

Meeting Street Academy is working as incubator



These Meeting Street Academy students are Toni Walker, Juliana McKinney, Princess Scott, Cameron Ravenel and Luke Lambert. PHOTO BY JULIA LYNN.

By Park Dougherty

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South Carolina's schools have been failing to educate low-income students for decades and show few signs of improvement. One out of three of its public high schools have dropout rates that exceed 40 percent. Only New Mexico has a higher percentage of these "dropout factories." In South Carolina, 89 percent of them are "high poverty schools," which means at least three fourths of the families they serve have low-incomes.

The spectacular success that a private school, Meeting Street Academy, is having at educating students from this socio-economic background warrants close examination. In addition to providing insights into principles, policies and procedures that work well in the classroom, it is dispelling myths about who can learn and demonstrating how effective autonomous schools can be. (Like a public charter school, a private school is controlled by its own board of directors, which allows decisions to be tailored to one school and made quickly.)

Meeting Street Academy is doing things very differently, and it's working. In 2011, its first grade ERB scores were well above the national average and just under the private school average. In 2012, all of its second-year kindergarteners scored above the national average and 71 percent scored in the top quartile (MRT.)

Likewise, all of its students are reading at or above their grade level, and all of the students in its highest grade (second) are reading more than a year above their grade level.

The school started in 2008 with three and four year olds and plans to expand one grade each year through grade five. Starting with three year olds is one of many unique, research-based keys to success. Even at that young age their language skills can be up to two years behind their peers, but starting then allows them to catch up in one year. In addition to starting a year early, these students spend 40 percent more time in the classroom every year than those in South Carolina public schools on average through an extended school day and year-round school.

Requiring a family commitment is another difference. It is the parents, not the students, who get assessed before admission. Those willing to commit to active involvement in their child's education are invited to sign a contract to volunteer 10 hours of service per semester, follow their child's homework daily and read to their child every night. Meeting Street Academy also provides its students with uniforms, food, and musical instruments as well as instruction in tennis, soccer and cooking and has arranged for MUSC to provide on-site health services that include medical, dental and vision screenings.

For all of this, their parents pay \$2 per day. The rest of the operating costs are covered by Sherman Capital, LLC, the Charleston-based financial services firm that founded this school. The other major contributor has been the City of Charleston, which provided the land for a new building. On July 23, the building was opened with a ribbon cutting ceremony that was attended by students, parents, teachers, administrators, Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Gov. Nikki Haley and South Carolina Department of Education Superintendent Mick Zais.

Among public officials, interest in this private school is very high, for obvious reasons. It is proving that children in low-income households can be just as successful as those with more. It is also demonstrating how this can be done. That is to implement

the best practices that research has proven to be effective. The challenge is to make them scalable – i.e. to move them from the private school laboratory into the public school system. Making that happen in traditional public schools will not be easy, but it could happen in public schools with autonomy – i.e. charters.

Meeting Street Academy is planning to open a new campus in Spartanburg this fall and to start with three year olds. Since the S.C. Charter Act provides no funding for that age, the kindergarten will be operated as a private school, but grades one and above will be on a public charter basis. This will enable these effective practices to spread into the upstate and, eventually, throughout the state. Meeting Street Academy is a solid step towards teaching South Carolina how to educate these at risk children.

Park R Dougherty chaired the committee that launched the Charleston Charter School for Math & Science through its first three years. At Wells Fargo Advisors, he is a first vice president - investments.

Reader Comments

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of www.charlestonmercury.com.

Peter Smyth wrote on Aug 10, 2012 9:17 AM:

" This sounds great. But MSA has all the resources "failing" schools lack, including more money. They require parent involvement and screen students to make sure parents will be committed. They say they don't screen students, but like charters, the de facto screening is that parents who apply are more committed to their child's education.

MSA is a good thing, but it is totally bogus to hold it up and say this is what other schools should do - unless you make it possible for other schools to do these things. This is not an equal opportunity school. I wish it were. "

Sarah Johnson wrote on Aug 10, 2012 9:26 PM:

" This article brings so many questions. How do public schools reach the children who have parents that cannot or will not make such a commitment? Would this school be successful with older at-risk children? There is no data. How will SC get that much money per student for public schools? If autonomy is the answer, why not just give public schools autonomy? Why the push for charters? This school gives almost around the clock care for these children - how is that possible in our public schools? Does this school have any students with disability or English as a second language? Bravo for what this school has done, but it cannot be compared to public schools. Poverty has a huge impact on education, and the way MSA gained its success actually proves that point. "

Park Dougherty wrote on Aug 11, 2012 1:12 AM:

" "Bogus"? Spreading these effective techniques into other schools is the purpose and next phase of this organization's ambitious plan. They will be replicated in a new school opening in Spartanburg this fall, which will become a public charter school and pave the way for many more public charters throughout South Carolina.

"More money" is not being spent. In fact, at \$12,000 per pupil, it's right on the public school average and less than what most small schools are spending. As this model is replicated in larger schools the per pupil costs will decline. Money is not the explanation and is available in the public trough. Our education problems (and solutions) do not hinge on money. They hinge on how that money is spent.

"Parent involvement" cannot be required in public schools; but it is built into the public charter model. What's wrong with that? "