

Rocketship Lands in Milwaukee



JEM SULLIVAN

By Barbara Miner

Like most principals, Brittany Kinser is a cheerleader for her school. “I just want to make sure you’ll be positive,” she says when I visit the Rocketship charter school in Milwaukee.

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Looking younger than her thirty-seven years and with the physique of a long-distance runner, Kinser has a seemingly endless supply of energy and enthusiasm. It's hard not to like her. Following one of the school's axioms—Dress for Success—she is wearing a magenta pencil-skirt that nicely sets off her black sweater, tights, and four-inch stiletto heels. Her Dress for Success message is clear: I am competent and I am in charge.

At the same time, Kinser is nervous about my visit. It's understandable.

For almost a quarter century, I have criticized using public tax dollars to fund private voucher schools and privately run charter schools. Rocketship, an entrepreneurial network of charter schools based in the Silicon Valley, has become a national poster child for the privatization of public education. It is particularly known for its bare-bones curricular focus on standardized test scores in reading and math, its use of computer-based “learning labs” that cut down costs, and its promotion of the Rocketship brand—including a daily pep rally where students chant that they are “Rocketship Rocketeers.”

After visiting Rocketship Southside Community Prep, as Milwaukee's K4 through fifth-grade school is formally known, I could see why some people might react positive-

ly. Students were well behaved. Parents were welcome. The young teachers were energetic.

But as I left the school, I couldn't help thinking: Can young students dress their way to success? Or chant their way to academic achievement? Are computerized worksheets the answer to reducing the achievement gap?

Rocketship opened its Milwaukee school in 2013, serving overwhelmingly low-income, Latino students on the city's south side. The local chamber of commerce raised \$2.5 million in private contributions to help fund Rocketship's expansion to eight schools in Milwaukee by 2017.

Just inside the main entrance, there are banners from various universities hanging from the ceiling—part of the school's message that students should be thinking about college. At the students' eye level are Dress for Success posters featuring young children wearing the school uniform of khaki pants and a blue polo shirt with the Rocketship logo.

I'm not opposed to uniforms. I wore them throughout high school and appreciated that I didn't have to figure out every morning what to wear. But the nuns never told us that our uniforms were the key to success. The policy was based more on a Catholic school philosophy that worried about the sin of pride and

that discouraged too much attention to individual appearances.

At Rocketship, I couldn't quite figure out the laser-like focus on Dress for Success. They don't take it lightly. The school handbook notes that students who do not wear their uniform “may lose recess, lunch or other privileges.”

Is Dress for Success one of the main messages we should be drilling into four-year-olds? And why is it that the Rocketship uniform bears a disturbing resemblance to the uniforms worn by Best Buy and Kmart clerks?

Ultimately, however, I was more curious about the school's focus on chanting. It seems that Rocketship, along with Dress for Success, believes in Chant for Success. I got my first glimpse of this at the morning pep rally.

Rocketship Milwaukee is located in a one-floor, former industrial building. There is no library, no music or art room, no cafeteria or assembly hall. But there is a gym used for all-school gatherings.

Every morning before heading to class, the school's roughly 400 students sit on the gym floor in their assigned places. It is time for the Daily Launch.

“Good morning Rocketeers!” Kinser shouts to the students.

The students reply in unison.

“Good morning Rocketeers!” Kinser shouts a second time, making

sure she has the students' attention.

In addition to the Daily Launch, this Friday is also an awards ceremony—one of four or five during the year. Two students from each class will receive recognition for their math and reading achievement. As their names are called, the students silently come to the front, where they receive a certificate, and

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a medal is put around their neck, Olympics style.

When told to do so, the students in the audience clap for those awarded. I soon learn that Rocketeers have their own way of clapping. They say "ooh," clap once, and then perform a highly stylized motion that produces no sound—a dolphin-like flapping of arms. Then they say "aah," followed by another single clap and stylized motion. I'm confused, but the students know the drill. Learning the Rocketeer way to behave is clearly a significant part of the school culture.

The emphasis on behavior also includes rules on silently walking in the hallways. Rocketeers follow the lines painted on the floor, keep their heads slightly bowed, eyes downward, and clasp their hands in front of them.

The Daily Launch ends with the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by

the Rocketship chant. In case a student forgets the Rocketship chant, it is painted in large letters on the gym's wall. Kindergartners rely on rote memory.

The students begin their chant: "I am a Rocketship Rocketeer at home, at school, and in my community." The chant goes on for several more sentences, referring

to respect, responsibility, empathy, and "persistence in attaining excellence." Everyone chants in unison, even students who may not understand the words.

There is a noticeable crescendo as the chant reaches its end: "Together, we are all Rocketship Rocketeers!"

Silence then descends. The students slowly walk out in single file, class by class. Barely a sound is heard.

I am impressed with the students' behavior and ability to sit quietly. But at no point during the entire ceremony did any student address the gathering or say a single unscripted word. As I left the gym, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had been part of a motivational seminar for young children, some who barely knew how to tie their shoes.

Every principal knows there is one sure-fire way to guarantee success: Keep out the kids who might

drag you down.

For decades, many white parents and their schools relied on Jim Crow laws to help shape the local school. In the decades following desegregation and the *Brown* decision, new methods came into play. Transfer to a private school. Move to the suburbs. Institute admission tests. "Counsel out" English Language Learners, special education students, or those with behavioral problems.

And then there's transportation policy.

In the Milwaukee public schools, school buses are a fact of life. Poor families tend to move a lot, and the Milwaukee district tries to keep students in the same school, even if it means extra buses.

Rocketship does not provide transportation, and the school handbook makes clear that parents are responsible for getting their child to and from school, no exceptions. "Staying late at work, running into car problems, or getting stuck in traffic are not excuses for picking up a student late," the handbook says. Every Thursday, meanwhile, is a "minimum" day and school ends two hours early. In addition, parents/guardians must volunteer at least thirty hours at the school, and are required to attend school exhibition nights.

What if you are a single parent and your work schedule interferes with providing transportation or attending school events? Or you don't have a car? Or you are undocumented and you do not have a driver's license? As the saying goes,

you are SOL.

Put aside Rocketship's transportation policies, its chanting, and its Dress for Success culture. Forget that there's no library, guidance counselor, or social worker, and that there are fewer certified teachers than in comparable public schools. Does the strength of Rocketship's curriculum outweigh these concerns?

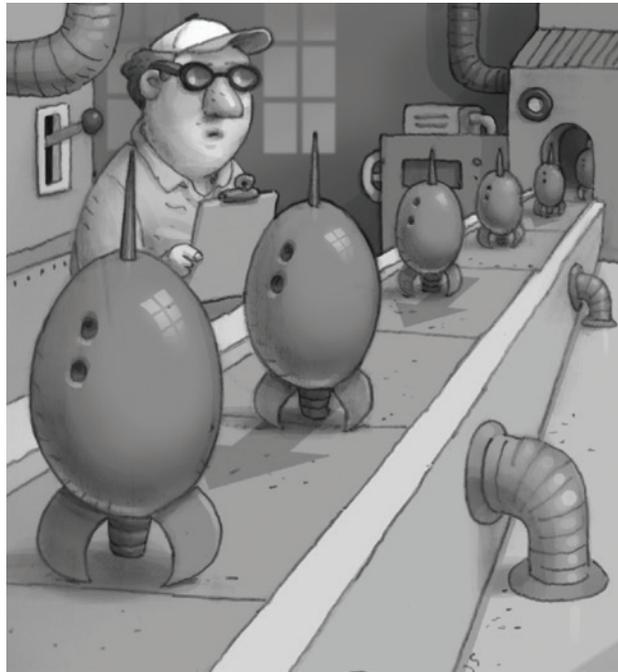
To find out, I visited Rocketship's computerized Learning Lab. These labs are central to Rocketship's "blended learning" model and to its claim to have found the holy grail of education—improving academic achievement while cutting costs. (John Danner, the firm's co-founder, once boasted that he wanted Rocketship to become the Model

T of schools, providing a mass-produced, cost-effective model of quality education in fifty cities by 2020. Like many Rocketship projections, this has been scaled back.)

Gordon Lafer, in an in-depth report this year for the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), notes that Rocketship's educational model rests on four strategies: "the replacement of teachers with computers for a significant portion of the day; a reliance on young and inexperienced teachers for the rest of the day; narrowing the curriculum to math and reading with little attention to other subjects; and even within these subjects, a relentless

focus on preparing students for standardized tests."

Kinser conducted my tour of the Learning Lab, which was a double-classroom with a partial divider in the front. The open back makes it possible for three Learning Lab



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monitors to keep track of two classrooms using the lab. The monitors are paid less than the teachers, and their main job is to keep the students on task.

While I was at the lab, a kindergarten class quietly walked in to work on math. The students dutifully sat down, put on headphones that completely covered their ears, and began working alone in front of computer screens. "Make sure your headphones are connected," a monitor told the students.

The K-5 students spend about an hour in the Learning Lab every day, Kinser said. Higher grades spend up to seventy-five minutes per day.

Rocketship touts the Learning Labs for their ability to provide "individualized instruction." But it's a narrow definition and has nothing to do with whether a student might learn math best by using manipulatives, or working out a problem cooperatively, or thinking through a problem. It's all about keyboarding the correct answer into the computer, "personalized" on the basis of how fast the computer allows you to proceed.

Ultimately, the Learning Lab relies on the old-fashioned model of the drill-and-kill worksheet, albeit on a computer.

In its early years, Rocketship schools in California made significant gains on standardized tests. But those results did not last.

In 2012-13, all seven of Rocketship's schools in California failed to make "adequate yearly progress," with English/language arts scores plunging 30 percentage points over the past five years.

Even Rocketship leaders are asking whether Rocketship's approach is better at teaching students to behave and repeat rote lessons rather than to think. As *Education Week* reported earlier this year, "Lynn Liao, Rocketship's chief programs officer, said the organization has also received troubling feedback on how students educated under the original blended learning model fare in middle school. 'Anecdotal reports were coming in that our

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students were strongly proficient, knew the basics, and they were good rule-followers,' Ms. Liao said. 'But getting more independence and discretion over time, they struggled with that a lot more.' ”

Toward the end of our visit, Kinser and I talked in her office. It was a back and forth. She told me that the Learning Lab monitors do not need a bachelor's degree. She has hired art and phy-ed staff who, while not certified teachers, are considered “highly qualified.” She would like to offer music and Spanish classes, but says that hasn't been possible, nor are there any teachers certified in English as a Second Language. Bilingual education isn't even on the Rocketship radar.

Kinser doesn't provide details on staff turnover or how many teachers are newly hired from Teach For America (TFA), although she admits it is “probably higher than you would like.” According to the employee handbook, all Rocketship employees are “at will” and can be fired “at any time, for any reason, with or without cause, and with or without advance notice.” Lafer notes in his report that nationally, teacher turnover at Rocketship was 29 percent in 2012-13, and that 75 percent of Rocketship teachers are affiliated with TFA. Rocketship Milwaukee was projected to spend almost 29 percent of its budget on central

administrative functions outside the school, compared to 8 percent for the Milwaukee Public Schools, according to Lafer.

Kinser referred financial questions, from staff pay to administrative costs, to the national office. By the *Progressive* deadline, the only information provided referred to the school's rent. The building is owned by Turner Impact Capital, a for-profit investment firm and hedge fund based in Los Angeles. Rocketship hopes to ultimately buy the building, but further details “are protected by a confidentiality agreement,” Rocketship said in an e-mail. (Traditional public schools are publicly owned. The practice of charter schools using public education dollars to privately buy real estate has been highly controversial.)

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“I don't criticize parents for where they send their children to school, or teachers for where they teach,” I reassure her. But, I add, it's important to look at policy issues, from curricular offerings to how public funding of privately run charters undermines the democratic oversight of public institutions.

Kinser taught in Chicago and later worked with Rocketship in California. As we talk, it's clear

she knows little about Milwaukee. She presses me: Why is there such strong sentiment against Rocketship? I decide to explain at least part of the reason, knowing before I begin that it is complicated.

For more than a quarter century, I tell Kinser, business people and politicians in Milwaukee have said the public schools are beyond hope and that the answer is in private voucher schools and privately run charter schools. Rocketship, a national franchise based in California, rides into town like it's the savior, bypassing the elected school board. It rents a building bought and renovated by a Los Angeles hedge fund that partners with Rocketship, but refuses to release financial details. So we have all these Wisconsin tax dollars flowing to California—to the charter franchise, to technology firms and to an L.A. hedge fund—with little to no financial transparency. In addition, a school serving low-income students of color is overseen by a nonelected board whose president lives not in Milwaukee but in an affluent white suburb, and who does not have an educational background but is head of the chamber of commerce.

“The setup smacks of colonialism,” I explain. “And that bothers people.”

Kinser winces, but doesn't try to respond. ♦