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19722 Collier Street, Woodland Hills CA, 91364
Tel: 818-346-5100 • Fax: 818-346-5120
www.chimeinstitute.org

CHIME Charter School Benefits From Being a Melting Pot

By **Richard Nemeč**

rnemeč@ca.rr.com

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LIKE most Americans these days, I am desperate for some good news out of the public sector. And although I wrote them off long ago, I still secretly yearn for a sign there is some life left in our public schools.

Several years ago I found and wrote about an island of educational success, a public, albeit charter, school in Tarzana called CHIME. Having watched from afar the further disintegration of Los Angeles schools, partially as a parent of a 2007 L.A. Unified high school graduate at another acclaimed charter, I decided to return to CHIME at the start of this school year for another look.

The visit reinvigorated me. I am once again bullish about the prospects for large-system public schools, if only more of them can adopt all or parts of the CHIME model. The model is readily adaptable, according to CHIME's current director/principal Amy Hanreddy. (The acronym stands for: Community Honoring Inclusive Model Education.)

As I discovered five years ago, this is a school that intermixes high-achieving, middle-of-the-road and special education students, and the melting pot is mutually beneficial to all. But it is also a school with large amounts of committed faculty, staff and parent involvement. It is a stimulating elixir.

It is not surprising that the driving force behind the school, Julie Fabrocini, was recently recruited away from CHIME by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to help assess the foundation-supported education programs and applicants for new grants. She had headed CHIME from its birth through its now-golden age.

It is further not hard to believe that educators from around the nation and the globe have visited the school to learn how they can adopt parts of its model. Along with Fabrocini's leadership, the key is a team-based, results-oriented culture. General education and special education teachers, along with classroom aides, work seamlessly.

In a time of severe budget cuts and public school layoffs, CHIME has managed to keep its full-time music and art teachers through parents sponsoring twice-a-year fundraising events that have paid most of the two teacher salaries. CHIME's librarian, Heidi Mark, works without pay as the mother of two students.

The school does not pay the large sums for curriculum, as their counterparts in the charter or LAUSD systems do. Teachers at CHIME create their own curricula.

Imagine a world where all children are equally valued, a world where all children are seen as a gift.

To be honest, charter schools, like other public schools, are a mixed bag. There are just as many learned people strongly against them as those who passionately support them. I wrote a favorable piece on the school five years ago that drew rave reviews from a number of the CHIME students' parents. I'm an unabashed supporter of the school.

This year I talked to Fabrocini again just before the school year began and she left for her Gates Foundation assignment (although she is now a member of the CHIME board, so she will interact at the school monthly in the future). More recently I returned to visit classrooms. I am not a professional educator, but I think I can spot good management, teamwork, motivation, enthusiasm and dedication, and that sums up everyone you run into at CHIME - teachers, students, staff and administrators.

Hanreddy, a special education teacher by background, cannot visit a classroom without interjecting herself with a few of the students. She knows all of these students, and they know her.

There are no union issues here. The teachers are their own collective bargaining unit. Nothing illustrates the teachers' commitment better than their reaction to the funding crisis that began to hit public schools in the state three years ago. CHIME's semi-autonomous charter allowed it to cut through the bureaucracy by presenting prospective cuts to the faculty and letting teachers figure out how to get by with less.

In the end, the entire work force - teachers, administrators, staff - opted for a 7 percent pay cut and a freeze on raises, which is just now beginning to be unfrozen partially, three years later.

"I didn't have to come down with edicts," Fabrocini recalls. "I gave them the parameters, and they came up with the solutions."

Starting with 70 students (K-5 grades) a decade ago as an expansion of their preschool namesake at California State University, Northridge's education school, CHIME now has more than 700 students (K-8 grades), keeping the same rich mixture of about 20 percent special ed students in each classroom, and special education teachers who spend part of each day in all of the classes in their assigned grade level.

The continued aha! for this school where the overall state test scores have continued to improve each year is the enrichment of having the special education students.

When you strip everything away, Fabrocini thinks CHIME has been successful because it has what she called "a system for people working together embedded in its culture." You see that reinforced in every classroom at CHIME, and that makes me hopeful its culture can spread to other schools.

Richard Nemec is a Los Angeles writer who can be reached at rnemec@ca.rr.com.