

Worcester's wonder

An inner-city high school
sets a new standard
for public education

BY MICHELLE BATES DEAKIN

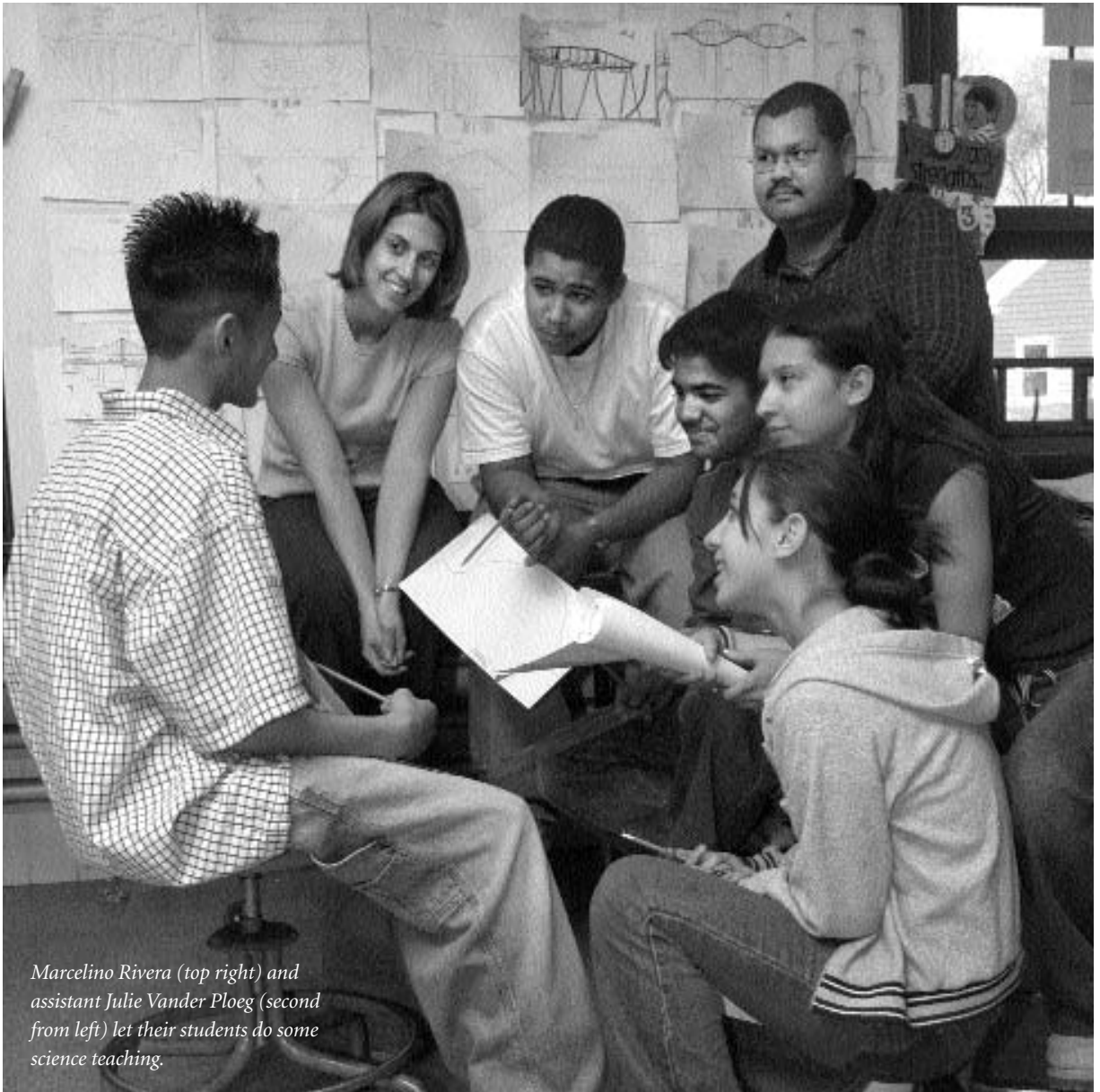
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W

When it comes to guessing the communities with the highest MCAS scores in the state, a lot of towns beginning with the letter “W” might come to mind—Wellesley, Weston, Winchester. But never Worcester. Nonetheless, sophomores at a public secondary school in the state’s second-largest city ranked fifth in the state in 2003 on the MCAS tests, with an astounding 97 percent scoring at the Advanced or Proficient level in math.

Who are these wonder kids? They’re not children of two-parent, college-educated families, and they don’t attend a magnet school, let alone a competitive-admission honors school. They are the products of University Park Campus School, a non-selective secondary school in Worcester’s poorest neighborhood, where most of the students are minorities and two-thirds come from homes where English is not spoken. This grade-seven-to-12 school, now in its eighth year, is shattering the myth that inner-city kids are not college material.

On a typical day at University Park, seventh-graders teach their own classmates, giving lessons on cell biology as the teacher looks on and lends assistance. This focus on presentation skills kicks in as soon as students begin their six years of study here. It doesn’t



Marcelino Rivera (top right) and assistant Julie Vander Ploeg (second from left) let their students do some science teaching.

matter that, at home, these same kids speak Spanish, Portuguese, Albanian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Swahili. In school, the focus is on listening, learning, and pursuing a goal that was once unthinkable in the crime-ridden neighborhood of Main South: to attend college. Last year, the first graduating class sent students to Brown, Georgetown, Tufts, and Holy Cross. Five other students are attending Worcester's Clark University on full scholarships.

The MCAS scores and college acceptance rates are reason enough for University Park to stand apart from most urban high schools, including the rest of Worcester's. But the school is also distinguished by its extraordinarily high attendance rates for pupils (96.2 percent) and teachers (99.6 percent) alike. It also has stunningly low suspension and expulsion rates: Both are zero. Last year, the Center for

Education Research & Policy (now the Rennie Center) at MassINC named University Park the only "high-performing" non-selective urban high school in Massachusetts. The report found that University Park excelled in the five areas that are the hallmarks of top urban schools: high standards and expectations; a culture of personalization; small learning communities; data-driven curricula; and strong community relationships.

"Having high expectations for the kids is really important," says principal June Eressy. "Contrary to what many people think, these kids will rise to the occasion."

URBAN KIDS, SUBURBAN SCORES

To understand how far the University Park students have risen, one has to look at where they started. When the first

seventh-graders started in 1996, half of the 35 children read at below the third-grade level. Four could not read at all. Today's students enter with similar disadvantages. Seventy-eight percent of University Park students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 67 percent do not speak English at home. Sixty percent of the school's 210 students are minorities.

These numbers make the MCAS results all the more startling. For example, when this year's senior class entered University Park five years ago, only 1 percent of the students were reading at grade level, while 30 percent were three grades behind in reading. But not one of this year's seniors failed the 10th-grade MCAS two years ago. Indeed, since 2003, every University Park student has passed MCAS in both math and English, meeting what is now the state's graduation requirement, on the first try.

In most cases, with flying colors. In 2003, 87 percent of University Park sophomores scored advanced or proficient on the English section of the MCAS, and 97 percent scored advanced or proficient in math. That's close to the performance of the very selective Boston Latin School, where 98 percent of students scored advanced or proficient in math and English. In comparison, at Worcester's South High School, the comprehensive public high school in the same district as University Park, just 33 percent of students scored advanced or proficient in English (31 percent failed outright), and 25 percent scored advanced or proficient in math (42 percent failed).

Only three high schools in the state outscored University Park on the math portion of the test, and each of those is an exam school: The Massachusetts Academy of Mathematics and Science in Worcester, Boston Latin, and Boston Latin Academy. In English, University Park ranked 28th in the state, outscoring the Lincoln-Sudbury, Belmont, Duxbury, and Winchester public high schools.

Partly based on 2002 MCAS scores, the MassINC report singled out University Park as the only urban high school worthy of the label "high performing," noting that at University Park alone "students consistently performed at high levels," passing MCAS with scores "substantially higher

than state averages, despite high rates of poverty (70 percent) and minority enrollment (56 percent)." What accounts for this standout performance? The study found that, like eight other urban high schools it considered "higher performing," University Park has small size, data-driven curriculum, internships, and community service opportunities. What set the school apart, according to the report, were the relationship between the school and the community, an intense focus on reading in grades seven and eight, capable school leaders, an extended day, and a unique relationship with Clark University, its Main South neighbor—and partner from the start.



Principal June Eressy: "Contrary to what many people think, these kids will rise to the occasion."

THE CLARK CONNECTION

In the early 1990s, Richard Traina, then president of Clark, and James Garvey, then superintendent of the Worcester public schools, envisioned a high school that would provide children in Worcester's toughest neighborhood with the best possible education. Many partnerships between universities and high schools have sprouted up across the country. Unlike most such arrangements, however, Traina and Garvey decided not to overhaul an existing school with the university's help, but to build a brand new school from scratch.

A commitment to the neighborhood around it was nothing new for Clark. Since the mid-1980s, the university has donated between \$7 million and \$8 million to revive the blocks adjacent to campus in the Main South neighborhood (See "Urban Studies," *CW*, Summer 2000). It has been rehabilitating abandoned and burned-out buildings, spurring business development, and increasing public safety in its urban backyard. The university also promises free tuition to Clark for local kids who can meet its admissions criteria.

"It's enlightened self-interest for Clark," says Jack Foley, who has worked at the university since the mid-'70s. He now serves as assistant to the president, a job that includes overseeing the school's government and community relations, and he's been a member of the Worcester School Committee for four years.

An involvement in the Worcester public school system has long been part of Clark's revitalization plan, and the



There's no tolerance for street talk or fighting at University Park.

university embraced Traina and Garvey's goal of a small, personalized learning environment with a strong core curriculum and high expectations and standards. The difficulty was in creating this environment with children who could not read or speak English well, and to do it at a per-pupil cost comparable to the rest of the high schools in Worcester—about \$8,600.

Traina and Garvey found a dynamic leader to put their ideas in motion. Donna Rodrigues, the school's founding principal, had taught Latin, Spanish, and French in Worcester schools for more than 20 years. She grew up in Main South and still lives there today, and she knows the neighborhood inside and out.

"This was a job of a lifetime," says Rodrigues, now a program director at the nonprofit group Jobs for the Future, in Boston, where she is creating a guide for educators interested in replicating the school she created. In it, she writes, "This had to be my job. It was my neighborhood."

At the time she was hired as planner and then principal, Rodrigues was fresh off a year at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. Her new post gave Rodrigues the opportunity to combine her experience teaching inner-city

children with her new academic credentials, all with the support of the school department and the expertise of Clark's Hiatt Center for Urban Education.

In fact, there is so much sharing of resources between the two institutions that it can be hard to tell where Clark ends and University Park begins. For its first two years, University Park was located on the Clark campus as it awaited its own school building. Even now, graduate and undergraduate students from Clark are continually crossing Main Street to student-teach and help kids with homework. University Park uses Clark's gym and library, and juniors and seniors at University Park can take Clark courses for credit.

"We have a synergistic community," says Tom Del Prete, director of the Hiatt Center. "The attitude of partnership makes a tremendous number of resources available, and we learn a lot from each other."

HEAD START FOR HIGH SCHOOL

As a facility, there's nothing impressive about the University Park Campus School. It's a well-scrubbed three-story schoolhouse built in the 1830s, and its stone stairs have been eroded by generations of students. The cramped cafeteria is in a windowless basement. Some rooms are heated to sauna-like temperatures, but one classroom goes unused because it has no heat at all. Even so, seventh-grader Yari Reyes, who is African American, says it was like winning a lottery when

she found out she was going to University Park.

“Here we start preparing for our SATs in the seventh grade,” Reyes says proudly. “On the first day of school, the teachers explain to us that this is a serious place. They expect us to get high scores.”

The seventh and eighth grades are important at University Park. These two years of intensive preparation get students ready to hit high school running, and educators at the school and at Clark see them as essential to the students’ later success. “We can take kids at a vulnerable age and nurture them over time,” says Del Prete. “And we can have uniform expectations for kids even though some of them are more under-prepared than others.”

Indeed, the expectations—for academics and behavior—are established even before students enroll, with acceptance by lottery, except for sibling preference. “The only criterion is that they live in the neighborhood,” says June Eressy, who succeeded Rodrigues as principal at the end of last school year. The promise of the school is spreading, with 55 students now on a waiting list.


Eressy, like Rodrigues before her, requires prospective students to attend information sessions before they can apply. “That’s when I establish the school’s social curriculum,” says Eressy, who explains to applicants that they’ll get two

hours of homework every night, and that there’s no tolerance for street talk or fighting at University Park. She warns that if kids don’t show up, she’ll call home; if no one answers the telephone, she may even drop in. To parents who attend the session, she stresses how important it is for children to be in school—that is, not home helping parents with babysitting or translating.

Entering seventh-graders start in the summer at the school’s mandatory August Academy. In the morning, there’s swimming and other kinds of recreation; in the afternoon, there are programs designed to initiate students into the school’s culture of high expectations. The Academy is part of a larger Clark-sponsored summer program for 7- to 12-year-olds throughout the Main South neighborhood that’s staffed by Clark faculty and students, along with some older students from University Park.

What follows the August Academy is a two-year process of moving from remedial reading to college-prep. Knowing there was no sense giving students textbooks they couldn’t read, Eressy, who was University Park’s first English teacher, started teaching from picture books.

“We had to take a longitudinal look at the kids and get them reading,” says Rodrigues. “We knew that by ninth grade we wanted them all following an honors curriculum.”



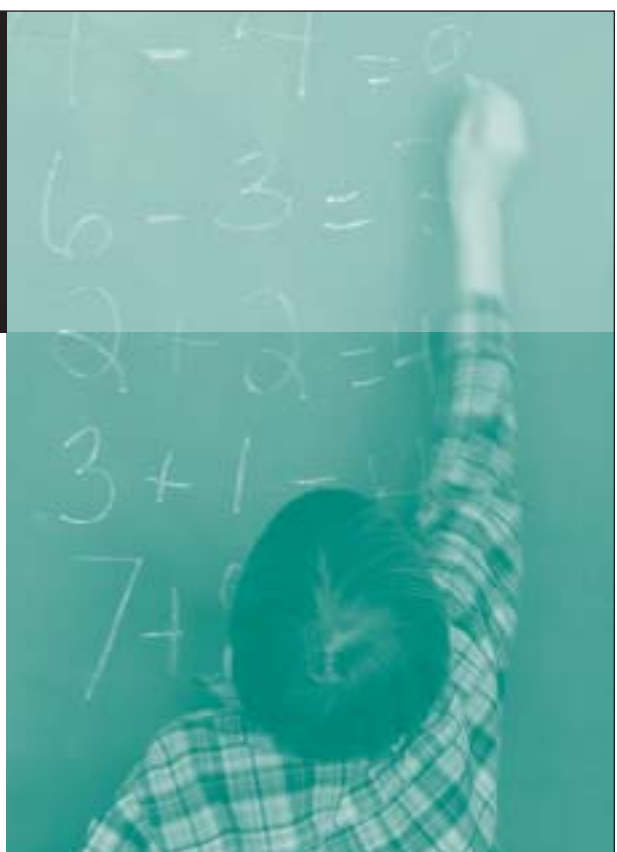
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Former principal Donna Rodrigues found a way to hire the best.

seniority, Rodrigues, as principal, wouldn't even have the right to interview them. Fearing that she would end up with teachers who weren't committed to University Park's high standards, Rodrigues convinced the teachers' union to allow her to hold informational meetings for interested teachers. She used the meetings to her fullest advantage.

"I told the group to listen carefully, because this might not be the right choice for them," recalls Rodrigues. She talked about the school's 90-minute classes. She talked about the before-school homework time and the after-school homework time that was expected of them. She briefed prospective teachers on the planning meetings that were part of the job, and she stressed that teachers had to give constant feedback to students. Most importantly, she stressed that teachers who came to University Park had to believe that their students could succeed. After this briefing from Rodrigues, not a single veteran teacher applied.

That was just fine with her. She hired two graduates from Clark's Hiatt Center, and the following year she hired two more. "They had no bad habits," says Rodrigues. She also valued their connections to Clark professors, who regularly visit University Park and guest-lecture.

But as University Park's reputation spread, veteran teachers eventually did begin to apply, for the best reasons. Jim McDermott left his position as liaison for language arts for the entire Worcester public schools system to return to the

trenches at University Park. He has a simple motto when it comes to selecting what the kids study: "If it's good enough for Phillips Exeter, it's good enough for us."

Marcelino Rivera, who started in September after teaching science at Sullivan Middle School, welcomes the focus on learning at University Park. "I don't spend time on discipline," he says. "I can always get to my lesson. These kids want to be here, and they know what the expectations are."

Eighth-grade math teacher Kate Shepard is another believer in the University Park model, saying, "There's a culture here that kids are expected to do the work, and they rise to the occasion." Shepard says she gets warnings from other Worcester teachers about problem students who are on their way to University Park. But once the kids get immersed in the school's culture, she can't even see the behavior she was warned about. "It's a different place with different expectations," she says.

Peer pressure is one of the strongest influences on the students' behavior, says Shepard. If a seventh-grader says, "shut up," a 12th-grader will remind him that "kids don't say that here." And it's not just in behavior that upperclassmen

Teachers who came to University Park had to believe that their students could succeed.

Even though many of the students in the seventh and eighth grades are not native English speakers, University Park never offered bilingual classes. Instead, the faculty, fellow students, and Clark volunteers run before- and after-school sessions to help improve fluency in English. Seventh- and eighth-graders are also given 90-minute math classes to help overcome deficits in that area.

HIGH STANDARDS FOR TEACHERS

In opening University Park for the first class of seventh-graders, Rodrigues was deliberate in choosing her initial staff, both veteran teachers. One was Eressy, a former colleague of hers at South High School who in 2001 received the double honor of being named a Milken National Educator and Teacher of the Year in the Worcester public schools. The other was Dermott Shea, a longtime math and science teacher with a knack for relating to inner-city kids.

But as the school began to expand, Rodrigues knew that union bidding rules would keep her from being so selective. Not only would teachers from throughout the Worcester district be able to claim new teaching slots entirely based on



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help out. Shepard says she has had 11th-graders volunteer to tutor in her class simply because they want a chance to get to know the younger kids.

Tutoring is common during the before- and after-school homework sessions. Peers help each other, and Clark students drop in to provide one-on-one support. Some teachers are paid to stay for the homework center, too. At University Park, high expectations are not just for kids.

HIGH HOPES, CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES

When the first class of University Park students graduated last June, Damian Ramsey was valedictorian. He's now a freshman at Brown University in Providence, RI, worlds away from the Main South neighborhood where he grew up with a drug-addicted mother. He frequently returns home on weekends to visit his neighborhood friends, many of whom are teenage parents or gang members (See "I gaze at the stars," page 67).

"It's definitely different coming from Brown and going home," says Ramsey. "I really get to see it and think, 'Wow. I made it past all this.'" He's careful to add that he's not passing judgment on his neighborhood friends who haven't gone to college.

Ramsey finds the work at Brown challenging, but he says University Park prepared him well. He says that getting accustomed to his new social environment, and in particular to the wealth and privilege all around him at an Ivy League school, was more difficult. "I speak Ebonics back home with my friends, and a lot of people here don't have that experience," he says.

Tony Mastrorio, who graduated second in University Park's class of 2003, is now enrolled at Georgetown University. Mastrorio says he was ready for this highly competitive school, having taken classes taught by Clark faculty in government, economics, and international relations while at University Park.

"UPCS definitely opened up my options," says Mastrorio, noting especially the writing skills he gained with close teacher attention. He'd never heard of Georgetown until ninth grade, when Donna Rodrigues brought both Ramsey and Mastrorio to Washington to speak to officials in the US Department of Education, the Department of Justice, and the Office of Housing and Urban Development about their high school and the revitalization of the Main South neighborhood.

Rodrigues always stressed student presentations, ensuring that in every class students stand up and speak so they become comfortable doing it. "I made a deliberate decision to help all the kids focus on presentation skills," says Rodrigues, who was initially struck by the trouble many of the students had making eye contact. "They needed practice speaking in front of people and developing that kind of poise. They needed to learn how to package themselves."

Ramsey and Mastrorio think that emphasis worked for them. Both see themselves returning to Worcester after college, Mastrorio to pursue a career in law and politics, Ramsey with his eyes on public policy. “I want to try to help out kids in a similar position,” he says.

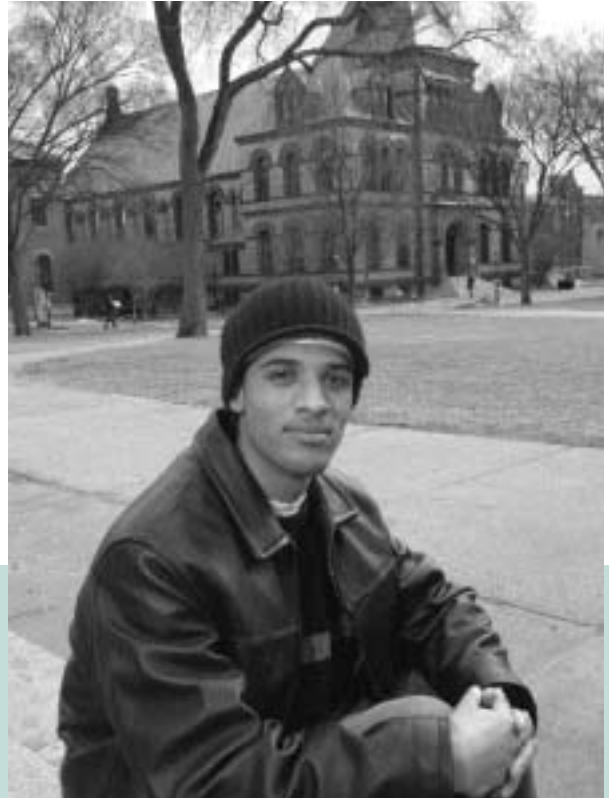
Whether even University Park will be able to do so in the future remains uncertain. Given the culture of high expectations at University Park, setbacks fall hard on students and staff.

When it opened, University Park had 90-minute blocks of classroom time spread out over an eight-hour day. Money from the Worcester public schools allowed the school to pay teachers for the extra time. But two years ago, budget cuts ended all extended-day programs in the city. As a result, University Park lost an entire class period from the school day. The school sacrificed seventh- and eighth-grade

The poetry of Damian Ramsey, valedictorian of University Park's first graduating class, combines the language of the street with a writing discipline learned at the school:

“I GAZE AT THE STARS”

We are God's children
That's what we are
I gaze at the stars
and see all the flaws
of this world we live in
kids chillin' on street corners
spraying 9s at their brothers
we ought to be lovers
hugging, kissing, showing affection to each other
under the lord above
where's the love
young teens get caught in a whirlpool of sex and drugs
it's WWII on the streets
mothers get beat
blood starts to leak
little kids get robbed when they trick or treat
stealing candy from a baby
no it ain't sweet
but it's bitter
trying to sleep at night and hear gang members pulling triggers
look at the figures
one million die
then ten thousand more lose their lives
burning in the heat of hatred and I ask myself why
as I read the scriptures
my little sister i miss her
caught in a drive by and shot down by a pistol
poetically incline
wish i could be sublime
but i live in a world where saying i love u is a crime



giving me goose bumps like RL Stine
and chills up my spine
when i think of the statistics
all those who die and those uneducated
and ignorant folks whose hatred elevated
to cause 911
this is not a pun or a joke
all that smoke that developed after the fires and boulders enveloped
so many innocent brothers and sisters
once again i read the scriptures
hoping for hope
but the world can't be fixed by reading a book
hear being black makes u a crook, or should i say minority—look
at the absurdities of our societies
they bother me like gnats
plutonium bullets fired from gats
we're trapped
and “we want free” like Amistad, we feel enchained by the hatred
no love amongst our cousins, brothers, sisters, fathers, or mothers
the fire burns my hands when i step outside my door
we live in a hellish universe where thousands are poor
discrimination floods this nation
and never ends
hostility exists even amongst friends
rage breeds more rage
I'm drunk with disgust
it makes my heart bust
I'M CRUSHED

Spanish to avoid cutting the time spent on core subjects.

"It was devastating," says Rodrigues. She offered to give up a teacher position in exchange for the longer day, but the school committee wouldn't accept the trade. Rumor had it that the school committee was leery of showing any kind of favoritism toward the high-performing school. But in all likelihood, the deal wouldn't have lasted more than a year anyway, since the school committee made another \$14 million worth of cuts in fiscal year 2003.

Worcester schools superintendent James Caradonio says he regretted the need for cutting the extended day at University Park, just as he was sorry to eliminate 190 teaching positions across the city over the past two years. But he says there's a silver lining in proving the school's success under stress.

"When people come from around the country to look at University Park, they always want to know whether they've hit on any hard times," he says. "They can say, 'Yes, but look at our student achievement.' It's continued to stay at high levels."

But the hard times got personal for Rodrigues, and not just the budget. She began to feel a sense of isolation from her longtime colleagues at other public schools. The better students at University Park performed, the farther away

people sat from her at principals' meetings. She heard whispering and laughter from people who had been longtime friends. As discussions ensued about creating small learning communities within the large high schools, one colleague jokingly asked, "Do we all have to become little University Park Campus Schools now?"

Even worse were some of the compliments. People began to refer to Rodrigues as a "charismatic" leader who oversaw an "island of success." She bristled at the idea that what she and her team had pulled off couldn't be done elsewhere. To her, it was just one more excuse for giving up on needy kids.

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

Rodrigues brought her tenure at University Park to a close last June. She says it was the right time for her to move on—with the first graduating class. At Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based educational research, consulting, and advocacy group, her mission is to travel around the country talking about University Park and how other school districts can form similar partnerships in pursuit of equally stunning results.

Indeed, educators from around the country are flocking to University Park—from New York City; Washington, DC; Las Vegas; and Los Angeles—to see what makes the school work. But it may not be easy to re-create the special envi-

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Clark University's Jack Foley and Tom Del Prete.

ronment of University Park at high schools with more than five times as many students.

“The challenge is, how do you convince all the students and all the teachers that the students are capable of performing at high levels and that you will do everything possible to support them to achieve at high levels?” asks Paul Reville, executive director of MassINC’s Rennie Center and a lecturer at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. “The challenge for the school district leaders is how to learn from the success, to honor the extraordinary results, and to encourage others to adopt some of the principles that are at work here, without at the same time canonizing this school and its faculty in a way that is sure to marginalize the rest of the systems.”

That challenge is not lost on superintendent Caradonio, who, as deputy superintendent, served on the steering committee that created University Park. But it’s a tall order to extend that success throughout a city when a fiscal crisis has lopped \$30 million off the school budget in the past two years.

Caradonio is hopeful, however, that as the city’s large high schools begin to divide themselves up into smaller learning communities within their sprawling buildings—a process that’s underway with the help of an \$8 million grant from

the Carnegie Corp.—the lessons of University Park will have greater local relevance.

“The issue is creating the same personalization and motivation at the larger schools,” says Caradonio. He believes the larger schools can look to University Park for guidance on family involvement, project-based instruction, and curricula that prepare kids for higher-level thinking skills.

“People tend to canonize small schools,” says Caradonio, but adds that making a learning community small means nothing if there is no culture change. “It’s not just the new wineskin that’s important,” Caradonio says. “It’s the new wine that goes in it.”

At the large high schools, however, the “new wine” is being made as it’s poured. “University Park had the advantage of starting from scratch, building the team, and building the student body that set the model and the tone for succeeding classes,” says Clark’s Jack Foley. “It’s more difficult going into a large building and changing the culture. But I know

The issue is to create the same personalization and motivation at the larger high schools.

it can be done.”

One Worcester principal trying to do it is Maureen Ciccone, who worked with Donna Rodrigues and June Eressy when they were teachers at South High School. Under Ciccone, South High has formed a partnership with Clark’s Hiatt Center, which is administering the Carnegie grant, and they’re working together to create three academies within the 1,500-student school. One of the greatest benefits she’s gotten from University Park, she says, are the Clark-trained teachers who have done their student-teaching there and since come to South as teachers. But she’s also been inspired by the example of personalization and high expectations set by University Park.

“Everyone in Worcester has benefited from the results that University Park has achieved,” says Ciccone. “I think what they’ve done is what everyone should be able to do if we just dig a little deeper. They’ve shown us what’s possible.” ■

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