

Public-private pact helps dream team teach in South L.A.

By BILL HIGGINS

The achievements of the Accelerated School are infinitely more impressive than its location. The school looks a bit like a minimum-security prison, albeit one with child-drawn murals on the walls. A cyclone fence topped with barbwire surrounds a cluster of identical pre-fab buildings. There is no grass or gardens. The gray buildings surround an asphalt open space with basketball courts and metal cafeteria tables.

This is not the location anyone would use for a "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" remake.

However, this 360-student inner-city charter school has a 98% attendance rate, 1,500 students on a waiting list and was voted Time magazine's 2001 Elementary School of the Year. It outperforms other nearby public schools by more than double on standardized tests.

In 1994, two Watts-based L.A. Unified School District teachers, Jonathan Williams and Kevin Sved, realized that the new Charter School Legislation Act offered them an opportunity "to dream up the ideal public school and then realize it," says Williams.

Sweet dreams

As with most dreams, theirs required money. The two 25-year-olds needed \$237,000 in startup funds required by the LAUSD. Fund-raising was not their forte; but their amateurish, though passionate, funding requests caught the eye of an exec at the Wells Fargo Foundation, which came through with \$200,000; the Weingart Foundation gave the extra \$30,000.

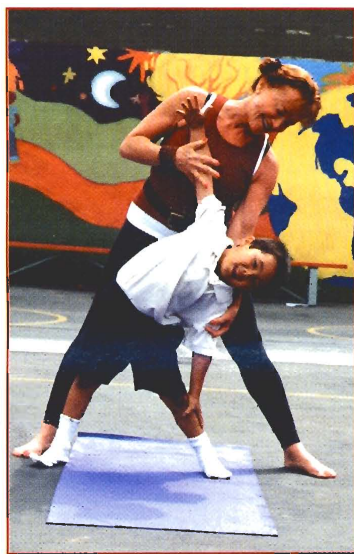
"The school is really a public-private partnership," says Sved. "The private funds are what enabled us to leverage

the public funds." (The school receives roughly \$5,000 per student annually in public funding.)

Concurrent with that early fund-raising, Williams and Sved came into contact with a guardian angel by the name of Tara Lynda Guber, wife of Mandalay Pictures CEO Peter Guber, and a co-founder of Education 1st!, a media-based nonprofit that spotlights the growing crises in education.

"Kevin and Jonathan had a passion and a vision," says Guber. "They weren't afraid to say what they wanted and fight for it."

Guber knew Carole Little and Leonard Rabinowitz, co-founders of the Carole Little clothing company, and she



POSED FOR SUCCESS: Guber (with a student) believes that yoga helps "make the kids learning-ready."



FINALLY, A SYSTEM THAT WORKS: At the Accelerated School, "each child is treated as if they're gifted," says Tara Lynda Guber.

got the fashion mavens behind the idea of a college prep school — kindergarten through 12th grade — in the inner city.

The connection had a major payoff. The land that the Accelerated School now occupies, about a mile east of USC on Martin Luther King Boulevard (and where its award-winning Marmol + Radziner-designed high school is being built across the street), is where the fashion company's former headquarters once stood. Little and Rabinowitz donated the 3.9-acre \$6.5 million property.

In fall 1994, the school opened with 50 kindergarten-through-fourth-grade students. It grew a grade a year and is now K-8, with the high school being added next year.

What makes this school different from the standard LAUSD campus is that it follows the Accelerated School Model developed by Stanford's Henry Levin in 1986. "The concept is to close the achievement gap by providing kids meaningful hands-on activities," says Williams.

"When we were teaching in Watts," says Sved, "a lot of the staff was really young, innovative and hardworking. But there were also a lot of teachers who were used to the same old, same old. It was pretty easy to see which teachers were working hard and making learning fun and meaningful and which weren't."

Sved points to teacher accountability,

the planned K-12 span, on-site budget control and required parental involvement (at least 30 hours per year helping out at the school) as some of the reasons for the charter school's success.

"Good schools can transform communities," Guber says. "What I'm seeing now is that the kids are teaching the parents."

Future perfect

"This is a new model for urban education," says Sved. "We're serving a population that wouldn't have the opportunity for this kind of education if we weren't here."

The school offers a curriculum that could rival an upscale prep academy. And it's the private funding that pays for special programs, like second-graders studying art by sculpting. Or how last year, the fourth-grade class went on a civics field trip to Sacramento. Guber herself is sponsoring a program where students have twice-a-week classes in yoga as part of P.E. She sees it as a model that can lead to the introduction of yoga in public schools.

"The LAUSD is really happy to have us," she says. "They're even helping us to create satellite schools. It's a new model, a new world out there. This public-private partnership, we all know that it's the way things are going to have to go now. And it's working. We're just proving that it can work."