

Animo High Empowers its Teachers

By SHERRY POSNICK-GOODWIN, Photos by SCOTT BUSCHMAN

"Welcome, ambassadors," says Jose Urias to ninth-graders entering his classroom at Animo Leadership High School in Los Angeles. "The Organization of American States is now in session."

Seated in roundtable formation, students take turns describing the problems in their respective countries and offering historical perspective.

"Our problem in Peru is cocaine production," says Mayra Campos. "They grow cocaine because they get more money for this than growing cocoa."

Her project partner, Nelson Palamo, points out that the problem won't be solved until farmers can make enough money to feed their families by growing legitimate crops.

The students, nearly all of them Hispanic, are enrolled in a class on the History of the Americas, co-created by their 27-year-old teacher, Urias. Last year the course was accredited by the University of California system as meeting a world history requirement.



Youthful teachers like John Newsom are the norm at Animo.

By giving teachers the freedom to design their own curriculum, pick their own textbooks and teach the way they want to, Animo, a charter school that is proud to treat teachers as professionals, is attracting teachers in flocks. Teachers also enjoy the small campus with approximately 400 students



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Mayra Campos and Jayne Cabrera

"Teachers have a lot of input when it comes to decision-making here," says Urias. He and Mario Alcala are co-presidents of the Asociacion de Maestros Unidos chapter of CTA.

"We are given a lot of autonomy and treated like professionals. We are provided with assistance and do not have a top-down management structure.

"What we do have here is AB 2160," he says, referring to the CTA-sponsored legislation that would have allowed chapters to bargain procedures by which teachers could have a say in the selection of curriculum, textbooks and professional development. As it is, such critical decisions are left solely in the hands of administrators and school boards.

Animo Leadership Charter High School opened in 2000 and is one of two college-prep schools

operated by Green Dot Public Schools, a nonprofit charter school developer. In 2002, Green Dot opened its second campus, Animo Inglewood Charter High School.

Both schools begin with freshmen and add one grade level per year. They serve mostly low-income minority students, many of them English language learners. Green Dot founder and CEO Steve Barr plans to open 100 high schools in the Los Angeles area over the next decade. Animo Leadership, chartered by the Lennox Elementary School District, got a 4 on the API, but received a 10 when compared to similar schools.

While some charter schools exploit teachers, Barr says his vision of a charter is a "teacher empowerment act." This, he explains, means "putting more dollars into the classroom where they belong - and into teacher pockets." The school receives approximately 90 percent of the amount per pupil as the Los Angeles Unified School District, but pays teachers 10 percent more. And Green Dot has already built up a cash reserve of \$300,000 even though it has to rent facilities. Part of the reason is that Green Dot schools have less bureaucracy than a typical district.

When faculty members told Barr they would like to be part of CTA, Barr said fine. "A lot of people in the charter school community said, 'What the hell are you doing?'" he recalls. "But teachers need to know they have some stability. And if you are bent on systemic change within the urban school environment, the biggest player is the teachers union. I want us to be partners with the union at all our schools."

"The best thing about being part of CTA is that it brings credibility to the school," says math teacher Rob Clifford. "Sometimes we meet teachers from traditional schools who are suspicious of us. We tell them we are a public school and a union school. We have a contract."

"Working for Green Dot Public Schools has the feel of working for a startup company," says Clifford, noting that teachers are given cell phones and laptop computers, and that students have access to laptops. "I don't feel like I am working for a large, institutionalized facility. I know every student here."

He says he feels pushed to be creative. "Some teachers here get competitive. It's like, 'Wow, you're doing something really exciting. I better do something exciting, too.'"


In one of his class projects, students studying probability and statistics surveyed all students regarding elective courses they would like to see. As a result, a drama teacher, Craig Robinson, was hired last year.



Alejandra Ceja



Asociacion de Maestros Unidos Co-President Jose Urias encourages ninth-graders Mayra Campos, Jayne Cabrera and Alejandra Ceja to argue their points of view in a course he designed.

 Since Animo Leadership, which shares space with a law school, did not have a stage, Robinson and his students built one.

At Animo, all but one of the teachers are under age 30. At lunchtime, they can be found playing volleyball with students, strumming guitars or sitting with students on the lawn. Many work after school with students in clubs or sports, and frequently take students on field trips - sometimes across the country - to look at colleges.

"We really push the idea of going to college," says English teacher Lisa Flores, one of three instructors who took students to Boston colleges over spring break last year. "In fact, one of our graduation requirements is that students must apply to three colleges. These kids are 98 percent Latino, and a large number of them will be the first member of their family to graduate from high school. A lot of the teachers here come from similar backgrounds and want to show them they can succeed."

Flores brings energy and enthusiasm to Animo. Recently, her students brought music to play for classmates and had to explain why the lyrics could be considered poetry.

She meets with parents regularly and arrives an hour before school each day to coach the cheerleading squad.

"Working here is not for everybody," says Barr. "Teachers must work very hard and become leaders immediately. Nobody hands them curriculum and tells them to teach seven periods and leave at 3:30.

"But I am pleasantly surprised over and over again. I have found that if you treat teachers with respect, pay them well and challenge them, wonderful things happen."

Publish Date: 10/03