

N.O. school, a model for charters, gets \$1 million from Oprah donation

by Lucy Bustamante / Eyewitness News

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NEW ORLEANS -- The kids scream at the mention of their school on the Oprah Winfrey Show, and this was before they found out Oprah's Angel Network gave them \$1 million.

The goal: to create more of them.

"It was truly amazing and very emotional for me actually, seeing all the scholars because they just work so hard every day," said Margo Lukens, the curriculum director for the school. "It's really great seeing them recognized at a national level."

Oprah featured the 200 students at the New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy, or Sci Academy as they call it, as an example of a charter school that works.

"The charter movement is just so strong and so fast and urgent here, and we really can make a difference really quickly and show the rest of the country some things that are really working," Lukens said.

The proof? Principal Benjamin Marcovitz says most of the freshman that arrived reading at a 4th grade level caught up to their grade or higher a year later.

"We know we're going to have lots of kids who are not going to be right with us from the beginning. It's an open enrollment school, and that's the point," Marcovitz said.

It may be open enrollment, but their methods translated into scoring only behind Ben Franklin and Lusher, which are selective enrollment schools.

Here they don't only test the kids. The teachers get tested every two weeks.

"Teachers need to be observed every single day talking about teaching and learning and making sure they're constantly improving," Lukens said.

And the kids get interim assessments every five weeks

"They're kind of trial runs of any state tests, or college prep tests like the ACT, or even for advanced placement exams," Marcovitz said. "We don't ever want to take those exams and be surprised with what the kids are getting."

Jacque Williams Jr. proudly shows off his heavy school bag.

"One of my teachers said I have a little child in there," he said.

He admits at first he wasn't very happy with no sports, double the math and tripled the English just in his freshman year. But, he gets the point.

"They keep you focused and they want to make sure you succeed in life," Jacques said.

They're in school from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. in these trailers in New Orleans East.

Jacque knows exactly where to put the million bucks.

"I would like to see a new building," he said.

But Marcovitz says before they could learn to read, they had to learn to trust the teachers

"Often our children are coming to us from places where all together they didn't feel safe, and so what we see, particularly with our freshmen in the first couple weeks and some times first couple months, is their response to, say, somebody looking at them funny," Marcovitz said.

So they make it clear: the teacher is their boss, their leader, and they don't have to treat them like a number; instead, they often give them theirs incase the homework gets too hard.

"They give us their phone number to call them just in case," Jacques said.

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