

# THE PLAIN DEALER

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## A solution as obvious as ABC

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On a recent morning, Sister Maureen Doyle led a group of us through the bright, colorful and quiet halls of the Urban Community School.

Her visitors were curious to see an example of educational success in Cleveland. So we accepted Sister Maureen's invitation to tour the private near-West Side school that she oversees as executive director.

About 400 students - almost equally divided among Latino, white and black children - make up a student body that goes from preschool to eighth grade.

The kids are mostly poor. All pay something to attend, but tuition is based on family income and can be as little as a couple hundred dollars a year.

Seventy-four percent of the children qualify for free lunch, and 34 percent come from families that live on less than \$11,000 a year.

But poverty doesn't stop them. Classroom after classroom buzzed with minds hot-wired to learn. Some were hunched over books or notebook paper. Others huddled in tight circles with their classmates. A few even sat still as a teacher lectured about math or science.

Discipline problems are rare. But when they do flare up, students are more likely to resolve them with peer mediation than a trip to the principal's office.

Teachers spend time crafting creative lesson plans. One actually darkened the window shades and turned the heat up to 98 degrees to go along with a lecture on Dante's "Inferno."

Nearly nine out of 10 students at the school graduate from high school, and 62 percent of them go on to college.

Sister Maureen, a bubbly and ruddy-cheeked Ursuline nun, is justifiably proud of the school. She has visions of growing and expanding beyond the new \$13 million red-roofed school building that opened last September.

"Our mission is to give a good education to as many students who wouldn't be able to afford it otherwise," Sister Maureen said.

But wait a minute. Isn't that the role of public education? So why can't public schools be more like Urban Community School, which doesn't accept taxpayers' money?

When one of us asked Sister Maureen just that, she answered by praising the dedication of the teachers and willingness of the students to make the school a success. But her answer disturbed me and I left the tour feeling uneasy and incomplete.

I've met dedicated teachers and willing students in the Cleveland public schools. That answer was too simplistic.

What are the secret ingredients that make one school succeed and another fail?

To her credit, Sister Maureen had a better answer when I called her a few days after the visit to ask the question again.

"Of course parents are critical," she said. "Give me a parent that will guarantee that they will spend two hours a week to help the teachers teach and I'll guarantee you the child will learn and excel."

But that's not all.

"We get great support from both sides of town and from people of diverse backgrounds, anyone who values faith-based education has been supportive of what we're doing," she added. "The public does not and has not supported public education in the last 40 years, not since busing began. Now, as the public schools fail, people have a ready-made excuse to stand aside."

So that's the deal. It takes a village to make a school. Urban Community got one behind it.

If Cleveland's public schools are to thrive - or just survive - they must do likewise.

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