

Outside support ensures inside classroom success.

By Charles B. Knapp

In an editorial, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution commented on research that indicates that the private firms that manage public schools have generally not been successful in improving student performance ("Private letdown for public schools," @issue, May 1).

The fact is that when it comes to creating great schools, there is no single magic ingredient.

Drew Charter School in East Lake has been assisted since its inception in 2000 by an effective private firm, Edison Schools. The success that Drew has experienced, however, is really more directly related to the fact that it enjoys the support of an entire community.

As an educator for 36 years, I've learned that how well you address the challenges students face outside school can affect how well they perform inside the classroom.

Drew is a key element of the East Lake Foundation's comprehensive approach to community revitalization, which has become a national model for other cities seeking to transform their neighborhoods. Many initiatives focus either on housing or education. But you need both to help people turn their lives around.

East Lake has mixed-income housing, educational opportunities for adults and children, affordable daycare and recreational and social programs. Just as the foundation collaborates with many partners, so does Drew. With the support of more than 25 organizations, Drew's outstanding teachers, principal and staff balance rigorous academics with a rich array of visual and performing arts and a physical education program as varied as many large universities.

Drew's campus includes the East Lake Family YMCA, the Charlie Yates Golf Course, home to The First Tee® of East Lake – a junior golf instruction and mentoring program – and The Villages of East Lake. These facilities and partners enable Drew students to learn to golf, swim, play tennis and more.

Other partners include the Atlanta Speech School, which provides professional development for Drew teachers; Young Audiences, which teaches students about the arts; and THE TOUR Championship played every fall at the East Lake Golf Club, whose proceeds benefit community programs.

About 48 corporate and community volunteers come to Drew each week to provide one-on-one reading and math tutoring. Parents are involved in the school as board and PTA members, mentors and volunteers. Not only are Drew students preparing for college, but colleges are preparing for Drew students. Special educational endowments have been established at the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech to support the higher education of Drew students.

Drew has come a long way in a short time. In fact, over its first five years, the school had one of the highest rates of improvement in both the city of Atlanta and the state of Georgia.

The answer to a successful school is not whether or not it chooses to be assisted by a private firm. The answer is to make a school part of a community. A place where parents, teachers, administrators, volunteers and community members all dedicate themselves to each child's success.

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