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A charter network bucking the status quo in a brand new way

By TRACY DELL'ANGELA | May 4, 2016

Match Beyond has a bodacious goal: to invent a college program that wipes out undergraduate debt and cures poverty.

Not the rarefied college designed for that by-the-bootstraps, defy-the-odds high school senior trotted out for interviews and inspirational speeches when visitors come to high-poverty schools looking for their scholarship success stories.

Nope, this is something that could be far more authentic and a lot more pragmatic. This is a program for college dropouts, single parents and marginally employed adults whose lives and limited resources make a traditional college experience an expensive gamble.

The idea behind Match Beyond is to offer non-traditional students who have all but given up on college a real shot at a middle-class job, and they do this in four ways: they offer them a low-cost and flexible online college curriculum that results in an accredited Associate's or Bachelor's degree; they support them with full-time academic and life coaches who keep them motivated, resolve everyday hurdles with childcare and time management; give them a study space with free food and computers; and ultimately help them with employment support and coaching.

I've been working for and around educational programs for almost two decades now, and as much as I've seen some impressive and inspirational programs, I haven't seen anything quite this surprisingly fresh in a while.

To be honest, when I visited Match this week as part of a delegation from the Education Writers Association conference in Boston, I expected to see a well-choreographed tour of a high-performing charter school (what we used to call the classic "dog-and-pony show" when I was a newspaper reporter), and I picked this site visit because I wanted to visit the network that (in full disclosure) hired my soon-to-graduate daughter as a tutor starting this August.

What I wasn't expecting to see is a network that could have replicated its charter model many times over—but intentionally chose not to. Instead, Match is tackling some of the most intractable and universal problems in education today:

- How do we make college affordable, especially for our most economically vulnerable students?

- How do we improve our nation’s dismal college completion rates, notably for low-income students, only 59 percent of whom enter college and only 12 percent of whom earn a degree?
- How do we create a rigorous teacher-training program that prepares certified rookies to succeed in some of the most demanding urban classrooms in America—one that gracefully exits candidates who aren’t cut out for teaching or able to demonstrate effective practice during an intensive two-year residency program?
- How do we make it easier for K-12 teachers nationwide to share Common Core-inspired lesson plans, classroom management techniques, and best practices around tutoring and coaching?

With the exception of Match’s charter school, which started 15 years ago and now serves 1,250 students in grades pre-K through 12 on four campuses, most of these new Match programs are too new to have reliable data proving their success. Match Beyond started as a small pilot in 2013 and officially launched in 2015 after officially partnering with Southern New Hampshire University’s College for America, with 125 students enrolled and at various states of securing jobs and completing their degree (which, at \$5,000-a-year tuition, is completely covered by a Pell Grant).

Match’s Teacher Residency program only became an official master’s-degree-granting graduate program in 2012, with its practices and results under rigorous study by Harvard University economists. Match Export, designed to freely share best-practice teaching techniques online, is also in its infancy.

So yeah, the jury is still out on these intriguing but still largely untested innovations. And they will doubtless face the knee-jerk critics willing to attack anything coming out of this initiative — because it challenges the status quo, because rich people are investing in it, and mostly because Match has the word “charter” attached to it.

That’s a shame, because Match is expanding in ways that defy the typical charter narrative espoused by the anti-reform sector. If charter operators were indeed only interested in lining their pockets, privatizing education, undermining unions, and saying “poverty doesn’t matter,” then Match’s safest and savviest path would be rapid expansion of their charter schools, for which they receive an enviable \$17,000-plus per pupil.

Instead, they are turning those anti-charter narratives on their head—with models that are now losing money (and will at best break-even), that serve traditional and charter models alike, and that embrace the wraparound services that teachers unions have long argued are crucial in meeting the needs of low-income students.

For all those reasons, I hope the anti-reformers can suspend judgment and find something here to support. Because the one thing we can’t keep doing is the same thing we keep doing, over and over.