



feature story



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A School to Call Home

Haven Academy grows with its students in foster care

By Danielle Chambers

When I was in elementary school and in foster care, teachers did not understand my situation. They didn't understand why I never had lunch money or why I had scars and old clothes. Even then I knew that I was different, and that's how I was treated. The teachers did not know how to handle me and my problems. They took me out of class—sometimes several times a day—for special education meetings, so I did not get the basic learning foundation. That's still hurting my education today.

Children placed in the system are often starved of a normal life and opportunities, including a stable education. Schools often don't understand the needs of foster children who have to move from home to home and school to school. It's a setback, because they have to start all over again. Over time, they fall behind.

But just this year, a new charter school in the Bronx, New York, was set up especially for students in the foster care system and students whose families are at risk of becoming involved in the system.

No More Moving

The school, Haven Academy, was started by an agency called New York Foundling to meet the specific needs of at-risk youth and children in foster care. Two-thirds of Haven Academy's students are in foster care or receiving foster care prevention services, and the other one-third are students from the neighborhood who aren't involved with the child welfare system. Although the school is less than a year old, it already has a waitlist.

"We created this school because kids in the child welfare system move a lot," said principal Jessica Nauiokas. "The belief is if you stay in one school...you'll be on a path to success."

Haven Academy opened last September with 92 students. Right now the school has only kindergarten and first grade. But each year, the school will add one new grade so that the current students can stay at the same school up to 8th grade, and maybe beyond (the school provides transportation so kids can keep attending, even if they move). That should give students a better chance to have a

good experience while they're in school by growing with them throughout their education and smoothing their life transitions.

One Big Family

The idea is that school staff will get to know all the students' families and encourage everyone—foster parents, biological parents, grandparents and other family members—to be involved. The staff refer to adults as “family” rather than “parents,” and the school sees itself like an extended family.

The school has several special services. There is not only counseling for students, but for the entire family. And if students are transitioning from their foster care families back to their biological families, they'll receive extra counseling and support during that period. When a child goes back to his family, his biological parents will get books and techniques on what children need in order to learn and to be happy and healthy.

Teachers greet each student by name each day. A social worker is also on staff to make sure all students are well taken care of. Each classroom has two teachers to give each student extra attention with schoolwork and to make sure they're safe. Because the teachers know the students so well, they can more easily spot signs of abuse and help those who are struggling emotionally with behavior problems.

The students have a longer school day and longer school year than the average kid. The school day begins with breakfast at 7:30 followed by a morning meeting. Classes include art, math and reading. Many after-school programs don't end until 5:30.

I was surprised at the range of opportunities that the students have. Haven Academy has activities that include yoga, violin, science club, dance and jump rope.

A Lot of Love

While walking into the school cafeteria, I was overwhelmed by the volume of the boisterous children. And I saw something I have never seen before: teachers eating lunch with students. During recess, the students would stop playing to give the principal and teachers hugs. I noticed the teachers respected the students as people, and the students gave the same respect to their teachers.

Teachers used special techniques to discipline the students and get them to behave. Even their tone of voice was different from what I'm used to hearing when a student misbehaves. Instead of yelling, they used a firm but kind tone. As the children lined up to go outside and play, they seemed patient and calm.

Principal Nauiokas told me the way teachers treat their students is no accident. Each staff member sees it as a personal responsibility, she said. The students receive a lot of much-needed attention, support and respect so they'll

feel secure and trusting.

Every teacher has a role to play in keeping the students' behavior under control. This keeps the school focused on education instead of discipline, explained Nauiokas.

Shape Up, Not Ship Out

In a regular school, a child with serious behavior problems might get pushed into special education. While I was talking with Principal Nauiokas in her office, a teacher brought in a little girl who was throwing a huge tantrum: yelling, crying, pounding her fists and making strange whooping noises with her mouth closed. It was clear that she had more than the average behavior problems. The principal sat her down and made her listen. She used a firm tone, but did not yell.

"Sometimes it's a power struggle with the kids and there's not much we can do to prevent that, but we can control our responses," said Nauiokas. To make the girl trust her, she spoke to her, telling her what she was going to do before she did it.

When the little girl calmed down, she was allowed to go to the other side of the room and play with an Etch-a-Sketch to reward her for improving her behavior and also to make sure she continued to calm down. Here, explained Nauiokas, they try to keep the focus on education by helping students control their behavior instead of punishing them for it.

Students come to Haven Academy with many social and emotional needs. Some students' parents have passed away and others are in jail. The majority of Haven Academy's students who are in foster care have experienced physical or sexual abuse.

"We find that kids who have been through traumatic experiences do have more behavioral problems in school," said Nauiokas.

From what I saw, school is a place where they are surrounded by caring adults who encourage them and truly want to help them.

A Real Need

Some people doubt whether it's a good idea to recruit such a large number of students in foster care. Before the school opened, some local newspapers questioned whether it was the right thing to separate them into a different school. But Nauiokas believes that the children get things at Haven Academy that they just wouldn't get in a regular public school, including a strong sense of family.

Now that I'm older and can reflect back on my own tough times in school, I look at these students and think they're getting great opportunities and a great foundation. If a school like Haven Academy had existed 15 years ago, it would have benefited me and many other students who were in care at that time. At least someone finally realizes

that the education system has repeatedly failed these kids and it's time to wake up and try something new.

As these little kindergartners and first graders get older and start middle school, the challenges that Haven Academy faces now in meeting students' needs are going to change. Pre-teens have many emotional and social needs that teachers must deal with, and pre-teens in care often have extra needs.

When these students start middle school, the school will hire a high school coordinator to help them prepare for the next step. Will Haven Academy eventually add a high school? Maybe, said Nauiokas, but right now they're taking it one year at a time so that they can "get it right" for each new grade level they add.

I hope Haven Academy can do it, because they are addressing a real need. Everyone's not born with an equal shot. It's good to see a school try to accommodate the needs of all students, including those in care.

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