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**PHILANTHROPY**

By William C. Symonds

## A School Makeover in Mapleton

A school district outside Denver has galvanized students and parents with a daring experiment in public school choice

This spring, Charlotte Ciancio, the feisty superintendent of Mapleton Public Schools, held a series of open houses for parents in her district, which serves 5,800 students just north of Denver. In previous years, Ciancio's meetings had attracted only a handful of people. But this spring, more than 1,000 people packed the sessions. The reason: They were eager to learn about what may be the nation's most radical experiment in public school choice.

Few school districts have ever gone as far as Mapleton has over the past two years in providing choices for students. Take high school. For decades, once students finished eighth grade in Mapleton, they automatically went on to Skyview High, a sprawling, traditional comprehensive high school. No more. The old Skyview is being phased out, and will no longer exist after its last class graduates next year.

In its place, Mapleton has created six small high schools scattered around the district. From now on, every eighth grader must choose among these six schools. There's no such thing as a default option. And this fall, similar choice will be extended to elementary and middle-school students, as well. In all, Mapleton now offers parents and students 17 schools, up from just seven before the reform began.

**BACKED BY THE GATESES.** By the standards of U.S. school reform, this is revolutionary change. And it's a revolution that's being financed by Bill and Melinda Gates. Their foundation is backing all of the high school "models" that have been brought into Mapleton. Those include two small schools affiliated with the Big Picture Co.; Welby New Technology, which is modeled on Napa Valley's famed New Technology High School; and Mapleton Expeditionary School of the Arts (MESA), based on a model that grew out of Outward Bound. Then last December, the Gates Foundation gave Mapleton a \$2.7 million grant to help it manage all this change.

Tom Vander Ark, who heads the Foundation's education initiative, is a big fan of Mapleton and its passionate superintendent. After six years of trying to fix high schools, Vander Ark is convinced that one size doesn't fit all. He believes school districts should strive to provide students with a "portfolio of choice" in schools. "Mapleton is a good example of a district that's seeking to create really interesting, high-quality options for its kids," he says (see BusinessWeek.com, 2/27/06, "[Campus Revolutionary](#)").

Ciancio is betting that choice will transform Mapleton from a struggling district into a star. "Our schools have been an embarrassment for a long time," she concedes. Last year, before the high school reform was implemented, just 12% of Mapleton's ninth and tenth graders scored proficient in math on Colorado's standards-based test. (The goal set by the No Child Left Behind law is 100% proficiency). And for years, more than half the students who start ninth grade have dropped out or left the district before graduation (see BusinessWeek.com, 11/21/05, "[America the Uneducated](#)").

**EARLY DAYS.** But now Ciancio vows that every student who starts high school will graduate. And in addition to earning their diploma, she promises they'll be ready to go to college. And not just any college: Her aim is to push the average score earned by Mapleton juniors on the ACT exam from a lowly 15 last year to 23—good enough to get into competitive Denver University.

It's far too early to judge how much of a chance Ciancio has to pull this off. Most of the new high schools only opened last fall. So there hasn't been time to get a reading on what this will mean for test scores, let alone graduation rates. Indeed, students, teachers, and administrators are still on what amounts to a shakedown cruise. It hasn't always been smooth. Mapleton already had to jettison one of its new high schools—called Expeditionary Learning—in favor of a different model.

Ciancio hardly has the makings of a revolutionary. The 48-year-old superintendent grew up in a modest bungalow in the heart of Mapleton's old Italian-American neighborhood, before going off to Colorado's historic teacher college, the University of Northern Colorado. Most of her 25-year career has been spent teaching in conventional settings.

**READY FOR CHANGE.** When Ciancio was growing up, Mapleton was still dominated by the Italian immigrants who built flourishing nurseries and truck farms in the once-bucolic outskirts of Denver. But by the time she was hired as superintendent in 2001, the metropolitan Denver area had exploded up and down the Front Range, and Mapleton had become a heavily developed, almost inner-city district. Today, about 70% of its residents are Hispanic, and over half are low-income.

So when Ciancio was hired to lead Mapleton in 2001, the school board was not interested in incremental change. "There was a lot of frustration," says Carole Adducci, who headed the board when Ciancio was hired. So Ciancio led a group of

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administrators and parents who embarked on a lengthy study of school reform. They even flew around the country, visiting the most promising new small high schools, including The Met in Providence, and San Diego's High Tech High. Ultimately, they chose four of these models to bring to Mapleton, creating a total of six new schools. (Two schools were based on the Big Picture model, and two others on the Expeditionary Learning model.)

It's already clear that these new schools are producing some very positive changes. Attendance averaged over 90% at the new schools this year, vs. just 76% at the old Skyview High. Parental participation has soared. Three-fourths of parents showed up for student presentations at Skyview Academy, a new school based on the Coalition of Essential Schools model, this year, up from just a fifth who used to come in for parent-teacher conferences.

**MAGNET FOR TEACHERS.** The most encouraging development may be that all this reform has acted as a magnet in attracting energetic, well-qualified leaders and teachers to Mapleton. Ciancio was able to hire Michael Johnston, 31, a bright Yale Law School grad, to lead MESA, for instance. Johnston, who's devoting his career to school reform, previously taught in Mississippi, before leading another small school.

Similarly, Marc Dysart, who teaches algebra at Welby New Technology, has an engineering degree, and was teaching at a posh private school before coming to Mapleton. "I was looking for a small public high school," he says, that was committed to producing better results. And many more teachers are giving Mapleton a look. At a recent job fair, a long line formed in front of Mapleton's table. "At first, we thought they were in the wrong line because we'd never seen that many people interested in working in Mapleton," says Michael Kirby, one of Ciancio's key lieutenants. "But they were in the right line."

Many parents are also thrilled with the options their kids now have. Take Lori and Dan Farson, whose oldest son, Tyler, chose Big Picture, where he just finished up his sophomore year. "He's beyond psyched," says Lori, "because he's learned to fly a helicopter in his internship, and now wants to become a military pilot." Meanwhile, Tyler's younger brother Brandon is a freshman at New Tech, where he enjoys using computers to work on projects. "They're making their own decisions, and because they're in different schools, there isn't as much sibling rivalry," says Lori.

**BIRTHING PAINS.** The excitement isn't confined to Mapleton. "Our enrollment for next fall is coming in very strong," says Ciancio. "Over 100 more kids from outside our district have signed up,"; acting under Colorado's unusual open-choice rules, which allow parents to send their kids to another district, as long as there's room.

Still, Ciancio is the first to admit that Mapleton faces huge challenges. Gates' money has been used to help smooth the transition, by providing lots of training to teachers and staff on the new school models. Even so, one school—called Expeditionary Learning—has already failed to take root.

The key problem is that enrollment never rose to sufficient levels, possibly because another school—MESA—was using a similar approach. "We decided we just couldn't support two similar schools," says Ciancio. So now the old EL school is morphing into Global Leadership, a school that's based on the International School of the Americas in San Antonio, which emphasizes international studies.

**RAISING EXPECTATIONS.** Teacher burnout is another danger. Many of the new models place added burdens on teachers, because they stress creative, project-based learning. In turn, that means teachers must help think up new projects, instead of just teaching from a textbook. "Biology is not precooked here," says Dominic Dew, who teaches biology at Welby New Tech. "We just started teaching biology (this year), so I have to develop my own projects." Because Welby is so small, Dew has also been asked to teach geometry. "I'm not used to teaching geometry," she admits, "And it's challenging."

Ultimately, how well choice works will hinge on Mapleton's success in raising student achievement. To do that, it must transform traditional expectations about what students will achieve. "Mapleton has a long history of providing options for kids that aren't academically challenging," says Kevin Welner, an education professor at the University of Colorado who's evaluating Mapleton. "But now they're saying that all of the small schools are going to be college-prep."

Still, there are already signs that Mapleton's approach is saving some kids. Take Victor Barron, 17, who was expelled from Denver's Manual High for fighting during his freshman year. After Denver refused to take him back, Victor took the bus up to Mapleton, which let him sign up for its new Big Picture school, starting in the fall of 2004. "This was my last chance," says Victor, both of whose parents dropped out of high school. "I like this school so much better than Manual. Everyone knows each other, and there are no fights." At Big Picture, Victor has done an internship at an animal hospital, and now dreams of attending Colorado State University in Fort Collins to study veterinary medicine.

There are good reasons to hope that Mapleton's revolution will eventually produce a lot more stories like Victor's, and raise overall district performance. Leadership is critical, and Ciancio is both tireless and capable of motivating her team. She's also won strong backing from both the school board and the local business community. Best of all, she's realized that she can't wait until students reach high school. That's why this fall, Mapleton is revamping its K-8 system of schools as well, with the aim of not just giving parents more choice—but also raising standards in the critical, early grades.

All of this change has already raised hopes around Mapleton. "This is a big step in the right direction," says Linda Wolfe, a Mapleton resident whose grandson is now attending Welby. Wolfe explains that of her four children, only one got a high school degree. "The other three fell through the cracks, and dropped out." Wolfe doesn't believe that kind of failure rate is acceptable anymore. "It's about time they did something like this," she says. And along with many residents, she's convinced that choice will produce better results.