

Lessons from the other side

School that's 96% low-income offers just what the upscale want

SANDY BANKS

It's not exactly where you might expect to find an example of public school success:



The campus is in a former flower mart, across the street from the Greyhound station and a short walk from skid row in an industrial area of downtown Los Angeles.

But inside the Para Los Niños Charter School, children defined by disadvantage are proving skeptics wrong.

I paid a visit to the school last month, after I'd mentioned it in a column about an effort by parents in nearby South Park to create a new Metro Charter school for children living in the upscale neighborhoods near L.A. Live downtown.

Some of those parents seem to have written off nearby Para Los Niños: it's too poor, too Latino, too linguistically deprived to offer their children enough of a challenge. They are business owners, architects, technology creators, accountants — not elitists, just upscale high-achievers worried that their dreams and the school's aspirations wouldn't be a good fit.

Those are the kinds of concerns on many middle-class minds. Para Los Niños is a magnified version of a city school system that gets less diverse and more economically challenged with every passing year.

Of the 410 students on Para Los Niños' elementary campus, 99% are Latino and 96% hail from low-income families. More than two-thirds of the students are not fluent in English.

But the school is proving that demographics are not destiny.

Its test scores are on par with many suburban public schools. And its curriculum relies on the sort of child-centered approach favored by progressive private schools with five-figure tuition.

Admission is by lottery, and the school has twice as many applications as open spots some years. Most students live in the garment district, but others come from as far away as Lennox and Long Beach.

"If you had our parents in a room and asked how many want their kids to go to college, 100% would raise their hands," Principal Titus Campos told me.

Still, Campos knows that the school's student-body profile turns some parents off. "We hear it all the time," he said.

When they try to recruit in other neighborhoods to diversify enrollment, "the



GERARDO MOLINA, Los Angeles Times
Para Los Niños students file past the "Oceanography" mural. The school, in an industrial part of downtown L.A., uses art as a forum for the study of math, science and history, which helps students who are still learning English.

"The focus here is on everybody doing whatever it takes to meet the children's needs."

— TITUS CAMPOS,
Para Los Niños principal

question asked most is 'Where do the children come from? Are they all Latino?'

Does that matter? I asked sixth-grader Ron Bellamy. He's biracial but looks black and didn't speak Spanish when he came to Para Los Niños four years ago.

"It was perplexing at first," Ron admitted. "But there was always somebody around to translate." Most of his classmates spoke both Spanish and English. Instruction after second grade is in English only.

What mattered most to Ron was not skin color or language but the well-stocked library, lively music classes and elaborate art projects, he said. "My other school didn't have any of that."

What would he say to parents worried that their non-Latino children wouldn't fit? "They'd get along just like all of us. We don't put people in groups," he said. "We don't judge by race."

::

Social issues are part of the calculus that parents use to choose. But what happens in the classroom is what matters most. And the reality of Para Los Niños seems to me surprisingly close to the prospective Metro Charter's goals: The focus is on learning

by doing and fostering personal growth. Teachers aren't required to "teach to the test" but to reward curiosity and nurture creative thinking.

And the school is beautiful inside, with student collaborations — giant murals, sculptures and collages — lining the hallways. It looks more like a hipster art museum than an elementary campus with skid row roots.

The charter was launched in 2002 by Para Los Niños, a 30-year-old nonprofit that pioneered social service programs for neglected children whose homeless parents were trapped by economics on skid row.

The neighborhood is students' laboratory and their lives the canvases for their discoveries. They take city buses to Walt Disney Concert Hall, hike the historic 6th Street Bridge, study the architecture of Union Station and the history of Little Tokyo.

The school has an artist-in-residence and a team of visiting architects. Students practice math by designing their own playground, study anatomy by constructing a "human" body, learn about the ocean by creating an image out of glass beads, chicken wire and fabric scraps.

It may not be glamorous or high-tech, but the students I met and projects I saw make me believe it works.

::

My column on the campaign for a new Metro Charter drew applause for parents' efforts to create a downtown school that newcomers can shape through high standards. But it also drew com-

plaints about "boutique charters" that promote isolation and shortchange "impoorished children of color."

Para Los Niños Charter shows the choice is not so stark.

By using art as a forum for the study of math, science and history, Para Los Niños keeps its students from falling behind while they are still learning English.

That embodies the promise of the tax-funded charter movement: allowing unconventional schools to experiment in ways that will ultimately offer public school systems road-tested measures for raising student achievement.

Para Los Niños Charter works because it brings parents into the process, trusts its team to innovate and isn't hamstringed by district rigidity or by union rules. Teachers create their own lesson plans and can go where students' interests lead; the cafeteria ladies who serve the lunches also clean the tables after students eat.

And the principal is not above mopping up a sick child's vomit, or afraid to receive a second-grader's hug.

"The focus here," Campos said, "is on everybody doing whatever it takes to meet the children's needs."

That may not make it right for every family, but it does make the campus a model of what a charter should be.

Not just a refuge for students fleeing unsafe, uncomfortable or under-achieving schools, but a testing ground for new ways of teaching that broaden children's possibilities.

sandy.banks@latimes.com