

Turnaround Starts With Students

By Marc Fisher

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Sister Mary Bourdon runs a school divided into two campuses. One is a spanking-new set of classrooms in a lushly equipped arts center in Southeast Washington. The other, five minutes away by car, is a warren of rooms in an old apartment complex where gunmen burst in one recent day, desperate to find a hideout.

You won't see metal detectors or security officers at either campus of the Washington Middle School for Girls. Instead, you'll find parents clamoring to get their kids into the school.

The parents look beyond the physical setting to what happens in these classrooms, which is nothing less than the transformation of the same kind of children who drift through the city's public schools and emerge, on average, less likely to succeed than when they entered.

"My daughter could not read at all -- not even 'c-a-t,' " says Kimberly Young, whose older daughter completed Washington Middle and moved to a suburban Maryland high school, where she's earning a 3.6 grade-point average. "In the D.C. public schools, she was failing and acting out. Here, they refused to let her fail."

Young's younger daughter, now in sixth grade at Washington Middle, was assigned to attend Saturday tutoring sessions. "When I couldn't bring her because I was working, this school sends a teacher to get her every week," the mother says. "They find the problem, and they fix it."

In as little as two years at Washington Middle, some students have jumped several grade levels in reading and math test scores, and many graduates move on to top-flight private and public schools. The first Washington Middle graduates to finish high school are attending college in impressive numbers.

D.C. Schools Chancellor [Michelle Rhee](#) has spent her first year tackling the system's big structural problems -- fixing decrepit buildings, shutting down mostly empty schools, pushing out burned-out teachers.

But spiffy buildings and greater financial efficiency only go so far toward the ultimate goal: eradicating the assumption, all too common in many D.C. schools, that the kids are too dysfunctional or damaged to learn.

Sister Mary and the faculty at Washington Middle insist that their girls perform at a high level. A private Catholic school with only 90 students in grades 4 through 8, Washington Middle aims to admit girls whose families cannot afford more than the school's \$25 monthly tuition. The school depends on philanthropy from individuals and foundations for the bulk of its \$1.5 million budget.

"If kids are even barely passing and we can connect with their parents, we take them," says Bourdon, who goes to nail salons, cookouts and apartment complexes all over Southeast to recruit students.

The school features morning prayer and a religion class, and students wear classic Catholic school uniforms. Otherwise, the focus is on secular academics. Most of the girls are not Catholic, but, in contrast to the archdiocese, which is closing several inner-city schools, this private school is growing.

Launched a decade ago by the National Council of Negro Women, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and the Religious of Jesus and Mary, Washington Middle hews to a traditional curriculum yet allows teachers the freedom to find their own ways to connect with children who often lack serious academic role models.

"The way we carry ourselves in front of the children is very different from the public schools," says Nicole Short, who came to Washington Middle after working in the D.C. system. She teaches a life skills class that includes instruction on etiquette, public speaking and writing.

In Maureen Heard and Brianne Wetzel's social studies class, the six sixth-graders face off against Miss Heard in a heated contest to see who can answer the most questions about ancient Rome. The girls nearly burst out of their seats to score points on the details of Roman government, architecture and social roles. They lose this time but immediately debate how to beat their teacher in the next round.

"No one has taken these kids seriously," says Heard, who is in her second year as a volunteer in Response-Ability, a Catholic version of the [Teach for America](#) program that trains recent college graduates to work in inner-city schools. "Once we show them that they can succeed, you see them really grow up and gain confidence and bond with each other."

The tight friendships fostered by a small school that mandates long hours and parent involvement result in a sense of separation from the outside world -- an invaluable tool where the streets are rough and the temptations palpable.

"We want the school to get inside the girls so they are not living in two worlds," Bourdon says. "They get teased in their neighborhoods for wearing the uniform and carrying the books, but we tell them, 'You have to make a decision about who you are and what you want to be.' " For most girls, that decision is easy, despite the jealousy and ribbing they face back home.

"If I was in public school, things would have happened," says eighth-grader Bianca Bradley. "Fights, drama. At my old school, the teachers didn't care -- they just gave us the work and sat down at their desk. Here, they show you every step."

"Here, you don't have to act out to get attention," says classmate Celisman West.

The girls admit that they are not always angels and that detentions and suspensions are liberally dispensed. "But our friendships are so close, we can talk about anything," Bianca says. "We're all like sisters. It's family."