

LB charter school teaches students to 'think big'

By Tom Hennessy

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Because Constellation Community Middle School doesn't have custodians - instead, students take turns cleaning - there's more money available for activities and field trips, like the one these sixth-graders took to the La Brea Tar Pits.

By the day after Barack Obama's election, Brayan Chavez had pretty much decided what to do in life.

"I want to be president of the United States," said the 13-year-old student body president

of Constellation Community Middle School, in Long Beach. "I want to change the world."

At CCMS, a charter school whose students are encouraged to "think big," Brayan's lofty ambition scored high with Executive Director Daphne Ching-Jackson. She tells her 170 mostly at-risk and minority students that Obama's election proves the White House is within reach of most of them.

That is saying something for a school where 60 percent of students have had to learn English, and 45 percent are from homes where parents did not graduate from high school.

Since the opening of the first charter school in St. Paul, Minn., in 1992, there is growing sentiment that they may be the wave of education's future. There are about 4,600 such schools in the U.S. now; 750 with 276,00 pupils in California. The charters pride themselves on minimizing bureaucracy and outdoing traditional schools in meeting the needs of the children they serve.

Take Brayan, for example. He was not exactly presidential timber when he entered sixth grade at Constellation two years ago. "I was fooling around a lot," he admits. "I wasn't doing my homework." Now in eighth grade, he has earned a 4.0 average for the first time in his school life.

Ching-Jackson tells another story, that of a seventh-grade boy who interviewed last fall for enrollment. "I asked what he likes about school and he said, 'Nothing.' Now he has few absences. He feels the teachers care about him. He is engaged in class and puts effort into his homework. His mother is pleased that her son is showing academic achievement whereas he was failing at his prior school.

The boy's turnaround does not surprise her. "These are the kinds of things that happen at charter schools because we are mission-oriented." The mission? "To respond to the needs of our kids so they will be proficient in reading, writing, mathematics and speaking. We're small enough that a kid stands out as an individual, not just as a kid in a seat."

Neighborhood-oriented

CCMS is housed at - but not affiliated with - St. Anthony High School on Sixth Street near downtown. It mostly serves the surrounding inner-city neighborhood, although a few students live outside Long Beach.

The most noticeable difference between Constellation and other schools is its calendar. Although it is sponsored by the Long Beach Unified School District, it runs on a trimester schedule. The school is closed - or as its administrators say, "off-track" - in

April, August and December. While students in other schools might celebrate a month off, some at CCMS are more apt to wonder how they will fill the time until school starts again.

CCMS is funded by the California Department of Education, the U.S. government, foundations and the community at large.

Another prime Constellation hallmark is its **PeaceBuilders** program. "Because of our small size, we are able to keep the campus safe," says Ching-Jackson. "We have no gangs and no fights."

The **PeaceBuilders** concept instructs students not to put down peers, to apologize for misdeeds and to seek a "wise" person when needed.

Ching-Jackson: "Students are taught to take responsibility for their actions, accept consequences for poor choices, be each others' keepers, focus on school work, always do their best and clean up after themselves."

In summary, she notes, "We offer all this to the Long Beach community free, with no tuition. In effect, it's a private school education at no cost."

Why, then, is Constellation not overcrowded? In fact, it nearly is. With a

capacity for 180 students, it now has 170, as already noted. When applications rise above that limit, a lottery system combined with a waiting list is employed.

One other nontraditional element: There are no custodians. Students take turns doing custodial work. A list of work assignments is posted at the school entrance. The money saved allows for more activities, such as field trips.

Parents' involved role

What do school parents think? If one, Alexandria Brooks, is typical, they could not be more pleased. Her youngest child, a daughter in eighth grade, is the fifth child she has sent to CCMS. Brooks serves on the school's board of directors and drives her daughter to school every day from Harbor City. The school means that much to her.

"Charter schools are a reflection of the ancient times of structure, accountability and discipline," says Brooks. "Not only academics are taught, but self-worth and the importance of respecting others. Charter schools express the quote that 'It takes a village to raise one child.' And so the carefully screened staff are the villagers who help to rear your children in the right direction for the full six hours a day they are with them.

"Teaching them to be productive citizens is what charter schools focus on in every aspect of their lives. Whether it be academics, cultural, race or socially, their goal is to nurture the world."

Parents take part in several ways - by serving on the Parent Activity Committee, supporting their children in class, helping teachers, working in the office or even giving a hand with such chores as painting, plastering and repairing. The school's board of directors has three positions for parents and two for teachers. Four other positions are filled by others in the surrounding community.

Ching-Jackson also notes a full range of parent-student meetings, such as potluck dinners, multicultural night and summer socials.

"They can help serve and donate a dish. And typically, we have student performances. In many ways, we are a microcosm of the Long Beach community, and this is why I am a part of this school."

She has served as executive director, a title equivalent to principal, for 10 years.

A teacher's view

"It's an inspiration to watch students progress at Constellation after they've been

here a few months," says Teresa Lowther, who teaches sixth-grade English language arts and social studies. As was the case with Brayan Chavez, Lowther notes that newer students "seem to take more pride in their work."

She worked in the LBUSD for six months before being hired in 2005 to teach at Constellation. Lowther has the enthusiasm of a newcomer and the unshakable belief that smaller learning environments, like Constellation's, are the future of inner-city education.

"Long Beach high schools are establishing small learning academies within the large school," she says. "Poly has the 'PACE' and CIC programs, Millikan has 'Quest,' Wilson has 'Distinguished Scholars.' These smaller learning academies keep kids connected to students with similar needs and goals. They don't feel lost in a sea of 4,500 kids."

A current buzz phrase in education is "differentiating instruction," notes Lowther.

"All kids come to us with different background knowledge, different reading levels, etc. According to the state's standards, the teacher is really expected to customize instruction for each student to meet his or her individual needs.

"(But) I don't see how this will really work

effectively if inner-city schools remain so large, especially since a lot of kids need to be taught more than academics. They need to learn the social skills and hidden 'rules' of being successful. They need someone to hold them accountable if they slip."

That pretty much defines the approach at Constellation. "If I taught at Franklin or Washington," says Lowther, "I would have about 200 kids on my roster, and could have 40 kids in a class. At Constellation, I have 54 sixth-graders with a maximum of 30 in a class. And I'm able to maintain relationships with about a hundred seventh- and eighth-graders until they are promoted."

Lowther adds, "This fits my philosophy of getting to know students so that I can help them build assets that they as individuals will need to succeed."

History of CCMS

Constellation was founded 15 years ago when middle-school teachers Mary Ruffner and Jim Norris felt a need to break with the usual public-

school experience, especially in the challenging middle school years.

That's when youngsters are becoming conscious of their appearance and of the opposite sex. They are also feeling a growing

level of independence from parents and are beginning to worry about financial matters.

CCMS opened in 1994 with 35 students in trailers on the grounds of Franklin Middle School. Later that year, it moved to 501 Pine Ave. In 2001, it moved to its current location on the grounds of St. Anthony High School.

While it sounds ideal, problems remain. For example, athletics are limited to two basketball hoops and participation in community 5K foot races. And since access to the records of high-school students is not allowed, the school cannot adequately chart the progress of its graduates.

For all that, it is a great school.

Tom Hennessy's viewpoint appears Sundays. He can be reached at 562-499-1270 or by e-mail at Scribe17@mac.com.

Find out more

If a charter school approach may be the thing for the future president in your family, you can call Constellation Community Middle School's Daphne Ching-Jackson at 562-435-7181. To make a tax-deductible donation, send a check to Constellation Community Middle School, P.O. Box 2130, Long Beach, CA 90801-2130.