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

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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 real 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 Zeiderman, 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 Zeiderman helped develop the Hartford program's curriculum, together with educators from Trinity College and the public

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.

But 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 not making excuses for black kids and saying they've got hidden intelligence," says Callahan. "I'm doing my best to help them to compete."



ONE OF AN OCCASIONAL SERIES

Aristotle

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

The Hartford school system created its magnet program in 1981, with a federal grant and a plan to desegregate city schools.

In the early years, there was also foreign language and international studies component to the magnet program — set up to draw students from suburban towns. That experiment lasted only three years, say guidance counselor Robert Kremer. There just wasn't enough interest, I says.

There were also some racial problems at bus stops, recalls Callahan with white kids' getting hassled.

Yet the intracity component of the magnet program, the classical studies part that was established as way of bringing together students from Hartford's diverse neighborhoods, has survived and remains popular.

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

"It's as multicultural as the city," says Kremer.

One of the few white students is Josh LaPorte, an eighth-grader who comes from 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.

Though the neighborhood where Quirk is located is very different from the one where the LaPortes live, the classical magnet program itself is a haven with a decided "sense of comfort and control," says Mary LaPorte.

"There is very active parent involvement," she adds. Last year, when illness and personnel shifts caused complications, parents worked with administrators to resolve the problems.

"It's a school within a school," she said. "You buy into it. 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 in 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 ills 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 unsafe."

But Kremer says that a program as attractive as classical magnet might succeed, if expanded to draw students from suburban towns.

"I think it's doable," he says. "If you get the parent who is more informed, I think it could work."

Mary LaPorte says she feels her child is safe going to Quirk. So do 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 got 105 on yesterday's test. She is wearing pink and purple rosettes 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.

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

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 districtwide.

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.

to educate 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 the first through sixth grades.

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 still a worldly 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 tattered texts 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 houses 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 Hite, "City life has corrupted him."

Says Pretlow 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 faculty — teachers of astronomy, rhetoric and math — are walking around and around a round table.

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

"This is a tradition," explains Cal-

lahan. "It wards off the evil spirits."

With his seventh-grade philosophy class, Callahan is persistent.

"Can you lead a life that is truly happy as a drug dealer?"

Marlon Daley says no.

"My father was a successful drug dealer and someone was paid to kill him off. I don't call that happiness."

Says Callahan, "Marlon is saying to be happy, you need peace."

But Jamal Walker leaves the class unconvinced.

A drug dealer would have the money to buy all the comforts that matter. Even other people.

"Buy you a prostitute," he says. "Money talks." He hangs his head and admits he is doing badly in school.

He has been in trouble for cursing at a teacher and for fighting.

His mother has warned him about failing.

But still, instead of reading his two chapters of "Julius Caesar," he played Sega.

In school, it is very hard to concentrate.

"These girls, they are tempting me," he says.

"I hate being a seventh-grader."

Marlon Daley doesn't.

Several years ago, his father, George Clement, was stabbed to death in his sleep in Philadelphia.

To Marlon, it seemed like a wasted life.

He believes his own life will be much different.

He was hoping against hope to be accepted. The program has changed him already. Marlon feels himself leaving his crowd, having less and less in common with the guys he used to hang out with, on the corner of Magnolia and Albany.

"I thought it was one in a million for me to get in the program. Everybody wanted to get in."

That he is in the classical magnet program proves that he has been singled out. School officials have chosen him for something very fine and special.

"It's like they are trying to grow a special crop," he says. "Like growing better roses."