



◀ Fountain Square Academy students (l-r) Rodolfo Garcia, Carlos Schrunder and Eduardo Galeno in a middle school English class.

# Fountain Square Academy works to raise horizons

## Charter school's students outperform those in city's traditional high schools

**T**he first thing any visitor might notice during a stroll through Fountain Square Academy is that there are hallway windows opening into the classrooms.

The second: That view reveals students who are, well, studious.

Wasn't always thus, Kevin D. Teasley volunteered as he led the one-reporter tour through the three-year-old charter school located just off Shelby Street and Pleasant Run Parkway. Teasley, president of the Greater Educational Opportunities Foundation, said the school opened with good intentions, but also with chaos.

"We had poor leadership at the beginning," he said, "and made poor decisions."

Such an assessment makes all the more striking this other observation, that Fountain Square Academy now "outperforms every traditional high school in the city," despite serving stu-

dents who typically came to the charter school performing one to two grades below their levels. Many of the school's students qualify for free breakfasts and lunches – which, by the way, the academy provides.

Founded in 2005 with students in grades five through nine, Fountain Square Academy now serves students in grades five through 12. This spring, it will graduate its first official senior class (although last year four students who were well ahead of the curve actually completed their schooling; three are now enrolled at the University of Indianapolis). Like all other charter schools, the academy is free. There is no tuition.

Teasley, whose GEO Foundation operates four charter schools in Indiana and Colorado, credits the current success to a stabilized, stronger staff led by two new administrators – Keena Foster, the principal, and Vic Bardonner, director of external affairs and student services. Foster came from the leadership team at Westland Middle School; Bardonner formerly led the Center for Character Development at Lawrence Central High School.

The statistics bear out Teasley's optimism: 67 percent of this year's 10th-graders passed the state testing. The numbers of the four closest high schools which the academy's students would have otherwise attended range from 26 percent at Northwest to

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40 percent at Arsenal Tech.

Teasley said the reason is because, although the students are young people not expected to achieve by most of the community, at Fountain Square Academy achievement is indeed expected. Achievement, he added, is made possible by the school's unique environment mixing small classes and comfortable surroundings with high expectations.

Students come from all parts of the city, but most of the academy's 214 students come from the Fountain Square community for which the charter school was founded. The impetus for the school (as well as for the other charter school located in the former factory building – the Southeast Neighborhood School of Excellence, serving kindergarten through sixth-grade) was a neighborhood survey by Southeast Neighborhood Development which revealed that Fountain Square residents saw better educational opportunities as the top priority.

The Fountain Square Academy has approached that goal with an educational program where “all roads lead to college.” But it is more than just a slogan: All academy students attend college classes, most of them at Ivy Tech. For free.

The plan is working, Teasley believes, because the academy provides the support system required for success. “We back up our promise by paying,” said Teasley, who said the goal is to remove any doubt from students' minds that they can achieve at the college level. To get that done, the GEO Foundation pays for the students' tuition and books, and even transportation between the academy and campus. Meanwhile, one school administrator is tasked with the full-time job of making sure those students are taking the right classes, either for an associate's degree or so those credits will transfer to a four-year institution.

The plan is this: students who enter Fountain Square Academy in fifth-grade will graduate with at least 30 college credits – and as many as 60 credits. The higher number, by the way, represents a two-year associate's degree. The Middle College program, begun last year, has seen academy students in such Ivy Tech classes as psychology, computer information systems, inter-mediate college algebra, English composition and argumentative essay.

Last semester – the school's first with a senior class – saw three students taking classes at Ivy Tech; this semester, that number shot up to 10. Teasley believes the program will snowball, now that students can see the success of their classmates.

The program also seeks to leave no child behind: The academy now partners with Marian College, which provides tutoring for students needing help in reading and mathematics.

The school's rocky start, Teasley said, came because parents and students – and even some teachers – didn't notice that the school's promise came with a promise of commitment. “We're come-one, come-all,” he said, “but we have expectations. Show up, on time, in uniform, ready to learn.” That discipline took some time to develop.

The school has matured in other ways, as well. Lacking space for arts and athletics, Fountain Square Academy now partners with Garfield Park for such programming. Teasley's goals for the immediate future are relatively humble – expanding the student body to its ideal size of 300, and refining the relationships with Garfield Park and Marian College. “The changes we have made need to sink in,” he said. Meanwhile, the staff will continue under study, “to make sure we have the right mix to make these dreams come true.”

For Teasley, the school's first four years have been “in pilot mode.” Now, he believes the school is ready to serve the community as designed. “We're ready for prime time.” He wants to prove that the model works, that children who enter the school with low achievement leave with higher achievement and much higher goals.

“Our ultimate goal is to create a citizen who is productive in society, not dependent upon society,” he said. But while the academy and its parent GEO Foundation work to make individual dreams come true, Teasley believes there is an even more ambitious plan at work.

“All this is to support the bigger goal – to break the back of poverty.”



▲ The Fountain Square Academy is located in a building which originally housed the Leedy Drum Co. factory, and which before the renovation was home to a wallpaper company.