



# Building Academic

# Success in Schools

By Olga V. Block

When my husband Michael and I opened our first charter school in 1998 our ambition was to create one of the best educational institutions in the country. We sought to reach this goal by offering an education that combines the best practices of education systems around the world. In May of 2008, *Newsweek* designated BASIS Tucson “the best public high school in the United States.” While our decade-long journey from non-existence to “the best” was not free of difficulties, it is, I believe, a true testament to what American Education can be.

*Newsweek* bases its ranking of schools on the academic rigor of the program measured by the number of Advanced Placement (AP) exams students take. At BASIS, the curriculum is centered on the College Board’s AP program in all core subjects. Students are not just offered random collections of AP courses but an AP program that starts in fifth grade and culminates in 11th grade.

A score of a three or higher on an AP exam generally earns students credit in an introductory course at state universities or, at the very least, serves as a verification of a student’s expertise and knowledge of a subject at an

elite institution. In the 2006-07 school year, BASIS Tucson High School students scored an average of 4.9 out of a possible five on the AP Calculus BC exam and an average of 4.8 on the AP Physics exam. Nationwide the average scores were 3.6 and 2.8 respectively. In the 2006-07 school year 89 BASIS students in grades 9-11 took 202 AP exams; 75 percent of those students scored above 3.0. Moreover, most students taking AP exams are juniors or seniors while BASIS students must begin taking exams in the ninth grade.

For many these results are hard to believe. My colleagues and I are confronted with the typical demurs. The most prominent among education professionals is “well you give entry examinations, right?” In fact, we do not. The most memorable may be a local newspaper, which, after collecting (incorrect) ethnicity data from the Arizona Department of Education website, claimed “only ten percent of its students are minorities.” In fact, the student population at BASIS Tucson that year was 36 percent minority.

The reality is that BASIS, like all charter schools in



Arizona, must accept all students regardless of race, class, sexual orientation, language, religion or disability. The success of BASIS can be attributed to a rigorous curriculum, the work of dedicated teachers who are experts in their disciplines, the trust of hundreds of families who have put their children’s education in our hands and the freedom allowed to charter school operators in the state of Arizona.

### **The “New American School”**

BASIS School, Inc., a nonprofit corporation, has contracts with the state of Arizona to operate two charter schools: BASIS Tucson, founded in 1998 and BASIS Scottsdale, founded in 2003. Charter schools generally aim to provide options that are not available at traditional public schools with offerings ranging from college prep programs to dropout prevention centers. There is a constant incentive for charter schools to attract and retain students since they receive funding based on student counts. As a result, charter schools generally focus on underserved student populations.

The charter law in Arizona grants school leaders a large amount of flexibility and control over school-level management and curriculum decisions. Because of the freedom allowed under the law we were able to come up with a vision for a “New American School” which would combine the rigorous curriculum and accelerated pace of European and Asian schools with the openness of

the American classroom and the questioning nature of American students.

As a native of the Czech Republic, I had experienced European education as a student, as a professor at Prague Economics University and, after the revolution, as the Vice Dean of the School of Social Sciences at Charles University. When I placed my daughter in the sixth grade at a local suburban middle school after moving to the United States, she was still learning English. I was fascinated by what the school did to make her feel accepted and also by the students’ participation, discussion and spirit within the classroom. At the same time I was stunned by the lack of structure and discipline within the school. There seemed to be no thought behind the curriculum; students were simply assigned to classes that were available. Homework was an option for the students, not a requirement. There was no consequence for a late or missing assignment.

When we founded BASIS we knew we wanted a school that would be guided by high academic standards, freedom among teachers to guide the program and curriculum in their field of mastery, student responsibility, parental choice, outcome-based measurables and constant collaboration and improvement in delivery, strategy and school policy. BASIS Middle School requires high levels of accountability through a “must pass” comprehensive exam system and a curriculum which involves teaching biology, chemistry and physics as



separate sciences starting in sixth grade as well as college-level economics in eighth grade. Students take Algebra I in seventh grade, Latin in both fifth and then sixth grade, a modern foreign language beginning in seventh grade, along with English language and literature and U.S. and world history courses. Physical education and fine arts complement the rigorous academic curriculum.

The curriculum at BASIS Upper School is centered on the College Board's AP program in all core subjects. Students take at least six AP exams during their high school tenure, with these exams counting as final exams in the course. All students complete calculus, physics, biology, chemistry, U.S., European and world history, English literature, critical writing and analysis and a modern foreign language—and they do all this by the end of their junior year. Most students also take AP calculus and a good proportion take AP micro and macro economics. While BASIS students have enough credits to graduate after their 11th grade year, many choose to attend their senior year in hopes of gaining “high honors” after passing advanced capstone courses and a senior research project off campus.

### **Running a School Like a Business**

Perhaps more important for the schools' success than control over curriculum is the control the charter law grants school leaders over school-level management decisions. In Arizona, charter school

leaders can hire who they want, fire who they want, pay teachers what they want and create a pay structure using whatever incentives they wish to incorporate.

Teachers at BASIS are expected to be creative, independent and diverse in their teaching styles and methods and influential in shaping the BASIS curriculum. It doesn't matter how well thought-out or challenging the curriculum, if a teacher can't convey the information to the students then the students won't understand and build knowledge. With teachers playing such a pivotal role in the success or failure of a school, control over staffing decisions is critical.

BASIS does not have a starting base salary or set pay increases for teachers who have worked at the school for a certain number of years. Instead, we negotiate salaries on a case by case basis and offer teachers performance bonuses based on their performance on agreed upon tasks, student test scores and other measures of academic progress. Thanks to a generous founding contribution from Barbara and Craig Barrett (chairman of the Board of the Intel Corporation), we also implemented a “Master Teacher Program” at our Scottsdale campus which rewards teachers for the results they produce in the classroom and their efforts and success in mentoring other teachers. The program, which raised over \$350,000 in the 2007-08 school year is funded entirely by private contributions, a large proportion of which were made by BASIS parents.

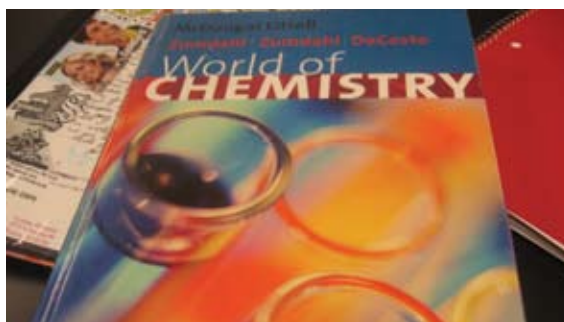
Another benefit under existing state law is that Arizona charter school teachers are not required to have teacher certification. While this may seem like a minor distinction, it allows us to recruit from a much more diverse group of individuals whose backgrounds are not necessarily in education. The BASIS faculty consists of everything from fresh graduates of Ivy League schools to former university professors, investment bankers and scientific researchers. Among the teaching faculty, 56 percent hold Masters Degrees and 10 percent hold Ph.D.s. Only 15 percent hold current teaching certificates in any state in the country.

## The Bottom Line

The Department of Education holds charter schools accountable to the same standards as traditional district schools, but because charter schools must attract and retain students in order to receive funding they are also directly accountable to their consumers: parents and students. As an immigrant, one of my biggest challenges in running a school was understanding how the parents view education in the U.S., which was an essential element in retaining students and running a successful school. There were dynamics of this society I simply didn't understand.

I was completely unaware of the importance placed on extracurricular activities. Parents came to me wanting their students to have a band and I thought "okay, but what does that have to do with our school?" Eventually the students got their band along with a number of other extracurricular activities. Because extracurricular activities are very costly and divert resources away from academic education, we offer extracurricular activities on a fee basis allowing us to reserve our resources for the academic program and, at the same time, offer the students the more "well rounded" experience they desire. Whenever we must determine whether or not to support a program with our state funding we first ask whether or not it is vital in fulfilling the mission of the school.

While we will make arrangements to offer the extracurricular activities and school dances the parents and students desire, we are unwilling to budge on issues that are critical to the mission of the school. When we opened the first middle school we implemented comprehensive exams in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades and required students to pass the exams in order to advance to the next grade level. Several years ago a sixth grade student who failed her comprehensive exam came to my office to ask me, quite annoyed, if I had the legal right to fail her. I told her "yes baby, I do." Allowing students to progress to the next grade level before they have mastered the skills and material necessary to move on harms the failing students as well as those who have mastered the material. Our job is to get the



students up to the required level of mastery, not to get them through the grades.

## A Model for Reform?

In 2005, an *Arizona Republic* headline asserted "Basis charter schools may offer the best free education in the U.S. But applying the formula to public schools may not work." We cropped the quote and put it on the back of our business cards which now read, quite simply and deliberately, "BASIS may offer the best public education in the U.S." We didn't include the second portion of the quote because its author had completely missed the point.

The curriculum and policies specific to BASIS are not formulaic. They cannot simply be applied, like fertilizer, to any system and 'watch the students learn.' The formula that makes this sort of success possible is the freedom to innovate and reform at the school level. Entrepreneurial freedom gives the United States the chance to fight the gloomy predictions about the future of its education. The Arizona charter law is an example of this entrepreneurial freedom which we need to guard. Too often the laws that protect these freedoms are truncated by experts who believe they know what is best for all people in all situations. No other industrialized nation has a population as diverse as that of the United States. Centralizing a whole system on federal, state or even the monstrous district level simply doesn't make sense. America's comparative advantage is the creativity and freedom to develop within small educational units to serve the needs of a diverse population. ■

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