Camino Nuevo Charter Academy
697 S Burlington Ave. Los Angeles, CA 90057
Grade Span: K-8
Principal: Atyani Howard

School Description:
“Camino Nuevo Charter Academy was founded in August 2000 by Pueblo Nuevo Development, a nonprofit community development corporation in the MacArthur Park neighborhood of Los Angeles.

“The MacArthur Park neighborhood is one of the poorest and most densely populated neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Most of the residents are immigrants from Mexico and Central America. In 1992, Philip Lance, who was working then as an Episcopalian Minister, began organizing local residents to find ways to address the severe economic and social problems in the area. Over the past 12 years, several organizations and businesses have grown out of this effort, including a thrift store, a worker-owned janitorial company, a nonprofit community development corporation, a charter school, a health clinic, and early childhood programs. Together, these organizations are providing children with an outstanding and enriched educational opportunity as well as revitalizing this urban neighborhood and making it a safe and healthy place to live.” [From Camino Nuevo’s website]

School Mission:
“The mission of Camino Nuevo Charter Academy is to educate students in a college preparatory program to be literate, critical thinkers and independent problem solvers who are agents of social justice with sensitivity toward the world around them.” [From Camino Nuevo’s website]

Program Evaluation and Research Branch Reports

Charter School Report
In June 2005, The Program Evaluation and Research Branch issued a report called “Learning from Charter Schools in Los Angeles”. The report looked at innovative school level practices that the district could learn from. Attached is the chapter on best practices learned from Camino Nuevo Charter Academy.

Charter Renewal Case Study
In January 2005, the Program Evaluation and Research branch published a report to coincide with the charter school’s renewal. The excerpts below are from the executive summary of the report:

“Findings indicated that Camino Nuevo has been successful in addressing most elements of its charter, including effective parent involvement and outreach, student-centered instruction, and strong collaboration between the administration and teachers and between teachers themselves. The school aligned itself with partnerships that enabled it to carry out its goal of fostering ecologically and artistically conscious students.
Professional development was strong and classroom instruction showed many elements of instructional quality. Camino Nuevo has implemented its English Language Development program quite extensively. Student achievement gains reflect these strong practices, and are higher than those for comparable students in both math and English language arts in other District schools.”

“One area emphasized in the charter petition that was only partially implemented was incorporation of critical thinking activities in classroom instruction. While many instances of critical thinking activities were observed, they were not a significant part of most lessons, and tended to be brief.”

*Bilingual Model:*
The follow excerpt details the school’s bilingual program at both elementary school sites. It is also from the January 2005 PERB report.

“Different approaches for supporting English Language Development are used on Camino Nuevo’s two elementary school sites. The Townhouse site has full immersion in English and the Burlington site uses a “maintenance” model. The bilingual maintenance *heritage model* is one of the programs utilized mainly in Kindergarten through second grade to transition ELD students from their native language by learning their language in order to facilitate the acquisition of English. The students initially are instructed in their native language, predominantly Spanish, 90% and English 10% of the time in Kindergarten and move to 80%/20% in first grade, 70%/30% in second grade. Based on teacher feedback, the school is looking into incorporating the *Avenues* program to improve one of the current programs, *Into English*, because it has more English language development models in reading and writing. An English language development block provides students 45 minutes to one hour of ELD instruction based on their ELD level.

“ELD portfolios are important for monitoring ELD students progress. Teachers work collaboratively on the portfolios and the principal reviews them periodically for individual discussion. The portfolios are reviewed biannually to analyze samples of student's work in order to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses. In terms of providing feedback to teachers regarding ELD instruction, for instance, the principal at the Townhouse site conducts classroom walk-throughs every week to provide teachers with feedback on how to "build upon the ELD component in their lessons and instruction."”

“In addition, an ELD pacing plan monitors the pace students should progress to reach the next desired ELD level. All teachers have a new program, *Into English*, and bring in experts to do trainings with the teachers, who had expressed need for ELD support and more resources. Each of the fourth and fifth grade teachers at the Burlington site dedicate an hour each day to ELD. The teachers take a homogenously group of students by ELD levels to address English language needs directly. For example, a fifth grade teacher takes on a group of ELD 2 students to review the digestive system.”
Data:
See attached documents for API.
Student Enrollment from 2006-2007

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<th>Group</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
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Reclassified Students

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Teaching Staffing

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<td>2006-07</td>
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Full Credential 85.4%
University Intern 14.6%

NOTE: Camino Nuevo Charter Academy operates one charter on two separate campuses. The data above is for both campuses.
Academic Performance Index Change from 1999 to 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>CA ELEMENTARY AVG</th>
<th>LAUSD ELEMENTARY AVG</th>
<th>CAMINO NUEVO CHTR AC</th>
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<tr>
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<td>2007</td>
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Notes: ASAM, small schools, and direct funded charter schools are excluded from state and district averages.

1999 to 2007 API Growth:
- CA = 142
- LAUSD = 223
- CAMINO NUEVO CHTR AC

Planning, Assessment and Research
Camino Nuevo Charter Academy (CNCA) opened in the 2000-01 school year as an elementary school with two campuses serving the MacArthur Park area and Wilshire corridor west of downtown Los Angeles. It has grown into a multilevel network of schools. There is a K-8 complex of elementary and middle schools in converted commercial facilities at opposite ends of the same block of Burlington Avenue near MacArthur Park, partially facing Wilshire. There is also a K-8 site on Harvard Avenue farther west, using facilities in the Wilshire Boulevard Temple. A small high school site of innovative design is under construction on an odd-shaped property near the Hollywood Freeway to the north. The elementary school at the Burlington site is the original unit of the network, and it is the one that best meets our case study criteria. This profile will concentrate on that elementary school, but the linking of multiple schools means that some details about the Burlington middle school and the other sites will be included in passing.

The elementary campus at Burlington Avenue has 353 students in grades 3-5. Over 99% are Hispanic/Latino, with 87% rated as English Language Learners. The student population reflects the low-income immigrant population of the MacArthur Park neighborhood. Most of the families reside in crowded apartment buildings, and most of the parents have not graduated from high school. The eligibility criteria for the federal free and reduced price meal program include over 99% of the students. The school’s academic performance places it in the top 30% of schools in California with similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

At the time the school was founded, students in the neighborhood were being bused “far away” and/or placed in large, overcrowded schools with multitrack calendars. Parents expressed a desire for a neighborhood school where students could get personal attention, and where the flow of family life and student growth would not be disrupted by long commutes and conflicting calendars. They also felt that the existing schools were
not satisfying the needs of Spanish speaking students in learning English. Partly in response to their needs and wishes, the school operates on a traditional single-track calendar of 200 days a year. The Harvard site also offers full day kindergarten.

The school was founded by Pueblo Nuevo Development, a nonprofit community development organization, in partnership with the New Visions Foundation and the nonprofit ExEd school business services organization. Pueblo Nuevo Development has been addressing the neighborhood’s problems since 1992 under the leadership of Philip Lance, a former Episcopalian minister. Prior to starting the school, the organization had started a number of other endeavors that created local jobs and met community needs, including a thrift store and a worker-owned janitorial company. The reputation of the organization in the community helped it to gain the support needed for the charter school, and its track record of getting small grants was a major factor in successfully applying for a grant to buy school facilities. Lance and other leaders saw the opportunity to create a charter school as a central institution in community building. From the beginning, the school was based on the principle of maintaining strong roots in the community and developing existing resources and relationships.

Camino Nuevo’s vision is to prepare students with the academic skills necessary to be competitive in college—“leveling the playing field”—as well as the character to be lifelong learners and active citizens. One leader told us that the goal is for students to become “amazing bilingual biliterate critical thinkers” who will be influential participants in the real world. There is a strong sense that “education allows students to see the real world as well, to see that they are part of something larger and that they can make a difference and take responsibility for what they do.” In line with this philosophy, the school includes a focus on social justice and environmental responsibility in its programs.

We observed class sessions at CNCA and interviewed teachers individually. We also conducted group interviews with the leadership team, a group of teachers, and a group of parents. We attended a social event for parents, a health fair, and an Earth Day assembly at which students presented a costume drama about pollution.

The most distinctive aspect of practice at Camino Nuevo is the school’s high degree of engagement with the local community, including personal involvement with
parents and students and a variety of social and health services for families. This engagement is also exemplified by the school’s use of marginalized urban spaces to create attractive and educationally supportive facilities for neighborhood schooling.

Key Practice #1: Family Involvement, Health Services, and Student Well Being

This is a cluster of related practices organized around the belief that student success consists of more than academics, that families are critical to student success, and that the school can make a critical difference for families. The school’s goals for students include character development as well as standards based learning. Parents are actively recruited and trained as partners in student learning. In addition, the school seeks to address social barriers inside and outside of school that hinder student learning, which means responding to student behavioral issues and addressing the social and health needs of families. One teacher identified the school’s strategy as taking a holistic approach to make an impact on students’ lives.

Although some parents were involved in the founding of the school, it took time for many parents to understand their part in schooling. The first parent meeting had one parent in attendance. A leader told us that the staff “really struggled to figure out the right approach.” They worked on bringing parents to school and making them comfortable. The school employs a family coordinator as the primary liaison and resource person for parents, and keeps them informed about the school with a monthly newsletter in Spanish and English. “Now parents take leadership and empowerment to a different level.”

Several parents and teachers told us that there is a lot of communication and closeness between teachers, parents, and students. One said that teachers coming to CNCA from other schools are “blown away” by the level of parent involvement. A teacher told us that the parents are “not afraid to approach you and ask you questions.… They’re not afraid to come to the school.” This helps motivate students in the classroom as well. “They know that their parents are involved and therefore they need to do well. … When you say, I’m going to speak to your dad tonight, they know that you’re going to speak to their dad. You have that relationship with their parents and they know it.”
Parents contract with the school for 15 volunteer hours of service a year, and are required to attend conferences with teachers. Parents serve breakfast and lunch to the students, and provide campus security. Security is important because the arrangement of the facility requires children to walk along a public street to get between buildings or go to the playground. There are always several parents on campus, which helps create a safe environment for the kids.

A teacher said that parents “realize from day one that we require a lot more from them than other local schools…. We also accommodate them, we know they don’t have a lot of time, they work, and we work with them and modify our scheduling.” The school offers a lot of Saturday classes that parents can attend to make up their time. Some of the parents go far beyond the 15 hours, doing as much as 100 hours of volunteer time.

One change was made this year based on experience. The staff realized that the level of parent involvement tended to be strongest at the beginning of a school year and taper off toward the end. Thus, they devised a system that assigned each grade level a month of the calendar for priority service. As an incentive, the volunteer jobs most desired by parents are reserved for parents of that grade level during that month. This has developed into a broader focus on one grade level a month, including newsletter highlights of what is happening in the classrooms of that grade.

Parents get a report card showing how many hours they have completed, as well as whether they attended the mandatory conferences. They are also told how many books their child has read toward the required number of books for each grade. If the parents aren’t doing their part and meeting the requirements then they are placed on “probation” until they improve. No families have been cut out of the school for such deficiencies, but the staff makes a special outreach effort to communicate with the parents, find out what issues they are dealing with, remind them of the correlation between their involvement and their students doing well, and help them find ways to contribute to the community.

The executive director meets with parents at the site one morning every month for a social event called “coffee with Ms. Ponce.” This is sponsored by the parents of the grade level of the month. The meeting is conducted in Spanish, and includes time for
comments from Ms. Ponce as well as the site principal, but it is also time for parents to discuss school issues and meet socially. At the meeting we observed, one parent addressed the group to explain a change in the school calendar. Parents also discussed issues among themselves and volunteered answers to some of each other’s questions. There is a raffle every month to reward the parents who host and participate in the meeting. This event gives parents a chance to meet staff socially and not just in the context of a conference about their children. This keeps the anxiety level low, helps parents feel comfortable with administrators and teachers, and establishes a pattern of staff availability to parents. A teacher told us that parents “prepare and bring important issues to the floor. They show a lot of pride in it.”

*Parental Empowerment*

Parents are involved in formal governance at the school through a site based council, with one parent representative from each grade level. The school provides parents with leadership training in the tools they need to engage in the governance process. Their contributions to decision making are taken seriously. For example, the requirement to wear uniforms was not imposed by educators, but requested by the parents and the students. The council has also responded to the feedback that some parents felt they did not have enough communication with the parent representative for their grade. As a result, they added another tier of representation, where each classroom has a parent identified as a representative for the other families, and communicates those parents’ concerns to the grade level representative on the site based council.

The school also tries to empower parents in their children’s education and in their own lives by providing them with activities and workshops. A survey is used to find out what topics parents want to focus on, and this information helps to plan the calendar. The school offers a monthly workshop about academics so that parents know how to support their children at home, including how to read with the child, how to help with homework, and how to monitor the child’s progress. It also offers a monthly workshop on practical issues such as immigration, insurance, tenant rights, and access to public services.

Leaders told us that, over time, parents have become acculturated to the school’s philosophy. They had to learn that the process of education is non-punitive and involves
reflective discipline. They had to get over the “school versus parents” or “school versus kids” mindset and learn to work together for common goals.

Family Health Program and Clinic

The school has an active family health program, based on the belief that students must be healthy to learn. They established a community health clinic two years ago in the Wilshire front of the building. It is operated by the California Family Care Hospital on an exchange basis with the school, where the school provides space and the hospital provides services. It is open to the public but gives priority to school families. The clinic is open from 8 am to 5 pm with a doctor on site, and provides free care to those who qualify. They also contract out for mental health services to be provided at the site. The clinic engages in prevention efforts, conducting family health education directed by the clinic doctor.*

There is no school nurse. Families can sign up for the clinic as their primary care provider, satisfying many of the requirements for student care, and the school contracts with the district for any additional required services. Having the clinic on the school site eliminates false sickness as an excuse for absence, since parents can be told, “Bring your child to the clinic.” A teacher told us she has had difficulties with students who needed counseling, but she was easily able to communicate with mental health services and find support with the help of the clinic staff.

Early Childhood Program

Next to the health clinic is a multi-use family center offering a preschool program for children from 14 months to three years of age. The plan is for this program to grow until it includes ages from infancy to five years, as a family service and as preparation for kindergarten. The program also includes parenting education sessions that parents must attend in order to enroll their children in the preschool.

* According to Camino Nuevo, some of these details have recently changed, but were accurate as of the date of our site visit.
Combining elementary and middle school grades on adjacent campuses and under the same administration also builds long term relationships with families and students. One teacher said that staff members have “a sense that the students are their own children.” All the students she sees in the hallway know her, which in turn gives her a sense of accountability for the students. Parents don’t have to meet new administrators and learn new rules when their children move into the sixth grade. A large number of new enrollees each year are siblings of existing students. This helps to build relationships with families over time, since staff members get to know the parents, their situations, their needs, and their strengths.

Likewise, students entering middle school don’t get lost in the adjustment to a new school. According to teachers, student carry a sense of ownership and belonging with them into sixth grade, which creates a much more focused experience in middle school as contrasted to the common experience of middle school as a revolving door. The middle school teachers also know more about the students because of communication and collaboration across grades. One teacher told us that “middle school kids can’t ‘pull things’ at school because the staff already knows them.” With only 60 students at each grade level, staff members get to know students’ areas of strength and challenge, and pass that information on to their next teachers. There is also satisfaction in watching the students grow over a longer period of time than teachers usually get to see.

The parents in our group interview expressed strong feelings of appreciation for the school’s and teachers’ personal attention to their children. One said, “There’s a lot of communication between teachers, students, and parents.” Parents reported that their children are treated as individuals. One said that her student was really behind at another school, and received no help until enrolling at Camino Nuevo, where a teacher provided extra help for him to catch up. Another said that her student was ahead of the class, and was happy because the teacher moved her forward in the material and encouraged her rather than letting her get frustrated. The teacher taught her, “The more you learn, the more doors will open.” The parents agreed with each other that “the teachers here really care.”


**Student Behavior**

Camino Nuevo seeks to help students develop constructive behavior habits over time. There is a School Culture and Climate Committee responsible for creating, maintaining, and supporting the school’s culture. This committee developed the Camino Nuevo Way as a set of principles for the school, which are reinforced and referenced throughout the year and in classrooms. Students produce and videotape skits on the Camino Nuevo Way. Individuals who exhibit the Camino Nuevo Way are given public acknowledgement at monthly Community Meetings that are largely planned by students and attended by many parents as well as students and staff. Staff members told us that students “get really involved” in these assemblies, and that parents and students “all enjoy it.” The Camino Nuevo Way consists of the following principles:

1. I stop problems before they start and I am committed to resolving differences in a positive way.
2. I give my best effort in everything I do.
3. I make choices that positively impact the community around me.
4. I set goals for myself and use time wisely to achieve them.
5. I communicate in a thoughtful, positive way.
6. I am compassionate and respectful of all life forms.
7. I harm no one and no thing with hate.
8. I expect to be challenged and will challenge myself in my work.
9. I am persistent in pursuing my goals even when I am not successful at first.
10. I work to keep the Earth clean and green.

The school emphasizes positive behavior as much as possible rather than reacting to negative behavior, and several of the teachers use point and reward systems within their classrooms to track and motivate student behavior. The school has a point system to promote accountability for behavior outside of classrooms based on a consistent approach within the community. These are called “dragon points,” after the school’s mascot; students call themselves *Los Dragones Valientes*. Points are tracked by the class rather than the individual student, and one class in each grade is honored each week with a ceremony in which they take responsibility for a stuffed dragon that will live in their
classroom for the week. The dragons have names, and the students take pride as well as enjoyment in winning the dragon for their grade.

Parents and staff told us that the school’s discipline is stricter than at most schools, both in the specificity of expectations for students and in the consistency of enforcement across the school. However, discipline is non-punitive. The disciplinary process is intended as a learning process for students, using a reflective approach to discipline that emphasizes internal responsibility rather than external authority. Students who misbehave are encouraged to think about the consequences of their actions, and sometimes to write a brief essay about their own behavior. They are reminded that they signed a commitment to follow the school’s rules. Parents are brought into the disciplinary process at an early stage, promoting communication and cooperation between school and home as a solution to many problems. Focus group parents identified the school’s disciplinary environment as one of the primary reasons for bringing their children to the school. One parent said, “The behavior rules last forever once they’re learned.”

Key Practice #2: Urban Infill Facilities

According to founder Lance, “Facilities are as important as practice.” The facilities at the Burlington site of CNCA have won urban design awards and have been featured on the cover of architectural magazines, but what matters is the difference the facilities might make in education and in the community environment. The most important feature of the facilities is not the design, but the fact that small pieces of unused urban space were reclaimed for a neighborhood school site that would not exist if it had to start with a full size property. Lance calls this an “urban infill” strategy that makes local schools possible while developing otherwise unproductive space.

The school started with 1/3 of an acre holding the shell of an unfinished mini-mall, and converted it into a school facility. Changing retail use to educational use required different bathrooms, safety modifications, and attention to access for those with
disabilities. They added steel structures to make corridors wider and create an exit route. The subterranean parking lot from the retail property was retained for staff parking.

The design included an interior courtyard that resembles a small town square and provides students with a safe outdoor space for breaks and lunches. It includes an amphitheater area for assemblies. When we visited, we found parents using the courtyard as a social gathering area and interacting with students on break. In the back of the amphitheater area, a specialist was working with a special needs student on a physical coordination task.

In separate transactions, the school later bought other properties on the same block for expansion. They acquired an adjacent property for $1 from the city and then raised money to pave it as a playground and add a play structure. Students at a neighboring law school wanted to help Camino Nuevo, and wrote a grant proposal to create a mural on a wall facing the playground. The mural honors the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, and was designed by artist Ernesto de la Loza and painted by students and families.

The middle school facility was converted from a warehouse on the opposite end of the block from the mini-mall that became the elementary school. Skylights were added for natural light in classrooms and hallways, and the electric lights in the building automatically adjust to save energy. The upstairs hallway faces busy Wilshire Boulevard, but is screened by perforated aluminum sheets. According to leaders, this feature grounds the school in the reality of the urban neighborhood, while keeping the street noise out of the classrooms.

These efforts produced a safe, secure place for a school close to the students’ homes. It has limitations; there is no cafeteria or gym. Common spaces like the playground must be scheduled creatively for all grades to use. There is room for expansion over time, though, as other properties on the block eventually become available.

The school emphasizes taking pride in making a positive impact on one’s environment, and the facilities embody that principle for the students. A lot of paint is
consumed to cover graffiti right away. Parents in the neighborhood call to report taggers, since they want to keep the school attractive.

According to staff, the students and parents appreciate the bright colors and clean school. In our group interview with parents, we did not ask specifically about the facilities, and parents did not comment on this topic. However, one of them emphasized the value of having a school “across the street from home.” On the other hand, one parent said that she didn’t mind driving some distance from home to the school “because the kids here learn better.” The contribution of the creatively designed facilities to education at CNCA is not clear from our research. But the contribution of the urban space used creatively is clearly what made a school possible in this neighborhood.

Summary

The promising practices we emphasize at Camino Nuevo are based on the engagement of the school with its local community—the cluster of family, health, and student behavior programs at the school, and the creation of modern facilities in unused urban spaces. In our observations and interviews, these practices seemed to be expressions of a culture of participation, service, and personal development on multiple dimensions. The passion and commitment of the staff is readily apparent, inspired at least partly by the opportunity to serve and become involved with the students and families of this community.