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The Central Falls Success

by Joe Nocera | January 3, 2012

Central Falls, R.I., is a speck of a city, one-square-mile of triple-decker houses and tired storefronts a few miles up the road from the state capital, Providence. It is the poorest city in Rhode Island, with 27 percent of its residents below the poverty line, according to the Census Bureau. Earlier this year, it started bankruptcy proceedings. Its mayor, who is the subject of a state police investigation, has been pushed aside in favor of a receiver, who has taken control of the city's finances.

Central Falls, though, also has one of the most promising reading experiments in the country. The Learning Community, a local charter school, and the Central Falls public elementary schools have joined forces in a collaboration that has resulted in dramatic improvements in the reading scores of the public schoolchildren from kindergarten to grade 2. Given the mistrust of charter schools by public schoolteachers, creating this collaboration was no small feat. And while the city's bankruptcy now threatens it, the Central Falls experiment not only needs to be preserved, it should be replicated across the country. I haven't seen anything that makes more sense.

When I last wrote about public schools, it was through the prism of Steven Brill's book, "Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America's Schools." Though a fan of the charter school movement, Brill concluded that, by themselves, charters were never going to fix what ails the nation's public schools; you couldn't possibly scale them to encompass 50 million public school students.

As it turns out, Meg O'Leary and Sarah Friedman, the co-founders of The Learning Community, had gotten there a whole lot earlier. Before starting The Learning Community in 2004, they spent three years working with the

Providence school system on a pilot program designed to come up with ways to "transform teaching practices and improve outcomes," says Friedman. During a time of upheaval in the school system, a small corps of great teachers were the real anchors in the schools. In setting up The Learning Community, O'Leary and Friedman wanted to apply the best practices they had learned during the Providence project — and, eventually, to use their knowledge to help public school districts in Rhode Island.

They got their chance in 2007, when Frances Gallo became the Central Falls Schools superintendent. After she got the job, Gallo stopped in on several families just as they had learned that their children had won a spot (via lottery) in The Learning Community. "They were so excited," recalls Gallo. She wanted to understand why.

So Gallo began spending time at The Learning Community — where she, too, became excited. The school drew from the same population as the public schools. It had the same relatively large class sizes. It did not screen out students with learning disabilities. Yet the percentage of students who read at or above their grade level was significantly higher than the public school students. When Gallo asked O'Leary and Friedman if they would apply their methods to the public schools, they jumped at it.

Did everything go smoothly at first? Not even close. "At first it was, 'Oh, here comes another initiative,'" recalls Friedman. There were plenty of "venting" sessions at the beginning, along with both resentment and resistance. But The Learning Community invited the teachers to visit its classrooms, where the public school teachers saw the same thing Gallo had seen. And very quickly they also began to see results. Most public

schoolteachers yearn to see their students succeed — just like charter schoolteachers do. Most of the resistance melted away.

There is another important element to this collaboration: The Learning Community advisers who work most closely with Central Falls teachers haven't just done a fly-by. They have worked hand in hand with their public school colleagues for three years. They have been a constant, encouraging presence. They have developed relationships. And they have treated the public schoolteachers with respect. It makes a huge difference.

Early on, O'Leary and Friedman convinced Gallo to hire reading specialists for Central Falls. (The Learning Community's methods call for a great deal of one-on-one instruction, especially when a teacher sees a student beginning to lag behind.) Ann Lynch, a Central Falls elementary school principal, told me that budget cuts have already forced her to cut back from two specialists to one. Everybody is worried about more cuts: the combination of the bankruptcy and a new state funding formula — which will cut back some state financing for the Central Falls school district — has people fearful that The Learning Community's project will be pared back, too.

Let's hope it doesn't happen. What is happening between this one charter school and this one school district offers an all-too-rare chance for optimism — not just about Central Falls's public schools, but America's.

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COMMUNITY**
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