

Daniel Weintraub: Taking risks to take back the schools
By Daniel Weintraub -- Bee Columnist
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Greg Lippman and Jennifer Andaluz were two idealistic young teachers from San Jose who dreamed of creating a school that welcomed what they called the "wretched refuse" of the public school system, underachieving kids who otherwise would almost certainly drop out or be shuffled along until they graduated with few skills and little chance for a decent job. In their dream, Lippman, 30 and Andaluz, 27, would take these kids from poor families in gang-ridden neighborhoods and put them through a high-standards, high-expectations high school with the promise that anybody who graduated would go on to a four-year college.

It was an outlandish idea, to be sure. But thanks to California's charter school law, which allows teachers, parents and communities to create their own public schools free from most state and local regulations, the dream came true. In Central San Jose, the school is called Downtown College Prep - or DCP to its teachers and students.

The school's journey from a difficult birth through its first graduating class four years later is chronicled in a new book by former San Jose Mercury News reporter and columnist Joanne Jacobs.

"Our School" (Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2005) is eye-opening, chilling and inspiring. Up-close and personal, it follows the lives of the students, parents and faculty who had faith that they could break free and succeed.

When the school opened its doors in 2000, 83 percent of its 102 students were Hispanic, and nearly half were not completely fluent in English. Most had earned Ds and Fs in middle school, and some were taking the ninth grade for a second time. If they made it, almost all of the students would be the first in their families to go to college.

"With few exceptions," Jacobs writes, "DCP students are the kids nobody else wanted, the kids nobody really believes can make it. The ninth graders ignore homework assignments, then cut detention for failing to do homework. They carve on tables, scribble graffiti on the walls and rip the expensive dividers that split space into classrooms."

One of the keys to DCP's survival was a strict disciplinary policy. Kids were given multiple chances but ultimately were expelled if they refused to comply. As Jacobs tells it, Lippman, who was the first principal, sometimes enforced the policy with regret.

"He hates to lose students, but he sees no alternative to setting and enforcing rules,"

Jacobs writes. "Schools that tolerate disorder fail all their students."

DCP's evolution wasn't seamless. The founders naively overestimated the skills the students would bring with them, assuming that their problem was motivation, not academics. When they realized, belatedly, that many of their charges came barely able to read and write or with no ability to multiply or divide, they revamped the curriculum to transform the freshman year into more of a basic skills boot camp. A project-based, experiential learning style was tossed in favor of a more structured curriculum.

With so much to do, they at times let important things slide, like connecting with immigrant parents, many of whom did not understand the importance of the heavy homework load the school put on the students. Although they wanted their children to go to college, they also expected the girls to be home in the afternoon to take care of siblings and the boys to work part-time to help support the family. These and other cultural differences had to be overcome. They were, under an almost brutally honest administrative regime and a principal who seemed to relish critiquing his own mistakes.

Over its first four years, the school added about 100 freshmen each year, and by the end, about half of the original class graduated, with about a third transferring to other schools, 11 moving away and six who were kicked out or left for disciplinary reasons. Although those numbers might be typical for the demographic that DCP was educating, the other result was unique: Every one of the graduates was accepted to a four-year college.

Although its stories of success are heartwarming, "Our School" leaves you wondering about the thousands of similar students who don't have a Downtown College Prep as an option, and the teachers in our massive, urban high schools who don't have inspirational leadership with a dogged determination to throw out the old rules and create a new model where professionals are given the support they need to shine.

The book is a call to arms for our best teachers: Rise up, take the initiative, take back the schools. We need you. We need more Downtown College Preps.

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