

www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chicago/ct-x-c-gobal-experience-high-school-020100929,0,4614977.story

chicagotribune.com

From basement classrooms, a broader view of the world

Startup high school integrates subjects to focus on 'things that matter in the real world'

By Pat Dunnigan, Special to the Tribune

September 29, 2010

The low-ceilinged basement hallway where teacher Carlos Leite leads 15 high school students through an exercise does not have the look of a place where parents would spend \$22,000 a year in tuition.

But Delphina Worsley, whose 16-year-old son moped his way through European boarding school and some of the most prestigious schools on the North Shore, has come to see it as nothing short of amazing. "Henry absolutely hated school," she said.

Now her son takes two trains and a bus from Glencoe to get to the no-frills basement that houses the Global Citizenship Experience School, a private, for-profit high school that opened with 15 students this month in Lakeview.

He arrives early, stays late and comes home talking about school in a way that makes his mother's heart leap with cautious hope.

"Everything you learn is completely relevant (at GCE)," said Henry, whose application essay described his frustration with being made to learn "useless facts, that I have to spit out in random exams and after that I'm allowed to forget everything."

GCE is the project of teacher turned educational consultant and entrepreneur Eric Davis, 35, who says he put 15 years of experience into creating a high school built around "doing things that matter in the real world."

After a six-student, 18-month pilot program that ended last year, Davis opened the doors Sept. 7 to a group of mostly freshmen and juniors. The school rents the basement and coach house of a Lakeview mansion owned by the Menomonee Club.



The program follows a course of study that is designed to meet state standards, but the subjects are blended and taught in a way that emphasizes individual, project-based learning that takes place, as much as possible, out in the world — in the city's museums, libraries and neighborhoods. An overlapping framework ties in the themes of cultural awareness, civic engagement and sustainability.

History and English are combined, for example, and Spanish class includes elements of rhetoric, science, art and visits to Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. Students also spend 30 to 90 minutes each day in one-on-one or small-group instruction catching up on fundamentals. They learn study skills in a class called "executive functioning."

The school is pursuing accreditation through the National Independent Private Schools Association and an England-based international accrediting body called World Class Learning, Davis said. The process typically takes two to three years, he said.

English and history teacher Keziah DeFusco, 30, is one of four full-time staff members at GCE. In her seventh year of teaching, she is GCE's most experienced teacher and serves as curriculum chair.

The key to the curriculum, she said, was the development of "guiding questions" that integrate individual subjects. "It was a huge challenge," she said. To link the study of history and language arts, students will visit the Chicago History Museum, consider events through the eyes of a local character and read the works of Chicago authors ranging from Carl Sandburg to Studs Terkel, she said.

The student body is split almost evenly between scholarship and tuition-paying students, according to Davis. The group includes refugees from three countries and nearly every type of school in the educational landscape. Except, in most cases, the type that worked for them.

Claudia Hinton, a psychotherapist and mental health consultant to Chicago Public Schools, is the school's counselor. "Most of these students were being held up to this model of what was (considered) normal," she said. "It didn't work."

Davis, who said he struggled with a learning disability until discovering, late in high school, the motivation he needed to become a good student, says figuring out each student's learning style is also key to the school's approach. "We profile every student's strengths and weaknesses," he said. It's about "managing the learning process more than filtering knowledge."

At the same time, students have to master the skills and knowledge that will get them into college. "It's not like we're reinventing education," Davis said. "We present information in a way that's a little more compelling."

The result, he hopes, will be a group of students educated and at home in the world.

"There are certain skills and experiences we believe an 18-year-old should enter the world with," Davis said of the school's philosophy. "I want our kids out in the world. I want our curriculum extending into the world."

It's an idea that seems to resonate with his students, some of whom described themselves as bored, unmotivated or lost in the crowd at their previous schools.

A growing number of parents are also willing to take a leap on a different model of education, in large part because the urban public education system isn't working, said Tim Knowles, director of the

University of Chicago Urban Education Institute.

"It's absolutely a trend and it's a product of a broken status quo," Knowles said.

Barbara Radner, director of DePaul University's Center for Urban Education, adds that schools like GCE may help to fill a gap created by the disappointing performance of Chicago's charter schools, once seen as leading the way out of the public school system's malaise.

"One-third of the charter schools in Chicago are failing," she said. "The promise has turned into faint hope."

Davis, who taught English at the Latin School of Chicago for three years and has run his own tutoring, test prep and educational consulting firm since 2002, has both philanthropic and entrepreneurial ambitions for the school. He wants to expand the program into something like a franchise, with GCE providing the curriculum and teacher training for duplicating the model in public and private schools. His plan calls for the school to grow each year until a maximum of about 160 students is reached, with about 60 percent paying \$18,000 a year in tuition and the remaining students attending on scholarship. Ideally, he said, he'd like to see the program housed on a college campus.

But colleagues, parents and students say it is his vision of what education should be that sells.

"I've always thought of him as a big idea guy but also someone who can make this stuff work," said Billy Lombardo, a Latin School English and creative writing teacher and friend who has known Davis since 1998 and who has done tutoring work for Davis' firm, Educational Endeavors.

Among his other big ideas, Davis founded a summer camp and after-school tutoring program for underprivileged students in 2005 and helped develop an independent high school fiction magazine that is now international, Lombardo said.

Roger Wallenstein, a retired teacher whom Davis recruited to serve on the GCE board, is also a fan. But Wallenstein, who was involved in a startup school effort in the 1970s, acknowledges the pitfalls. "It's like opening a restaurant," he said. "A lot of them won't make it the first year."

It's a risk Delphina Worsley is willing to take.

"It's a leap of faith for me," she said. "I have such faith in Eric. He has ignited something in Henry."

Copyright © 2010, [Chicago Tribune](#)

Evidence that PBL Works

Special Options

Many of us out there know that [project-based learning](#) [1] (PBL) inspires students to understand core content knowledge more deeply *and* gain key skills for success in college and career. Many of us have also directly contributed to results for students on state tests, college-going, and college persistence metrics.

In addition, we know from surveys and focus groups that most of our students are engaged and excited about learning; however, until now, we did not have a rigorous experimental design study approved by the United States Department of Education.

The Data

Here's some exciting news: the [Regional Education Laboratory West](#) [2] (REL West), just released a report called: *Effects of Problem Based Economics on High School Economics Instruction*. Designed as an in-school, randomized controlled trial that tested the effectiveness of a problem-based economics (PBE) curriculum developed by the [Buck Institute for Education](#) [3] (BIE) on student learning and problem solving skills. (Full disclosure: I helped create the curriculum as a teacher in the late 90's and I serve on the BIE Board of Directors.)

From the BIE website:

Experimental Study of BIE Project-Based Economics Units

Finkelstein, N., Hanson, T., Huang, C.-W., Hirschman, B., and Huang, M. (2010).

A study, conducted by WestEd's Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West), addresses the following key research questions:

- Does PBE increase student content learning, motivation to learn economics, and problem-solving skills?
- Does PBE increase teacher knowledge in economics and teacher interest in teaching economics?

This federally funded experimental study examined the combined impact of a one-week summer professional development institute and the use of the BIE Project-Based Economics curriculum on the economic knowledge of approximately 7,000 twelfth grade students taught by 76 teachers in 66 high schools. Student outcomes that were studied included scores on the standardized Test of Economic Literacy (TEL), scores on performance assessments of student conceptual understanding. Teacher outcomes included confidence in teaching economics and satisfaction with teaching materials.

Results

Both high school students and their teachers benefit:

- Students outscored their peers in the control group who received the more typical textbook- and lecture-driven approach.
- Students also scored higher on measures of problem-solving skills and their application to real-world economic challenges
- Teachers scored higher in satisfaction with teaching material and methods than those in the control group.

For more info, view the official IES [report](#) [4] or the WestEd [research site](#) [5].

As exciting as this news is for practitioners and school leaders who support PBL, I am still left with some essential questions:

Do you think more people will decide to use PBL because we now have "hard" data to confirm our beliefs about student learning? If not, what will it take to convince them to use a PBL approach? Does data really help convince people to change practice? If not, what does?

What do you think?

Source URL: <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/project-based-learning-findings-study-bob-tenz>

Links:

[1] <http://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning>

[2] <http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/pg/11>

[3] <http://www.bie.org/>

[4] <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?ProjectID=89>

[5] <http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rstudy/18>

This article originally published on 9/30/2010

Edutopia: What Works in Education © 2010 The George Lucas Educational Foundation • All rights reserved.