

Why Luis *Can* Read

Because he's not allowed not to: How Amistad Academy turns low-performing urban students into academic achievers

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By Carole Bass

E is for Enthusiasm

The students, all wearing blue Amistad Academy polo shirts and khaki pants or skirts, put away their *Catcher in the Rye* essays. It's time to start *Hamlet*.

"Raise your hand," says teacher Marc Michaelson, "if you're in Mr. Krause's Breakfast with the Bard."

More than half the hands in the room go up.

"When I looked on the Internet for materials about *Hamlet*, they were mostly high school materials," Michaelson informs his eighth-graders. "This is going to be tough going. But you will get it."

He hands out a short introduction to the play. Veronica volunteers to read the first paragraph.

When Veronica started fifth grade, she read at a second-grade level. She repeated seventh grade. Now she zips through the paragraph about Shakespeare's background without stumbling, even over words like "lucrative."

"OK, stop," Michaelson says. "'Stratford upon Avon' — anything strike you?"

Jaleesa raises her hand.

"Ain't Avon —"

"Not 'ain't,'" Michaelson corrects.

"Aren't Avon and Stratford in Connecticut?"

Right, Michaelson answers. Connecticut is in New England, he points out, drawing a connection between Shakespeare's Elizabethan England and the students' own world.

Then he asks about the difference between tragedy and comedy. What's a tragedy?

A small kid speaks up: "Like in *South Park*, when Kenny dies at the end."

Right, Michaelson responds. “It’s a great tragedy in *South Park*, when Kenny dies at the end of every episode. Now what’s a comedy?”

The same kid answers: “*South Park*, when Kenny dies. Because it’s funny!”

The class determines that *Hamlet* is a tragedy. “It really goes to the deep-down parts of human nature and how does somebody react when something awful happens,” Michaelson tells them.

Then Luis raises his hand.

“Do you want to know some of Shakespeare’s other plays?” he offers.

He rattles off *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Michaelson asks whether each is a comedy or a tragedy. Luis nails each one.

Less than four years ago, Luis came to Amistad Academy with reading test scores in the 1st percentile — the lowest ranking there is. One year ago, he was on the verge of failing math.

Now he’s above grade level in both math and reading. And every morning, instead of joining most of the school at breakfast, he and some classmates meet in an upstairs classroom for Breakfast With the Bard. That’s how he knows so much about Shakespeare.

“We’re using our time wisely,” Luis says.

And enthusiastically.

REACH and Preach

The first thing you see at Amistad Academy, on James Street in New Haven’s Fair Haven neighborhood, is a huge banner that covers the outside of the red brick building.

The banner spells out “REACH: RESPECT. ENTHUSIASM. ACHIEVEMENT. CITIZENSHIP. HARD WORK.”

It could also say “PREACH.” Amistad preaches those “REACH values” constantly to its middle schoolers, who are mostly poor and almost exclusively (97 percent) black and Latino. REACH posters are all over the inside of the school, too. REACH values are part of the contract that all new students and their parents sign, along with school administrators.

It’s corny. It’s hokey. But it works.

It works so well that Amistad has become a bright star in Connecticut’s education constellation. Officials from the state education department, suburban districts, New Haven’s other schools and elsewhere in the country have all visited the 5-year-old charter school to find out how it turns struggling students from tough neighborhoods, kids like Luis, into academic achievers. Gov. John Rowland invited Amistad students to the Capitol and highlighted the school as a success story in this year’s State of the State address.

It works so well that the state has approved an Amistad spin-off, a new K-8 school called Elm City College Prep that's set to open in the fall.

It works because Amistad practices what it preaches.

Most school slogans — cliches like “Excellence First” or “Educating for Success” — are lip service. They have no real meaning. At Amistad, the slogans work because they're real. Teachers show Respect for students and demand it in return. They reward Enthusiasm and Citizenship.

Most important, Amistad expects — demands — ACHIEVEMENT. From all 250 students. It knows that achievement comes only through HARD WORK by both students and teachers. Everybody is on the hook, because failure is not an option.

The school day is long, starting at 7:30 a.m. with breakfast and then group activities. Classes run from 8:30 to 3:45 — compared to New Haven public schools' six-hour day — followed by a school-wide arts and sports program until 5 p.m.

Amistad is part of the educational reform movement known as charter schools. The state “charters,” or licenses, the school and funds it to the tune of \$7,200 per pupil. That's far below the per-pupil average for Connecticut public schools, so Amistad has to raise private donations to make up the difference. It reports directly to the state Board of Education, bypassing the New Haven school district. This year, Amistad's per-pupil cost is \$10,700, more than \$1,000 less than New Haven spends.

Efforts to turn around struggling urban schools tend to fall into two camps: the touchy-feely, build-up-their-self-esteem camp and the back-to-basics, uniforms-and-strict-rules camp. Amistad falls squarely into the second.

“Whenever I come across curriculum materials on self-esteem, I laugh,” says the principal, Dacia Toll. “You can't give a kid self-esteem. They get it from achieving. Kids know what's real and what's phony.”

But too often, back-to-basics schools settle for behavioral improvements alone, for quiet hallways and orderly classrooms. Amistad considers those necessary but hardly sufficient. Students also need to learn — a lot.

They start off far behind. They have to catch up to grade level and then zoom ahead, so they can excel in high school, so they can go to college, so they can get good jobs and make good incomes and be good citizens who contribute to society.

“I'm trying to change their lives,” says the 31-year-old Toll, who co-founded Amistad after graduating from Yale Law School.

The achievement gap between black and Latino students on one hand, whites and Asians on the other “is the civil rights issue of our time,” she says. “There's an urgency.”

That urgency helps account for Amistad's stunning results.

Students apply through the New Haven district's magnet-school lottery. It's strictly luck of the draw, with no "creaming" of top applicants.

When they arrive in fifth grade they are, on average, two years below grade level in reading and math, the same as their counterparts in other New Haven schools.

Four years later, their Connecticut Mastery Test scores are double to triple the New Haven average and higher than the statewide average. Last year, Amistad eighth-graders posted higher CMT writing scores than students in wealthy college-prep towns like Greenwich, Avon, Madison and Cheshire. Visitors from as near as Hamden and as far as San Diego come to glimpse the secrets of Amistad's success.

Those secrets? They're simple: hard work, high standards, strict discipline and a constant, obsessive focus on "taking it to the next level."

Or in the case of students like Luis, several levels.

Luis' Turning Point

"Last year, I was getting a lot of low grades. I got my report card. I had two F's." Luis, an outgoing eighth-grader with brown eyes and a sunny smile, tells the story matter-of-factly. There's no trace of embarrassment or boasting.

His mother came to school for a meeting about Luis' report card. "Miss Toll was talking to me and my mother," he remembers. "Then we left and got in the car. My mother was on the verge of crying, and that just clicked. When I saw how upset she was, I felt like crying, too. I looked out the window because I didn't want her to see my expression."

After that, "I started studying every day." He studied math, spelling and vocabulary, in that order. Thursdays, he spent extra time on vocab because there was a test every Friday.

Sounds simple: You work hard, you get good grades. But for Luis, it took nearly three years of Amistad's continual pushing for that simple equation to take hold. Until then, he was studying "not even a bit," Luis reports. "Just listening to music and doing my homework."

Amistad recognizes that parents are essential to their children's education. That's why the school asks parents and students to sign a three-way contract before enrolling. In the contract, parents promise to get their kids to school on time, supervise homework, communicate with teachers.

It took all that and more to bring Luis' grades up, says his mother, Nerida Rodriguez. As she tells it, last year's dramatic turnaround was more complicated than the way Luis recalls it.

In addition to the meeting with Toll, Rodriguez got calls from a couple of Luis' teachers.

“They know that Luis can give a whole lot better,” says Rodriguez, who works as a certified nurse. “I really appreciate what they did. We agreed to keep in touch every week.” And she agreed to “keep him out of the TV, be a little more strict when he got home, review all the work, make sure he was doing what he was supposed to do. It was very strict here in the house. That’s how he got back on track.”

By the end of seventh grade, Luis was “doing OK,” Rodriguez says. He went to Amistad’s summer program, which helped his writing a lot. Then, when this year started, “he was acting silly,” goofing off. “You know, teenager stuff.”

His teachers called again.

In fact, he failed his first three math tests this school year. Since then, his math grades have been in the 80s and 90s.

Through fourth grade, Luis went to West Hills/Conte magnet school, he says as he gobbles a lunch of “deep dish pizza” — it looks like a mini-quiche, about 3 inches across — fruit juice and chocolate milk. He had lots of friends at West Hills. “They were into the street.”

His mother decided he should go to Amistad.

“She wanted me to have a higher education,” Luis says. “She wanted me to be more focused and be around people who wanted to succeed.”

Next year, Luis will attend New Haven Academy, a new, small public high school. Down the road, he hopes to go to the University of Connecticut or the University of Miami.

C is for Coaching

Dacia Toll sits down next to Teron McFadden. He’s a first-year teacher, filling in for someone who’s on maternity leave. Toll has just finished a formal observation of his sixth-grade math class. Now they sit down in her office to talk it over.

It’s a small, crowded room, and she shares it with another Amistad administrator. That doesn’t matter so much, since Toll is hardly ever in her office — she teaches one class a day, and the rest of the time she’s usually walking the halls, in and out of classrooms, checking in on students and teachers.

“How’d you think it went?” she asks McFadden, a tall, energetic young man.

“I thought it went very well,” he replies. His goal was to review the students’ recent tests, identifying weaknesses and reteaching the stuff that had tripped them up. He covered everything he had planned, and “it went exactly how I wanted it to.”

“I did think it was a terrific lesson,” Toll agrees. “First and foremost, they know the math. You covered a lot of ground. Your movement around the classroom was excellent. While they were working the problems, you were working the classroom.”

Then Toll gives McFadden two tips “that would take it up a level.”

During the first half of the lesson, she observes, McFadden clearly signaled when he wanted a response from the whole class — by saying “class?” — and when he wanted kids to raise their hands. The second half lost that “clarity,” and the kids started calling out more. That’s an obvious disruption. Toll points out a not-so-obvious consequence: Because the same two or three students quickly answered every question, “you couldn’t tell which kids knew the answer and which didn’t.”

Second, Toll recommends that McFadden “do tiny little mini-lessons” before each problem that the class works through together, rather than waiting until the kids are stumped.

She illustrates: ““OK, what do you do when you add fractions? What do you do when you multiply? Do you get a common denominator?” And they can all say ‘Nooo!’ I think you would have a much higher rate of success.”

And success is what it’s all about.

Afterward, McFadden says he found the session helpful. “Being a first-year teacher is very, very hard,” he says. “I’m constantly asking questions: ‘How can I better this?’ It’s a constant learning process.”

The C in Amistad’s REACH acronym stands for Citizenship, not Coaching. But the kind of one-on-one attention, encouragement and concrete suggestions for improvement that Toll gave McFadden are crucial to the school’s success.

After seeing it in Toll’s office, I see it again in Roxanna Lopez’s classroom. This time, Lopez is coaching students in her fifth-grade writing class.

They’re working on essays about their mothers. Make ’em concrete and vivid, Lopez urges. She shows them how, writing another acronym on the board: SAFE. That stands for Sensory details, Anecdotes, Feelings and Examples.

“A lot of you wrote that you love your mother because she’s a good cook. Don’t just say you like her fried chicken or mac & cheese,” Lopez tells the kids. “Tell us what it tastes like, what it smells like. Tell us a story that starts with ‘once’ or ‘I remember.’ You’ve got to convince the reader that you’ve got something to say, that they should want to keep reading.”

While the class works in pairs on improving their drafts, Lopez takes aside three boys who have asked for extra help. She asks James to read his essay out loud.

“What do you mean when you say your mother is mature?” she asks.

“I really mean she’s old,” James replies. “But you told us not to say ‘old’ or ‘ancient.’”

Lopez is not satisfied: “You love your mother because she’s old?”

She asks him for an anecdote. In a sample essay for the class, “I wrote that my grandmother is really strong,” she points out. “And I told the story of how we went to Mexico and we had to bring her back in the trunk of our car. That anecdote backs up the idea that my grandmother is strong, because you have to be strong to travel in the trunk of a car. I want you to come up with a story that supports the idea that your mother is mature.”

A is for Achievement

John Krause, a round-faced man with a beard, is reading numbers out loud from his computer screen. The numbers are algebra grades. The numbers are low.

“Only four of those are passing,” Krause points out to his eighth-grade class.

“Whatever you’re doing is not working. It’s not going to work next year or the year after. My temptation is to pull the algebra books and go back to fractions. We’re wasting my time. What am I going to do? I’ve tried my best. At this point I just don’t know what else to do.”

Dacia Toll, listening in, explains why Krause is being so hard on the kids. This is the lower of the two eighth-grade math classes. Six months from now, most of these kids will be at New Haven public high schools.

“Our alumni say the teachers don’t care” about students at those high schools, Toll relates. “I wouldn’t put it that way. But I would say that [students are] allowed to fail” if they don’t do their work.

At Amistad, by contrast, students are not allowed to fail.

Instead of sink or swim, it’s more like swim or else. So while New York City and other urban districts try to end “social promotion” by forcing huge numbers of kids to repeat grades, Amistad retains just three or four students a year — less than 2 percent. It ends social promotion by making sure the kids earn a real promotion.

And the school does not expel students. Ever.

“I’ve gone very close with a group of eighth-graders,” Toll says. “But I knew I was faking it.

“If we want to be part of a conversation about improving the public schools, we can’t take the route of just asking the tough kids to leave.”

Much of the back-to-basics school movement has a nasty edge. It couples the case for traditional education with an attack on permissive liberal values, teachers’ unions, “ghetto culture” and, seemingly, anything associated with cities or poor kids. Where liberals tend to blame low school performance on poverty and racism, conservatives blame teachers and the kids. Many of the conservatives’ get-tough policies seem more designed to punish failure than to promote success.

No such punitive agenda is detectable at Amistad Academy.

Amistad calls itself a “college prep middle school.” From Day One of fifth grade, students hear about “climbing the mountain to college.” Eighth graders learn about applications and financial aid — not only for the private high schools that many of them attend, but also for college. Every classroom door bears a sign with the names of the teachers who share the room, the names of the colleges they attended, and their undergraduate and graduate degrees.

About a third of Amistad graduates go to private high schools — nearby ones, like Choate and Notre Dame, as well as far-flung boarding schools. Eighth-grader Jaleesa Freeman is typical of this group: She lives at the Brookside housing project, came to Amistad because her mother saw she needed a more challenging school, and has just been offered a full scholarship at the prestigious Portsmouth Abbey prep school in Rhode Island.

The other two-thirds go to New Haven public schools. Amistad expects them, like their prep school counterparts, to excel and go on to college.

“We’re learning from our alumni,” Toll says, “that we need a better transition to high school. After four years here, they know us so well. They’ve figured out all the rules. Then they get to high school and the game changes. It has to change. There’s much less hand-holding. They may be glad that their teachers aren’t on their backs all the time.” But that means the students have to take responsibility for their own success.

That’s what Krause is trying to get them to do.

“Maybe we are not ready to work hard enough to do the algebra,” he tells his failing eighth-graders.

“You guys are definitely ready for it. But it’s hard work.”

They have a test the next day. “You’ve got a half-hour now to figure out what you’re going to do,” Krause tells them. “Luis, if you want to spend a half hour playing Uno cards, if you think that’s going to get you ahead, go to it.”

The kids pull out their books and start studying.

Before Amistad, Krause taught in public schools in Baltimore and Catholic schools in Philadelphia. “I came here thinking I knew a lot about teaching, particularly teaching in an urban setting,” he says. “Then I found out how little I did know.”

What did he learn?

“Number one is, instruction is really important.” At his previous jobs, “you don’t really push the kids,” Krause says. “It’s not about whether they’re learning. There was more concern about documentation. As long as I wrote down names and numbers, it didn’t matter whether the numbers went up or the numbers went down. I wasn’t held accountable.

“Here, there’s a drive to do well. I’d be embarrassed” if his students flunked.

The day after Krause reams out his lagging eighth-graders, they take their algebra test. The results: an average 15-point jump in their grades. Luis pulls an 85, a solid B.

They’re not allowed to fail.

S is for Strict, H is for Hard Work

“Some people consider strict to be a bad thing,” Toll says. “I think it’s a good thing. It’s not the same as mean.”

At Amistad, kids move through the halls in line and quietly. Shirttails are tucked in. They look adults in the eye, respond politely when spoken to, sit at their desks with feet on the floor, raise their hands to speak in class.

“We do sweat the small stuff,” says administrator Doug McCurry. It’s similar to the “broken windows” theory of community policing — the idea that small problems, like untucked shirttails or broken windows, will lead to bigger problems unless they’re fixed right away.

Behavior and academic achievement “are two sides of the same coin,” Toll says. “We do both. Obsessively.”

Most of what Amistad does is common sense. None of it would succeed without the H in REACH: Hard work on the part of students, staff and parents.

Hard work takes time. The long school day was hard to get used to, Luis Oppenheimer remembers. It was tiring. And then there was homework.

“It was a lot,” Luis remembers. “Math, reading, science, history.”

What was the hardest?

“Everything.”

“I didn’t want to go to this school, but I got used to it.”

This year, he got the payoff: His reading score, which was in the first percentile when he came to Amistad, has soared to the 59th percentile. “That felt great.”