

ROCK CENTER with Brian Williams

Schools in bankrupt city work to prove poverty is no barrier to success

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Central Falls, Rhode Island may seem like an unlikely standard bearer for a reading or public school revolution – it is the poorest district in the state with more than 85% of its students on free or reduced lunch plans. And, the city itself recently went bankrupt. Yet, a remarkable collaboration between The Learning Community charter school and surrounding non-charter public elementary schools continues to demonstrate that students are hungry to learn and that, in the words of The Learning Community credo, poverty is not a barrier to success. The collaboration is part of what is called the Growing Readers Initiative – an effort to share best practices between teachers from different systems to turnaround some of the lowest reading scores in the state.

Walking the vibrant halls of The Learning Community – where the reading program began – watching the younger students proudly use their reading strategies to read books one and two grade levels ahead and listening to older fifth grade students engage with one another on questions of friendship, racism, loyalty, it is clear that The Learning Community is a remarkable place. Indeed, in 2009, Learning Community students exceeded the expected performance for a school with its level of poverty by 25% in reading and 45% in math.

Visiting nearby non-charter Veterans Memorial Elementary School and observing The Learning Community teachers working with the Veterans teachers to share the reading methodology charter school teachers saw work so well in their school, it is clear that something special is happening. Kids gather on the rug to learn reading strategies, back at their desks, students practice their strategies independently and with one another. I felt like a giant sitting in a 2nd grade desk chair when the students were explaining their books to me! All the teachers we met share a deep commitment to their kids and an understanding about what will best help their kids read, learn and thrive – and a willingness to continuously how best to do that. The effects of that dedication are clear at Veterans and across the Central Falls district. In the first year of the partnership between The Learning Community and the school district, reading scores district-wide increased 29 points – an amazing achievement and a tribute to all the teachers and their students.

Although collaborations between charter public schools and non-charter public schools are rare, so too are collaborations between non-charter public schools themselves. One of the teachers we spoke with said the only thing that catches readily in schools during flu season (when we were

there), was the flu. Yet, she and her colleagues were proving that sentiment wrong day after day. The school district had hoped to expand the collaborative effort through fifth grade this year but put those plans on hold fearing the impact the city's bankruptcy filing and potential state cuts would have on education dollars. Now, facing \$1.5 million in cuts to the 2012-2013 school year budget, the superintendent of schools in Central Falls says funding for the Growing Readers Initiative is in peril, jeopardizing the ongoing collaboration and shared learning between the teachers that has clearly been key to their students' successes.

Late last year, Sean F. Reardon, a Stanford University sociologist, published a study that showed the achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families (from the top 10% of family incomes and the bottom 10% of family incomes) has grown by 30-40% among children born in 2001 versus those born 25 years earlier. Reardon's work was recently highlighted in the New York Times, as was work by Susan M. Dynarski and Martha J. Bailey, both of the University of Michigan, which showed that the disparity in college completion rates – the single most powerful predictor of future success – has grown 50% between kids from wealthy families and those from poor families – since the 1980s. There is much to be concerned about in those statistics and even more in the challenges confronting kids and families across the country. There are also signs of hope that poverty does not need to imprison consecutive generations. One of the places that gives meaning to this hope is Central Falls, Rhode Island.