Philly’s school of high marks - 500-student Penn Alexander excels - and academics elsewhere want to learn more

Philadelphia Daily News (PA) -
Friday, November 9, 2007
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IN SCIENCE CLASS this fall, Maxwell Gontarek has been learning about genetic engineering by observing the offspring of two zebra fish - an albino father and a wild mother.

“It’s fun,” Maxwell, 12, said of his time at the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander University of Pennsylvania Partnership School.

“I’ve gone here so many years I don’t really want to leave,” said Maxwell, who plays stand-up bass in music class and is one of three seventh-grade representatives on Student Council.

Meanwhile, Umar Farooqi, in his seventh-grade social studies class, has been learning about the trial and execution of Greek philosopher Socrates, convicted of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens.

“I love it. This school has good education, I love the building and the teachers are really cool,” said Farooqi, who has two younger sisters also enrolled at Penn Alexander and an older brother who has since graduated to Central High, a top academic magnet school.

This is public education at one of Philadelphia’s most successful school “experiments.”

Since opening its doors in 2001, just before the state takeover of city schools, the K-to-eighth-grade, West Philadelphia school created from scratch by the school district and the University of Pennsylvania has become a success story in its neighborhood - and a model for school reform in other cities.

Students interviewed said they were hooked on their school, from its engaging classroom lessons to the building’s unique design, which features plenty of windows and a sun-drenched atrium that is ringed by classrooms on three floors.

“It just has a friendly atmosphere and the learning environment is really good,” Farooqi, 12, said of the 85,000-square-foot building. “It makes you feel welcome, I guess.”

Educators nationwide are hooked, too - on the school’s test scores.

UCLA called two weeks ago. The University of Arkansas at Little Rock recently sent two representatives to check out the school at 42nd and Spruce streets. The College of Charleston and Howard University, in the nation’s capital, have also been in touch.

These universities want to understand how Penn created one of the city’s highest-performing public K-8 schools - while drawing students solely from the school’s surrounding (and, thanks to the school, rapidly gentrifying) neighborhood.

The latest state standardized test scores show that 81.4 percent of the school’s students are proficient or advanced in math, and 80.3 percent are so in reading.
By comparison, across the Philadelphia School District, 44.9 percent of students are on target in math and 40.6 percent in reading.

“The expectations are high and the curriculum is rigorous,” observed Sheila Sydnor, who was selected from 60 applicants to become the Penn Alexander School’s first and only principal.

“I don’t think we teach just enough. We go beyond just enough, and that has made a difference,” added the 32-year district veteran.

Despite Penn Alexander’s test results - which are also higher than the state’s average scores - there is one education organization that has never attempted to learn from the school: the Philadelphia School District.

“I don’t get calls,” Sydnor said sheepishly.

“We would love for the school district to call us more, but that’s hard,” said Ann Kreidle, a Penn Alexander parent who also is manager of Penn’s partnership schools with the school district.

In addition to Penn Alexander, those include Wilson and Lea elementary schools, both of which Penn has managed since 2002 as part of the state’s takeover of the district.

Penn Alexander’s success has unfolded at the same time as the school district’s much-watched experiment of placing 45 low-performing schools under private management.

That experiment, a result of the state takeover, has frustrated critics who believe it has been more expensive and less successful than the district’s own internal reform efforts.

While never conceding as much, the School Reform Commission this spring slashed funding to the seven outside management organizations and announced that come next fall, new reforms will be introduced at 70 schools that have never achieved adequate yearly progress, or AYP, under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

Penn Alexander has always achieved AYP, according to Sydnor, helping 83 percent of last year’s eighth-graders earn admittance to top high schools, with nearly half being accepted at magnet Central High School.

Sandra Dungee Glenn, chairwoman of the Philadelphia School Reform Commission, said the school district has not yet attempted to determine how Penn Alexander has been able to achieve its success.

“I don’t know that anyone has taken a hard look in terms of, what is it that’s making it work?” she said. “Is it that extra investment from the university that’s paying for some special things there? That’s the kind of thing I think we need to take a closer look at.”

John Frangipani, Penn Alexander’s regional superintendent, said the school has given the school district much to consider.

“I think they are on the right track,” he said. “We have seven years of information to look at to see what has to be corrected and what’s worth doing over again.”

One area of concern, he noted, is the gap between white and black students who reached the coveted “proficient” and “advanced” levels on the latest state reading and math test.

In both subjects, just over 95 percent of white students reached those levels, while 70 percent of black students did so.

“Why is a school like this that is getting so much more support not closing the achievement gap?” he asked. “So we have to look at both sides of the coin before we start replicating.”

Sydnor said remedies now being used to close the gap include providing lagging students with an after-school program, and during school hours an hour or more of additional reading and math help each week.
Sydnor and Penn Alexander faculty members confirmed without reservation that the school’s success is directly linked to the partnership with Penn, which is much more hands-on than the school district contract allows for at Lea and Wilson schools.

For starters, Penn contributes $1,000 per student annually at the 511-student school. The additional teachers hired with those funds help keep class sizes no larger than 17 students in kindergarten and no more than 24 students in first through eighth grades. (In the school district, by contrast, classes can be as large as 30 students in kindergarten through third grades, and 33 students in fourth through 12th grades.)

The school has a certified librarian, a full-time instrumental music teacher and an education technologist who oversees the school’s 350 laptop and desktop computers, which are in three labs, the library and all classrooms, Kreidle said.

In addition, the school selects all of its own teachers and is aided by staff and student teachers from Penn’s Graduate School of Education, while regular field trips to Penn’s science lab and other facilities are invaluable, Sydnor said.

“The university cares a lot about the fact that this is a neighborhood public school,” said Sigal Ben-Porath, an assistant professor who serves as faculty liaison between the graduate school and Penn Alexander. “It’s not a lab school, it’s not the children-of-the-[Penn]-faculty school. It’s a university-assisted, neighborhood public school.”

Still, 20 percent of the students are related to Penn employees, Kreidle estimated.

The school’s success has helped boost housing prices in the surrounding area, which could account for an unusual school district trend: Penn Alexander is becoming whiter.

In 2002, 58 percent of the school’s students were African-American, while today the figure is 48 percent. Then, 19.4 percent of students were white, while today 29 percent are. The Asian population of 13 percent and Latino population of 6 percent have changed little.

“I think a lot of people in the neighborhood are getting upset that it’s getting too gentrified, but the whole city is getting gentrified,” said Mary Goldman, education committee co-chair for the Spruce Hill Community Association.

Parent Eugenia Hewwing said the school’s diversity was a draw and relief after her son, Christian Campbell, 7, experienced trouble fitting in as one the few African-American students at his former Lower Merion Township school.

“I already see the improvement,” Hewwing said after volunteering at the school recently. “He actually likes going to school. He’s not coming home saying, ‘Mommy, the kids didn’t want to play with me.’ “

Diversity is important to Mecky Pohlschroder, as well. The Penn microbiology professor was born in Germany and her husband is from Ivory Coast, in West Africa.

While volunteering at the school where the couple has a son in first grade, Pohlschroder also praised the school’s embrace of parents.

“I’m definitely not an odd person who is here,” she said, pausing from helping a group of first-graders write the letters “O” and “P.”

“We often overlap,” she said of parents. “The fact that the teachers do allow the parents to come in is really nice for me. I know friends who say, ‘Oh, really? My teacher doesn’t want us to come in.’ “ *