

Forbes

CREATIVE GIVING *Country Day In Harlem*

For as little as \$400 a year Harlem Academy offers city kids a very intense education.

By Alex Davidson

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Zina Mingo has lived in Harlem for all her 40 years and now teaches in a Harlem public school. But committed as she is to the community, she wasn't willing to subject her son, Devon, now 8, to the educational system she works for. "Most of the schools in Harlem are failing schools, and that's just not an option to me," she says.

Instead, Mingo is pinning her hopes for Devon on Harlem Academy, a four-year-old not-for-profit school just north of Central Park. With its small classes, focus on rigorous academics, required parental involvement and long school day, the school gets results; 90% of third graders score above the national median in reading and math. Students arrive at 7:30, begin sports at 3:45 and leave at 5 or 6, depending on whether they want homework help after sports. For that, parents pay as little as \$400 a year and as much as \$16,000, depending on income.

Harlem Academy is the passion of headmaster Vincent Dotoli, 39, whose lawyer father and CPA mother could afford to buy him a private school education at Far Hills Country Day in New Jersey. After college he taught in rural Maine and Rhode Island and then for four years at Buckingham

Browne & Nichols, a well-endowed 125-year-old private school in Cambridge, Mass. But he didn't feel his efforts there made much of a difference. "Those students were going to be successful whether I was there or not," he says.

So in 2001 Dotoli enrolled at Columbia University to earn a master's in education administration. His thesis was on a model for a private urban school that could skirt the public school bureaucracy dragging down big city schools, while involving parents, who are too often treated as a nuisance in those same schools. Edmund W. Gordon, director of Columbia's Institute for Urban & Minority Education, joined Dotoli in meeting with prospective students and parents. Harlem Academy opened in September 2004 with 12 first graders in one room rented from an arts group. In 2005 it moved to bigger quarters and now has 74 first-through-fifth graders.

The two men have attracted substantial business support. Mark Johnston, president of private outdoor advertising company Van Wagner Communications, and John Schmidlin, former chief technology officer and managing director at JPMorgan Chase, sit on

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the school's board. The Goldman Sachs (nyse: GS - news - people) Foundation chipped in \$100,000 in 2004. With the current financial crisis, donations are now drying up. Dotoli says he'll cut back on renovations but won't retreat from plans to add a new grade next year or from a policy of admitting kids without regard to parents' ability to pay.

With an operating budget of \$1.2 million, Harlem spends \$16,200 per student, the same as the city spends, but well below the \$24,600 average for New York state private schools. Each class has two teachers and no more than 16 students. Parents must each work four hours a month, doing anything from stuffing envelopes to running new parent orientations. They are offered seminars on financial literacy and health and nutrition and are encouraged to interact with teachers. "I talk to teachers every day," says LeShan Gaulman, a social worker with two sons at the school.

In its long school day Harlem Academy is similar to the Knowledge Is Power Program, which runs 65 charter schools for

city kids. But Dotoli rejects what he calls Kipp's overemphasis on preparing for standardized tests. He can get away with such test heresy, since Harlem Academy is private, not a publicly funded charter school.

Applications for 2008-09 were up 90%, and only one in four was accepted. Perhaps students do well in part because only those with motivated parents get in? Dotoli concedes that point, but makes another: Students are no wealthier, on average, than others in Harlem, where 36% of families are below the poverty level. So Harlem Academy provides an opportunity for a private education that its students wouldn't have or at least would have to leave Harlem to get. There's only one similar school above 96th Street in New York City; it doesn't charge on a sliding scale and enrolls only middle schoolers.

Dotoli aims to expand Harlem Academy to 320 students and add three more grades. But he's careful not to make any grand claims for his little school. "I don't say this is the end-all solution to inner-city education."