
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

It's All about Relationships

June 17, 2005

Alan J. Borsuk

<<<>>>

Retrieved 06/17/05 from

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/metro/jun05/334378.asp>

Not all of Marcia Spector's schools are in the voucher program, but they're 'choice' in other ways

Sixth of 7 parts

Think of it as the Marcia Spector School District.

It includes five schools, which will grow to six this fall. By then, more than 900 students are expected to be part of the "district." Every student is paid for with public dollars. None of the schools is religious. Together, they have more students than almost 200 school districts in Wisconsin.

There is no Marcia Spector School District, of course. But three things about it are real:

One is the schools themselves. Among the more interesting in Milwaukee, they are well-run, focused, intimate and energetic.

A second is what the schools say about the way the definition of a public school is being stretched and reshaped, perhaps more so in Milwaukee than anywhere else in the United States.

And the third is Marcia Spector, 61, a forceful figure, both idealistic and effective as a business leader. She is executive director and chief sparkplug of Seeds of Health, the non-profit organization that operates the schools. Seeds is by no means a one-person show, but Spector has been at the pivot point of launching and running each of its schools. She illustrates the potent role an educational entrepreneur can have in creating schools and changing the status quo, given the latitude to do so that exists in Milwaukee.

Spector was well known in the 1980s as president of the Shorewood School Board - she was known as Marcia Stein then. She played a prominent role in setting the course for the

city/suburban voluntary integration plan known as Chapter 220 and in developing a special education consortium among North Shore schools.

She still sees herself as a strong proponent of public education.

"But there are different ways of doing that," she says, describing the alternative approaches the Seeds schools and some others take. "There are all kinds of choices out here now."

More and more, she says, she has seen that when it comes to educating children, there are children whose needs aren't being met by traditional public schools. She calls what Seeds has created "an education mosaic" of different approaches that emphasizes close relationships between teachers, students and parents.

One after another

Many who have tried to be entrepreneurs such as Spector have not been particularly successful, given the long list of skills and determination needed to create a school that is good. Count Spector on the short list of those who have shown how to do it.

When Spector joined Seeds of Health about 20 years ago, the agency consisted of a single clinic on the south side for a program known as WIC, which provides health and nutrition information and help to low-income women and children up to 5 years old.

Spector led efforts to expand Seeds to include a high school for 25 school-age parents. The school, now called Grandview, opened in 1988, operating under a contract with Milwaukee Public Schools and funded by state aid for youths who are labeled "at risk."

Things grew from there.

Grandview's enrollment rose quickly. Several years later, MPS, which at that time was short of space, asked Spector if Seeds wanted to open an elementary school on the south side under a partnership contract. That led to Windlake Elementary.

When Windlake reached capacity, Parkside Elementary was born. Hilltop Elementary, serving kindergarten kids, was opened in the building that houses Grandview. The three elementary schools are small, stress connecting to families and serve a wide range of children, many of them Latino.

Believing there was a large, unmet need for small, relationship-oriented high schools, Seeds was given permission by the Milwaukee school board in 2001 to open Veritas High School, a college-prep charter with an alternative-school feel, in a Christian Science church on Oklahoma Ave.

And now Seeds is readying a charter high school, to be called Tenor, located in the old Cathedral High School building downtown and focused on preparing students for careers.

That comes to six schools, with many of the students low-income, from minority groups or with the kinds of personalities or needs that have led them to seek alternatives to the conventional public schools.

Breaking conventions

They are part of a strong component of the local education scene. About 23,500 students in Milwaukee attended publicly funded schools that aren't traditional public schools this year.

That includes charter schools, alternative schools, schools for at-risk kids, and schools taking part in the state's private school voucher program.

That's more than 25% of the enrollment in the conventional MPS school system - which isn't always so conventional itself because it includes more than 8,200 students enrolled in charter schools that are staffed by unionized, MPS teachers.

And then there's another 6,700 Milwaukee children who attend public schools outside the city under two state programs: Chapter 220, which encourages voluntary transfers to increase racial integration in urban and suburban schools; and another called open enrollment that allows students generally to attend schools in any district other than the one in which they live.

Add all those numbers together and nearly a third of all students getting a publicly funded education in Milwaukee are doing it in a school that would not have been in-bounds 30 years ago.

The school voucher program is only the best-known and most controversial part of an explosion in Milwaukee of new schools, many of them started by individuals or small groups who had a vision of what they thought would work. Some have been huge failures. Many are OK, but have fallen short of being really good. And some are showing what the idea is supposed to be about.

Howard Fuller, a former MPS superintendent and the most prominent advocate of Milwaukee's voucher and charter schools, is wistful and almost sad when he talks about the track record of many of the new schools. But ask him about Spector and he says, "She's been able to realize the new vision of public education. . . . Marcia is an example of how it works and how it could work."

'The family feel'

The main Seeds building is the old St. Mary's on the Hill Hospital at W. Greenfield Ave. and S. 32nd St. It is an unusual structure, perched atop a knoll and home to Grandview, Hilltop and the WIC program still run by Seeds.

Like the other two elementary schools in the Seeds network, Hilltop stresses relationships with kids and parents, and it has a relatively conventional, well-run program on other counts.

Students at Windlake did well above the average for MPS schools this year on standardized tests. Students at Parkside and Hilltop did not take the tests because the schools serve only kindergartners.

At Grandview High School, classes often involve just a handful of kids, working in an atmosphere that appeared to an observer to be informal but on-task, often with the goal of making up for prior years when they pretty much ignored their schoolwork. Each student has a teacher-mentor, and the relationships are strong. Teachers are universally called by their first names, and the teachers know the personal background of each student.

Grandview student Travis Lilach, 15, said: "It's not that it's easier. It's just they help you to understand." She said she had major truancy problems at the public school she attended previously and is getting high grades at Grandview.

Jan Dahlman, principal of the school, said the graduation rate is above 80%, a good record given the students' backgrounds.

On the state tests this year, the percentage of Grandview students who were proficient or better in each subject was very similar to the MPS averages - which is quite good for an alternative school.

At Veritas, the program is more sophisticated academically and the orientation is much more toward going on to college. But the feeling is still informal and intimate, with small classes, a schedule with fewer classes for longer periods each day and such features as an intersession for somewhat unconventional subjects in the middle of the school year.

"What appeals to me is the one-on-one basis with the teachers," says Lazandria Skinner, 18, who recently graduated as valedictorian at Veritas.

Julia Lugo, 14, a freshman at Veritas in the school year just ended, says, "I like this school because of the family feel to it."

Veritas 10th-graders scored above average for MPS on the state tests, with 63% of students proficient or better in reading, compared with 42% for MPS. In math, it was 54% at the school, compared with 29% in the system, and in social studies it was 56% to 35%.

Spector and Seeds have mastered the several channels that exist to get funding for schools.

That includes contract arrangements with MPS to provide alternative and partnership schools, contracts with MPS and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for charter schools and participation in the Milwaukee parental choice voucher program. Seeds of Health schools also receive federally funded services under what is called Title 1 for low-income children.

All together, Seeds of Health received \$5.2 million in public money this year to operate its schools - which might sound like a lot until you figure out what it costs to educate more than 800 kids.

One thing that is consistent among the Seeds schools is the emphasis on relationships.

A widely used slogan in education currently, both in Milwaukee and nationally, is that schools, especially high schools, need to address a new version of the 3 R's: Rigor, relevance and relationships. Based on what Spector has heard from the students who have come to her schools, she knows which one she puts at the top of the list.

"It's all about relationships," she says. "There is a great crying out for small, individualized schools."

She says the key thing she has learned in 15 years in the alternative stream of public education is "that bigness doesn't work."