



THE OPEN DOOR POLICY

*Charter Schools give students new opportunities
by embracing partnerships*

A little charter school on the North Side is proving that the best way to open doors for students is to look outside their own walls.

Manchester Academic Charter School (MACS) was founded in 1998, as an outgrowth of Manchester Youth Development Center. In one of the city's most economically distressed neighborhoods, the school has met state achievement standards for seven straight years. The school is small, with 200 students from kindergarten to eighth grade. What it lacks in size, the school makes up for in resourcefulness.

MACS has partnered with a dozen arts, educational, and youth organizations to bring a wealth of resources to bear for its students. The school shares a building with Manchester Youth Development Center, where many students go for tutoring, after-school and weekend activities. Students also make pottery at the Manchester Craftsman's Guild, learn science at the Carnegie Science Center, and compose oral histories with the Saturday Light Brigade (a local youth radio group) and the Andy Warhol Museum. Two days a week, for two hours, students take electives like yoga, sewing, cooking, and chess, many of them taught by outside groups.

"Sometimes the kids can't decide what they want, there are so many things for them to do," says Vas Scoumis, the school's CEO and principal. "It's a good problem to have."

Manchester is one of many charter schools drawing on local expertise to provide students with top-notch education.

Why do partnerships flourish so readily in charter schools? Because they are innovative, independent, and less bound by bureaucracy. When an outside group approaches Scoumis about an opportunity or an enrichment program, as long as he knows his nonprofit board supports the concept he is free to act.

"When I see things that a kid needs and the school needs, there's not a whole lot of red tape I have to cut through to get it done. If it's a great option for our kids, and we can afford it, we'll do it," Scoumis says. In this way, Manchester has welcomed programs that few public school students experience, such as "Street Law," a course the state bar association offers to introduce inner-city youth to the study of law.

"I want to open as many doors in the world to these kids as I can," Scoumis says. "One way to do that is through these partnerships."

Especially in tight budgetary times, schools need to take advantage of every partnership opportunity they can. Charter schools have become leaders in showing how to do it.

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



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