



Like a free private academy

WINNER The Accelerated School/ Los Angeles A charter school challenges inner-city kids with tough coursework-- and engages them with art and yoga

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Zachary Johnson has a familiar complaint about his school: the cafeteria food stinks. In most places, such gripes fall upon deaf ears. But Zachary, 13, attends the Accelerated School in South Central Los Angeles, where the teachers are determined to make school both challenging and attractive. Says Zachary, who helped persuade administrators to add a salad bar: "The teachers actually listen to you, and you don't find that in other schools around here."

Nor do you find many inner-city schools with the academic results produced at Accelerated, which serves Grades K through 8--and, as a charter school, is free of much of the red tape that often chokes other institutions. While some states have begun to question whether most charter schools outperform regular public schools, the Stanford Achievement Test scores at Accelerated have jumped 93% since 1997, with increases of 35% in reading and 28% in math last year alone.

School officials credit their success in part to their 97% average attendance rate, which in turn is boosted by classes that emphasize art, poetry and yoga along with arithmetic and grammar. "Unless you're fully engaging the mind and body of the children, they're not going to be as productive," says Kevin Sved, 34, the school's co-founder. Accelerated says it outperformed the community's other public schools by 270% on last year's standardized tests. "It's like a \$20,000 private school without the tuition," says Mario Ortega, 37, a mortgage banker who transferred his two children there from a private academy. "I never expected to find quality education in South Central Los Angeles."

Infamous as the scene of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, South Central is populated mostly by hardworking Latino and black families. Half its residents never completed ninth grade. Forty-three percent of its households earn less than \$15,000 a year. The lure of crime and drugs is always whispering just down the alley. Yet Accelerated shows that even in this setting, academic excellence is possible.

The seed for Accelerated was planted in 1992 when Sved met Johnathan Williams. Both were teachers, and Williams was a leader of their local union who teamed with Sved in a failed attempt to initiate reforms at another South Central school. But when their efforts were stymied by bureaucrats, the duo submitted to the Los Angeles Unified School District an application to start their own charter school under a new state law permitting a limited number of public schools to operate free of many district and state regulations. Skeptical administrators gave Sved and Williams just six months to round up \$200,000 in start-up money and find a site for the school. After securing funding at the last moment from Wells Fargo Bank, the two hurriedly went door-to-door to recruit students. In September 1994, Accelerated opened with two teachers--Sved and Williams--and 50 students, shoehorned into a leased church social hall.

"We had to sell the people here on the idea that their kids can succeed," says Williams, 34. "This is about treating all students as gifted." The message resonated: each parent signed an agreement to spend at least 30 hours a year helping out at the school. And as their kids progressed, word spread, and the school grew. Says second-grade teacher Gillian Bazelon: "These kids are finally in an environment where a lot is expected of them, so they come to school ready to learn."

Kids at Accelerated learn by doing rather than just reading or listening. Fourth-graders study aerodynamics and the history of flight while constructing model airplanes. Second-graders try their hand at sculpting while learning about Rodin. First-graders are taught to manage personal bank accounts with play money they can use to buy toys at the student store. Rita Kanell, a first-grade teacher, recalls the joy of watching her students pepper a visiting composer with questions about Beethoven and Vivaldi.

The curriculum follows an approach pioneered by Stanford educator Henry Levin, whose 1986 "Accelerated Schools Model" called for schools to introduce slow learners to the same material as gifted students, while school officials work closely with parents. Says Sved: "We are forming a new and exciting model for urban education, and we've shown that it works."

Accelerated has its pick of accomplished teachers and links their pay to student performance. Unlike many guideline-laden public schools, Accelerated gives its teachers near-total control over instructional methods and a real voice in running the place. "For the first time in 19 years of teaching, my experience and my opinion make a difference," says kindergarten and first-grade teacher Faynessa Armand.

Sved and Williams have forged a partnership with California State University, Los Angeles, which helps with teacher training and grant applications. Wells Fargo, the school's largest donor, pumps \$200,000 into Accelerated each year. And the school in 1997 received a \$6.8 million office and warehouse site, donated by clothing designer Carole Little and her business partner Leonard Rabinowitz. As a result, Accelerated is that rare inner-city public school with stylized, glass-block walls and palm trees.

Today Accelerated has 11 teachers, 270 students, a waiting list of 1,200 kids and a \$2.3 million operating budget. A planned \$30 million expansion will add a two-story high school to the property by 2004. Graffiti-filled walls outside the school have given way to student-painted murals. Classrooms are teeming with books and artwork. And at lunchtime, Zachary is thrilled to grab food from the new salad bar.