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Charting a New Course in the Classroom

Noble and Empower charter schools find CrossFit fits their mandate to pursue excellence in education.

By Chris Cooper

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"The greatest threat to our nation is no longer overseas. It's an uneducated population that can't be contributors to our democracy and our future."—David Oclander, principal fellowship, Noble Network of Charter Schools

In a June 2012 article, the U.K. publication [Daily Mail](#) reported that the number of people shot dead in Chicago from January to June 2012 was greater than the number of U.S. soldiers killed in Afghanistan. According to the article, Chicago fatal shootings numbered 240 during the period, while 144 U.S. service people lost their lives in Afghanistan in the same time frame.

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The Noble Network of Charter Schools has institutions located in the worst neighborhoods of Chicago: Englewood, Garfield Park, West Humboldt Park. Ninety-five percent of its students live below the poverty line, and many of the schools in the neighborhood are equipped with metal detectors to curb violence. When students enter Noble schools in the ninth grade, they're usually reading, writing and doing math at a third- or fifth-grade level. Four years later most qualify for college. In fact, among open-enrollment public schools in Chicago, kids from Noble score among the top students every year.

A charter school is a public school: students don't pay to attend, and it's funded based on enrollment. Though a charter school operates outside of public school boards, students are held to the same state and federal academic standards as their peers. Charter schools are non-sectarian and are required to accept any student regardless of race, religion or creed.

Funding for charter schools is less per student than schools within local school boards, so opening a charter school carries both financial and professional risk. Administrators and teachers are also paid less at a charter school and lose their tenure when they leave the traditional system. Starting a charter school, or teaching at one, requires taking a chance.

Even with these hurdles, dozens of new charter schools are launched every year in the U.S. The rewards are rarely financial, but operating a charter school allows for longer school days, an adjusted curriculum, new and dynamic teaching opportunities, and the chance to pursue diverse learning models. Charter schools have the freedom to experiment and adapt.

"We've broken the code on great academics. And the code is based on a really disciplined culture and hiring incredible talent to deliver the great academics to the kids," said David Oclander, principal fellowship at the Noble Network of Charter Schools.



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Charter schools such as Chicago Bulls College Prep offer teachers and administrators more flexibility than institutions governed by local school boards.

It's not the pursuit of money that makes administrators want to open charter schools. It's the pursuit of excellence. And CrossFit fits that model perfectly.

Oclander was introduced to CrossFit at Fort Bragg around 2006 while serving in the military, and CrossFit was introduced to the Noble Network by Jason Ronai, assistant principal at Chicago Bulls College Prep, in 2012. Oclander retired from the military in December 2012, and he pressed the Noble Network to have its P.E. teachers attend the CrossFit Level 1 and CrossFit Kids courses. Now five Noble schools have adopted CrossFit. When Oclander opens a new Noble school in 2014, CrossFit will be central to its curriculum, both in and out of the gym.

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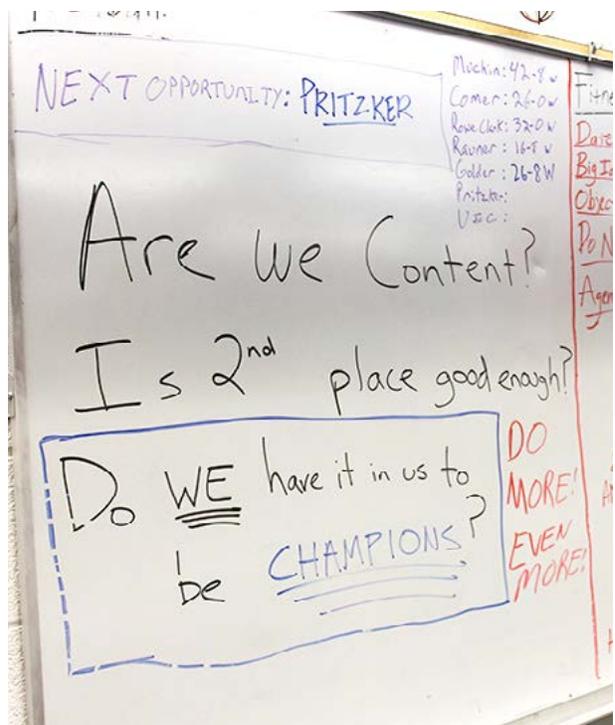
The Noble school system was launched by Mike Milkie in 1999.

"We give a lot of autonomy to the Noble campuses," Milkie said. "A lot of these great ideas (like CrossFit in gym class) can bubble up, and the principals know that if they come up with a great idea, they're going to be able to implement it in almost all cases. If it works really well, it will be shared with other campuses. Then other principals can use it, tailor it to their campus, or come up with something completely different."

"Ten of our campuses make up the top 10 schools on the ACT," said Oclander, referring to a national college admissions examination. "Of the top four, two use CrossFit as their central fitness program."

Collaborative Competition

"There are two main things that set Noble apart," said Milkie. "First, the quality of the adult that we put in front of the student: principals, teachers, office staff, maintenance. Second, a really structured school and learning



The culture of excellence is everywhere in Noble schools.



*Expectations are high at Noble schools,
but impressive college-placement rates indicate
students are rising to the challenge.*

Charting ... (continued)

environment. Students have very high expectations, not only academically but in terms of their personal behavior. I think that allows teachers to teach and allows students to develop habits of self-discipline that last a lifetime.”

Some of the rules seem strict: arriving 10 seconds late for class is one demerit, and arriving a minute late is two demerits. But those familiar with the **Broken Windows Theory** will recognize the “signaling effect” in students: a solid foundation creates opportunities for positive growth. Students dress the same to deconstruct financial hierarchy, and the “no embarrassment, no fear” policy means that students can speak up in class or correct one another without feeling defensive.

The rules also mean Noble schools don’t need metal detectors at their front doors. Many other schools in their neighborhoods do.

Visitors to a Noble school will notice spotless floors and well-dressed kids. No one chews gum; the top button of every polo shirt is buttoned. Students arrive early for class and immediately begin working. None doodle or stare out the window blankly. They’re too busy.

“Our classrooms run off discussions, so we go into class and never know what we’re going to discuss that day,” said Josh Hernandez, a senior. “You have to have your notes



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David Oclander (right) left the military in 2012 to join the Noble Network.



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Shining floors, shining minds. Noble schools have high standards for academics and cleanliness.



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Noble schools strive to create a culture of success, where high levels of achievement are expected rather than surprising.

prepared. You have to be able to analyze any piece of evidence from the text and break it down. In the fitness component, if you're not fit, you fail the exam and wind up in summer school. You're accountable."

Milkie believes that one of the largest catalysts for growth is competition, and Noble Schools improve through competition at every level—principals, teachers and students.

On average, teachers at Noble are paid slightly less than at other area schools, but there's still nationwide competition to be hired.

"That's because of our cultural element," said Angela Montagna, director of external affairs for the Noble Network. "We attract high-performing educators who are interested in maximizing impact, and they can do that in the culture that Noble creates."

The philosophy fosters an atmosphere of collaborative competition. Dr. John Ratey, author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, says this sort of environment can create the best possible learning experience in the classroom, too.

"You want everyone in your tribe to be at their best," Ratey

said. "Competing is fun, and you want your team to win. One natural element of competition is exploration. You want that because you don't want people just thinking about what's straight ahead, or just following the rules. You want people to think of new ideas and break the rules."

"One of the strengths of the Network is that we have really strong people, and they're encouraged to compete against one another," Milkie said. "We have data on discipline, academics, and fitness, and they compete on those core elements. I think that makes everyone better. We reward them based on improvements against previous years, so there's a lot of cooperation: they're not competing against each other in that year but against their own past performances."

Milkie is talking about high-school principals, but he could be talking about one of more than 8,000 CrossFit affiliates worldwide.

On each Noble campus, teachers also compete against one another to produce the best results.

"Some stuff you can't measure, but a lot of it you can," Milkie said. "Whether it's scores on ACT exams or results on a fitness test, teachers compete against other teachers

across the network, and then everyone shares best practices. Which campus has the most students doing the highest average number of push-ups? We want to know. And we do.”

Kyle Feuerach teaches CrossFit at Pritzker Prep, a Noble Network school. He pitched CrossFit to his principal as a good way to combine physical education and leadership lessons. It was so effective the school rearranged its schedule to include CrossFit in the middle of the day rather than after class.

“We’re working on leadership curriculum and tying in standards,” Feuerach said. “In most CrossFit workouts, there’s a minute where you want to stop. It’s a natural reaction: *this is crazy*. The beauty is when you don’t stop; you keep pushing through, and you learn that resiliency, that you’re capable of more than you believed. In a CrossFit gym, that just happens, but here we’re pushing it. They hold each other accountable for it.”

Accountability can sometimes mean punishment in the form of demerits at Noble, but Feuerach won’t use burpees as a reprimand.

“We don’t want them to associate exercise with punishment,” he said. “One example is when they leave trash in the change rooms. We have great students; they’re all good people. The only reason they’d leave trash for others to pick up is when they’re so tired that they can’t pick it up themselves. Our job is to get them into the kind of shape where they can pick up after themselves. It helps them to think about growth in a positive way.”

Feuerach knows he’s competing with other teachers and puts the success of his CrossFit program on his own shoulders.

“I know that we have a long way to go,” he said. “Our success will be based on my own growth curve.”

Like, Feuerach, Hernandez accepts responsibility for those around him.



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CrossFit is well suited to an environment that already emphasizes excellence, measured results and friendly competition.

"I'm an amateur boxer. One of my lifelong goals is to open my own boxing gym for the community, get kids off the street," the 17-year-old said. "As you know, Chicago's become known for violence, and that impacts me."

He continued: "I've noticed, at my young age, that people come into the gym and turn their lives around. I want to study entrepreneurship to build my leadership. I enjoy making others better. That's the environment that Bulls (Prep) offers you, and to continue that environment, entrepreneurship was a strong study for me in college."

At the student level, competition has an impact in academics, fitness and discipline.

"Students are proud when they do well individually, and they're proud when they do well as a campus," Milkie said. "One of the best things we can teach them is that life is full of obstacles, that they can overcome them, and that they can learn the important elements of life as they overcome them. We have targets—academic, fitness, discipline—that they need to reach. A lot of times they don't. The lesson of how to deal with defeat is one that lasts a lifetime."

For William Washington, a senior at Bulls Prep, these lessons are now transparent.

"Phys. ed. is not predominantly about fitness and health," Washington said. "It's about going through real-life

situations to better yourself and be prepared for anything. For example, my gym class is more about working together as a group and reacting to problems, learning from failure."

One of Washington's strongest lessons has come from study time before an exam.

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—William Washington

"We're working out at the same time," he said. "Like we'll have one minute to go over the test material, and then do push-ups and burpees, and then go back to studying. It's very effective. It's taught me to multitask. If I fail at a push-up, the class will tell me what I need to work on to prepare me for next time. It's the same with the test."

Last year, the Noble Network's graduating students qualified for US\$53 million in scholarships. At Pritzker Prep alone, 150 kids split \$17 million in scholarships.

One of the scholarship programs sought by Noble students—Questbridge—offers full-ride scholarships to prestigious schools such as MIT and Columbia. On Oct. 22, three students at Chicago Bulls College Prep received notice that they had qualified for the final round of consideration for the scholarship. Hernandez was one.

Empowering Students

Noble has much of the puzzle figured out, but across the country in San Diego, Demi Brown and the Empower program are just starting to piece it together.

Brown's personality has never fit in her body, even when she was much larger. At four feet 10 inches and 190 lb., Brown found herself in the same predicament as many of her students: out of shape, unmotivated and mentally sluggish at school.



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Principal Oclander offers new meaning to the term "squat suit."

Brown currently teaches at another charter school but wanted to create a new model around CrossFit. Though only 31, she's acquired the administrative credentials required to be a principal in California. She acquired her love of CrossFit from CrossFit Mission Gorge.

Five years ago, Brown saw Oprah Winfrey perform a few push-ups against a wall on her television show, and then she tried them in her classroom. Though heavy herself, Brown knew the kids in her class needed physical activity.

"Even though I wasn't a role model, I knew how to guide my students," Brown said. "When I found CrossFit, I started thinking, 'How can I get my students to work this hard? There's a chance to chunk the two together.'"

Ian McHugh, owner and coach at CrossFit Mission Gorge, offered to help.

Brown recalled "seeing the connections and camaraderie, seeing them groan in a good way when Ian showed up. They really loved it."

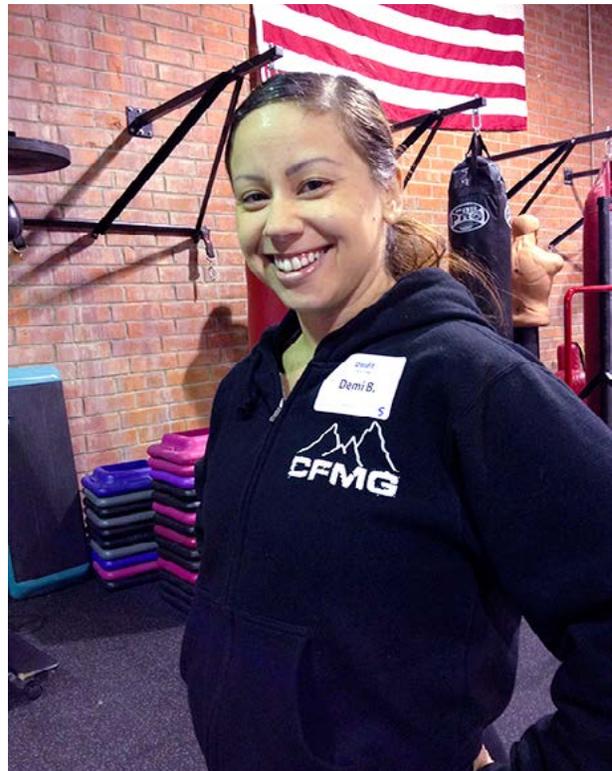
She added: "That's when this whole crazy idea (of opening a charter school) was born."

Though they receive some government funding, charter schools often require additional fundraising to operate. Before they're up and running, charter schools in the formative stage still need funding to navigate through the bureaucracy and red tape of the approval process in the company of lawyers.

"We raised a little over \$7,000 and spent it all on legal fees," Brown said.

In California, a charter school starts with a charter petition. Though funding is available for charter schools throughout the state, it's not easy to get. There are 16 required legal elements to a charter petition, which can take a year to write. Proposals must include a five-year budget. Petitioners must project their startup enrollment and then get half that number of teacher and parent signatures to match. Next, a board of trustees decides which charter petitions are upheld.

Brown's institution will be called Empower Charter School, and it will reach the final step in the process on Dec. 3. Brown hopes to build the first school and then offer the template to other schools through the creation of her own charter network.



Courtesy of Demi Brown

Demi Brown found CrossFit at CrossFit Mission Gorge and believes it will create fitter students at Empower Charter School.



Courtesy of Demi Brown

Empower Charter School has received a great deal of support from the CrossFit community, including Katie Hogan (center).

To help with fundraising, the CrossFit community is stepping forward. As in starting a CrossFit box, Brown is relying heavily on word of mouth and the reputation of other CrossFit coaches. On May 11, Brown held a Fitness and Field Day at a local park to raise awareness for the Empower project.

"Over 60 people showed up, representing affiliates from all over San Diego," Brown said. She's also received financial contributions from CrossFit Mission Gorge, CrossFit 858, CrossFit Elysium, CrossFit Ocean Beach, CrossFit Fortius and Pete's Paleo, as well as an online fundraising campaign.

"Katie Hogan was the first Games-level athlete to make a donation," Brown recalled fondly.

After approval, a school isn't paid its annual budget up front. Part arrives in October, after most schools have been open (and teachers paid) for weeks. The rest is deferred over the course of the year, making fundraising critical to the early success of a charter school.

Empower's school day will include CrossFit workouts at several points. In the morning, students who arrive early will participate in volunteer-led games. They'll focus on skill acquisition during gym time and talk about functional movement in biology. Several teachers will take the CrossFit Kids course and work movement into their curriculum.

It's another step forward for CrossFit within an educational setting. Hundreds of schools already use curricula written by CrossFit Kids in gym class, and a few dozen—such as Noble schools—incorporate a leadership component. Empower will be the first to name CrossFit in its petition for charter, and the program is included alongside other big concepts: nutrition, character, goal setting, integrity, ownership—and play. Classrooms will have personal-record boards, and nutritional discussion will be part of science classes.

In a section titled "Comprehensive Fitness Program That Incorporates Health and Character Education," Empower's petition for charter says, "The exercise program will be



Courtesy of Demi Brown

On Dec. 3, Empower will find out if its charter is approved, and local CrossFit athletes will be at the meeting to show their support.

based on the CrossFit Kids curriculum. The CrossFit Kids PE curriculum is aligned to the National Standards for Physical Education, and ECS will ensure that lessons are also aligned to the Physical Education Content Standards for California.”

The petition continues: “The CrossFit Kids curriculum will empower students to be well-rounded children who embrace fitness early in life and choose to continue healthy habits as adults. CrossFit Kids is easily scalable and differentiated to meet the needs of all children from a variety of fitness backgrounds. This accessibility allows every child to participate and experience success.”

**Empower will be
the first school to name
CrossFit in its petition
for charter and build its day
around workouts and
active play.**

“We have a clinical psychologist as our board chair,” said Brown. “She advocates for a lot of recess time. We’ll have morning recess, lunch recess and another at the end of the day in addition to phys. ed. and an organized CrossFit Kids program.”

Brown continued: “They all go together. We have PR walls and goal boards in my classrooms. They can set PRs in math or language or phys. ed. It can all be embedded in the curriculum as part of the character aspects.”

In a typical day, students will start with guided play before any classroom time. Games are rolled into the classroom: if the students are studying whales, they’ll play games about whales and then present what they’ve learned to other students within the same hour. In language class, they’ll talk about whales in Spanish, and then write creatively on the same subject before P.E. begins.

The nutrition component is still in the idea stage, but Brown imagines a student trying kelp (a seaweed) with lunch and learning about its high iron content. After lunch, children may attend class in Spanish and then switch to English for journaling about the day.

Brown is happy to be among the first charter schools built around a CrossFit curriculum but wants to see the movement grow. Long term, Brown is aiming to launch a charter management organization and replicate Empower’s model in other areas.

“We want to replicate what we’re doing across the country,” she said. “We have the highest density of CrossFit in the country in San Diego, but we want to help others too. People are already contacting us through our [Facebook page](#) asking, ‘How can we get one of these in our neighborhood?’ We can make that happen.”

Brown’s first reward will come if Empower’s charter is approved on Dec. 3. She hopes to have a packed courtroom because she believes public opinion will help carry the vote, and CrossFit Invictus has promised to send athletes to help fill the board-of-trustees meeting.

Stepping outside the common ground of local school boards is expensive and could be career-ending for teachers who give up tenure to teach in charter schools. But principals and teachers make the leap for the freedom to experiment with new teaching and learning strategies, and many students are eager to follow in hopes of attaining elevated levels of education. The pursuit of excellence means pushing away from the average in order to pursue the excellent, and it’s no surprise some charter schools are finding the CrossFit program suits their needs very well indeed.



About the Author

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