

Where Kids Run the Show

TABLE TALK WITH JENNIE NILES '84, FOUNDER OF AN URBAN D.C. PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

By Leah Williams

Washington, D.C.'s public school system—notorious for being the lowest-performing in the country—still has trouble shaking its reputation three years after reforms have begun to enhance its status and numbers. Stories of high dropout rates, altercations between teachers and students, poor resources, run-down buildings and abysmal test scores persist, and wide achievement gaps dividing white and minority students and poor and affluent students remain.

In such an atmosphere, the successes of D.C. public charter school E.L. Haynes stand in stark relief. According to founder and Head of School Jennie Niles '84, since the urban school opened in 2004, the pioneer class of students, who first scored 30 percent proficient in the DC-CAS (comprehensive assessment system) tests in reading and math, is now at 76 percent proficiency in reading and 86 percent in math, with 43 percent scoring at the advanced level. The overall statistics for the school reflect the same trends.

“All kids are capable of high academic achievement, and to date we [adults] have dramatically underserved kids—poor kids and kids of color in particular. . . . It's us grown-ups who need to get ourselves organized around getting kids the right resources, at the right time, in the right way,” says Niles.

She has been instrumental in helping students attain such resources. As one of the authors of D.C.'s winning application for funds from President Obama's Race to the Top program, she helped the district gain \$75 million. Nationwide, Obama has slotted \$4.35 billion for states and districts planning significant educational reform. Requirements for the funds include improving staff recruitment and development, adopting rigorous standards and assessments, creating data systems that effectively measure student progress, and turning around failing schools. The D.C. team was one of only 12 winners last year.

Niles' school currently serves 600 students in grades pre-K through eighth but will soon expand to include high schoolers,

eventually serving 1,200 students. With 21 percent of the student body English Language Learners, 62 percent qualifying for free or reduced lunch, and 85 percent students of color, E.L. Haynes is composed of students many might expect to underperform.

“At E.L. Haynes we have a really diverse community of students—we strive to be what every public school in America should and could be,” says Niles. “We want to break down stereotypes of what urban schools are.”

Niles doesn't undercut the obstacles her students face due to the racial discrimination, poverty and tensions in their inner-city neighborhoods: “The resilience that our kids have is just remarkable. How they have the patience to come to school and try their hardest in the face of all sorts of things. . . .” But as formidable as these obstacles are, “none are determining factors in what they're able to do,” she asserts. “We [at E.L. Haynes] have to counterbalance the real challenges kids have in life.”

The arsenal she's built to help combat these challenges—and tailor education to meet individual needs—includes a strong mental health team to assist students with traumas in their lives, inclusion teachers for those with disabilities and English Language Learner specialists. “You're going to get there,” Niles tells her students, even if they require “training wheels, a temporary crutch, new glasses or just a different path altogether.”

Niles considers encouragement from adults crucial. She believes too many students can sense adults' skepticism about their abilities, often based on the mistaken philosophy that a student is born capable of achievement or isn't. “I see every day that that's not the case,” she says. Sensing an adult's lack of faith can be “devastating to a little person,” she adds. “Kids respond to expectations.”

Expecting students to act responsibly enables them to become “masters of their own destiny,” according to Niles, which



FRED CARLSON

includes not only facing the consequences of bad behavior “but also giving them voice in what’s not going right for them.” Her school uses a “guided discovery process,” slowly introducing students to different resources in the classroom—a set of crayons, for example—and agreeing to the limitations of their use. “For instance,” Niles says, “crayons don’t fly.” When students act responsibly, they are free to use the materials in the classroom at their own will.

A welcoming atmosphere, another feature Niles thinks essential to student growth, is often absent from public schools that lack even basic resources. When the doors of E.L. Haynes open each morning, the principal is there to greet every student by name. Within the next few minutes, several teachers and staff members will do the same. “The teachers know the students individually . . . so they don’t feel like ‘I’m just another kid,’” says Niles. “For students’ development to take off, they need a sense of belonging and connection. . . . If something has upset them before they get to school, we need to know within five minutes so we can fix it and get them back on track.” Often what’s wrong is that a student hasn’t eaten, which is instantly remedied. But sometimes the problems are more troubling, in which case the mental health team is there to assist.

Those first moments of greeting help build a strong community for students: “The more connections to the teacher and to the school, the better state they’re in . . . to learn,” says Niles. “There’s an intertwining of their lives with [the] adults’ here.”

The importance of forming connections with those in need was the most influential lesson Niles took from her time at PEA. “Exeter’s *non sibi* is central to who I am,” she says. After graduating from PEA, Niles received her bachelor’s degree from Brown University. Confident that scientific literacy and *non sibi* were part of the ideal society she wanted to help forge, Niles began teaching science and directing service-learning programs in middle and high school. Moving into school administration and reform, Niles headed the Charter School Office for the Connecticut State Department of Education and then directed Education Initiatives at The Ball Foundation of Glen Ellyn, IL. She earned master’s degrees in Public and Private Management from Yale University and in Public Administration with a focus on Educational Administration from Trinity University.

Then a yearlong fellowship with New Leaders for New Schools, a training program for educators to become urban principals, gave Niles the opportunity she had been waiting for: to build her own school from the ground up. A simple educational philosophy determined her plan of action. “What we need to do,” she explains, “is use whatever works.” Niles knew one step was fundamental: “We needed a group of very smart, capable people with a number of skill sets,” she says. After hiring a team of educators based on their instructional expertise and determination to do whatever it took to help all students achieve, the new founder gave them the directive “to beg, borrow and steal whenever we see what works.”

Just six years later, E.L. Haynes has been the recipient of numerous accolades in addition to the Race to the Top funds its

founder helped win. The school earned D.C.’s first Fight for Children’s Quality Schools Initiative Award and has been a three-time recipient of the Silver-Gain Award from New Leaders for New Schools’ Effective Practice Incentive Community grant program, an award ranking the school among the top 10 in a consortium of 144 charter schools nationwide.

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Everyday incidents constantly confirm Niles’ faith in her students’ initiative and potential. At the U.S.A. Science and Engineering Festival Expo on the National Mall in October, for instance, a group of her students had a booth showing how to make decorative paper from the recycling bin alongside exhibits by NASA and Harvard. Or when a teacher informed her that the school needed to change its curriculum because her students were ready for algebra a year ahead of schedule. And the observation by a seventh-grader on a University of Virginia visit: “This is a beautiful campus, but I can see myself better at a small liberal arts college.”

Then there’s Elijah. As Niles was trying to remember an inspirational Aristotle quote she thought he might appreciate for the back of their school uniforms, the eighth-grader assured her, “Oh, Ms. Niles, I’m cool with Aristotle.”

“Developing the life of the mind is not often talked about in educational reform . . . mostly because . . . we’re making sure all the basic academic pieces are in place,” Niles says. Reflecting on PEA’s methods of empowering student thought, she observes, “That’s what I want for all E.L. Haynes’ students. I can already see how the Harkness method can shape our high school program. I’ve even asked [PEA History Instructor] Rick Schubart how we can get the tables.”

For many urban high schools, reaching 75 percent proficiency would be an impressive achievement, but Niles is setting her sights much higher: “We want our high school to be one of the best in D.C. or even the nation. I want our kids to be as well-prepared as Exeter [students] when they sit next to each other at college.”

Her next goal: “Sending our first group of kids to college in 2015 and having them successfully complete it.” Ultimately, Niles wants to “have our graduates come back and teach for us, or they could just start helping to run the world. We know the kids can do it. We’re not shooting small.” ●

Learn more about the E.L. Haynes school at elhaynes.org.

