



Students in the main hallway at Gateway High School. Below, the main entrance to Gateway High at Geary and Scott, for many years the Benjamin Franklin Middle School.

A Different Way to Learn

Gateway schools celebrate 20 years of educating students who learn differently

By FRAN MORELAND JOHNS

“BE TRUTHFUL, GENTLE and FEARLESS” proclaims a sign on the office wall of Sharon Olken, executive director of Gateway School at Geary and Scott.

Olken first came to Gateway in 2000, teaching humanities. She served in a variety of positions, including dean of faculty and principal of Gateway High School. She launched Gateway Middle School in 2011. In recent months she has been busily involved in celebrations of Gateway’s 20th anniversary.

“Our mission has always been to serve a population of students that reflects the diversity of San Francisco, and help them understand how they learn best,” while building their academic skills, Olken says. “We added health support, literacy programs and electives, which have been very popular,” she says. “We want kids to thrive.”

Part of thriving, Olken says, is understanding racial bias and prejudice. “In training teachers, we’ve learned to start by understanding our own beliefs in order to create equitable outcomes for all kids,” she says.

About 75 percent of Gateway’s population is made up of students of color. And 96 percent of the group is college-bound, 40 percent of them the first generation of their families to attend college. Anyone can apply to Gateway, and a fulltime recruiter crisscrosses the city throughout the year encouraging applicants. Then — not good news for aspiring students — only about one quarter of those applying are accepted.

Some are accepted into other schools they’ve also applied to, and others are wait-listed and might be enrolled later. Acceptance is by lottery. A computer has replaced the humans who formerly pulled names out of a rotating drum, and diversity is achieved by giving priority on the basis of factors such as San Francisco residency, eligibility for free or reduced lunch and learning differences.

Olken explains that learning differences are not just the better-known conditions such as autism, ADD and ADHD, but an assortment of other things including dysgraphia, dyscalcula and auditory processing disorder. Gateway was founded to address exactly such needs, and is dedicated to helping students discover how they learn best. About a quarter of the student population has been diagnosed with learning differences.

Olken explains that charter schools — Gateway Middle and High Schools are among the 15 charters that are part of the San Francisco Unified School District — all receive a measure of freedom from rules governing regular public schools, but must meet all state laws and also have site and community oversight



Six moms and a dad

It was 20 years ago that a group of San Franciscans — “six moms and a dad,” according to founding principal Peter Thorp — saw a need for a school tailored to serving students with learning differences. And Gateway High School was founded.

The effort had actually started two years earlier, when the group went from discussing the need to seeing an answer and applying for a multitude of permits. “They had this ‘What Hath God Wrought’ moment,” Thorp says. “Suddenly they needed a building, and a principal — and that’s where I came in.”

The idea was to address a citywide need. Some of the founders sent their own children to Gateway and some did not.

“There were so many kids with learning differences,” says founder and board member Suzanne Schutte. “We had an opportunity to bring this experience to all of these kids. That it actually happened is amazing.”

by the district. They must also be re-certified every five years. Charter schools — thrust into public discourse when charter advocate Betsy DeVos was named U.S. Secretary of Education — do not lack for dedicated opponents, though most of them focus on for-profit charters, which are widely seen to siphon off assets and good students.

Gateway High founding principal Peter Thorp, now working in public education in New Mexico, observes: “There are good guys and bad guys among charter schools, and 90 percent are good guys.”

School board member Rachel Norton, who has concerns about “the slanted playing field between charters and traditional public schools,” nevertheless expresses deep respect for Olken and declares Gateway schools are “excellent public schools.” Gateway founder and board member Suzanne Schutte says: “What’s been really cool is that we are laboratories, able to share what we’ve learned.”

Gateway’s first location was at the corner of Jackson and Webster, in the building that now houses San Francisco’s Montessori Public School. It soon moved from there to Seventh Avenue near Irving Street and, in 2005, moved again to the corner of Scott Street and Geary Boulevard — the site of the former Benjamin Franklin Middle School, which had closed because of declining enrollment.

“We finally have found a home,” Olken says. “Ben Franklin had been extraordinarily vibrant at its height, and we feel a responsibility to that. Our location is central and easily accessible.” With a 24:1 student-teacher ratio, she is confident her schools are reaching the aspirational goal posted on her office wall as well as that posted on the website: “Step up. Do right. Dream big.”

Two students, sisters Ava and Rose Golant, recently offered their opinions on what it’s like to enter Gateway’s halls. Freshman Rose, whose favorite class is humanities, said that about half of her classmates came from Gateway Middle School, so a lot of people already knew each other. But she has made many new friends. Sixth grader Ava, who came to Gateway from George Peabody Elementary, agrees. “It’s kind of like a small community,” she says, “and everybody is nice to each other. I tripped in the hall, and an 8th grader helped me up.”

Freshman Owen Popper, who completed three years at Gateway Middle School before moving on to Gateway High, observes: “I chose to go to Gateway for two reasons. I was not accepted into the school that I wanted to go to, and I had seen Gateway and the way it worked. I thought it would be a good fit, and so far it seems that it is.”