NORTH CAROLINA COALITION FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

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A Charlotte Charter School Defied the Odds. Here's How.

Charlotte, NC – As much as gum on the sidewalk and pencil shavings on the floor, the all-staff email from Mr. Benson signals the kids are back in school: *If you have any old ties lying around, please bring them in next week. It doesn't matter if they're from the '80s.*

Kareem Benson, a **boisterous and energetic** teacher at Sugar Creek Charter School in Charlotte, is in charge of character education. And every year, he teaches his students how to tie a tie.

"No, that instruction isn't for higher schoolers," Sugar Creek Superintendent Celeste Sundo said in a recent interview. "He teaches tie-tying to kids in second grade. Then he talks about why people wear ties, what they symbolize. It's about teaching the unwritten rules. Schools are a middle class institution. But our students typically aren't from middle class families. So how do we bridge that gap?"

Sugar Creek sits in one of the lowest-income sections of Charlotte, and nearly every student comes from an **economically disadvantaged** home. Of the 1,750 K-12 students, five are white. (The public elementary school around the corner has eight white students.)

*Mr. Benson teaching character education | **PBS Charlotte***

Sugar Creek's mission is to eradicate generational poverty in the lives of its students through rigorous education. It's steeped in a decades-long school culture that prizes pragmatic life-skill development and spurns excuses.

'If the students didn't learn, we didn't teach'

Cheryl Turner helped found Sugar Creek in 1999, and she led the school until her retirement last year.

"The problem is that everybody is quick to blame the children. They say they have a hard life, don't have stable families, they come from poverty. Supposedly, all these things make it impossible for them to learn," Turner said in a 2024 **interview**. "Our expectation is you will learn. And our theory is, if the students didn't learn, we didn't teach."

The results speak for themselves. Sugar Creek's Black and Hispanic students outperform their Charlotte peers in math, reading, and English, some years by double digits. The school has met or exceeded academic growth benchmarks in nine of the past 10 years.

But those results are all downstream of the culture Sugar Creek imparts in both faculty and students. Consistently effective school-wide instruction, like any team sport, requires a motivated staff that's fully bought-in to the school's strategy, and students who understand and respect what the school is trying to do.

NC Charter School Teacher of the Year Ryan Henderson, from Sugar Creek, poses with former Superintendent of Public Instruction Catherine Truitt

The faculty culture-building begins on day one: All new Sugar Creek staff participate in an immersion exercise. New teachers are given a mock scenario (such as a single mom who earns $30,000 per year) along with a budget and a task – buy food for a family of five for a week, for example. The teachers are then put on a bus to complete the task in areas of Charlotte where students live.

The purpose is to show, not just tell, teachers what the families they serve experience every day, and how it might have been different from their own experience growing up. Sugar Creek pairs that immersion training with in-depth analysis of understanding poverty, grounded in a framework created by **Dr. Ruby Payne.** Every single staff member is paired with a "coach" for support and continued growth.

Breaking generational poverty

"For students to break the cycle of generational poverty, we need to teach much more than academic preparation," Superintendent Sundo said. "We need to focus on preparation for life and careers, and that includes the 'hidden rules' of operating in environments different from where they grew up."

Elementary and middle school students take a character education class every year that goes far beyond virtues like 'how to be kind.' The students learn how to enter and exit a conversation, how to ask for help with a professional assignment, and how to operate in a work setting. In high school, the development curriculum gets even more intensive.

The net result, Superintendent Sundo says, is that every student graduates Sugar Creek with a plan that contemplates either college admission or a career pathway, along with the life skills – the basic training – to execute that plan.

"We've had graduates come back to us and say, 'I was set up to focus on actually being in college, instead of having to sink or swim in an unfamiliar environment,'" Superintendent Sundo said. "That's what we're trying to accomplish."

Sugar Creek's work extends to the families they serve, too. The school offers parents monthly seminars on finance, stress, health care, and more. A mobile dental clinic offers oral health services to students for free. And the school has a room with basic amenities for families experiencing extreme challenges, including clothes, a washer/dryer, job applications, and a food pantry.

A formula for others to learn from

Sugar Creek is the oldest charter school in Charlotte. It took leaders years to hone a successful formula. But that's the purpose of charter schools: to experiment, fail, adjust, and try again until something works.

There will be some years when Sugar Creek doesn't meet its own expectations. Those will be periods of more experimentation and growth. But the school has built a strong record over the past decade, with academic outcomes that consistently exceed the district as a whole.

That's the promise charter schools were built on: the freedom to test ideas that traditional public schools, bound by broader bureaucracies and more rigid structures, often can't easily pilot on their own.

Other schools, charter and traditional alike, don't need to adopt Sugar Creek's culture wholesale to benefit from studying it. Not every school needs to teach second-graders how to tie a tie. At their best, charter schools like Sugar Creek function less as an alternative to public education and more as its research and development arm – proving out ideas that, once validated, belong to every school willing to learn from them.

We asked Superintendent Sundo if there's a student who comes to mind who personifies Sugar Creek's success. Here's what she said:

"Our salutatorian last year came to us in elementary school. She was born and raised in Africa and came in not even knowing how school works.

"We provided language services, support in academics and reading, and slowly over the years she worked her way up. She took what we taught her in character education – resilience, respect, planning – and now has a full ride to St. Louis University.

"Seeing kids I taught in elementary school, seeing them leave here as adults who have skills, soft skills, a plan – that's why we do this."

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