

Urban Community School: A quiet success; Cleveland elementary celebrates 40 years of innovative education

Jennifer González, Plain Dealer Reporter
Plain Dealer (Cleveland)
March 2, 2008

Copyright 2008 Plain Dealer Publishing Co.

Marquex Rey is an attorney awaiting an assignment in the Foreign Service.

Marcela Alonso works as a pediatric nurse. Her brother Daniel, a National Merit semifinalist from St. Ignatius High School, is headed to Columbia University.

And Kristina Morales is an assistant vice president at KeyBank.

But they all have at least one thing in common: They credit their success to Urban Community School.

Now marking its 40th year, the innovative, private elementary school on Cleveland's near West Side has been unwavering in its mission to educate low-income students through an unusual nongraded curriculum.

"Urban allowed me to flourish," said Marcela Alonso, 30, who earned a nursing degree from Ursuline College and now works at Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital. "It not only gave me a great educational foundation but a belief that I could do anything."

Alonso, whose two other brothers also graduated from Urban, said her parents chose the school because it was close to home, Catholic and had a sliding scale for tuition.

The lower tuition - some families pay as little as \$150 a year - especially helped because her parents didn't have a lot of money after moving to Ohio from Mexico.

Almost half of Urban's current families live on \$15,000 or less a year.

Yet despite the financial challenges some face, 91 percent of Urban alumni graduate from high school, and 62 percent advance to college.

Morales, 29, says her experience at Urban was so important to her that soon after learning she was pregnant, she put her name on the school's waiting list. She didn't want to send her daughter, Angelique, now 9, anywhere else.

Today, almost 200 students are on the school's waiting list, even though Urban does no marketing and parents learn of the school primarily through word of mouth.

The hallmark of an Urban education is what is known as differentiated learning. That means students progress at their own pace.

For instance, during a recent morning in kindergarten teacher Julie Babcock's classroom, students scattered after morning announcements and prayer to work with their teachers. The lesson was math; specifically, learning to count coins.

Advanced students stayed with Babcock. Another teacher worked with the other youngsters.

Babcock said she knew that coming to Urban would be challenging because of the individualized attention given to students. It means multiple lesson plans instead of the usual whole group lesson and continuous monitoring of students' academic growth.

"We try to assess kids every week," she said. "As soon as they have mastered a concept, we move them ahead."

As more Northeast Ohio Catholic schools either close or merge, Urban - founded by the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland - is stronger than ever. Three years ago, a new \$9.5 million school building opened at West 49th Street and Lorain Avenue after the school raised \$16 million during a capital campaign.

Today, the school has 454 students but plans an expansion that could accommodate about 150 more.

Urban was established after the closing of St. Patrick and St. Malachi elementary schools in the late 1960s. In their place, the PM Foundation Inc. was established to operate the newly created Urban Community School.

The Ursuline sisters wanted their school to be diverse, inclusive and affordable and provide individualized attention, says Sister Maureen Doyle, Urban's longtime director.

In many ways, the school hasn't changed much since Doyle arrived as a teacher in 1983, becoming its director four years later. She said she was instantly struck by the school's diversity and its individualized focus.

"The cultural, economic and religious diversity in the school was something new to me," she said. "Students were respectful of one another. Children were involved in their learning and responsible for what they learned. I found an underlying value to be, 'It's OK to be who you are.' "

One of the more challenging aspects of her role as director, especially during the early years, was serving as both educational leader and development director. Doyle said she no longer pulls double duty, since the school now has a development director who raises about \$1.1 million annually.

Because Urban does not follow the traditional Catholic school model of covering costs with tuition and church money, its financial picture is much rosier than that of many other parochial schools.

It helps that the school is associated with people who not only value its mission, but also have deep pockets.

Contributions from Urban's board of trustees accounted for nearly 60 percent of the school's \$16 million capital campaign, according to Tom Sullivan, the board president.

"That's extremely unique, especially for an elementary school," he said.

Sullivan also credited Doyle's leadership for the school's continuing success.

Former student Rey, who now lives in the Atlanta area, said she still keeps in touch with Doyle.

Rey said that part of the reason she remains attached to Urban is that its staff not only cares for students while they are there, but also about the people they become.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: jgonzalez@plaind.com, 216-999-4327