

FOSTER CARE, FOSTER CARE AND EDUCATION

December 5, 2017 — 9:37am

# A private school just for foster children

Most kids arrive ‘mad at the world,’ the CEO says. ‘They want to know: Why are people not taking care of me?’

by Dale Mezzacappa

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Darryl Murphy

Jullion Kelsey credits C.B. Community School for keeping him off the streets.

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Jullion Kelsey has gone through a lot.

The tall, strapping 18-year-old from South Philadelphia grew up with his grandmother as his primary caregiver. He had nobody else – his mom lived in Georgia “and I couldn’t live with her.”

His grandmother made an effort. She sent him to a charter school through 8th grade, and for high school, she insisted that he enroll in a cyber school, doing his schoolwork and attending classes by computer from home. She reasoned that he would “stay out of the mix, stay out of trouble.”

But he didn’t stay out of trouble, and his education effectively came to a halt in that unsupervised environment. Then his grandmother died, and he was on his own, bouncing “from [foster] placement to placement.”

Kelsey wound up at a group home upstate, where things didn’t go well. By his own description, he was angry and acting out. He moved to an all-boys group home in Philadelphia, “but there was a lot going on, and they kicked me out of there.” Finally, he was able to move in with a relative in Southwest Philadelphia.

For the last several months, he has been taking the bus and trolley every day to C.B. Community School in Roxborough, which was established to educate foster children like him and set them on a course to a stable future.

The trip takes an hour and 15 minutes each way, but it’s worth it to Kelsey.

“Without this school, I would be on the streets,” he said. “I would’ve probably dropped out.”

C.B. Community, located on the second floor of a synagogue housed in what used to be a textile mill, rose from the ashes of Arise Charter School, established in 2009 as the first charter school in the country with a mission to educate foster children.

It closed in 2015 after becoming mired in financial and management problems as it struggled to serve one of the neediest populations in Philadelphia. To obtain its charter, the founders agreed to meet traditional benchmarks of success – reading and math proficiency on standardized tests and high graduation rates. These goals proved unrealistic and unattainable for a population whose academic progress, on average, had stalled around the 5th grade as they coped with their turbulent lives.

Traditional schools have not been able to do well by these young people either. The most recent study by the Philadelphia Youth Network said that while the graduation rate was rising for students overall, it was not rising for young people in foster care. A 2006 report had put that rate at 30 percent – less than half of what it now is for Philadelphia students as a whole.

Roberta Trombetta, who was acting CEO of Arise during its final two years, raised money to convert the charter to a private school and maintain continuity for its 90-plus students. Arise was in West Oak Lane; the new C.B. Community School opened in Roxborough. This fall, it had 67 students, most between ages 15 and 20.

Many of them, Trombetta said, come “mad at the world.”

Often, they are traumatized, and some have major health issues, such as diabetes and asthma.

Their academic records are all over the place, and reconstructing the paperwork is arduous and time-consuming. In many cases, nobody had bothered before to keep track of how many credits they had earned toward graduation.

Nor had anyone ever assessed what they had actually learned and what skills they had.

“This school is really about a triage,” said Trombetta, the school’s president and CEO. “We do diagnostic assessments, gather up history, transcripts, get them all in one place.

“The kids are so tired of ‘telling my story.’ They want to know: ‘Why are people not taking care of me? Why am I learning here for the first time that I’m not a 12th-grader?’”

C.B. stands for “competency-based,” meaning that students are evaluated and learn skills necessary for career and college readiness. Based on what they know and can do and on how many high school credits they’ve earned, they are put on a realistic path, called Journey to Graduation.

“We bought into the model of competency-based education,” said Trombetta, describing an academic structure similar to that followed by some of the District’s innovative schools, including Building 21. Students are assigned tasks, ranging from writing a persuasive essay to completing and understanding a lab experiment, and evaluated on how well they can do them. There are no letter grades; instead, students are rated on a scale that includes “highly competent,” “competent,” and “not yet.”

“Community” is part of the school’s name to signify that the students get lots of personal attention from the staff and from personnel in more than 20 partner agencies and organizations. The school employs a full-time nurse and a full-time social worker. It houses a

satellite outpatient clinic of NHS, a provider of education and human services, staffed by a full-time therapist. A psychiatrist visits twice a month.

Artists from the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia provide art instruction.

Director of Social Services Sara Schwartz sees anywhere from five to 15 students every morning. They troop into her office, which is right inside the school's entrance, just to talk.

A family member died. They have a housing issue. They need child care.

Trombetta said, "We have 17 moms here. A lot of things happen outside of school that comes in here."

Many students are referred for truancy.

Schwartz said, "A lot of kids were going to neighborhood schools that couldn't serve their needs."

At C.B. Community, however, the daily attendance rate is 80 to 90 percent.

"This is about re-engaging with school," Schwartz said. "They've been disengaged. They're coming back at age 17 or 18 after being out of school for a half a year, or a year-and-a-half, or two years. But in this building, people show up. C.B. really focuses on addressing holistically all of the issues facing these young people, so that there's space freed up for kids to really be able to engage academically in a way that's really meaningful."

Karen Ayres, the science teacher, took a break from a class where five students were studying the "chemistry of life."

"We teach from our hearts and try to reach their hearts," said Ayres. "We meet their social and emotional needs. We have social workers, a program for young mothers, a work program. ... These are individuals. Not just academic creatures. That's what brings success, especially with children with a lot of needs."

Ayres points out that "just 30 percent of kids in care graduate from high school. That's not where we want to be. This school is only part of the solution."



C.B. Community School is located at Mishkan Shalom Synagogue, whose name that means “sanctuary of peace.”

## Woefully behind

Some of the students, like Kelsey, come from residential centers, generally placed there by Family Court judges. Many of those centers have schools attached, called “on-ground” schools, that advocates say are only minimally regulated for academic quality.

“What the system has not done well is investigate what kind of education takes place in residential centers,” Trombetta said.

But whether they have attended these residential centers or not, many of these students have fallen woefully behind. A wall poster of an oval racetrack in the hall tells the story.

The racetrack has four lanes, two for reading and two for math. The oval is divided into four equal segments, each representing a grade range: K-3, 3-6, 6-9, and 10-12. Colored bits of paper with four-digit numbers, but no names, show progress.

Most of the bits of paper are clustered around the 2nd- to 5th-grade area.

Trombetta said some students make major leaps after just a few months – they just hadn't taken assessment tests seriously before. For others, it's harder to make progress.

Students are assessed, through conversation and a look at their academic records, to see whether they are “graduation-eligible.” That means not just that they are within striking distance of the 23.5-credit graduation requirement, but that they “have the skill level, have demonstrated competency in classes that we can see on paper.”

Of those who meet those criteria in any given year, “the first year we graduated 92 percent of them and the second year 100 percent,” Trombetta said. Since the school in this incarnation is only two years old, it is too early for long-term measures of success.

“The real story here is this school being one opportunity on a continuum of schools, not a be-all-and-end-all, but a choice.”

### **‘They need a place’**

Trombetta is an attorney who has worked for the city's Department of Human Services and for Carson Valley Children's Aid. To keep C.B. Community open as a private school, she raises \$1.6 million a year. One-third of that amount comes from private individuals and another third from the state's Education Opportunity Tax Credit and Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit programs, which award scholarships to students to attend private schools and award funds to educational programs that help marginalized populations, she said.

The rest of the budget comes from foundations and money from a DHS fund designed to move foster children to independence. Most of the budget goes to salaries, she said.

She has another chart on her wall, one that compares the cost of caring for dependent children in institutional settings, where their education is almost always wanting, to the cost of living in foster homes and attending a day program like C.B. Community.

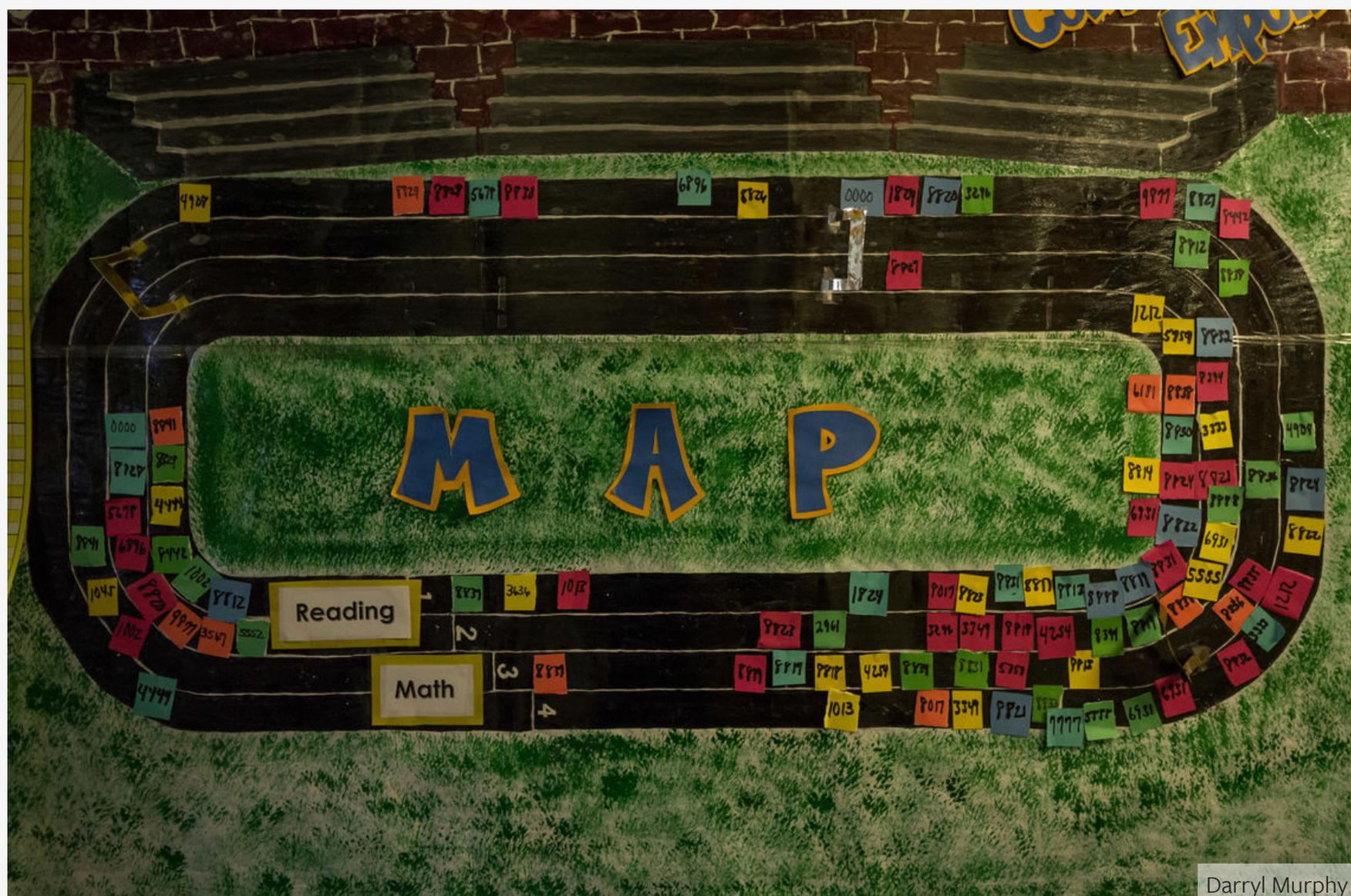
Even when programs are very small, as C.B. Community is, the savings run into the millions, the chart shows.

But most important, “kids should not be in institutions,” Trombetta said. “They need a place in Philadelphia that wraps around them with all the support services. All kids want to be in a

regular high school.”

Now that C.B. Community is established, its board considered re-applying for a charter, which would have made it eligible for more public funds. But it rejected that option in favor of applying under the Office of New School Models to be recognized as an innovative school. Applications were due at the end of November. If accepted, C.B. Community would become a regular District school.

“I’d love to be in real partnership with the District in some way,” Trombetta said. “The ultimate for us would be for the District to acknowledge that they haven’t been able to serve these kids in a way that allows them to graduate. Absorbing them through the C.B. Community model into the District would be a win-win for everybody.”



Darryl Murphy

A wall poster of an oval racetrack in the hall tells the story of students' academic standing. Most of the students are clustered in the 2nd to 5th-grade area.

## Kelsey's goal

Jullion Kelsey hopes to graduate by December 2018. “I’m trying to get all my credits. I’m

the little kid who said

currently a little behind,” he said.

The school turned him on to reading. When asked about his favorite book, he mentioned *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, by Brian Selznick. It’s about a young boy whose father died in a fire. Hugo was alone, and he “didn’t have nowhere to stay,” Kelsey said. “He was living in a tower clock. ... He built something. That book caught my attention.”

He still has his days of frustration. One fall day when he stormed off in anger, social studies teacher Steven Brown followed him outside.

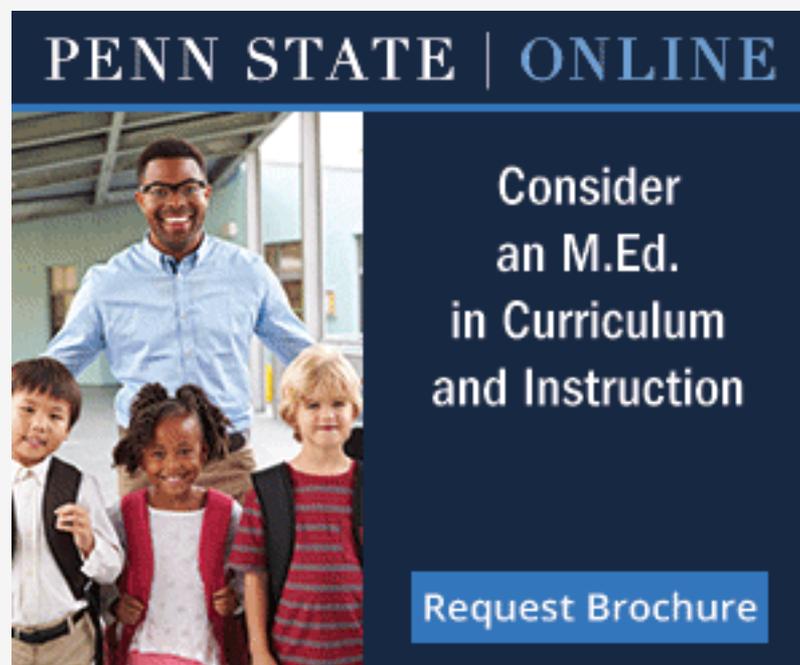
“Mr. Brown came out and talked to me, deep stuff I needed to hear. He said, ‘We really want you here.’ I felt that came from the heart, so I came back.”

Now Kelsey has a job at a restaurant on City Avenue, is working on getting his own apartment, and aspires to get a commercial driver’s license and become a truck driver.

“This school is really helping me,” he said. “We’re like a family here. We all stick together.”

## **Read the stories of four students and their journeys to C.B. Community School.**

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Dale is a contributing editor at the Notebook. She has reported on education since 1986, most of that time with The Philadelphia Inquirer.

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