

An educational alternative is winning students over

By CHARLES PROCTOR
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Ninth-grader Anabel Gonzalez was in danger of dropping out of school. And she didn't care.

Anabel preferred wandering Roosevelt High School with her friends to sitting in a classroom. She detested the Eastside school's run-down facilities and crowded classrooms, and she feared the girls she fought in the halls. Administrators wrote her up repeatedly and seized her skateboard.

Today, the 15-year-old freshman sometimes can't bring herself to leave school. She sits with about a dozen other students in a shiny new classroom. At her desk, she works on a sleek Macintosh computer. She eagerly attends math, music and kickboxing classes. Some days, her father doesn't pick her up until 8 p.m., and that's fine with her.

Anabel's outlook, and the attitudes of 25 other students like her, has been changed — at least for now — by Boyle Heights Technology Academy, an alternative high school a few minutes from downtown Los Angeles.

The school has small classes in a new \$10.9-million building with resources that would be the envy of some college prep academies. In partnership with the Boyle Heights Technology Youth Center, it serves students who are at risk of dropping out, who are truants or failing classes or have had run-ins with the law.

These are the teens "no one really wants to deal with," said Jimmy Valenzuela, director of the youth center, which houses the school. "People label them high risk, at risk, bad kids, gang kids, probation kids."

"But we don't. We look at them as youth."

The county-run school has a link to Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who is embroiled in a legal battle over his plans to take some control of the Los Angeles Unified School District. Valenzuela, an acquaintance of the mayor, and school officials credit Villaraigosa with securing \$7 million for the youth center when he was a member of the L.A. City Council and hundreds of thousands of dollars more when he became mayor.



BRYAN CHAN/Los Angeles Times

DRUMBEATS OF CHANGE: Musician Mark Schulman gives drums and words of encouragement to students at Boyle Heights Technology Academy.

And Villaraigosa is scheduled to head-

line an event Thursday night at the center that officials have likened to the school's and center's coming-out party. The band Ozomatli and members of the Black Eyed Peas also plan to attend.

Villaraigosa, teachers and administrators view the school as a model for others. They hail the Boyle Heights campus as an unprecedented confluence of education, technology and an opportunity for troubled teens.

The mayor "sees this as a school of best practices," said Ramon C. Cortines, Villaraigosa's top education advisor.

Every student at the school has a computer. Teachers deliver lessons via PowerPoint and upload lectures to the Web so students can replay them. In their free time, students can mix their own songs in the center's state-of-the-art recording studio or sketch pictures with animation software.

The school is housed above the youth center, which gives the Boyle Heights community access to classes and gives students a choice of many after-school programs, including Web design and

City Terrace home to arrive at school by 8. Anabel took a chance and enrolled.

And she hasn't looked back.

Like Anabel, Kenia Chavira, 16, was a habitual truant at Wilson High School in El Sereno. Kenia said she saw no reason to attend crowded classes in which students were disruptive.

When she heard about Boyle Heights Tech, "it made me feel like this was my opportunity to learn, to go to college, to be what I want to be," said Kenia, now a sophomore at the alternative school.

Kenia isn't sure what college she wants to attend. But she knows what she wants to be: a nurse, as her mother was.

Anabel harbors ambitions of going into criminal justice, maybe as a corrections officer. But she also casts a longing eye on a career in music.

The school so far houses one class each of ninth- and 10th-graders. The building is not finished. Caution tape dangles from a stairway, a few of the rooms sit vacant and an errant truck left a partly patched hole in one wall. Administrators plan to open an 11th-grade class next year and a 12th grade the year after that. Eventually, they hope to serve as many as 100 students.

The school screens applicants to make sure they either live in the Boyle Heights area or have shown a willingness to pursue their education, said Mamokhin, the principal. Administrators also accept recommendations from other high schools and probation officers.

The current students relish the opportunities few dreamed they would have.

Last Friday, for example, drummer Mark Schulman, who has played with Cher, Velvet Revolver and Pink, donated drums to all the students and taught them his personal technique for stress-management: beating a drum very loudly.

The students whooped and hammered their drums so hard that mini-sonic booms seemed to cut through the room. Wide smiles splashed across their faces.

"I'm really proud of all of you," said a beaming Schulman. "You've all shown initiative in coming back and being in this program."

The students responded with thunderous applause.

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