

going **public**



**Across the country churches
are stepping up to serve local
schools—and showing Christ
in the process.**

by dave urbanski

For an American culture that views the Church and the state as perennial cage-fighting foes, the simple, six-word question was nothing short of taboo.

But members of Embrace Teachers—a church-based outreach to faculty in Omaha, Neb.—had built such a high level of credibility and good will through various acts of kindness all year long that the question they posed to one principal felt altogether natural.

“How can we pray for you?”

Rather than rattling off a list of needs (or looking at the group members like they were from Mars), the principal thoughtfully replied, “I’m not sure. Let me think about it.”

The next time folks from Embrace Teachers found themselves in that principal’s office, they couldn’t help but notice a large box sitting atop his desk. It was stuffed full of prayer requests from teachers, administrators, support staff—even students.

For Ian Vickers—co-founder of Embrace Teachers and director of community and international relations for Christ Community Church in Omaha—this little slice of outreach triumphed not because church members became skilled at persuading others to accept Jesus or winning a political debate, but because they had earned the school’s trust and respect by consistently meeting practical needs without condition.

“Prayer in school happened,” Vickers says, “and not through legislation.”



What Are We Missing?

A growing number of congregations are learning that outreach to public schools doesn't mean tearing down an iron curtain or diving into a sea of protests and lawsuits. There's very little to figure out, invent or dream up. In fact, apart from discovering and meeting the schools' needs, everything else—spiritual conversations, church attendance, conversion experiences—happens naturally.

Jeremy Del Rio, a former youth worker who helps mobilize churches in New York City to "adopt" neighborhood public schools, sees a paradigm shift in the works.

He remembers a breakfast for youth workers connected with the 2005 Billy Graham Crusade in New York City, at which a presenter asked the 787 youth workers present how many were paid by their churches—and only a couple of dozen hands went up.

"That was a stark, visual representation that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few," he says, adding that there are 2 million New Yorkers 18 and younger.

"We began asking God, 'What are we missing? Who are the laborers you want to activate?'"

Del Rio concluded that the best places to reach most youth are where they are most days of the week—public schools. And who's connected to public schools? Not usually youth workers, but people in churches, of which "50 to 80 percent are directly connected to schools in some way," Del Rio notes, whether they're parents, grandparents, teachers, administrators or friends of students.

It was an epiphany that changed his ministry focus. But the "aha" moments were far from over. His next question: If church members as a whole are charged with public school outreach, what's the best way to make that outreach happen? Certainly not via traditional methods, which he says have led to an antagonistic relationship between churches and schools.

There had to be another way.

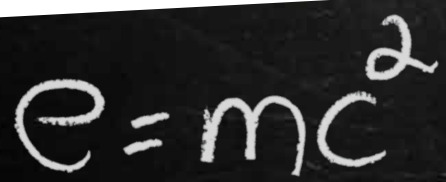
Service Without Conditions

Del Rio and others have discovered the painfully obvious truth that the Church has a credibility problem in American culture, and if churches have any hope of influencing lives within schools, they have to meet schools on their terms. That starts with serving with no strings attached—along with an open ear to helping schools overcome their biggest stated obstacles.

In Del Rio's context, the issue is literacy.

"The crisis of public education is very real," he notes, adding that New York City's on-time graduation rate is 44 percent and all other big city rates are 40 percent or lower.

"The average graduate of urban public schools reads at an eighth-



"We wanted to invest in the kids. This is not about bringing a conversion experience to the school. It's Christ in action more than words."

—Kirsten Strand, Community 4:12

grade level, which means those kids lack the basic skills to be transformed by the Word of God. They're not going to exegete 2 Kings!" Therefore, Del Rio concludes, the Church has every incentive to get on board with increasing literacy in public schools. "The challenge has become, 'Can churches begin to partner with schools to equip kids to be what God called them to be?'"

Michael W. Mele, bridge-building coordinator for the recently launched Forefront Church in Lakewood, Colo., found a convenient connection to a local school that many new churches share—Forefront meets in a local school auditorium on Sundays. Mele quickly forged relationships with Forefront's "host" school and identified low-key projects to build good will, including working in the school's garden and helping move recyclable material from the school to the city's transport station twice weekly, which saves the school money by not purchasing a larger recycling bin.

Kirsten Strand, director of Community 4:12, a ministry of Community Christian Church in Naperville, Ill., began the delicate dance of leading outreach as a privileged white person to an underresourced school in neighboring East Aurora, which is mostly Latino and lower-income. It began six years ago via a meeting with the principal of Brady Elementary. Strand had her trepidation, but also some solid guidelines.

"We wanted to invest in the kids," she notes. "This is not about bringing a conversion experience to the school. It's Christ in action more than words."

It also meant not flying into the town on the wrong side of the tracks wearing a superhero cape, but rather practicing responsible charity.

"That's the undergirding principle of what we do," she says. "We want to empower people—to provide a hand up, not a hand out. Yes, our charitable intentions can be wonderful, but churches can do more harm than good in this area."

So for the first six months, Strand did nothing but immerse herself in the community, attend school board meetings and build relationships. Then came the first outreach event—the Christmas Gift Mart. Rather than buying gifts and doling them out to students, which Strand emphasizes can be "demoralizing" to parents (especially fathers), the Gift Mart was set up so that parents could buy items at a very reduced rate—with all the proceeds donated back to the school. (To date about \$40,000 has been donated back over the years, and the Gift Mart has expanded to other locations, drawing more than 1,500 volunteers annually at three locations after starting with only 100 volunteers.)

In the last six years, Community 4:12 also has expanded to include six elementary schools in East Aurora, as well as a high school and middle



school. Other outreaches include a health fair, selling reduced-cost school supplies in the fall (Christmas Gift Mart-style, with proceeds donated back to schools), Saturday-morning tutoring, an after-school book club and art club, high school scholar-athletes who mentor elementary students, as well as a parent mentor program in which Community 4:12 pays parents \$1,000 annual stipends to work as teachers aides in their children's schools for 10 hours a week.

The parent mentor program is "far and away the best one from the schools' perspective," Strand says, adding that the program started three years ago at Brady Elementary with only five participants but has grown to 40 parents at six schools today.

Community 4:12 is transforming not only East Aurora, but the ministry's affluent, predominantly white parent church as well, Senior Pastor Dave Ferguson says.

"After over a decade of strategically focusing our outreach on people like us, we knew it was time to expand our focus into places that were culturally and economically different from our own community," Ferguson says. "We have become a church that knows you can't call yourself a church unless you care about the poor." The church still has a lot of growing to do in this area, Ferguson says, but leaders regularly challenge the congregation to give of their time and resources to be involved in the lives of people different than themselves.

"We've seen parents empowered to get involved in their children's school, students make academic progress they wouldn't have made without extra support and people who have always thought faith was a rigid set of rules start to question what it means to have a personal relationship with Christ," he says.

Celebrating Teachers

In addition to serving students and their parents, churches are supporting and encouraging teachers too. Along with Vickers' Embrace Teachers program, other creative outreaches to faculty have taken root in several schools around the country. Bill Yaccino, executive director of Catalyst—an organization that jump-starts relationships between schools and churches in Lake County, Ill.—has found that simple things such as serving teachers a home-cooked lunch in their lounge can be a win.

"I've never seen one small thing make such an impact," he notes. "That gets teachers asking, 'Who are these people who care for us so much and feed us so well?' And they do receive us well."

Del Rio has seen similar inroads made by church members

Passing the Test

Jeremy Del Rio, founder of 20/20 Vision for Schools in New York City, shares how one small seed has yielded bountiful fruit—and why churches are called to this backyard mission field.

If the moral test of a society is how it treats children, America has failed the same test for decades. Specifically, we have failed to educate the urban poor despite promising equal access to quality education for all. This educational inequity—where the place of one's childhood determines the quality of one's education—has been called our nation's greatest injustice.

And churches have watched it happen.

As we looked at what it would take to accomplish comprehensive reform, we knew it would require multisector, collaborative strategies led by people willing to commit. We also knew that churches are uniquely positioned to lead this effort.

First, as Christians, we are called to care about justice (Mic. 6:8, Isa. 61:1-8). Second, Jesus activates us as salt and light, that the world "may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:13-16).

Mobilizing congregations for scalable engagement requires a plan, beginning with committing to pray for a specific school as often as the church prays. If America's 300,000 evangelical churches actually prayed for its 100,000 public schools, dare we expect God to answer?

It continues as congregations overcome generational mistrust by cultivating personal relationships at the school. Next, churches respond to felt needs with meaningful acts of service. Then they develop an ongoing presence by volunteering as coaches or tutors. Finally comes the credibility to affect policy at the school and district level.

To date, nearly 200 New York churches have adopted schools through 20/20. Together, these churches have open-sourced a multisector effort to transform education in America because the problems are too vast for one person, group or community to overcome on its own.

If it's "about the kids," 20/20 reminds us to share.

And to lead.

—Jeremy Del Rio

ONLINE: JeremyDelRio.com; 2020Schools.net

School Rules

DO

- Frequently cast the vision for serving schools via messages, announcements from the pulpit, small groups and personal example.
- Be proactive and set up a meeting with the school principal, stating that your church wants to learn how it can serve the school.
- Build trust and respect by meeting school officials on their terms. First, ask what they need, then offer suggestions for how your church could help meet those needs.
- Be open to creative resource ideas. Keep your eyes and ears open for door-opening opportunities.
- Be realistic about what you're capable of providing. Better to start with a huge success on a small scale than a failure on a large scale.
- Make it easy for people to get involved. Offer a wide range of service opportunities for church members—both big and small commitments. Start by engaging people to serve at a big event.

- Train and equip lay leaders to coach and guide people who want to regularly engage.
- Stay committed for the long haul. Systemic change doesn't happen overnight.
- Have fun! Service should be a celebration.

DON'T

- Cross the school's boundaries, such as preaching to students, passing out tracts on campus, etc.
- Believe if you didn't convert somebody, your efforts are a failure.
- Force something that isn't happening. Relationships need to unfold naturally.
- Give up if there's resistance at first. Accept the fact that schools don't have a lot of reasons to trust churches.
- Forget that there's no law against prayerful people serving in public schools.



Looking for the right fit?

serving breakfast to teachers. "They were floored," he says. "Through the very spirit in which they just served breakfast, conversations naturally happened. When the teachers found out they were from churches, a half dozen of them asked for prayer right there."

Other acts of kindness that Vickers' Embrace Teachers outreach has sponsored include renovating teacher lounges, offering annual "wish lists" to faculty to offset the \$400 to \$500 worth of classroom supplies they regularly buy out of their own pockets, and the big tamale—a year-end celebration for teachers at Omaha's Quest Center basketball arena. Typically, 1,400 teachers show up each year, and gifts are presented throughout the evening—including high-end items such as trips and even a new car.

"The teachers loved it," he says, adding that the first year a Toyota Camry went to a fifth-grade teacher who that year not only took a homeless kid into her house, but also donated one of her kidneys to her sister.

"You just think, of all the people who could've gotten the car, she's at the top of that list," Vickers says.

Incarnational Presence

Making a transformational difference in the lives of the people connected to the schools sometimes transforms the lives of the people reaching out as well. Strand's commitment to East Aurora led to a "very strong calling to ministry" involving not just her entire family, but also a move from Naperville to be with their new friends in East Aurora two years ago.

"The challenge has become, 'Can churches begin to partner with schools to equip kids to be what God called them to be?'" —Jeremy Del Rio, 20/20 Vision

"We did the incarnational thing," Strand explains. "My husband quit his corporate job and is now a third-grade teacher in the district. He wanted to leave the rat race and do something he always had a heart for."

The move also involved their two young children. "It's safe to say that they're the only white kids in their classes, but they adjusted beautifully. They had some fears coming into it, but now they wouldn't go back."

And what did her church family back in Naperville think?

"Everybody thought we were crazy," Strand says. "But now a few people are considering making a similar move."

And how did the move affect her new neighbors?

"To be honest, it increased our credibility, and our ministry grew exponentially," Strand says. "We now have office space here, a second person on staff and a wonderful relationship with the mayor. It took things to a whole new level." ✕

New Jersey-based freelance writer Dave Urbanski wrote last issue's bivocational ministry article. He also serves as senior developmental editor for Youth Specialties.

Find it here.



Pastor**FINDER**.com