In the midst of Hartford’s poverty, in walks Aristotle

By MARY OTTO
Courant Staff Writer

There is an automotive shop on Edwards Street where those fancy alloy wheels hang in the icy sunlight, glinting cold and gold.

Just down the street there is Thomas J. Quirk Middle School where the subject is happiness and whether money can buy it. Aristotle is speaking, over the distance of two millennia, to a seventh-grade class.

Happiness comes from having what we need. But what do we think we need and what do we actually need, wonders Aristotle, through his intermediary, public school teacher Lee Callahan. And why?

Today, in the city of Hartford, where poverty, drugs and joblessness lurk outside the schoolyard, his students, part of the school system’s classical magnet program, are learning how to parse out desire.

"Can we be happy with just bodily goods?" asks Callahan, who has a philosopher’s short, trim beard and wears amusing ties, and on weekends plays jazz piano in a nightclub.

A few kids suggest they might want more than just bodily goods — maybe safety, honor. One boy says education.

Then Jamal Walker asserts that school is not essential to happiness.

"You don’t need an education! You could live off your parents or sell drugs."

"Let’s say," says Callahan, "as a drug dealer you could take care of your bodily needs. Have all the food you need. A nice home. A nice car. Nice clothes. The question is: Would you live well?"

A chorus of "yes," "yes," "yes."

Somebody adds: "Maybe not a long life."

It’s called a magnet program because it draws kids from all over the city.

It begins here at Quirk, a school on the cusp of two struggling neighborhoods, Asylum Hill and Clay Arsenal. It continues on the other side of Asylum Hill, at Hartford Public High School.

The program has 300 students, ranging from seventh through the 12th grades, studying Latin and logic, philosophy and mathematics, science and rhetoric.

The arrangement is unique in Connecticut’s public school system, state officials say.

"It’s probably unique in the country, in terms of the sustained record of accomplishments of students and faculty," says Howard Zelderman, a professor at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Md., who has worked with a handful of similar programs around the nation. It was more than a decade ago that Zelderman helped develop the Hartford program’s curriculum, together with educators from Trinity College and the public school system.

The program, with its Socratic dialogues, its theorems and syllogisms, serves as an antidote for the tough world outside, says Bob Keefe, coordinator.

"It’s law and order, it’s structure. It’s tradition. These are all things that are needed in the city very badly."

There is room for less than half the kids who apply.

The work is demanding.

It’s an example of a highly academic program working in the inner city for students who might otherwise get passed over. It’s not an honors program, but most classical magnet students go on to college.

Trinity College continues to take an active role in the program, counseling high school juniors and seniors, providing lectures and acquainting them with college life.

The rigors of the program attract city youngsters and hold them.

"I’m no making excuses for black kids and saying they’ve got hidden intelligence," says Callahan. "I’m doing my best to help them to compete."

An eighth-grade class has read an article on animal testing. In the Socratic tradition, the class is mastering the etiquette of intellectual exchange. Yet the ideas are flying, thick and fast — animals have to suffer to save human lives. But aren’t people animals, too? What is the difference between one kind of suffering and another?

What sets humans apart from other animals? Their ability for selfless sacrifice? Their ability to think and reason?

"Animals think," says Shelly McDermott, "but who knows what they think about? We don’t know how their minds work."

"That’s instinct, man," says Milo Sheff. "Like birds don’t think when to go south."

"Somebody points out that animals eat their young. That makes them inferior to people, who love and protect their young."

Class is over, but some kids are still arguing as they gather up their books.

"All humans don’t love their young," says Monique Jemison.

"And they don’t protect them, either."

Diverse backgrounds
Today, the racial makeup of the city school system as a whole — 49 percent Hispanic, 42 percent black and 7 percent white.

"It's a multicultural city," says Kremer.

One of the white students is Josh LaPorte, an eighth-grader who lives on a tree-lined street, along with some of his neighbors from the city's affluent West End. He attended Noah Webster School, a thoroughly integrated West End elementary school, and has adjusted well to life at Quirk, says his mother, Mary LaPorte, an administrator at Trinity College.

"It's a school within a school," she said. "You buy it into. You choose it. It's different from a lot of other things in the Hartford school system.

"Josh LaPorte's eighth-grade colleague, Milo Sheff, is black and is also the star plaintiff in the Sheff vs. O'Neill desegregation lawsuit against the state.

Civil rights groups filed the suit in 1989 on behalf of Sheff and 18 other Hartford area children, charging that racial and economic segregation at Hartford's public schools denies children an adequate education and violates the state constitution. Here in the richest state in the nation, they say Hartford's schools are collapsing under the weight of poverty.

"The suit goes to the heart of the ILS of the nation's public schools.

Lawyers at the trial have cited statistics showing how the schools come up short in everything from toilet paper and library books to test scores and college-bound students. The suit is asking for a regional desegregation plan that would link Hartford's schools with mostly white schools in 21 nearby suburbs.

"Callahan says his experience at Quirk makes him wonder if such a plan could ever work.

"Parents who are not racists don't want to take the risk," he says. "It's not the school itself, but the neighborhood. They don't want to send their kids to a place that is obviously unequal."

"Kremer says that a program as attractive as a classical magnet program might succeed, if expanded to draw students from suburban towns. "It'd be doable," he says. "If you need parents who are more informed, I think it would work."

Mary LaPorte says she feels her child is safe going to Quirk. So does some of her West End neighbors, who have chosen the classical magnet program over private school. Maybe some people are still afraid of the unknown, she says, but adds, "I think the perception is a lot different from the reality.

Making comparisons

In an eighth-grade logic class, Jacqueline Medina, 14, sits right up under the blackboard, looking up at the writing on the blackboard as if she is drinking in light from the sky.

She's got 95% on yesterday's test. She is wearing purple and purple rossets in her hair, and is small and quick and graceful like a gymnast when she takes her turn in logic class, moving through the terms and propositions and syllogisms.

She comes from Frog Hollow, the largely Puerto Rican section of Hartford.

Her mother is a nurse's aide and her father, she says, is a mail clerk who wants to go back to college and become an accountant, turn in logic class, moving through the terms and propositions and syllogisms.

"They didn't quite make it," says Jacqueline. "They want me to be successful."

"Kids drop out from classical magnet. They get pregnant. But it seems like fewer do than in the normal course of study, says Keefe.

About 80 percent of the graduating classical magnet students go on to college, as compared with about 60 percent of graduating seniors district-wide.

But it's really not fair to compare, says Keefe. Many of these magnet kids do not come from advantaged backgrounds, but they have support and motivation at home that set them apart from many other students in the system.

The program calls for educating a child in this program than in the mainstream program. There are the costs of an occasional teacher training seminar and Keefe's salary, $70,000. He also coordinates the district's gifted and talented program.

Now school administrators are discussing the idea of expanding the program to serve three through sixth grade.

By the time students get to Pat Russell's senior philosophy class at Hartford Public High School, they have acquired polish and sophistication.

Despite the academic setting, there is a world of urgency to the debates here at this school that shares the block with Harriet Beecher Stowe's Victorian home and stands a block away from one of the most troubled and drug-ridden enclaves in the city.

The kids are still pondering the same failure at those issues they used in seventh grade. Still pondering the nature of humanity, civilization. But the level of the discourse has evolved.

Today they are reading from Thomas Hobbes' "Leviathan." "At night we lock our homes and when we walk the streets we are constantly on guard." A discussion about power, fear and control quickly evolves into an analysis of the plight of the modern son of the ghetto.

"But there is a distance in the voices of the students, as if they were members of a Greek chorus, commenting on the dilemma of modern man.

"Says Keith Little, "City life has corrupted him."

"Says Prettow Harris, "but that doesn't necessarily make him violent.

"Adds Darnell Jenkins, "That's like saying if you are a kid from the projects, you are going to get into drugs and die by the time you are 18."

Questions, answers

"Inside the tiny, stark classical magnet office at Quirk, members of the city's teachers of astronomy, rhetoric and math — are walking around and around a round table.

"Heads bowed, collating pages for a poetry lesson, they stoop rhythmically, as if engaged in some ancient harvest rite.

"This is a tradition," explains C-