

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

Nonprofit-Public School Alliance

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2013

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A partnership between Fairfax High and the nonprofit Greenway Arts Alliance in Los Angeles has improved school finances and created a community hub **BY PHUONG LY**

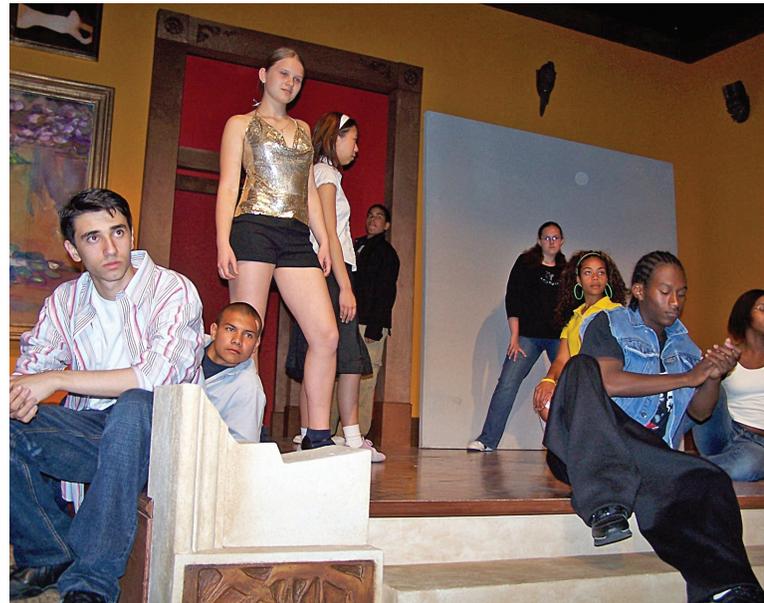
TO MANY OF ITS NEIGHBORS, Fairfax High School in Los Angeles was a place to avoid. A chain-link fence separated the school, which served many low-income students, from the rest of the bustling West Hollywood area. Graffiti marked the dilapidated school buildings, and the campus landscaping consisted of dirt and dying shrubbery.

But when actors Pierson Blaetz and Whitney Weston first noticed Fairfax High in the mid-1990s, they saw potential. The students could be an audience to whom they could pass on their love of theater with an arts education program. The school's parking lots could be transformed into a fundraising bazaar on the weekends, taking advantage of the crowds shopping at the nearby LA Farmers Market. And a long-abandoned social hall on campus could be resurrected as a theater for both the actors' troupe and students.

Their ideas, however, faced formidable obstacles. The Los Angeles Unified School District, California's largest school system, is a bureaucratic labyrinth. Neither Blaetz nor Weston had much experience with school politics or entrepreneurship. But, Blaetz joked, their profession gave them an edge; as actors, they were used to rejection—and bouncing back.

Over 16 years, the partnership between Fairfax High and the nonprofit Greenway Arts Alliance spearheaded by Blaetz and Weston has become a model for turning a school into a financially viable community center. The Melrose Trading Post, as the eclectic market in the Fairfax parking lot is called, has generated more than \$6 million in income since 1996, with proceeds evenly split between Greenway and Fairfax. As one of the most successful ongoing fundraising ventures in the history of LA public schools, the bazaar—which sells handmade jewelry, vintage furniture, and collectibles—has helped pay for classroom furniture and computers, sports equipment and uniforms, field trips, and scholarships. In 2000, the school's neglected social hall was turned into a 99-seat theater under a special agreement—Greenway would renovate it, in exchange for being able to use it for shows. Increasingly, however, both students and professional actors are sharing the stage through Greenway's arts education program.

Those successes have opened up new ideas about what is possible for a public school. Five years ago, profits from Melrose Trading Post were used to hire a development director for Fairfax. The fundraising position is common at private schools, but rare for public schools. As other California public schools slashed staff



Fairfax High School students perform at the Greenway Court Theater following its renovation.

and programs during the recession, Fairfax's development director raised about \$14 million in government funding and private donations for a new athletic field and stadium.

"The community wants to support the school. It's only in their best interests to have a thriving high school," Weston says. "We were able to broker that. There are so many resources in a community; it's just a matter of making the connections."

The chain-link fence surrounding the school has been painted a bright crimson, and flowering shrubs and green lawn welcome visitors. The improvements have penetrated deep into the classroom, says Ed Zubiato, who retired as principal this spring. Test scores have improved, with the school's academic performance index jumping more than 100 points in the past six years. During the same period, suspensions have plunged from about 600 a year to 200.

"We're stunned by what's been done," Zubiato says. "But why shouldn't we compete like private schools? It's time for people in public schools to quit complaining about what they don't have and see what we do have."

MUTUAL BENEFIT

The biggest challenge in the Greenway/Fairfax partnership was getting started. Initially, nobody at Fairfax High returned Blaetz and

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Weston's phone calls. Staffers at the 2,400-student school were so overwhelmed, only urgent messages were answered. Blaetz and Weston, who had worked on fundraisers for other community groups, didn't give up. Finally, a few months after they started calling in 1997, they attended a Parent-Teacher Association meeting to see if they could meet then-principal Carol Truscott. At first, Truscott was suspicious—usually people came to her with complaints, not offers to help. But once school officials and parents got to know Blaetz and Weston, ideas started flowing and plans took shape.

Still, Blaetz and Weston say they continued to experience unresponsive school district staff members and a confusing thicket of rules and regulations. A separate nonprofit, Friends of Fairfax, with school administrators as board members, had to be established to collect and distribute funds from the trading post. Nearly every aspect of a project, even the type of soil and plants used for landscaping, had to be approved by the district's central administration. Sometimes, however, skirting the bureaucracy forced Greenway to be more creative. As Greenway's staff grew and the school had no office space to spare, Blaetz and Weston knew that to get the school district to approve a building addition—even if Greenway paid for it—would take years. So they took an abandoned trailer on campus, purchased it from the school, and refurbished it into offices.

Weston says that empathizing with the stress under which school officials operate—pressure to improve test scores, constant criticism from the public, and a complex bureaucracy—helped cool her frustrations. “We spent a lot of time thinking about what it was like to be in their shoes,” Weston says. But Fairfax wasn't merely a poor victim that Weston and Blaetz were trying to help out. By attaching Greenway to Fairfax High, the arts nonprofit gained more name recognition, office space, and connections to politicians and community members. “There was a mutual benefit,” Blaetz says. “If we didn't have the high school, our nonprofit would have been unrecognizable. They had a brand.”

That respect for the challenges of and opportunities presented by public schools helped engage more school officials and others in the partnership, says Steve Zimmer, a school board member whose district includes Fairfax. “Urban high schools in the United States have a particular reputation of being factories of failure and places to be feared,” Zimmer says. “There are a lot of fear and race and class issues, and those play into how arts groups and philanthropy groups approach urban schools. The power dynamic is often we will give to you, rather than we will work with you. But when people work together as equals, good things happen. When people respect each other, good things happen.”

DEVELOPMENT OFFICE LAUNCHES

Although successful, the Melrose Trading Post and the Greenway Court Theatre were not changing how the school operated. Proceeds from the trading post had helped pay for school equipment and field trips, but weren't enough to launch bigger projects. Theater shows had brought more community members to the school, but the relationships weren't being cultivated. School officials still didn't have enough staff to keep up with phone calls.

That changed in 2006, after Zubiante became Fairfax's principal and helped create a development office. The mandate of the new

office wasn't just to raise money for Fairfax High, but to establish and sustain relationships. “School administrators on a day-to-day basis are just too busy,” says Zubiante. “But we need to talk with neighbors, with businesses, with government people. It's really important for people to see us and meet us, so that they're not talking about us as *that* school or *those* kids, but on a more personal level, as part of the community.”

The work of the development office has transformed Fairfax High into a school with a few neighborhood events to a full-fledged community hub. Film crews and food trucks have negotiated to use the parking lot during nonschool hours, generating about \$100,000 a year in revenue for the school. When the new stadium opens in the fall, many users will be nonstudents. A soccer association agreed to offer \$3 million in programs for city youths in exchange for being allowed to use the field for practices and games.

Flush with the victory of the stadium project, the next goal is to establish an endowment for Fairfax. Meanwhile, contributions of goods and services, small and large, flow in regularly. CBS Television City, located less than a mile from the school, donates soundstages and technicians for school events and opens its doors to students for field trips and programs. A local shop gave theater students a load of old costumes. A Fairfax alumnus offered an anti-bullying training program.

CBS had not been involved previously because nobody from Fairfax had ever made a request, says Mike Klausman, senior vice president of operations and engineering. “The public school system is spread pretty thin,” Klausman says. “We're part of the community, so we feel like we need to give back if we can.”

Joyce Kleifield, Fairfax's development director, says people want to help local public schools, but “many told us that they never donated because nobody had ever asked them before.” Also, says Kleifield, “they don't want to donate money to a fruitless venture. They want to see results, and they want follow-up.”

As Fairfax flourishes, other schools have inquired about how they could become more entrepreneurial and leverage their assets. Greenway is promoting the partnership model and wants to be a consultant to other schools. Greenway and Fairfax officials concede that replicating the model could be difficult for some schools, particularly those in poorer neighborhoods without the resources that Fairfax has. Private fundraising may also widen an inequality gap between schools in a district. Despite those challenges, Zubiante says, public schools need to start acting like private schools, “to advocate and pull their own schools up by their bootstraps.”

For recent graduate Farid Wadood, Fairfax was the best combination of public and private school. He had reluctantly enrolled in Fairfax in his junior year, after his parents could no longer afford the tuition at a private school. It was at Fairfax that he discovered a love for poetry and dance and found mentors in the Greenway arts education program.

“Before, I had heard that public schools were less than private school,” said Wadood, now a student at San Francisco State University. “I wasn't really expecting so many groups and diverse activities. There was such a sense of community. It turned out to be a great experience, and I honestly would not do anything differently.” ■