

What Matters Most

by Randi Weingarten
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A Unique Partnership for a New School Year

One of the reasons that the beginning of the school year is such a hopeful time is that it represents a fresh start. The classes are new and there is energy and a sense of purpose in the air. And the spirit of cooperation is at its most evident. Unfortunately, for students and teachers alike, as the year wears on, much of the hopefulness we feel at the beginning of school wanes. Typically, we get pushed into the familiar bureaucratic routines, usually by someone in an office who has forgotten what it's like to be a student and has never had to hold the attention of a classroom full of kids.

Think about it. Anyone who has ever had a job knows that being actively engaged in what happens in your workplace — being valued and empowered — makes you feel invested and willing to go the extra mile to get results. Teaching is no different. It is why professionalism and respect are so critical to those in the classroom. And it is precisely why Green Dot Public Schools — a unique charter school operator based in Los Angeles — caught the eye of our union, the United Federation of Teachers, and why we decided to partner with them to bring a Green Dot school to the South Bronx.



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Green Dot — the most prominent charter school operator in Southern California — distinguishes itself from its competitors and from many of the large urban public school systems throughout the country by explicitly rejecting the current fad of mimicking the practices of the corporate world such as repeated testing for quality control and heavy sanctions if a student, teacher or school falls behind.

Instead, Green Dot opts for the approach the UFT has been advocating for years. It focuses on quality teaching by fostering an environment in which teachers receive the right preparation and support for the task at hand. Green Dot teachers work within a culture of partnership and professionalism with shared responsibility and respect. And these schools are producing results. Green Dot currently operates ten pub-

lic charter high schools in Los Angeles' highest-need communities. Although only two Green Dot schools have had graduating classes to date, both have produced outstanding results: 79 percent and 61 percent of the Class of 2006 from Animo Inglewood and Animo Leadership, respectively, are attending a four-year university, which is a statistic we rarely even discuss in New York.

Schools flourish when there is teacher buy-in. That's why Green Dot schools have unionized teachers — a rarity in the charter school world. Green Dot views union membership as an asset because it guarantees that teachers will be treated with respect, and it is what makes this unique partnership possible. The progressive working conditions in the Green Dot schools in Los Angeles will be replicated in its charter school in New York — including keeping classes small and giving teachers an explicit say in school policy and curriculum.

This partnership is illustrative of the charter school idea that the late Al Shanker, one of the UFT's legendary leaders, promoted and popularized — before the charter school movement became so politicized and anti-teacher. It

is in the spirit of the two charter schools the UFT already operates. And the rest of the system seems to be getting the hint. Beginning this year, much of the decision making in New York City's public schools is being moved from the central bureaucracy to the schools themselves. This is a notion that the UFT supports — if teachers are treated as the key component in this new structure, working side by side with principals and sharing responsibility with parents and administrators in doing what's right for kids. A recent survey of public school parents in New York City found that 90 percent were truly satisfied with their child's teacher. Parents and teachers know that partnership works. And we hope that our school in the South Bronx will serve as another powerful example that when it comes to our schools, teachers do indeed know best.