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New route: A bus takes learning to places where the streets are deadly

With the Self-Determination Bus Project, a San Francisco-based nonprofit hopes to address safety issues that keep adults from earning their high school diplomas.

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OCTOBER 9, 2017 | SAN FRANCISCO — Where Shelia Hill comes from, people get shot for crossing the wrong street.

Visitacion Valley, a district that sits on the southeastern end of San Francisco near the San Mateo County line, has a history of substance abuse, drug dealing, and gang violence going back to the 1970s. It's not unusual, Ms. Hill says, for young men in the neighborhood to kill each other because they come from rival gang territories – areas that could be just two blocks apart.

“They can't even go to the corner store without risking their life,” she says. “It's crazy, but it's real.”

Hill's own salvation had been Five Keys Charter School, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that runs a community learning center in Visitacion, also known as Sunnydale for the avenue that winds through the neighborhood. Hill, 48, spent two years working to get her high school diploma through the program's independent study plan. Today she's a full-time teacher's aide and community ambassador for Five Keys, helping to bring in students from neighborhoods like hers. But she knows that most Sunnydale residents have to put safety before any kind of education – much less a career that would pull them out of a life of violence.

So she was thrilled when she heard that Five Keys was converting an old city bus into a state-of-the-art classroom that would cater especially to divided neighborhoods.

“The bus can pull right up to the community and people who want their education, they can get on,” Hill says. “They don't have to let the barriers stop them no more.”

The bus, or mobile school, is the latest project to come out of Five Keys, an education management organization that the San Francisco Sheriff's Department launched in 2003. The department at the time wanted to develop a more robust education program for inmates at the county jails but found it difficult to maintain close partnerships with local education agencies. So

they started their own. It's also just one example of how the school bus is being used to break down barriers and bring resources to students who need them most – from mobile science labs in Georgia to wifi in low-income neighborhoods in California and Texas, so that students can finish their homework.

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“We thought, ‘How cool would that be, if education became a pillar of the jail operations – if it’s integrated and not this afterthought?’” says Sunny Schwartz, then-program administrator for the sheriff’s office.

Since its inception, the program has expanded throughout the city and now offers a second chance for any student, 17 or over, who had dropped out of school and wants to get back on track.

Today half of all Five Keys students who come in for 12th grade and stay on the program for six months, graduate. Eighty-five percent pass their GED subtests, and 80 percent say they are either learning new things or the program is helping them achieve a life goal. Among those who were formerly incarcerated, only 40 percent relapse, compared to the state’s 65 percent recidivism rate. Five Keys also runs more than 70 accredited charter schools and programs for adults 18 and over in jails and communities across California, with 20 sites in San Francisco.

“But even with all of our community learning centers, you just can’t serve all the neighborhoods because of safety,” says executive director Steve Good. The Self-Determination Bus Project, he says, would bring Five Keys’s resources and years of expertise to those neighborhoods – and is a step toward closing that gap.

Creating a roving classroom

On a warm Wednesday in September, the mobile school sat parked outside the Five Keys learning center at 3120 Mission Street. The bus had once been part of the fleet that makes up the San Francisco Municipal Transit system. Muni donated two retired buses to the project: one is now used for parts, while the other has been given a total makeover.

Unlike the red-and-white behemoths that roam San Francisco’s city streets, the Self-Determination Bus is painted shades of green. Stamped across the sides are slogans like “I am committed” and “I am accountable.” Inside, the floor and ceilings are wood, and the space glows with a soft white light. Lime-green chairs append collapsible desks. At the back of the bus is a lounge with cushioned benches, throw pillows, and a small library. There’s free wifi and air conditioning.

The design involved feedback from community members as well as Five Keys teachers and students. The idea is based on research that suggests that classroom atmosphere affects student achievement.

“Creating an environment in my classroom where everyone felt safe, that was the most important thing,” says Josh Brough, a Five Keys instructor who spent four years teaching in Sunnydale. He recalls having to bike daily between two community centers that were separated by gang lines. Gunshots would sound outside his classroom. To counter that, he says, “I would put calming, happy reggae music all day long, get nice light coming in, get good air. Create that vibe.”

“Once I could get that accomplished – and I had to do it every day with different students – then it was time to start putting pen to paper,” he says.

Five Keys also equips the mobile school with the human resources that have helped its stationary learning centers succeed. Aboard the bus are a full-time instructor and a teacher’s assistant-cum-bus driver, there to help students get through the one-unit packets that are the hallmark of the Five Keys curriculum. Students are encouraged to go through the packets – subjects

like government, algebra, and English – on their own time, and receive support and additional instruction at Five Keys classrooms when their schedules permit.

In short, the bus – which parks near community centers in high-risk neighborhoods at a set rotation every week – serves as a roving replica of Five Keys sites across the city.

“We determine what classes you actually need to take and how you’re going to have to work to get your diploma,” Mr. Good says.

Many adults going back to school often have kids and jobs to worry about, and the flexible schedule and bite-sized materials are a godsend, says Hill, who enrolled in Five Keys in late 2013, after she adopted a young boy whose mother was an addict. Until that point she had been a single mother who sold drugs and engaged in prostitution to pay the bills. School had not been a priority. “I was embarrassed because I couldn’t read,” Hill says. “I couldn’t even help my son with his homework. He was what, 7?”

It was Mr. Brough who got her to open up about her literacy skills. He started her on Dr. Seuss, but never made her feel like she was slow or incapable. “He showed compassion,” Hill says. “This is the kind of teachers they’ve got at Five Keys: they actually care.”

To bring that kind of learning environment to the communities that need them most could be life-changing, she adds. “This bus, I believe it’s going to save a lot of people.”

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What happens once the novelty wears off?

Getting the project on the road, however, has presented Five Keys with both old and new challenges. The organization doesn’t run its learning centers on a regular schedule with daily transportation. Most students, whose average age is about 25, find their own way to class.

So the group wasn’t prepared for the problems that come with running a city bus – like what to do when the generator broke down after a few weeks of beta testing, or when the bus wouldn’t travel well uphill. “That’s been the steepest learning curve, the mechanical issues,” says Dorick Scarpelli, director of the College Pathways and Workforce Development program at Five Keys.

There’s also some concern that, once the novelty of getting on a bus to study wears off, instructors will still have to grapple with the problems facing all Five Keys locations – and adult education programs in gang-prone neighborhoods in general. How do you keep students calm when a passing car could mean a drive-by shooting? How do you help them overcome post-traumatic stress after they’ve seen their friend or family member shot on the corner across the street?

“They have to deal with money, being hungry, being sick,” Brough says. “There’s still going to be barriers, beyond just getting on the bus.”

Still, the mobile school officially launched on Oct. 3 – a three-week delay. And Brough says that for those who live in neighborhoods like Sunnydale, having a bus that allows them to attend class without fear of crossing gang lines could ease the danger and stress of their daily lives. And while not every student who walks into a Five Keys classroom – or steps on the bus – will leave transformed, he says every one that does makes a difference to their families and communities.

“You break the cycle,” Brough says.