

Urban Choice Charter School

Giving Hope to Education

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In 2000, Rochester, New York, ranked first statewide for violent crime and eleventh nationally in its poverty rates for children. During this turbulent period, Urban Choice Charter School Founder John Bliss spent 10 years working with students coming from these neighborhoods at one of Rochester's poorest performing schools. Surprisingly, the students in his class were among the highest scoring in the Rochester School District. Bliss knew that it was possible for the neediest students to be successful even if all odds were against them. He also knew that the methods and practices he used in his class could be reproduced so that more students could be saved.

This fact, along with some incredible stories he had heard from parents in the community, led him to pursue a new school unit within the Rochester City School District. This program would allow him the autonomy to expand and create an even more intensive program. This was before the New York State (NYS) had charter legislation.

Unfortunately, the school district was not ready for real change. Bliss' relationship with the district spun downward. "My mail was opened, book orders were lost, and in general things got pretty ugly for me," he recounts. Bliss resigned (after 10 years of service), surrendering his pension and health benefits. In an effort to make ends meet, Bliss placed his dream on hold and found traditional means to support himself.

"I still had all of my bills to pay, but I couldn't work for people that I didn't trust," he says. For several years he worked at odd jobs and did what he could to care for his family. This included shoveling snow and cleaning bathrooms at a downtown tennis club.

When NYS passed charter school legislation, Bliss wanted to start a school. It would be called the Truffula Charter School, named after



the trees in the Dr. Seuss book *The Lorax*. The application was not accepted, but the desire never died. Four years later Bliss would try again and be approved.

Designing a School from Scratch

The Urban Choice Charter School (UCCS) was started by a small group of people meeting for two years at a local library. The school had no organizational or financial support. It was based on the same principles that Bliss used while teaching. There was no lengthy, articulate, preconceived professional document to guide them. The team just plugged away.

Recalling his history up to the development of UCCS, Bliss says that getting a school isn't easy, but it is something you can accomplish if driven enough.

"When you hear the idea of someone starting his or her own charter school, that anyone can do it, I'm living proof that you can do it," he says.


Developing its Program

The UCCS motto is redefining urban education. It provides a safe and challenging environment that encourages academic progress for all children in grades K-8. Most are economic disadvantaged. The curriculum is based on New York's State Learning Standards, but it goes beyond its standards, offering close teacher/student relationships and a longer school day. "It is all about the relationships the students have with the adults who stand in front of them each day," says Bliss. Trust and respect can't be options. There needs to be an emotional commitment that is palpable.

Learning is assessed often and parent communication is frequent and honest. There are many adults who work with the students and share themselves. It is a community. Volunteers, college and high school students, physicians and others come to the school. The school employs a full-time nurse, three counselors, and an on-site nutritionist. Quality meals are served on real plates and silverware. Students attend music, art, health and Spanish classes. They also have access to a Mac lab, a rock climbing wall, plus guitar and drum lessons, among other enriching options. And every student goes outside every day. "Physical Education has become an extra at some schools but we believe that good health increases your chances for good grades." Bliss notes.

UCCS does not include any particular against-the-grain methods into its academia (unlike the style of Montessori, Reggio Emilia or KIPP). And Bliss says it is not the school's methods that deviate greatly from traditional education methods; it is the teachers' approach to implementing these methods. "Best practices exist in all great schools





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but we choose to be judged by more than test results," says Bliss. "We want great scores like everyone else but we also want kids who get up every morning excited about coming to school."

Redefining Expectations

Over 80 percent of UCCS students qualify for free or reduced meals. The school serves students from 16 different zip codes. Almost 90

percent are minority students who come from some of the most impoverished and violent neighborhoods in NYS, but their achievements have been extraordinary.

Last year, 91 percent of the fourth-graders passed the NYS math exam and 87 percent passed the NYS ELA examination. One hundred percent passed the NYS Science exam. In almost every grade UCCS students far outperformed their peers in other Rochester public schools. Similar results can be found in third to seventh grades. Bliss' vision has held true but it has taken extra effort.

Teachers get to school at 8:00 a.m. or earlier and the day doesn't end until 4:30 p.m. There are after school programs, Saturday programs and a full summer school. The school enrolls approximately 400 students but the school employs a much larger than normal size staff. There are 84 employees making the student to adult ratio five to one. There are about 22 students per class, but most middle school classes have only 15. There is a full-time teacher assistant in almost every class so learning can be as efficient and creative as possible. Staff gets what they want but the expectations are high. Teachers are held accountable through various measurements but there are no surprises. "Our school is not about hierarchies or egos; we have too much work to do," says Bliss and he has enough faith in the school to send his own daughter there.



Instilling Inspiration

Parents take an active role in the community at UCCS, and appreciate the way the school repays them through their children's educations. A mother recently met Bliss with a hug and tears in her eyes, explaining to him how the school has changed her life. "It is incredibly gratifying knowing that you have created a place that has so dramatically improved someone's quality of life," says Bliss, "but it is very hard work."

Success has not been easy. The school relies almost entirely on government funding despite enrolling some of the neediest students in New York State. Staff is told to earn respect rather than demand it. "Kids are treated like family," says Bliss, while admitting that this can be exhausting. "It is a balancing act because you need to be empathetic but you can't lose hope because the kids are counting on you.

"Our school is successful because the people who work in it are committed to something beyond a book," Bliss continues. "They know that kids can't be pushed over the bar. Students need to want to jump over it themselves and fostering inspiration takes a unique person." Urban Choice seems to have found a successful method for finding these individuals and with each passing day the students become more confident.

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