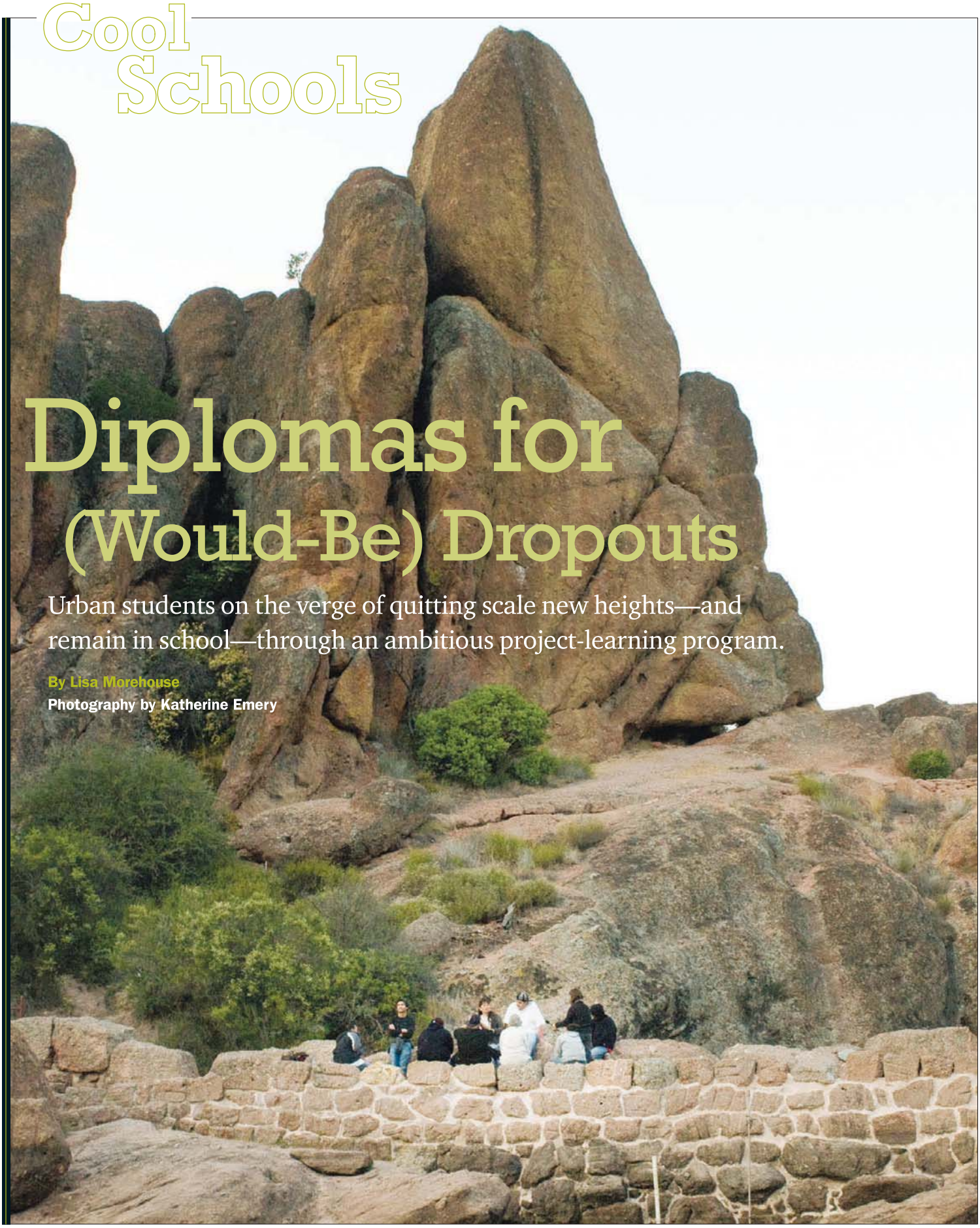

Diplomas for (Would-Be) Dropouts

Urban students on the verge of quitting scale new heights—and remain in school—through an ambitious project-learning program.

By Lisa Morehouse

Photography by Katherine Emery

Returning from a 6-mile hike through Pinnacles National Monument, in central California, students from San Francisco's Downtown High School want only to crawl into their tents and take a nap. Not so fast. First, they have to form groups and formulate written answers to an assigned question: If you were aliens landing on Planet Pinnacles, would you recommend inhabiting this land?

Louie Bustos, a high school senior with his San Francisco Giants baseball cap tilted precisely to one side, shares his group's decision against colonizing. "It lacks our basic necessity for living," he says. There's very little water, Bustos elaborates, so "bringing people to this dry, desolate planet would be futile." Daniel Carter's group disagrees, identifying resources such as vegetation, insects, birds, and animals. "The sweet aroma of maple blows through the valley below," Carter reads. "Everything looks promising for further research on Planet Pinnacles."

These students are clearly engaged in learning. Not long ago, they were ready to drop out of school. Firmly on the path leading away from graduation, Bustos, Carter, and their hiking companions made a sharp U-turn, by way of Downtown High School, toward success.

Downtown is a continuation high school in southeast San Francisco that educates students whose truancy, lack of credits, early parenthood, behavior, or prior incarceration have put them at risk for dropping out. The student population is predominantly African American and Latino, two ethnic groups that have tended to fall below their peers in achievement rankings, both nationally and locally.

"The school is designed to serve the most at-risk, most disenfranchised students in the district, those who haven't been successful in other schools," says Catherine Salvin, a longtime Downtown teacher and a member of the school's leadership team.

The school's approach to reengaging students in learning has an important twist: Downtown's curriculum is entirely project based. Its alternative format allows students to choose a thematic, integrated pathway of subjects each semester, find connections among these subjects in real-world settings, and, hopefully, discover their passions along the way.

Roots in Revolution

California introduced continuation schools in 1919 to give young people in rural areas the flexibility to work in agriculture while attending high school. "It was a compassionate and revolutionary idea," says Dennis Fisher, a consultant in the state Department of Education's Education Options Office.

Today, California's at-risk youth fit into many categories; the latest figures show that some 71,000 students attend 519 continuation schools around the state. Continuation school graduates, who receive a regular diploma, are held to the same core academic requirements as other high school students and must also pass the California High School Exit Exam. The schools vary in structure, size (from 30 to 650 students), and, says Fisher, quality. Some districts are known to use continuation schools as dumping grounds, but the schools also can be places to implement reform, and those that do so often deliver more than a diploma. They can have a lasting impact on students' lives.

Downtown's history features both extremes. In the mid-1990s, Salvin says, "it was like a bad Hollywood movie about high school," with weekly fights, chaotic passing periods, and rampant absenteeism. In 1998, the staff formed research committees, visited schools around the state, and developed pilot programs in the search for an alternative model for their school. Teachers created schoolwide projects, gave students a choice in scheduling classes, and used minimum days to teach high-interest thematic courses, such as African arts, poetry, even fishing.

"We were experimenting," explains Salvin, "and seeing if kids would come." The school's faculty and leadership team settled on a new school design and reopened in fall 1999 with a project-based structure.

Ten years in, that structure still holds, built around six core tenets of project-learning curriculum: integration, challenging academics, real-world focus, experiential study, applied learning, and authentic assessment. Students choose one of seven semester-long pathways, or projects—such as Get Out & Learn (GO&L) and Starstruck—with one or two instructors teaching all the subjects and partnering with outside agencies.

"We're engaging kids who are marginal," says Edward Cavanaugh, an instructor in the GO&L pathway. "They failed the system, or the system failed them. To make them repeat it seems counterproductive."

Stars in Their Eyes

Downtown's structure works well for student Zach Jefferson. "You're almost like a robot at a traditional high school," he says. "Here, you actually have a choice about what you want to learn."

There's power in curriculum integration, adds Starstruck student Daniel Carter. "They might mix astronomy up with math. I'm getting my math credits while doing astronomy, which is the thing that I like, right?" That power is amplified when it provides an entree into rigorous academics. Carter

Wide-Open Classroom: Opposite: Students gather after a hike to discuss what they saw. Left: Teacher Catherine Salvin describes the physiology of bats. Right: A rock staircase leads students to a lake.

Outside the Box: Left: Home base for one field trip is this campground at central California's Pinnacles National Monument. Right: Students in the Wilderness Arts and Literacy Collaborative created these baskets and ceramics.

points to other work—binary math, novel reading (Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower),* and essay writing—that relates to the class theme. He adds that teacher Anne Marie Grace also conducts daily warm-ups with articles about new planets, the International Space Station, and citizen astronauts.

Ed Cavanaugh grounds the GO&L project in experiential learning. "The classroom is wherever we meet," he says. "There are no field trips; we're just learning somewhere else." This group meets regularly at San Francisco's Aquatic Park, where the students build and sail boats they've created using historic local designs. "Lots of lightbulbs go on when you hand them a tape measure," says Cavanaugh. "It's real—because if they do it wrong, they waste material."

GO&L students read books like Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and go on eleven-day backpacking trips in the Sierra Nevada and the Ventana Wilderness, after studying wilderness first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, nutrition, mapping and compassing, and plant identification.

Such opportunities let kids apply classroom learning. After oohing and ahhing over a night sky undisturbed by city lights on the Pinnacles camping trip, the students spontaneously lie on the ground and start asking questions about stars, satellites, and constellations. Bustos tells his peers, "A lot of these stars are so far away, a lot of them don't exist anymore; it's just the light still traveling to us. It's like looking into the past."

That strikes a chord with Zach Jefferson. "Just think, we're here, and all that is there, and some stars don't even exist, and we're still looking at them. I just think, *daaaaammnn,"* he says. "You feel left out."

Jefferson had never been to a state or national park, gone camping, or studied the environment before he joined Downtown, but now he speaks at length about Redwood National Park and logging issues in northern California. He addresses the human causes of local wildlife endangerment, too—information he gained while doing local habitat-restoration work. This city kid plans to continue camping after he graduates, and last summer he got a job working with a San Francisco environmental-justice organization, one of the outside groups that partner with his program at Downtown. He says, "I'm much more aware of my city now."

Seriously behind in credits, Daniel Carter came to Downtown in his junior year. (Full disclosure: We never crossed paths, but Carter attended a school where this writer once taught). In Starstruck, something clicked. "I came in thinking, 'I'm going to learn some stuff about stars,' and it turns out I really got into it," he says. "Just think about the galaxies and planets out there we don't know about; there could be other life out there that we don't know about." Four months ago, Carter set up a telescope in his back yard to look for the North Star, Orion's Belt, and meteor showers. When he showed his mom all the craters on the Moon, she had to look twice to believe what she was seeing.

Bumps in the Road

Though new to Downtown, Principal Mark Alvarado advocates for the project-based structure and sees the results. As an assistant principal at a comprehensive school in the same district, Alvarado spent two years disciplining one student, he recalls, who was "among the top ten most challenging students I've ever worked with." This past June, he saw her graduate from Downtown. "She's an entirely different human being," he says. "I think there's a psychological effect. Downtown's the end of the road, and students are doing work successfully that's outside their comfort zones. Some of the achievements, you just can't quantify."

Data about continuation schools is hard to gather because of the small and fluctuating student populations. (Downtown, for example, has a capacity for 275 students and sees up to 400 students annually.) Downtown, which keeps its own records, creates internal assessments using the same rubrics across all projects (see "How To: Design Assessments for Project Learning," page 29). Staff members celebrate the students who graduate each year—consistently double and triple the number that graduated before project learning was adopted—especially when other district schools have been unsuccessful with the same students.

TURNAROUND TEEN

Watch former truant Louie Bustos find his passion for astronomy at
edutopia.org/downtown-slide-show

"This school is the achievement gap personified," says Catherine Salvin. "Each student who earns a diploma from this school is a student who wouldn't otherwise earn one. Graduating 60 to 95 kids a year is no small thing."

Not to suggest that everything is rosy at Downtown. Salvin frets about the kids who never get hooked, and Alvarado wants better data to find out where students are academically. He wonders, "Within that group, are the kids problem solvers?

How To:

Design Assessments for Project Learning

Assessing student learning during and at the end of complex projects can be tough, even at a school like San Francisco's Downtown High School, with its many thoughtful educators and supportive administration. Teacher Catherine Salvin says that Downtown's staff focused recently on assessment to create common high expectations and ensure academic markers for their at-risk students. "It's our job to make sure they're really getting an education," Salvin says. "Before we send them out into the world, even if they don't plan to go to college, we want to know they've mastered a certain set of skills." Salvin and her peers are working to build meaningful assessments at all levels of the school.

Create Stepping-Stones

Within the individual thematic projects, many of Downtown's teachers create assessment stepping-stones. In their multimedia project "So You Think You're Ready for Hollywood?" teachers Eunice Nuval and Kyle Beckham required students to master several academic tasks before moving into media production.

With the end goal of making a film, students conducted research on a system of oppression (xenophobia, sexism, and so on) and wrote a paper that their teachers graded based on a rubric. They studied *The Screenwriter's Bible,* by David Trottier, and wrote monologues they incorporated into individual screenplays based on their research. Peers assessed their work, too. In groups of ten, students selected one screenplay to turn into a film and took on tasks (working with acting coaches, running production teams, learning Apple Final Cut Pro software) to produce it. "Making the film and acting are the carrots" for completing high-quality academic work, says Nuval.

Let Students Teach

Twice a year, Downtown students teach peers and community members about their projects and semester-long learning during exhibition days. This past June, the Starstruck and Get Out & Learn (GO&L) students held their exhibitions off campus; Starstruck students replicated the solar system at Fisherman's Wharf and GO&L students described the process of making their skiff at Aquatic Park.

At school, Still Life/Real Life students presented multimedia oral history and photo-essay projects. In the Wilderness Arts and Literacy Collaborative pathway, Salvin and team teacher Sherry Bass pushed students to make their exhibitions interactive: After a unit focusing on northern California geology, immigration, and migration, students completed projects integrating painting and poetry with history and geology. For exhibition, the students created an art gallery and became docents, describing each other's artwork, and held a poetry reading.

Salvin believes exhibitions really show what students have learned because they become instructors during these events. But each teacher at Downtown evaluates student exhibitions differently. Though all teachers review exhibition evaluations filled out by visitors with their classes, some invest more time assessing student work and presentations. Others rely on a four-point scale to rate students on the quality of their product, presentation, and participation.

Use Schoolwide Assessments

Downtown's Literacy Committee has initiated schoolwide assessments. After piloting the program in a few pathways, all the teachers now assign a novel and a response-to-literature essay related to their theme, and score these essays on a standardized rubric. Before launching this assignment schoolwide, Downtown used weekly meeting time for professional development around vocabulary and Bloom's Taxonomy (so all teachers would be taking literature discussions to high levels), introduced the essay rubric, and repeatedly anchored essays together so there was a common understanding of what the scores mean. Last spring, the school piloted a similar program with reading strategies and a rubric; it will be added to Downtown's schoolwide initiatives this year.

Look Inward

Assessment doesn't end with students. Last spring, Downtown launched a project-portfolio system for teachers. For each project, teachers gather foundation pieces (project curriculum, syllabi, and so on), samples of varying levels of academic work, and examples of application of schoolwide rubrics, as well as typical student evaluations and project products.

The school leadership team led professional-development sessions and had teachers share their work. The sessions began with a preportfolio activity in which teacher pairs visited each other's classrooms and gave feedback about content integration and academic rigor. In their portfolios, Salvin says, "teachers must have evidence of their students satisfying our critical academic skills, which are the performance standards of project-based learning at the school and the schoolwide initiatives." *—LM*

Can they work in groups? Do they have twenty-first-century skills?" Ed Cavanaugh wants to see better content integration and echoes the comments of many teachers and students when he emphasizes the need for high, schoolwide standards: "As a school, we need to have the same expectations—academic and behavioral—in all projects."

Alvarado believes that professional development will narrow many of these gaps, and Salvin says that Downtown's committees (focused on literacy, math, curriculum, and school culture) push the staff to adjust the school's structure and standardize the academic expectations for each project. Alvarado hopes to build on Downtown's successes by developing the school's public-private partnerships and taking some of the organizing and fundraising load off teachers. (Projects like GO&L are nonprofit organizations that must raise tens of thousands of dollars.) But graduate Louie Bustos knows that Downtown, just as it is, changed the direction of his life. "I got totally lucky," he says.

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