WORLDmag.com | Archives
OCTOBER 2008 ISSUE

SAN DIEGO— Summoned by an old-fashioned, hand-rung school bell, 630 uniformed seventh- and eighth-graders line up at the chain-link gates to the interior campus of a college preparatory junior high school in San Diego. Separate lines form for boys and girls, boys on the left. Posted just inside the gates are school director Vince Riveroll and science teacher Rob Charleton.

With genuine smiles, Riveroll and Charleton shake each student's hand and greet him or her by name. There are also friendly reminders:"OK, no 'sagging,'" Charleton says to one boy, who grins sheepishly and pulls up his khaki pants. "Get rid of the gum," says Riveroll to a girl wearing a skirt of tartan plaid. She cheerfully complies.

None of this might seem remarkable at a San Diego County private school, or even a public one in a moneyed enclave like Rancho Santa Fe or Del Mar. But the idyllic academic scene on this bright Wednesday in June is unfolding at Gompers Charter Middle School (GCMS), a public institution in Chollas View, one of the most gang-infested and crime--ravaged neighborhoods in the county.

Not only that, but just three years ago, Gompers was widely viewed not as a school, but as what one parent called "a prelude to prison." At Gompers back then, hundreds of kids wandered the concrete breezeways in gang garb, but with no books, no paper, no pens. The breezeways themselves were lined with high chain-link fences and swinging gates that could be slammed shut quickly in the event of a fight, forming cages that would isolate a brawl while teachers scrambled inside their classrooms and locked the doors. More than once, San Diego police and SWAT teams swooped down to quell riots, handcuffing kids to the fences.

Academically, the school was the lowest-achieving in the county and among the bottom five in the state. Only one seventh-grader in 10 could read and write at grade level. Many hadn't surpassed third-grade literacy. The dropout rate: 50 percent.
That was then.

Today, Gompers Secondary is Gompers Charter Middle School. The 1,000 student suspensions doled out in 2004-05 plummeted to 100 in 2007-08. After decades in the tank, student test scores have risen in each of the last three years. Best of all, said Isaac Ramos, 13, who described himself as a bit of a nerd, "You can be whoever you want to be and you don't get bullied. The staff and faculty help you out. It's like family."
The No Child Left Behind program has been a favorite liberal punching bag. (It's also received plenty of criticism from conservatives.) One of the chief complaints: Poor and minority kids are the most likely to be hurt by NCLB's sanctions against failing schools.
But while NCLB is far from perfect, its failing-school sanctions are exactly what forced positive change in Chollas View.

In 2004, Gompers fell short of NCLB's "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) goals—-essentially, incremental stepping stones of improvement for low-performing schools—for the fifth straight year. That triggered a menu of federally mandated reform options, including replacing key teachers and staff, a state takeover, hiring a contractor to run the school, or converting the school to an independently managed charter.

San Diego schools superintendent Alan Bersin was a charter advocate long before NCLB sanctions were leveled at Gompers, which was one of nine failing schools in the county that year. Bersin established work groups composed of teachers, administrators, and community leaders to examine options for restructuring the schools.

Much to the relief of some union--controlled school boards that worried about teacher job security, many of the work groups rejected the charter option. But the Gompers work group didn't. Instead, they envisioned a college preparatory academy that, unlike some charters that recruit from far and wide, would serve only neighborhood kids.

Allison Kenda was a key member of that work group. She came to Gompers as a literacy administrator in 2003, just off a mission trip to South Africa where she worked to help students return to the school system after the end of apartheid. During the mission, Kenda said she began to appreciate the virtues of school systems in the United States: "Then God put me at Gompers, and I realized He had prepared me perfectly."

In that first year on the first day of school, Kenda found herself locked in a confrontation with a school security guard who refused to let her use a school-owned electric cart to carry a sick seventh-grader to the nurse's office. The security guard, who had been busy with a personal cell phone call, snatched the keys away from Kenda, saying, "You don't know who you're messing with!"

Two weeks later, the principal demanded that Kenda explain herself. But Kenda wasn't having any of it. "Let me make this perfectly clear," she told the principal evenly. "I am going to write this incident up. Somebody should lose their job over it, and it isn't going to be me."

That the principal would put the security guard over the needs of a seventh-grade kid was sobering, Kenda said. She remembers thinking, God brought me here to fight.

It turned out she would fight her own colleagues. In 2004, when NCLB sanctions kicked in, most of the Gompers staff seemed to see the kids as an irredeemable pack of future felons. But Kenda, Vince Riveroll, and a few others saw hidden pearls—kids who inspired them to stay and try to turn the ship around.

"Like Anna, who wrote in an English paper about her baby sister's birth being the most significant event in her life because her mother had died during childbirth," Kenda said. "Or Paula, who had lost four family members to gang violence. We began to ask ourselves, what would it look like if we were to really put the kids first?"
Led by Kenda and Riveroll, a small group began to lobby the district for the charter conversion under NCLB. The very idea touched off a political war that pitted a tiny but scrappy band of teachers and staff against the well-organized machinery of the school board and teachers union. In those days, teacher attrition at Gompers was twice the national average. In 2004, full-time teachers filled only 16 of about 50 faculty positions. That's why the school was able to offer a job to Najib Mesdaq that fall, even though the school year was already three weeks old.

Mesdaq had just completed his teaching credential at San Diego State University when he got the call. "I didn't choose Gompers, but I had always wanted to teach in a school like that," said Mesdaq, 31. "I wanted to help, to make a difference."

By the time he took over the eighth-grade English/social studies class that year, seven substitute teachers had already flitted through. "You can't handle us either," the kids told Mesdaq. "We're too ghetto for you." If he didn't quit like the others, the students said, they would force him out.

And they tried their best: When Mesdaq assigned seat work, the students tossed footballs in the classroom and played cards. He told them to sit down; they kept standing, smirking and defiant. Whenever students felt like it, they walked out of class. But underneath their bravado, Mesdaq detected an almost universal sense of abandonment.

"No one cares about us," a few kids told him. "They just want to come and get paid."
Mesdaq kept making assignments and holding the kids accountable. He enforced classroom rules, wrote up required disciplinary paperwork, and made phone calls home. And, doggedly, he just kept showing up. Within a few weeks, he had won the kids over.
Gompers kids in 2004 gained another ally: Vince Riveroll. Raised by a single mother, Riveroll grew up poor in San Diego. His mother worked multiple jobs and relied on food donations from their church to feed her kids. Two of Riveroll's brothers died from HIV/AIDS and another landed in prison. But Riveroll earned a college tennis scholarship, majored in education, and at the age of 32, became principal of Keiller Middle School in blighted southeast San Diego.

At the height of the violence at Gompers, the San Diego Unified School District began deploying administrators from other schools to try to keep a lid on lunchtime race riots. "They called me one day and told me to go up there," Riveroll said. "I went kicking and screaming."

At lunch that day, one high-school kid walked up to Riveroll and stood uncomfortably close. "Why are you wearing that suit?" the kid said, tapping a crowbar against his leg. "It's just going to get ruined when you break up a fight."

Shortly after that introduction, the district assigned Riveroll to take over the school. At first, the Chollas View community received him as an interloper—"Who does this baby principal think he is to try to change this place? And what kind of Mexican doesn't speak Spanish?" They also seemed to blame him for decades of failure. At meetings he called to work out grievances, parents and community leaders ripped him to shreds, prompting him at least once after a meeting to call his boss and quit.

"I'm out of here!" Riveroll said, calling from his car on his cell phone. "This is bigger than classroom teachers. You need an army!"

In time, though, students noticed that Riveroll didn't burn rubber to get off campus at the stroke of the afternoon bell, that he stopped to talk with them, that he listened and seemed genuinely to care. Parents noticed that he understood what it was like to be poor.
As they had Kenda and Mesdaq, Chollas View embraced him. Quickly, a small group of teachers, staff, and parents gelled in support of the charter conversion, including eighth-grade English teacher Tracy Johnston and a fiery mom named Michelle Evans. A mother at age 16, Evans had remained illiterate until her 20s when she spent money she didn't have to buy her own kids "Hooked on Phonics."

"I was not going to let what happened to me happen to them," said Evans, an African-American woman with short, stylish hair, big hoop earrings, and a smile that would light up Broadway. "I became a pit bull locked on to my children's education: No one was going to stop me from getting it for them."

But Gompers chewed up even good kids and spit them out. Because of transportation issues, Evans' oldest son, Zachariah, an athlete who had never been in trouble at his junior high school, enrolled at Gompers for ninth grade. Almost immediately, Evans began receiving phone calls: Zachariah was disrespectful and rude.

"Are you sure?" Evans said to the staffer who called. "Zachariah Parks?"

Then Evans found out that her son, who was taking advanced classes in junior high, had been placed in a classroom where high-school freshmen were reading third-grade books. Evans demanded that Zachariah be moved and Allison Kenda made it happen. And from that day on, Evans said, "My new job in life was Gompers Middle School. I was going to be there every day."

And she was, eventually becoming a prime force in convincing other Gompers parents that the charter conversion was the way to give their kids the same education available to other public school kids in the county. The community wasn't easily convinced. The work group had to get 700 signatures from parents agreeing to go forward, and the charter campaign and signature drive lasted throughout the 2004 Christmas season. Charter-boosting parents went door-to-door during Christmas vacation, with one parent redeeming cans at a local recycling center to get enough money for gas to continue her canvassing.

By January 2005, charter organizers reached their goal: Two-thirds of Gompers parents had signed. But when the group presented the signatures to the school board, one of the board members revealed a new requirement: Since GCMS was going to be an NCLB "conversion charter," and not a new start-up, more than one-half of tenured teachers at the school also had to sign on.

That news punched holes in the group's hopes. "We only had 16 tenured teachers, but many of them were a big part of the problem," Kenda said.

Still, the group went back to work, lobbying tenured teachers even as union leaders behind the scenes tried to persuade them to reject the charter petition. But again, charter supporters prevailed and more than half the teachers signed.
Still, the fight wasn't over. In February 2005, a month before the Gompers staff was to appear before the Board of Education for a final vote on the charter, the board removed Vince Riveroll as principal of the school. The board's only explanation: "Personnel decision." Charter organizers' explanation: The union-controlled board wanted to lop off what it saw as the head of the charter beast.

Chollas View revolted. Students and parents flooded local media with letters of protest and staged daily walkouts on the campus. The district sent nine administrators to attempt to keep order on the campus. It didn't work.

Finally, the night of the board's vote arrived. Parents, teachers, and community leaders packed the school auditorium, many hoisting pro-charter signs. Parent after parent took the podium to plead with the board to give their kids a chance at change. Kenda remembers watching the faces of the board members: They appeared unmoved.
Then a ninth-grade girl, known to be shy on campus, walked up to the podium. The meeting room grew quiet. Slowly, nervously, she pulled a sheet of folded paper from her pocket and began to read.

"My name is Maryam Saadati and I am a student at Gompers Middle School," the girl said. "I would like to read you this letter I wrote. . . . I thought that the school Board of Education wanted good things for

us. But it seems not. They want to take good things away from us. . . . We had a lot of different principal[s] who we did not care for, but [Mr. Riveroll] made great changes and for once, we want this because we see that it is good for us. Is it wrong for us to want good things?"

Maryam's words stunned the crowd. As she walked quietly back to her seat, Kenda remembers, her final question seemed to linger in the air: "An entire roomful of adults had just been shamed by a 14-year-old."

Soon after Maryam spoke, the board voted on the charter proposal: 5-0, a unanimous yes. The auditorium erupted in joy. On July 1, 2005, the core of the Gompers work group "hit the ground running," Tracy Johnston said. "It was the longest summer of our lives. We had to write the curriculum, clean the campus, make the schedule, and we had 50-something teachers to hire. We were still interviewing and hiring the day before school started."

Even after the charter launched, union leaders and district officials carped from the sidelines:
"You'll never get those kids to wear uniforms."
"You'll never get them to behave in class."
"You'll never get teachers to stay."

The doomsayers were wrong on every count. On the morning of the last day of school in 2005, kids wore gang colors and flashed signs. On first day of the charter that fall, dressed in their new uniforms, the kids—by themselves—formed quiet lines outside the school gates.

"You could see they knew that something new was happening and they were excited," said Pete Chodzko, who had been hired that summer and labored with the rest of the staff in preparation for the charter launch. Not all of the kids bought in right away, said Chodzko, who was named California Charter Schools Association Teacher of the Year in 2006-07. Still, most warmed to the new paradigm: Order and structure combined with a stable cast of caring adults.

GCMS staff spent the first year transforming a "culture of chaos" into a "culture of learning." It was an enormous hurdle, teachers told WORLD, just getting the kids to believe they weren't going to be abandoned again.

As Year Two rolled in, the new culture solidified; kids began to relax, to understand that order, safety, standards, learning, and above all, adults who cared, weren't merely a short-term gimmick.

Now, GCMS scores on student achievement tests have improved for three years running, with science scores jumping 450 percent in that span. Numerically, the scores are still below federal AYP targets. But for the first time in decades, scores have met the state's growth targets. The GCMS program keeps kids in school from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day with an option to stay until 6:00 in extracurricular programs. Every child's daily schedule includes 90 minutes of reading/language arts and 90 minutes of math.

And where the old Gompers turned good kids bad, GCMS turns struggling kids around. At her old school, "I was in special classes," said Jackie Aguilar, 15, who enters ninth grade this year. "People said I had mental problems, that I was going to be nothing."
When she came to Gompers in seventh grade, Jackie was reading at a third-grade level. Today, she has an "A" average, is approaching grade-level reading proficiency, and is burning to go to college.

Najib Mesdaq wants to be clear about the realities of GCMS: "It's not all a bright, sunny day and everybody's happy and skipping," he said. "We still have a lot of issues, a lot of frustrations. Kids getting in trouble. A couple of teachers who really don't want to be here."

But the transformation at GCMS has been "amazing," Mesdaq said. "It's not rocket science. It's not something where you have to go to school and get a doctorate to make it happen. You just have to love the kids, get the right people, and do the hard work. The rest will come."