



Urban Times

FROM: May 2009

ARCHIVES

Making SENSE of education in Fountain Square



▲ The Southeast Neighborhood School of Excellence is located on the lower two levels of the former Leedy Drum Co. factory, just off of Shelby Street at Pleasant Run Parkway. The top levels are occupied by the Fountain Square Academy.

FOR NEARLY FIVE YEARS, THE SOUTHEAST Neighborhood School of Excellence has flown under the radar of public attention – despite a record of achievement that justifies the “excellence” part of the school’s name.

That’s okay with Dr. JC Lasmanis, who holds the title of head of school and chief executive officer of the charter school for students in kindergarten through sixth-grade, more commonly known as SENSE. Part of the reason he doesn’t compete for attention is that he is unimpressed with comparisons with other schools based on test scores, despite the fact that SENSE is doing quite well in that category.

The bigger reason: So that SENSE can do what it was founded in 2004 to do – serve the children of the Fountain Square neighborhood, one of the poorer areas of Indianapolis. SENSE was created as a direct result of a community organizing effort by Southeast Neighborhood Development. One obstacle, as organizers saw it, was that Indiana’s charter school legislation requires charters to be open to all students, regardless of location. Organizers wanted SENSE to serve the immediate area – so students were recruited not by blanket publicity, but at the grass-roots level. Door to door, neighborhood organization by neighborhood organization.

Lasmanis praises SEND for seeing that “what we need is a back-to-basics type of school.” A close look at the neighborhood saw that the Fountain Square area was being revitalized, but that “the educational component was going nowhere.”

Into this climate SENSE was born, beginning with kindergarten through third-grade in 2004-05, then adding one grade level each subsequent year. SENSE occupies the lower two floors of a former industrial building just off Pleasant Run

Parkway and South Shelby Street just south of Fountain Square, sharing the building with the Fountain Square Academy – a completely separate charter school for grades 5 through 12, housed on the top two floors.

Lasmanis said SENSE can now risk widespread publicity because of a stable student base from the neighborhood it was intended to serve. Over 80 percent of the school’s 243 students share its zip code; over 90 percent come from the general Southeast neighborhood. More importantly, Lasmanis said, 97 percent of the school’s current students are re-enrolled for next year – a fact consistent with the “parental satisfaction” surveys which have every year been in the 93-94-percent range. Next year’s kindergartens class will have 19 siblings of current SENSE students.

In other words, there aren’t many student slots available for young people outside the Southeast neighborhoods. “That’s very much by design,” Lasmanis said. He is proud of the relationship his school has built with its constituency – a group of people he discovered had an anti-education sentiment. “It’s taken time to build up that trust,” he said.

Reflecting the Southeast neighborhoods, the SENSE student body is 72 percent white, 13 percent Hispanic, 7 percent multi-racial and 7 percent black – in stark contrast to the makeup of all Indianapolis charter schools (63 percent black, 24 percent white, 6 percent multiracial and 5 percent Hispanic).

Those SEND students converge every day on the former factory building which was for many years home to the Leedy Drum Co. – a fact much appreciated by Lasmanis. He has done his homework, discovering that the Leedy Drum Co. was not only world-renowned for quality drums, but that its employees lived in the neighborhood. (Side note: Leedy produced “the

world's largest bass drum," the famous drum used by the Purdue University Marching Band.) "We're reviving that heritage of excellence," Lasmanis said.

The numbers bear out that claim. Despite having 87 percent of its students qualified for free and reduced-price lunches, SENSE ranks in the top 10 among Marion County schools and in the top 50 statewide on student improvement on ISTEP scores. The Indiana Student Achievement Institute designated SENSE as its "Top Gainer." SENSE was one of only six elementary charter schools nationwide designated as a "Silver Gain" award winner by the EPIC National Charter School Consortium. SENSE has accepted an invitation to join the elite "Schools That Can" organization, a unique nationwide network of 40 high-performing urban schools.

Lasmanis is quick to credit his teaching staff for those achievements – and equally quick to point out that SENSE teachers are by a wide margin the lowest paid among the city's charter school network.

"The challenge," he said, "was finding good people. We did that." The goal, he said, was to find teachers who are role models. He also found teachers who were committed to the cause: For the first four years, there was no teacher turnover. This year, only two replacements were required.

He also credits two other basics – full-day kindergarten, and

the fact that all students are taught Spanish, art, music and physical education. A third reason is that SENSE has forged a relationship with the highly regarded Sylvan Learning program.

Through the generosity of that organization, academically struggling students work in Sylvan's academic reading program – for free. Lasmanis points out that Sylvan services can cost \$40 to \$50 an hour, a service virtually none of his parents could afford.

SENSE is operated on a year-round schedule, or what Lasmanis calls "a balanced schedule," one which eliminates the long summer break and provides longer breaks after each grading period. He describes the curriculum as a back-to-basics approach with key emphasis on strong reading and math skills. There are no more than 20 students in each class.

The fundamental strategy, however, is to give elementary-age students a greater sense that education is important, and that learning is desirable. In the words of the school's vision statement: to "create a thirst for knowledge." Lasmanis said the Southeast community came to realize that the city's abysmal dropout rate is not the problem, but merely a symptom.

"The educational problem is at the elementary level," Lasmanis said. "We need to start dealing with kids at a younger age, building a solid foundation."

– Bill Brooks



▲ Sylvan instructor Lindsey Meyer works with SENSE students.