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I've been to a lot of schools in the last six years. And not just in Estonia – whenever I'm on a state visit I always try to include it in my schedule. What I'm most interested in is the health of the kids attending them: their school dinners, the sports they play, what they get to do outside of school, fostering their values and instilling their culture in them, and of course what they learn. Since I haven't had the opportunity to share the impressions I've formed particularly widely, I agreed with Õpetajate Leht to do just that every now and again, given sufficient space and sufficient interest.

Since I'm not long back from a fairly big trip to the United States, I thought I'd talk about a municipal school I visited in New York. (Education in America is organised at the state and local government level, not nationally.) Public School no. 175 was right in the middle of Harlem – a name that's probably familiar to everyone, even if they've never been to New York or the States. It tends to be associated with ghettos and crime; songs and novels present it as a downright dangerous (and hence exhilarating) place. But in September 2012 that's where the NYC government recommended I go, because the school was said to have an exemplary DIY approach and the ability to turn dreams into reality. It even has its own little garden in the middle of the concrete jungle, with a community greenhouse – the first in Manhattan – taking shape on the empty block of land next to the school between two giant apartment blocks.

A concrete colossus behind towering walls

The school itself is a typical urban elementary school, drawing kids in from the surrounding area. The boundary juts out invisibly but all too clearly between buildings, and anyone who lives on the other side of it has to send their kids to another school. The lines are drawn so that the pupils, all aged between 4 and 10, can get to school on foot. The concrete colossus that is the school building is enclosed within high walls, beyond which are the broad city streets. There isn't a single car park to be seen nearby. Our little delegation is welcomed in the foyer first by an Estonian greeting stuck to the wall (Google Translate having got it absolutely right for once!) and then, a minute later, by the school's young, dreadlocked principal Cheryl McClendon.

"Oh, I have no idea how I'm going to fill in your day!" she says, looking a little anxious. "We've never had a first lady visit us before!" As a start she invites us into her modest little office, which we reach by passing through a corridor lined floor-to-ceiling with glazed grey tiles. It feels more like a hospital than a school. "Take it easy!" I say, doing my best to reassure her, and with that the nervous tension is gone. We talk about health and about the school dinners they provide, and when the principal hears that we **really do want** to take a look at the canteen and kitchen and **really do want** to have lunch with the pupils, she returns to her energetic self.

Principal McClendon shows us briefly around her school, which she's been in charge of for just four years. She recalls that on her first day she was stopped in her tracks by the noise and the bustle. The school is situated at the heart of an area that's home to Manhattan's poorest residents, who are mostly immigrants. More than 80% of the pupils are from families whose incomes leave them below the poverty line, meaning they go without a great deal. They live in homes where there are no books, where there's no dining table and where there's nothing of their own. Some of them starting school have never even seen real fruit and vegetables, let alone been lucky enough to taste real meat. That's why good school dinners are so important and why the school has taken it upon itself to sell books, so that families with little money to spare can choose those which are most useful and affordable. Indeed, there's a colourful book stall right opposite the main entrance, staffed by volunteer parents.

The school must find its own funding

The head of a school like this has to be an A-grade organiser. The city doesn't pay, for example, for foreign language, physical education, art and handicraft or music lessons. If the principal and the parents view them as part of a proper education, they have to put their heads together and think about how to include them. And in fact all of these subjects are on the timetable at the school – taught by non-profit organisations and volunteers. They have an agreement with a local theatre for music and dance lessons; a football club arranges sports classes for the pupils in Grade 1; an aerobics studio does the same for the kids in Grade 2; and so it goes on. And despite the fact that right behind the school there's a full-sized athletics stadium with a brand new roof (the complex having been built with the help of sponsors), no track and field training goes on there – there's no one to coach the kids, so it's used as an open-air playground. Hearing how much time and energy the principal expends finding partners and then finding sponsors to finance their activities, I realise that we've actually got it pretty good. I wonder to myself who ends up with the more competitive education: a secondary student from Estonia who comes out of school with three foreign languages or... But comparisons here are pointless, since there are a lot of different kinds of schools in America,

and those that boast private money enjoy much more flexible curricula. Which is to say that it's much easier to study subjects which aren't supported by the local government.

As I wander about the corridors I see little kids in cute blue and grey uniforms, who all smile at me and, if they can, come right up and start talking to me. There's no screaming and yelling and running around. How has Principal McClendon managed it? When I put the question to her, the man who's been shadowing her since our arrival steps forward – the overall-clad Tony Hillery.

We soon discover that Tony is the school's very own fairy godmother. When his own children grew up, he realised that he still wanted to do whatever he could for the good of the local kids. The director of a once-successful limousine business, he'd found himself out of a job in the recession, if not without loyal and grateful clients (including many Hollywood celebrities). He had enough friends and enough work here and then to spur him on. Now you'll find him at Public School no. 175 every single day. At first he helped out by keeping the kids in check in the corridors, and doing minor repairs here and there, and making sure the toilets were in working order and stocked with toilet paper. What most worried him though was the food that was being served up to the pupils – pre-packaged, microwave-reheated stuff no one was really able to identify. He did a quick tally of the diners and grocery stores in the surrounding area and found 53 fried chicken outlets and not one vegetarian restaurant. "It's a food desert!" he says, shaking his head. I knew the expression from a conversation I once had with Michelle Obama, who considers such places one of the greatest dangers to America's children. They're areas where the shops sell everything pre-packaged and where nothing on the menu at restaurants is fresh. Tony discovered that alongside the giant corporations whose priority is to feed children as cheaply as possible and therefore boost their profits there are little foundations and non-profit organisations who compete for the same public food funding and yet whose priorities are children's health, food- and exercise-related education and environmental awareness. And it is one of these non-profit organisations – which goes by the name 'Wellness In The Schools' (WITS) – that is currently catering Public School no. 175 in Harlem. As we're ushered in to its gleaming stainless steel kitchen, we spy a young, blue-eyed blonde behind a mountain of salad greens preparing lunch for the pupils. Although WITS is responsible for catering 40 schools, they provide fresh food in each and every one of them. All of the meals are parcelled up individually, too: every pupil gets two servings of fruit; a wholegrain bread roll; one serving of rice, potato or pasta; one portion of steamed vegetables (today it's broccoli); fresh salad; and meat or fish. None of it comes out of a box or tin. To drink they're given milk or water. As we watch, every pupil lines up for and gets their lunch, with entire classes sitting at their tables to tuck in together. While they're doing so, nutrition specialists from WITS wander from table to table, answering the kids' questions and explaining things to them. The teachers in Grades 1 and 2 are asked to tell their pupils about what they're eating and why it's good for them before they begin.

Keanu Reeves' donation

But Tony didn't stop there – he called on his A-list acquaintances to help the school out. And help they did: rooms were renovated, the stadium was built and his 'pets' – the garden and the greenhouse – took shape. The foundation he set up, Harlem Grown, is collecting more and more donations and making ever more ambitious plans. How the block of land next to the school, which was once little more than a rubbish tip, had been transformed into a quiet, green oasis I saw with my own eyes. The climate here means that a variety of things can be grown, giving the pupils the chance to experience what it's like to quite literally reap what they sow. All waste is composted, as Tony shows me when he produces a handful of his 'black gold'. One corner of the garden has been turned into an outdoor classroom, with benches dotted about for the students to sit on. A large sign hanging on the wall reads 'silence', reflecting the tranquillity that prevails here. The trees form a barrier to the traffic noise beyond, and the kids themselves are quiet. You clearly come to the garden to be at one with yourself and nature. Everything grown in the garden is used in home economics classes, but the gate is never locked. If someone has nothing left in the pantry at home, they're welcome to come to the school garden and take what they need. To date this openness and trust has never been abused.

Last but not least, Tony shows us his proudest achievement – one that was even reported on by the NY Times: his greenhouse. Keanu Reeves, one of his former clients, donated \$100,000 towards the project, and Tony hopes to cover all of the costs with it. 50 metres long and 20 or so wide, fully heated and using the rainwater from the surrounding buildings for its watering system, it's cutting edge stuff. In just a couple of weeks planting will begin of all manner of salad greens and herbs, some of which will be sold to local restaurants to ensure that the greenhouse can continue to operate year-round. It's created two new jobs for gardeners, plucking two families out of difficulty. And its doors too will be open to the local community.

As I prepare to leave the school I feel like I've been given a massive energy boost. On the one hand, not everything's served up to you on a silver platter in the land of opportunity; but on the other, if you really want something and strive to achieve it, anything's possible. The kids at this school know that dreams can in fact come true – if you work hard. The future's in their hands, and they know how to hold it.

The broken window theory

But how did Harlem become a safe neighbourhood its students want to move into? How did its schools become violence-free?

Tony explains that just as former NYC mayor Rudy Giuliani (1994-2001) based his approach to cleaning up the city – one of the 10 most crime-ridden in the country at the time – on the broken window theory, so did he and the rest of the staff in cleaning up the school. The theory preaches zero tolerance when it comes to disorder and hooliganism. Wherever you find broken glass, or a hole in the wall, or a pile of rubbish, if it's left unattended the problems will continue to mount. But if you deal with it immediately, that puts an end to it. And it works the same way with crime. The NYPD started calling people to order and arresting them for any kind of hooligan activity. At first this demanded a much higher police presence on the streets, but the approach worked, and worked quickly. Today, New York is well down the list of America's criminal hot spots: ranked somewhere between 30 and 40.

Implementing the broken window theory in a school means adopting a zero tolerance approach to the slightest signs of students picking on, being physically aggressive towards or otherwise bullying their peers. Any such acts are dealt with promptly, and punishments handed out where appropriate. That way, small things don't escalate into major issues, and violence is prevented. So whereas Public School no. 175 originally had a number of hall monitors for every corridor, now there's only one for the entire complex. Bullying and aggression are things of the past.

Setting a personal example

One of the things that Principal McClendon considers crucial is setting a personal example. To inspire both her pupils and her teachers, she placed the highest possible demands on herself from day one. She set up a range of elective subjects the students could take after school if they wished to. She considers it important to be dressed properly, but at the same time fashionably. And on top of everything else, she enrolled in the school's health clinic, losing more than 20 kg in 2011 through a combination of healthy eating and exercise. "How can I talk to the kids about good health if I look like some kind of benchmark for bad health?" she says. "Yep, that's me – or rather that was me." Not only has she given both the school and herself a new lease on life, but she's also given the children hope for the future.

www.wellnessintheschools.org