Real World:
Creating intentionally diverse schools to help students thrive

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www.TeachforAmerica.org

One day, while studying in the law library at the University of Georgia, Kriste Dragon (Los Angeles ’98, pictured to the right) struck up a conversation with a colleague who told her about a progressive organization called Teach For America.

Kriste was intrigued by what she heard and by TFA’s vision of equitable educational opportunities for all children.

During her time in law school, Kriste had engaged in juvenile public-defense work and witnessed unrelenting inequities, injustices that prevented children from reaching their full potential.

She went on to address those inequities first as a corps member and staff member at TFA, and today as cofounder and CEO of Citizens of the World (CWC), an innovative network of charter schools based in Los Angeles.

Kriste started CWC with Cam Starrett, Chris Forman, and Mark Gordon (pictured above), former board chair of Teach For America–Los Angeles, after searching for a racially and economically diverse school environment for her own children (now ages 16, 11, and 6).

Previously, she served as a professional-development coordinator at UCLA, where she created math curricula and grounded herself in the philosophy of education that would inform her approach to CWC.

Founded in 2010, CWC differs from many other tuition-free school models in that it’s what Kriste calls “intentionally diverse.” With three locations in Los Angeles, two in New York City, and two opening this year in Kansas City, CWC serves neighborhoods that are already diverse, rather than assigning or constructing its own concept of diversity and mapping it to a community.

The distinction is significant because, as Kriste adds, “this model works best when schools are co-created,” and community involvement is key to fostering support between parents and school leaders.

In terms of expansion, CWC will go where there is a need, as a value-add to communities that want it to be there.

CWC schools are “intentionally designed to reflect their surrounding communities and the larger society,” because students thrive when they are given the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with those from diverse backgrounds.

CWC empowers its students “to think critically and learn to engage respectfully and productively with fellow students by developing their capacity to enter into and understand the lives of others.”

Empathy resides at the core of CWC’s model, and Kriste appreciates TFA’s role in developing her own understanding of others, especially at such a young age.

“I appreciate TFA’s shift to deepening community relationships,” she says, “and I’m grateful for the responsibility I was given during my time on staff. It made me very attuned to providing opportunities to a younger generation.”

Kriste serves as co-chair of the national advisory board of The Collective, Teach For America’s alumni of color association, and she especially values the relationships she has built with fellow alumni over the years. She is a featured speaker at TFA’s 25th Anniversary Summit, where she is presenting a case-study session on intentionally diverse learning communities.

It’s through these communities, ones that truly reflect the rich diversity of our country, Kriste notes, that students can “courageously decide who they are in the world and how they want the world to be.”