

**Rocketship Schools
TRANSCRIPT**

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JEFFREY BROWN: Now we look to a California education experiment called the Rocketship Model that involves teachers, kids and parents and aims to expand one day to serve a million students.

NewsHour's special correspondent for education, John Merrow, has our report.

JOHN MERROW: The Model T was the first, the first innovative and affordable car available to the masses. Others had built good cars, but Henry Ford figured out how to build a lot of them. He and his moving assembly line proved that quality can be mass-produced.

Mass production is a problem the auto industry solved over 100 years ago, but it's an issue our education system has yet to figure out. America has lots of terrific schools. People open great schools every year, but typically open just one. Nobody has figured out how to mass-produce high-quality, cost-effective schools.

John Danner is the latest to give it a shot. He created an innovative charter school model with replication in mind. Charter schools receive public funding, but are privately managed and operate outside of the traditional public system.

JOHN DANNER, Rocketship Education: Our public education system's not really set up for change.

JOHN MERROW: Before going into education, Danner founded and ran a successful Silicon Valley startup. He designed his new education model after teaching for three years in a traditional public school.

JOHN DANNER: Causing change within that system's really, really difficult. And I think that's actually what charter schools were created to do, was to shake things up, do things differently.

ADAM NADEAU, principal, Rocketship Mosaic Elementary: All right, Rocketeers, it is 7:55. Let me hear you loud and proud. Good morning, Rocketeers!

STUDENTS: Good morning, Mr. Nadeau.

JOHN MERROW: Rocketship's seven schools are among the top-performing low-income schools in California. Once open, they operate entirely with public funding. The Rocketship Model has a few key parts that make it work. The first happens every morning, during something called Launch.

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ADAM NADEAU: Launch is a really powerful experience for us. Getting all of those kids, all the teachers, everyone in the community, parents included, in that same spot, doing some things together, it's meaningful.

STUDENT: Good morning.

ADAM NADEAU: Good morning.

JOHN MERROW: Adam Nadeau is principal of Rocketship's Mosaic Elementary School in San Jose, Calif. He says it all starts with high expectations.

ADAM NADEAU: We're trying to get kids at or above grade level, build the academic skills, but also build the character skills.

JOHN MERROW: Each school serves about 600 students, kindergarten through fifth grade.

JOHN DANNER: They're low-income, they're immigrants, they're often with parents working multiple jobs. If you think about the lives of the families and the children that are coming to this school, they have every possible strike against them.

JOHN MERROW: Parents are encouraged to participate in Launch because they are a critical part of the model.

VERONICA BARBOSA, parent: It's just amazing how the community comes together and just cheering for our school, like if we were cheering for our favorite football team.

JOHN MERROW: But Launch is about more than team spirit.

VERONICA BARBOSA: They encourage you to come in and help out in the classroom to see how your child is getting educated.

ADAM NADEAU: Getting families in there is really challenging, but it's really important. If they're going to know what a high-quality classroom looks like, they have got to see it.

JOHN MERROW: The hope is that, after students graduate from Rocketship and move on to middle school, their parents will advocate for high-quality instruction there. The next part of the model is about recruiting and supporting teachers.

Seventy-five percent of Rocketship teachers come from Teach for America. About half have less than two years of classroom experience. All teachers get professional development.

JUDY LAVI, teacher, Rocketship Mosaic Elementary: I have someone in my classroom almost every single day, sometimes every other day, giving me feedback and just holding me accountable to high-quality instruction.

JOHN MERROW: Another part of the model, teachers do not belong to a union.

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CRISTINA CALLAGY, teacher, Rocketship Mosaic Elementary: We do have an at-will employment contract, or non- contract, I guess.

JOHN MERROW: Could you be fired tomorrow?

CRISTINA CALLAGY: Well, I don't think they ever would. I'm valuable to the school. I produce good results with kids. And so they would have no reason.

JOHN MERROW: If the unions came to you and said, John, we'd like to unionize Rocketship, what would you say?

JOHN DANNER: I would say absolutely not. We're a startup. You know, in startups, you basically do something different every day. Any major school district has a 450-page kind of contract that literally says minute by minute what teachers are supposed to do. So the fit between how that's evolved and what Rocketship is like is just a bad fit.

JOHN MERROW: No union, is that a problem?

JUDY LAVI: I'm making more money than I made when I was part of a union. I have more job security than, I would say, than when I was part of a union. So I'm not sure what I would need a union for.

JOHN MERROW: With no union contract, Rocketship can decide what to pay teachers.

Andrew Elliott-Chandler is the principal of Rocketship Si Se Puede Elementary.

ANDREW ELLIOTT-CHANDLER, Rocketship Si Se Puede Elementary: I was excited to offer some of our third-year teachers doing well almost \$70,000 this year.

JOHN MERROW: That's almost 30 percent higher than a third year teacher earns in a neighboring district. Rocketship teachers typically make at least 15 percent more, thanks to this part of the model. It's the linchpin that makes Danner's financial model tick: the learning lab.

Every school has a room like this, lots of computers and kids, but no classroom teachers. Learning labs are staffed with hourly employees called individualized learning specialists, who lack teaching credentials.

MELANIE HANG, individualized learning specialist, Rocketship Mosaic Elementary: Yes, I have five classes that I coach. So that's probably about 150 students.

JOHN MERROW: For about one hour every day, students practice math and literacy skills. They work independently at their own pace. The computer is able to track and guide the progress of each student.

It's something educators call differentiated learning. Some students work on basic skills, while others advance to more challenging lessons.

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The learning lab allows a school to hire six fewer teachers, which Rocketship says results in savings of up to half a million dollars. That money is used to pay teachers higher salaries, fund academic deans who help teachers get better, and train principals for future Rocketship schools.

But one thing the savings are not used for, art and music classes.

VERONICA BARBOSA: I wish we could have art and music in the school, but at the same time if you want your child to have that in their life, you can make the effort to try and get it, like, after school or on the weekends.

JOHN MERROW: The learning lab saves schools a lot of money, but there's just one problem: They're not really working.

JUDY LAVI: There's definitely an aspect of us kind of not knowing enough about what's going on in learning lab to be able to use that in our classrooms.

ANDREW ELLIOTT-CHANDLER: We don't yet get data that says, OK, teach this differently tomorrow because of what happened here. And that is -- that is a frustration point.

JOHN MERROW: A problem we saw is that some students in the lab do not appear to be engaged. They sit at their computers for long periods of time, seemingly just guessing.

JUDY LAVI: That's definitely not the ideal situation. The ideal situation would be that they'd get help from somebody in the learning lab who would explain the concept to them. Then they would go back and practice it.

JOHN MERROW: Rocketship says it's about to make a big change to its model.

ADAM NADEAU: If I had to guess, I would say you come back in a year, you won't see a learning lab.

ANDREW ELLIOTT-CHANDLER: Next year, we're -- we're thinking of bringing the computers back to the classrooms and the kids back to the classrooms.

JOHN MERROW: What this new model might look like and how it may affect the school's bottom line is unknown, but the leaders are not worried.

ANDREW ELLIOTT-CHANDLER: Innovation, I think, is one of the most exciting reasons to be at Rocketship. It's exhausting, but it's also exhilarating. Things change dramatically every year.

JOHN DANNER: If you want to try some things, and you can prove that they work, nobody tells you not to do it in -- in the charter world.

JOHN MERROW: New Orleans, Nashville, Indianapolis, and Memphis have all approved charters for Rocketship schools to be built in their cities. Next year, two new schools will

For questions, comments, or more information, email us at news@learningmatters.tv.

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open in San Jose and one in Milwaukee. Danner plans to have 46 schools up and running in five years, with a vision of someday serving 50 cities and a million students. If he succeeds, Rocketship could become the Model T of education.