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BOOKSHELF

They Found Their Way in San Jose

A California charter school success story.

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Life really can imitate art. The art I have in mind is the kind of tear-jerker movie in which, say, a beleaguered small-town basketball team beats the odds and makes it to the state finals. Or in which someone--imagine Sally Field in a faded gingham dress--struggles to bring in the harvest and save a farm.

Joanne Jacobs's "Our School," a vivid account of the creation and first years of a charter high school in San Jose, Calif., has that kind of drama. It reads like a novel whose characters are both stereotypical and improbable. The founders of Downtown College Prep--as the school is called--are a Jewish guy from an affluent family educated at Princeton and Stanford and a woman who had been raised by a working-class single mother and had sleepwalked through her own high-school experience until a year in Spain as an exchange student persuaded her to become a teacher.

Many of the other characters are right out of central casting. The Rev. Mateo Sheedy is the patron saint of Downtown College Prep; while dying of cancer he helps to open doors to the philanthropic and business communities of San Jose and to a nearby university. Florina Gallegos, a local education activist and organizer, becomes the school's godmother, overseeing a thousand small details. There's also Florina's daughter, Alicia, who just happens to be earning a master's degree in education--at Harvard--and who reluctantly returns to San Jose to teach at the school "because Padre Mateo wanted me to be here." (Pass the tissues, please.)



But this isn't fiction. The challenges are real, the stakes high, the lessons important--and the achievements extraordinary. The entering ninth-grade class at Downtown College Prep was a challenge, to say the least. "Most students had earned D's and F's in middle school," writes Ms. Jacobs. "Some were repeating ninth grade. Some had been labeled learning disabled, hyperactive, or emotionally disordered." In addition, "most students read at the fourth- through sixth-grade level; some students had made it to high school with second- or third-grade reading skills."

One ninth-grader stumbled over the phrase "ride the carousel" on a language test, reading it as "ride the carrot salad." The school's informal motto thus became: "Downtown College Purgatory: Ride the Carrot Salad." A sense of humor was badly needed, for the first few years were grueling. Homework loads, required classes, teaching techniques--everything was a moving target, subject to adjustment or radical change. Eventually the basic verities of the school--discipline, hard work, an atmosphere of community, the involvement of parents--asserted themselves to good effect.

From scratch, teachers created innovative courses, such as College Readiness, in which kids were taught to take notes, organize their time and study for tests, as well as to formulate arguments and support them with facts. Classes were kept small, teachers and students worked long days, and more and more kids "crossed over," that is, metamorphosed from (barely) warm bodies to committed students. Grades on standardized tests and the number of students on the honor roll gradually crept up. Downtown College Prep has sent all the graduates from its first two classes to four-year colleges and now ranks among the top third of public high schools in California.

In "Our School," Ms. Jacobs brings to life the experience of particular kids and teachers but also, rightly, raises the big questions about charter schools: Do they work? Do they divert resources from conventional public schools?

Charter schools almost always take a few years to refine their efforts, and not all succeed at doing so. But Downtown College Prep and schools like it adapt more quickly than traditional schools--because they can. It's not merely a matter of their being free from various rules and regulations. The bigger difference is attitude. As Ms. Jacobs observes, principals and teachers at noncharter public schools have trouble learning from their mistakes because nobody is willing to admit to any--the inertia of the status quo is paralyzing. But at charter schools like Downtown College Prep admitting mistakes is part of the culture. What is more, the teachers who work there are young, open to new ideas and usually hostile to unions or anything else that gets in the way of a fresh approach to teaching. (That doesn't mean that they are all good teachers; charter schools are subject to the normal variations of human ability.)



Do charter schools take money from the traditional public school system? Of course they do, because they take students. And school districts with a lot of infrastructure and rising costs will get hurt if their enrollments are static or declining. As it happens, Downtown College Prep siphons off many difficult, underperforming students. They are the least likely to attend public schools regularly or to graduate--and require expensive extra services from traditional schools. So the financial burden on the district, in this case and some others, is minimal.

Will charter schools force traditional schools to change? Let's hope so, if only by embarrassing them with success. Certainly if noncharter public schools are forced to compete for students, they will have to improve simply to survive. But Ms. Jacobs makes no grand claims. Her task is mainly one of fidelity to the case at hand--a success story worthy of Hollywood.