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Diaz, a 1977 School of Education graduate with a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling, suggested the Parklawn site because the neighborhood has a relatively high population of young children. Two preschool programs already existed there, but most school-aged children were being bused. "The kids around Parklawn attended 30 different MPS schools," he adds.

Now vice president of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee, Diaz says he and Michael Morgan, then commissioner of the Department of City Development, included the cyberschool in their proposal and were able to secure $3.1 million specifically for the school.

"It was an excellent example of a number of good people coming together for a common purpose," said Morgan, who now is director of the nonprofit Spirit of Milwaukee Corporation. "We thought it was a terrific way to introduce our kids to cutting-edge technology and help them get a foothold in the new economy."

The computers and other technology were paid for out of the per-pupil allotment the school district budgets for each school.

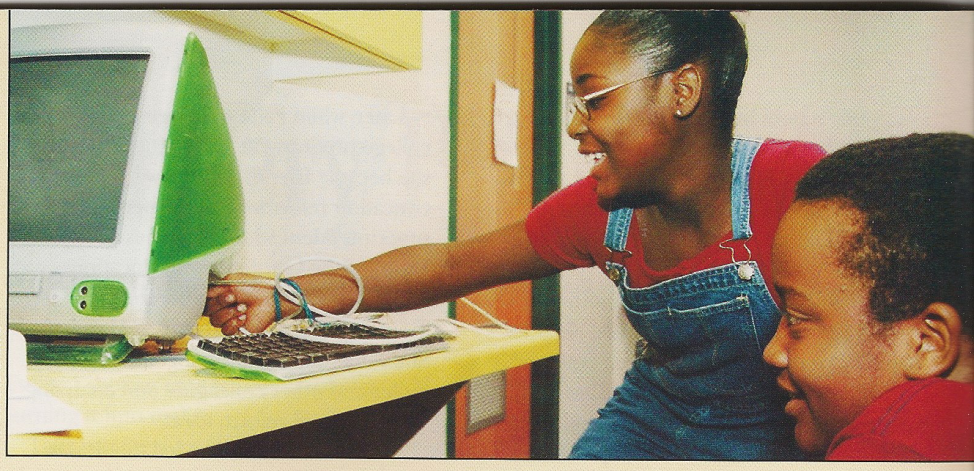
SUCCEED OR SHUT DOWN

In a perfect world, says Faltz, all schools would operate like charter schools. "Charters are public schools," she says. "We serve all kids. The difference is, we have a guarantee to get results or we cease to exist."

Although many of the school's students this school year are from the Parklawn neighborhood, next year any child who lives in the city can apply to attend. Students are not assigned to the school. Applications will be decided by lottery, as they are in other MPS schools. The only preference is given to siblings of current students and to children of faculty.

And even though the building is cable-ready for voice, video and data, the learning is still book- and project-based, Faltz notes. "We believe in real books, too. Books aren't going to go away."

The similarities to traditional schools, however, end there. At C³, the grades are blended, with first- and second-graders together; third-, fourth- and fifth-graders together; and sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders together. "Teaching multi-age is more difficult, more work for the teachers," says Faltz, "but the technology allows the children to work at different levels and help each other. It keeps expectations high."



PHOTOS: SAM CASTRO

Seventh-grader Katrina Gilmore sets up a desktop iMac in the computer troubleshooting lab.

The laptops offer teachers benefits also. They can immediately see on their screen the work on the laptops of all the students. The technology improves delivery of instruction because the teacher can instantly see who is not paying attention, who is not understanding the material, and who is sailing through it.

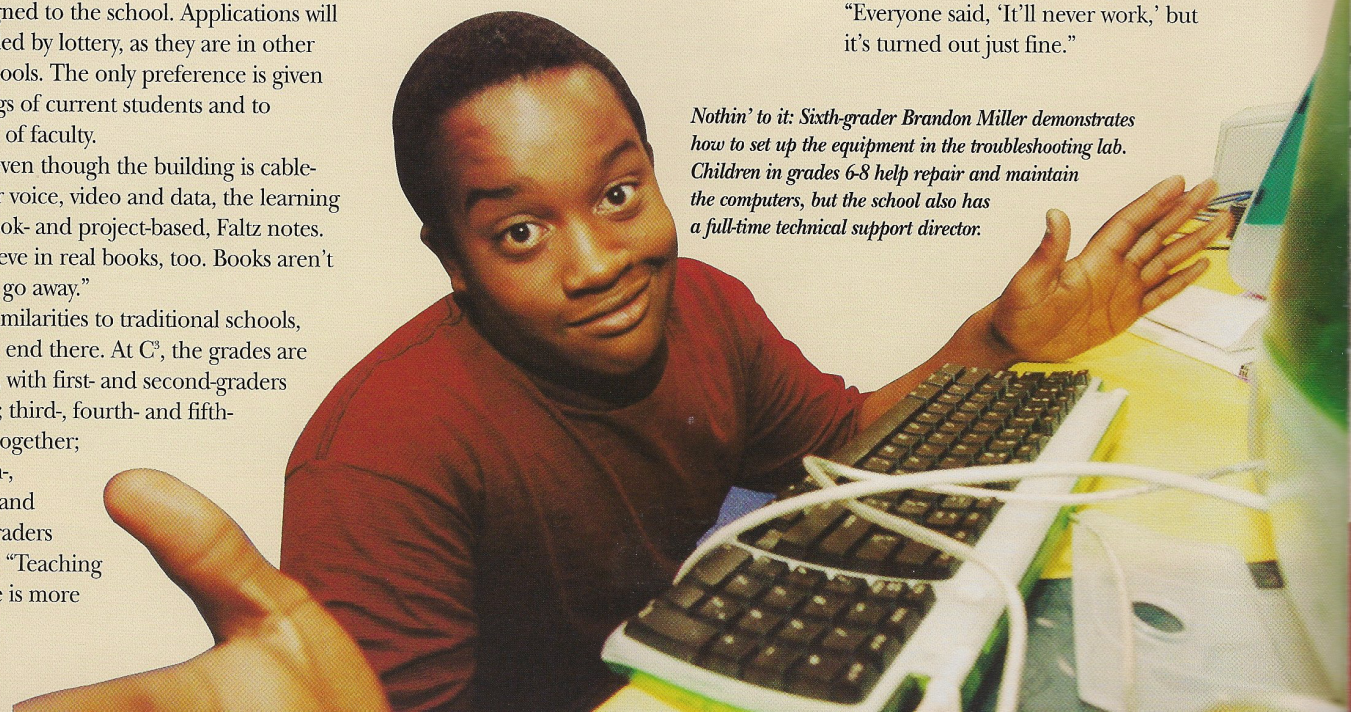
Forget chalk and erasers, toss out the transparencies and projectors. Each classroom has a "smart board" that responds to touch rather than to mouse clicks, and displays the teacher's computer screen on the board. Special tools allow the teacher to write on the smart board like a chalkboard. But it also allows the teacher to show more than one screen simultaneously, to instantly enhance the writing on the board with colors and shapes, and share with the class any screens on the computer, including material pulled off the Internet.

Faltz and her staff decided against wiring the new building for computers. Instead, antennae went up, relaying signals throughout the building. Also installed were wireless transmitters that broadcast the network so that computers with the right receiving card and protocol can operate. With Lucent cards and receivers, students can dispense with cords and outlets.

The iBooks were rolled out one classroom at a time, and the introduction came with a schoolwide rule: If students can't get their computer booted and running in the first two minutes of a class, they have to pull out paper and pencil.

The school employs a full-time technical support director who, among other duties, guides the middle-school-aged students in maintaining the equipment. Sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders take turns staffing the and troubleshooting lab.

Faltz, for her part, sees a bright future for both the school and its graduates. "Everyone said, 'It'll never work,' but it's turned out just fine."



Nothin' to it: Sixth-grader Brandon Miller demonstrates how to set up the equipment in the troubleshooting lab. Children in grades 6-8 help repair and maintain the computers, but the school also has a full-time technical support director.