

# Special

## Architecture and Design High School Continues to Evolve *Philadelphia charter school takes pride in success, looks forward to future*

By Tracy F. Sisser

Associate Editor



Two years after the creation of the Charter High School for Architecture and Design, (CHAD) the Philadelphia public school graduated its first senior class. Forty-eight students walked across the stage to accept their diplomas in a triumph that was as much theirs as that of the schools' founders.

CHAD, a public, independent, tuition-free high school, is one of 38 charter high schools in Philadelphia. It was opened in 1999 by AIA Philadelphia and a group of educators as the legacy project of the 2000 AIA national convention. It is the first – and still is the only – charter high school for architecture and design in the nation. The impetus for the project was to increase educational opportunities for minorities and women in Philadelphia and to expand the ranks of minorities in the architectural profession.

CHAD is now composed of 95 percent minority students, 91 percent of whom are African-American. The school is about 40 percent female. It draws students from every part of the city.

Unlike magnet schools, which can be exclusive about their admissions policies, CHAD must open its doors to all members of Philadelphia's community. It does not have entrance requirements, but applicants are put through a rigorous enrollment process to ensure that students who come to the school have an interest in and want to immerse themselves in architecture and design.

As a result, CHAD's classes are full of students who come to school ready to learn. CHAD, which is considered a high-poverty school, based on the number of students who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches, boasts of a 91 percent daily average attendance rate. Their goal for this year is a 95 percent

average attendance rate. The rate for Philadelphia's traditional public high schools is 63 percent, said Barbara Chandler Allen, director of development and mentoring. The average daily attendance rate for teachers is 99.9 percent, according to Allen.

If a student misses more than 14 days he or she must make up their credits during the summer. Administrators do not believe in social promotion (advancing students based on age rather than achievement). Five students did not walk with their classmates at graduation because they have not yet met CHAD's academic requirements. "We are holding kids accountable," Allen emphasized.

### Teaching children the way they learn best

The school aims to teach the children, "the way they learn best." CHAD takes kids who are daydreamers and creative and channels their talents and energies by focusing their studies through the design process, Allen said.

The mission of the school is to "integrate design throughout the curriculum," explained Allen. The result is a thematic and interdisciplinary approach that caters to students who are visual learners. For example, architecture principals infuse their geography and history lessons: when learning about the Roman Empire, the teacher asked the students to build a Roman aqueduct. Importantly, and somewhat uniquely in this age of cuts to arts programs, in addition to

their full academic load, each student is required to take a 100 minute design studio every day.

Last year, CHAD had 313 students and 17 teachers; this year administrators say the class will be more than 340, with a freshman class of about 100, and 20 teachers. Seventy-five percent of the teachers have permanent certification and all the teachers are working toward it. Class size is about 18 students, and no class exceeds 25 children.

The school is proud of their academic and attendance sta-

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tistics. "We look at our graduation statistics with great pride," Allen said. CHAD's passing grade is five points higher than traditional local public high schools. Twenty-three of the graduates are headed for higher education. This year the dean of the College of Arts and Architecture at the Pennsylvania State University will provide a scholarship to one of the students and officials from the Rhode Island School of Design and Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., will speak with the students. The school has helped its other graduates by placing them with architects or in programs like City Year or the Job Corps. Others will join the armed forces.

"High-poverty does not mean low-performing," Allen said. "CHAD is a school of high expectations."

### **Ties to the architecture/design community**

CHAD was born of the ideals of several members of AIA Philadelphia, and continues to enjoy the financial and program support of the city's architectural and design communities. The General Building Contractors Association and more 135 organizations, including more than 41 AIA chapters are founding contributors of the school. It has also earned the endorsement of the Industrial Designer Society of America and the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

It was "detrimental to the profession not to have an element of diversity," said George Manos, AIA, secretary of CHAD's Board of Trustees and one of the school's planners and earliest champions. "This is a long term prospect," Manos said. The school is trying to "plant a seed in a high school student's mind." These are the people that "won't appear in the profession for seven, eight, or nine years," he continued.

The school is about one block from Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, and students take advantage of the opportunities the Philadelphia architectural community has to offer. Students are, variously, conducting a two-year architectural study of the Kimmel Regional Performing Arts Center design

and construction process, participating in the University of Pennsylvania "Innovative Renovation" course under a full scholarship, and taking part in Pennsylvania Horticultural Society "Staging Committee" of the Philadelphia Flower Show, among other endeavors.

The school, for its part, is working to make sure that its students get the appropriate training. Its coursework is designed to make students more aware of community planning, development, and sustainable design. While students learn "old-fashioned drafting" first, they are also exposed to programs including PhotoShop, Bentley MicroStation, and Design 2000, a program similar to AutoCAD.

Manos said the school owes a lot to the architectural community and AIA-member firms. Allen agrees and is confident that this support can and will continue. "Money will follow a good idea," she hopefully concluded.



### **Building Funds**

Allen is working to ensure that lots of money will follow. "Fundraising is an essential part of the school's efforts," said Richard Bartholomew, FAIA, past president of AIA Philadelphia and one of the architects who wrote the original plan for the charter school. He is also an officer on CHAD's Board of Trustees. The

school's budget is \$2.5 million a year. As a charter school, CHAD receives about \$5,580 in funding per pupil from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. However, it costs at least about \$1,000 per pupil more than that to properly educate a student, Allen said.

The fundraising goal for general operating costs is \$225,000, Allen said, which is the difference between the funding CHAD receives from the commonwealth and their expenses. In addition to that, the school seeks another \$300,000 to create a physics, chemistry, and biology laboratory; hire a curriculum development director; address other program needs; and pay off the original \$650,000 low-interest start-up loan it used to secure and renovate the 26,000-square-foot facility.

Allen's fundraising efforts have met with success. One recent

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donor was so impressed she and her husband quadrupled their donation after touring the school. Allen hopes more individuals and institutions will agree to sponsor a student by donating the extra \$1,000 above the per-pupil allotment from the commonwealth, equipment, or in-kind contributions such as helping the group write grants. She also hopes to gain much more financial support from the AIA national, state, and local components.

### **The past and the future**

"Every aspect of this place is a work in progress," Bartholomew said. "We're very happy at how normal we've become."

He said a year ago this time it was a different story. He called the past 12 months a "year of survival and stabilization." He continued, "Now we are really starting to develop a presence in the city."

Indeed, the school faced many challenges when it opened two years ago. Terrible unrest at the school prompted administrators to close the school and reorganize. It opened three weeks later with a new principal, new teachers, fewer students, and a new discipline code. It was this reorganization and its commitment to helping minority students become aware of the existence of careers in architecture and design, officials say, that put CHAD on the path to its current success.

Now the school is recruiting additional teachers, hiring a new assistant principal, and reaching full enrollment. Administrators are also improving the physical environment, networking computers, and has added a computer instructor. They are also implementing Terra Nova tests, which are thought to be better assessments for visual learners.

Most of all, organizers and administrators hope that their efforts will provide an excellent education for the young people of Philadelphia and eventually effect an increase in the number of registered minority architects in America. "Our intention is to create a school that other AIA chapters can emulate," Allen said.

For more information about the school or to donate online, visit [www.chadphila.org](http://www.chadphila.org), call Barbara Chandler Allen at 215-351-2900, x 2245, or email [SPRINGRZ@aol.com](mailto:SPRINGRZ@aol.com) 