

EXCLUSIVE:
SCHOOLS
OF THE YEAR

TIME

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS OF THE YEAR

WINNER The Accelerated School/Los Angeles LIKE A FREE PRIVATE ACADEMY

A charter school challenges inner-city kids with tough coursework — and engages them with art and yoga.

By DAN CRAY

ZACHARY JOHNSON HAS A FAMILIAR COMPLAINT ABOUT his school: the cafeteria food stinks. In most places, such gripes fall upon deaf ears. But Zachary, 13, attends the Accelerated School in South Central Los Angeles, where the teachers are determined to make school both challenging and attractive. Says Zachary, who helped persuade administrators to add a salad bar: "The teachers actually listen to you, and you don't find that in other schools around here."

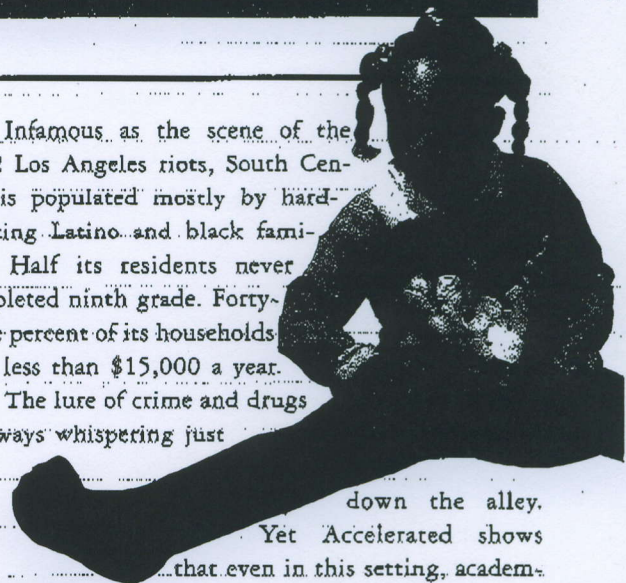
Nor do you find many inner-city schools with the academic results produced at Accelerated, which serves Grades K through 8 — and, as a charter school, is free of much of the red tape that often chokes other institutions. While some states have begun to question whether most charter schools outperform regular public schools, the Stanford Achievement Test scores at Accelerated have jumped 93% since 1997, with increases of 35% in reading and 28% in math last year alone.

School officials credit their success in part to their 97% average attendance rate, which in turn is boosted by classes that emphasize art, poetry and yoga along with arithmetic and grammar. "Unless you're fully engaging the mind and

body of the children, they're not going to be as productive," says Kevin Sved, 34, the school's co-founder. Accelerated says it outperformed the community's other public schools by 270% on last year's standardized tests. "It's like a \$20,000 private school without the tuition," says Mario Ortega, 37, a mortgage banker who transferred his two children there from a private academy. "I never expected to find quality education in South Central Los Angeles."

Infamous as the scene of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, South Central is populated mostly by hard-working Latino and black families. Half its residents never completed ninth grade. Forty-three percent of its households earn less than \$15,000 a year.

The lure of crime and drugs is always whispering just



down the alley. Yet Accelerated shows that even in this setting, academic excellence is possible.

The seed for Accelerated was planted in 1992 when Sved met Johnathan Williams. Both were teachers, and Williams was a leader of their local union who teamed with Sved in a failed attempt to initiate reforms at another South Central school. But when their efforts were stymied by bureaucrats, the duo submitted to the Los Angeles Unified School District an application to start their own charter school under a new state law permitting a limited

number of public schools to operate free of many district and state regulations. Skeptical administrators gave Sved and Williams just six months to round up \$200,000 in start-up money and find a site for the school. After securing funding at the last moment from Wells Fargo Bank, the two hurriedly went door-to-door to recruit students. In September 1994, Accelerated opened with two teachers — Ana Ponce and Barbie DeHart — and 50 students, shoehorned into a leased church social hall.

"We had to sell the people here on the idea that their kids can succeed," says Williams, 34. "This is

SCHOOL FACTS

