The growth of high-quality charter schools hasn’t happened fast enough, says Kriste Dragon, chief executive officer of Citizens of the World Charter Schools (at the network’s Hollywood campus). By 2016, Dragon plans to have CWC campuses in four states.

Mixing It Up

When Kriste Dragon couldn’t find the right neighborhood school for her daughter, she created one. Now, she’s taking her vision for mixed-income schools to neighborhoods nationwide

BY LEAH FABEL (CHICAGO ’01)

Kriste Dragon (L.A. ’98) and her husband had two priorities when it came time to send their first daughter to school: great academics and a student body that reflected the remarkable racial and economic diversity of their Hollywood neighborhood. They looked, and they looked, and she lost sleep over it. But that neighborhood school didn’t exist.

At the time, Dragon was the executive director of Teach For America Los Angeles. The education reformer in her also weighed in during those sleepless nights. “Whole sectors of our country have pulled out of public education,” she says. Without investment from every sector, the school she dreamed of for her daughter, and for children all over the city, would never exist.

So in 2004, along with a group of parents, Dragon helped to found Larchmont Charter School and eventually became president of its board. The network puts extraordinary effort into attracting a student body as diverse as its surrounding neighborhoods while maintaining rigorous academic standards. In 2011, achievement at Larchmont ranked in the top 30 of nearly 800 schools in Los Angeles.

Today, Larchmont serves grades K-9 on three campuses, with plans to serve K-12 by 2015. The schools have become so popular that they attract nearly 10 times as many kindergarten applicants as they have seats. The injustice of that dynamic ignited for Dragon a moral and educational imperative to replicate diverse, mixed-income schools as aggressively as possible.

In 2008, while still serving as a member of Larchmont’s board—a position she held until early 2012—Dragon started planning Citizens of the World Charter Schools, aiming to create a school model similar to Larchmont. With time, her vision for CWC evolved to include the network’s rapid expansion to other states.

“In order to be a leader today, and especially in these kids’ lifetimes, you
have to be able to navigate lines of difference,” she says. “The educational model needs to be one that is very conscious of putting kids together to form relationships that require that.”

CWC opened its Hollywood campus as a K-1 school in the fall of 2010, followed this fall by a school in Silver Lake, a gentrifying neighborhood several miles due east. In 2013, two campuses will open in Brooklyn, N.Y. By 2016, Dragon aims to have schools in four states—she and her team are researching options in Philadelphia, Indianapolis, and elsewhere.

So far, academic results have been promising. In 2012, its first year of official standardized testing, 92 percent of CWC Hollywood’s second-graders scored proficient or higher on California’s math exam. Nearly 80 percent met that bar on the English and language arts exam. In addition, CWC’s low-income students substantially outperformed other low-income students district-wide.

By strategically reaching out to all sectors of the community—every race, culture, and class—CWC schools have attracted a base of applicants roughly as diverse as the schools’ home neighborhoods. The diverse applicant base results in diverse classrooms. At the Hollywood campus, 41 percent of students in 2011-12 came from low-income families, and 59 percent were students of color.

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Alison Tatlock, a writer for the acclaimed HBO series *In Treatment*, was a founding parent at CWC-Hollywood. Her daughter’s nanny, a Guatemalan immigrant, is also a parent there. Their children are in the same class, and both are excelling.

“When dealing with integration, especially at a racial level, I don’t think that [parent interactions] will be a small part of our work going forward,” Dragon says. “Especially as we move to racially charged centers, specifically in the American South.”