

Email this article
Print this article
Most popular pages

Click to send
Choose File Print or Ctrl P or Apple P
Today | This Week

Ariz. charter school is alone in its class

Basis charter schools may offer the best free education in the U.S. but applying the formula to public schools may not work

Pat Kossan

The Arizona Republic
Nov. 22, 2006 12:00 AM

No schools in Arizona have achieved the kind of national status that Basis charter schools have.

In May, *Newsweek* magazine named Basis School Inc.'s high school in Tucson the third-best in the country.

Earlier this month, Intel Corp. Chairman Craig Barrett and his wife, Barbara, donated \$450,000 to Basis Scottsdale middle school, citing its excellence.

In a state worried about its educational quality, Basis School Inc. should be a powerful guide.

But can Basis be replicated in other public schools? A close look at the 560-student system indicates that the proposition would be difficult at best. Even its founders concur.

Basis' relentlessly rigorous curriculum inspires parents and leaders and could set a standard for how to educate intelligent, motivated students. But it doesn't live with the same academic challenges that most other public schools face.

Like those schools, Basis' high school and two middle schools are funded mostly with state and federal money. It must accept any student who applies if there is space, and its students must master state standards and pass the AIMS exit exam.

The similarities end there.

Basis offers few of the typical public-school extras, such as football or cheerleading. It strives to winnow students to only the high achievers: Beginning in sixth grade, it gives kids a final test and holds them back if they fail twice. (Any public school can do this, but it's rare, state officials say.)

Most of its students are ambitious children of engineers, attorneys and doctors, kids willing to hammer through math, science, history and literature courses years beyond their academic peers.

Only 10 percent of its students are minorities. None is an English-language learner. Few are low-income or have special-education needs.

What Basis offers is a free stripped-down elite education inside bland commercial buildings. It has the complexion and tenor of the best private schools but paid for with taxpayer money.

"We do for middle-class kids what public schools are designed to do: transform their lives," said retired Professor Michael Block, who opened Basis with his wife, Olga, in 1998. "We don't solve all problems. We do a certain thing. We do it well."

Weeding out slackers

Basis schools scare away slackers by insisting that potential students shadow a current student for a day.

The school weeds out the academically weak in the first few years of middle school.

"The magic bullet to this whole thing is the middle school," Michael said.

Teachers begin in fifth and sixth grade to prepare 11-year-olds to take on pre-algebra and the first of three years each of chemistry, biology and physics. By the end of eighth grade, students are ready for pre-calculus.

If they stumble along the way, though, they are out.

Each child must pass a comprehensive exam in sixth, seventh and eighth grades. If the child doesn't pass after two attempts, he or she must repeat the grade or leave.

One afternoon a few years ago, a sixth-grader who failed her comprehensive exam walked into Olga's office and asked, "Do you have the legal right to fail me?"

"Yes, baby, I do," Olga recalls saying. "If you don't like the rules, please don't come."

Olga concedes some children are not ready to be serious students and work 10 hours a day. They need not apply. "I want to give this space to workaholics," she said.

The school loses 10 percent of its students by seventh grade. After eighth grade, the school loses an additional 40 percent of its Tucson students who decide against attending the Basis high school.

Those who make it to junior year will have completed two years of calculus and taken Advanced Placement exams in a minimum of six subjects. They already have a transcript most colleges would accept.

This rapid acceleration through tough courses makes it nearly impossible for children to successfully transfer into Basis schools after the fifth or sixth grades. Most can't catch up.

The founders

Olga Block's fierce view of academics grew from her hard-line schooling under a communist regime, where she also worked as a university professor and dean.

Ten years ago, she moved from what is now the Czech Republic to marry Michael, then a University of Arizona economics professor.

The couple incorporated the non-profit Basis School Inc. in 1998.

Opening the Tucson school in her new American home only intensified her estrangement from the U.S. education system.

"It was also a frightening thing to me that the first question parents asked me was, 'Would we have a music band?' I have a math program. I have a physics program. I have a calculus program. What is this about a music band?"

Olga didn't try adjusting to the American classroom. Parents, students and teachers adjust to her.

She relented a bit and added music to her curriculum, but she turned her gym into a theater. Sports are an afterthought. Getting Tucson parents to fall in line with her no-nonsense learning philosophy was easy compared with the "helicopterish" parents who greeted her when she opened her Scottsdale middle school in 2003.

"It took me some time to overcome this whole problem (with parents): 'We studied for this test the whole night, and we only received a B.' Basically, the first year in Scottsdale, what we were doing was developing strategies of how to keep parents out."

Parents organize fund-raisers and dances, but they are asked to leave homework for their children to complete and leave lesson plans and teacher hiring to the Blocks.

"We're really good at what we do," Michael said. "We don't need parents to become active participants."

In the end, the Blocks admit their contrary notions would not work in most public schools.

"This is not possible to run a school like this in the public system," Olga said.

"This is a very, very particular school," Michael added. "It's partially an acquired taste."

Teachers and kids

Basis builds schools for particular children who say they are thrilled to learn the periodic table and pre-calculus in middle school.

"Everyone here knows they are geeks and nerds, and we're into it," said Amal Elhag, a 16-year-old senior at Basis in Tucson.

Few of those geeks are Latino, African-American or Native American, though 7 percent are Asian-American. Michael said he does not recruit students to broaden the schools' population.

"Legally, we take anyone," he said. "We certainly don't discriminate, so it's a matter of what parents seek us out."

The Blocks recruit teachers from across the country. Most have master's or doctoral degrees in the subjects they teach. Their average salary is about \$40,000, similar to the statewide average.

Before Basis, Ali Renner taught physics at an ivy-walled private school outside

Boston. She is teaching the same material to her Basis Tucson seventh-graders that she taught her high school freshmen in Boston.

"Every now and then, I step back and I look at what I'm doing with these kids," Renner said. "And I can't believe it."

Like many Basis teachers, Renner said she would not teach in a regular district or another charter school. She relishes her freedom to create her own lesson plans and tests.

Basis teachers receive a bonus and keep their jobs if their students succeed, which means passing comprehensive and state exams and classes. If too many students fail, their contract isn't renewed.

But students are eager to learn. Unlike at most schools, learning gaps among kids are minimal, history teacher Mark Zellmer said.

"I don't want to be in an environment where I had all that different range," Zellmer said. "I know that sounds snotty, but I don't want to deal with discipline issues."

"There is a need for a school that acts like a private school but is funded publicly. That's what I think this does."

Basis parents

Parents will tell you students do not have to be gifted to survive in Basis schools; they only have to be driven.

Parent Susan Price said it only makes sense to put her children in a school where their hard work will get them ahead of other achievers.

Once a child demonstrates a willingness to work hard, teachers do everything they can to make sure the child succeeds, said Lisa Rhodenbaugh, who has three children in Basis.

That is a great help to this mother of eight children, who is home-schooling her four youngest and can't devote hours to each child every day.

She thinks her boys are happier because the school now has more students and parents understand what kind of school it is.

"My boys have a fantastic social network," Rhodenbaugh said of her sons' friends. "They're from good families who are all about academics."

Reach the reporter at pat.kossan@arizonarepublic.com.

Email this article
Print this article
Most popular pages

Click to send
Choose File Print or Ctrl P or Apple P
Today | This Week