Supt. Roy Romer, who helped bring the New Tech schools to the district, said the academy's success shows that students can achieve in the right environment.

"What this shows is no matter . . . how much a high school has deteriorated academically, you can still succeed if you give it a shot in the arm," he said.

But the model hasn't been as successful at Jordan, where the New Tech campus' API score is 25 points below that of the regular campus.

The school hasn't fully implemented the New Tech model, especially in teacher training, said Bob Pearlman, the foundation's director of strategic planning.

The school also was the only campus to start by accepting 10th- and 11th-graders instead of beginning with freshmen and sophomores.

"By next year, it'll be a whole different story at Jordan," Pearlman said.

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