

Grantee Spotlight

In this section, we feature interviews with some of our grantee organizations' directors and key staff members, who share their thoughts on their work and the particular fields they're involved in.

An Interview with Dr. Claire Sylvan of the [Internationals Network for Public Schools](#)

Dr. Claire Sylvan is the founding executive director of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, a non-profit organization dedicated to the development and support of ten high schools for English language learners, nine in New York City and a 10th school in Oakland, California. The mission of the Internationals Network is to provide quality education for recently arrived immigrant high school students with the goal of preparing them for college



Dr. Claire Sylvan's love for languages may well have started in high school after she spent ten weeks in Colombia, where she quickly became fluent in Spanish. What amazed her, though, was that when she came back to the States, she ended up with a "D" in Spanish. "I spoke like a Colombian native," she recalls, "and the teacher was not impressed." That realization—that all language must be valued—has stayed with her.

Growing up in a home where both parents were activists (her mother was a union organizer of New York City case workers) and after receiving her degree from Brooklyn College, Dr. Sylvan went on to a career working among immigrant communities and workplaces across several New York boroughs. After receiving her master's degree, she taught ESL and Bilingual classes in the New York City schools. However, through years of experience, she realized that she loved the kids, but did not like the system. Eventually, "something sort of snapped in me. I had to leave, though I had no idea what I would do."

In 1991, Dr. Sylvan was hired as a teacher at the International High School at LaGuardia Community College. "I was blown out of the water. I couldn't believe that I was getting a check for treating kids with deep respect." After receipt of a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2004, Dr. Sylvan has spearheaded the Internationals Network to bring it to its current roster of ten schools, including the newly opened Oakland International High School.

Important Principles

Dr. Sylvan is very clear about the philosophy behind the Internationals Network. "First," she explains, "there's the principle of heterogeneity and collaboration," that is, students who speak different languages and who have varied educational backgrounds learn together. "There's the assumption that every single person who enters into our community has a strength [to contribute]." You may not know how to read, but

if you've been in a refugee camp, you have a knowledge of the world that can be tapped." The schools are small, with enrollment ranging from 300 to 470 students.

Another important principle is that of "language and content integration. Every teacher is a teacher of language," whether he or she teaches history or algebra. The focus on content provides opportunities for "scaffolding" students' language development. One of the ways teachers scaffold instruction is by placing students in cooperative groups where they can provide support and explanations in "kid-friendly" language to one another.

And then there's the tenet of "one learning model for all," with the student model reflecting that of teachers. "We're saying that the way adults interact in an educational setting will be mirrored in the way kids are taught." She mentions the traditional faculty meeting, where a principal stands at the front of the room and talks to teachers, who understandably may tune out. "The same is often true in the classroom, with a couple of kids raising their hands and the rest zoning out." In the case of the Internationals model, Dr. Sylvan says, both teachers and students work in interdisciplinary and heterogeneous groupings, while developing leadership skills through (in the case of teachers) planning professional development days, and (in the case of students) spearheading group projects.

Unique Challenges

Despite the strong principles that are the foundation of the schools, Dr. Sylvan is cognizant of the challenge of the teenage population that they serve. "With teenagers, you're dealing with identity problems. Their identity has been thrown up in the air. The decision to come to America was not made by the youth. It was 'You're now living in a new country.' Seventy percent of youth have been separated from one or both parents." For teachers, the challenge is a bit different. "It's not mainly linguistic diversity, but designing curriculum that takes into account kids' educational background. Some of our students may have very limited formal schooling while others of the same age have been fortunate enough to attend quality schools although they have limited proficiency in English. Designing a project that engages all of our students so that they can learn while sharing their knowledge, perspectives and experiences is a great challenge for teachers, one that requires our network and schools to provide teachers with intensive and on-going opportunities for professional development and sharing."

Dr. Sylvan goes on to say that the composition of the classrooms may reflect world events. "We see students from Bosnia, Haiti, French-speaking Africa." And with such diversity may come the need for conflict resolution between, for example, a student from Serbia and another from Bosnia; or a student from Afghanistan and another from Russia. "Students are encouraged to share their experiences and discover their common humanity through working together in small groups where they learn about each other's experiences as they depend on each other to complete their projects in class," Sylvan explains.

In what spare time she has, Dr. Sylvan loves to read (*Charlie Wilson's War*, Jane Austen, mysteries), take walks (sometimes two miles a day during the week and three or four on weekends). She and husband Roberto, have a son, 19, a freshman at the University of Chicago, and a daughter, 22, who's a junior in the dance program at Fordham University.

And Dr. Sylvan's feelings about her chosen mission? As director of a network of learners that, compared to other New York City schools, reflects much lower drop-out rates and a very high percentage of students going on to college (90% at some schools), Sylvan has a right to be proud. "The students we serve inspire you. I can't tell you how heroic our students and staff are. Our teachers go the extra mile—in fact, they go 100 miles."