

- looks at two schools with a common belief: Even the hardest-to-reach student can be inspired to learn.
- [B] Just two years ago, Aaron Segura was adrift, and slowly sinking. The 15-year-old was a standout golfer at West Mesa High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but his studies were another matter. Aaron was “just shuffling through the chapters” in courses like chemistry, his grades were low, and he was close to dropping out. It’s not that Aaron didn’t have ambition; it simply wasn’t being tapped in his large, impersonal public high school.
- [C] Then his mother heard about Albuquerque’s Charter Vocational High School, a place where students get plenty of one-on-one attention. Something else intrigued Aaron even more. His one passionate goal was to go into architecture, and Charter Vocational had just the thing for him: an architectural CAD (computer-aided drafting) program.
- [D] Aaron enrolled at the beginning of his junior year and, for the first time, found himself excited about learning. By the following summer, he had landed a job as a draftsman for an architectural firm. His plan now is to take up drafting professionally after he graduates this spring.
- [E] If Aaron has anyone to thank for his change of fortune, it’s 56-year-old Danny Moon. A longtime industrial-arts teacher, Moon ran a vocational shadowing and apprenticeship program in the mid-1990s, until the Albuquerque school district couldn’t pay for it any longer.
- [F] But two years later, in 2000, Moon’s phone rang. The state had recently passed a charter school law, and a district official wondered if Moon might be interested in opening a vocational charter school. Easy answer. With this sort of instruction, Moon knew he could target students like Aaron, who might have a tough time keeping their heads above water in traditional high schools. He’d also be filling a surging demand across New Mexico for skilled labor. “There’s been a mind-set that we needed to be training everyone in high school to go to college,” says Jim Folkman, executive vice president of the Home Builders Association of Central New Mexico and a founding member of the school’s board. “As a result, there was a huge void created for the trades—not just construction, but auto mechanics, computer trades, and so on.”
- [G] What Moon came up with was a school day consisting of four two-and-a-half-hour blocks of instruction. Each student would attend two of the blocks, one of them academic, the other vocational. A further twist was that, on the academic side, Moon didn’t want teachers getting up and lecturing. Instead, students would learn from online coursework provided by a computer program called Novanet, while teachers circulated through the classrooms to work one-on-one with students having problems.
- [H] One of Novanet’s major advantages over traditional classwork is that the program requires scores of 80 percent or higher on each of its lessons before you can move on. So much for “social promotion.”
- [I] When Charter Vocational first opened its doors in August 2002, it had 300 students and 15 faculty members. At the time, its only vocational classes were architectural CAD, automotive theory (and introduction to auto repair), and light construction trades (like building sheds). Since then, the school has added such subjects as PC repair and desktop publishing. It now employs a faculty of more than 30 and has about 650 students. Not that Moon is stopping there. He’s finalizing plans for a second vocational charter specializing in heavy trades like home construction and forklift operation.
- [J] Daphne Orner, a mechanical engineer turned math teacher—and the first instructor Moon hired at Charter Vocational—is typical of the school’s true believers. “What we can do with kids here, we can’t do anywhere else,” she says. Orner points out that, since the kids work individually with their teachers, they can progress at their own pace. “The beauty of this is that if a student finishes a course in November, he can start the second semester the next day. If they finish in February, well, okay, they start in February.”
- [K] Does that make academic sense? Well, last year roughly 75 of 80 seniors graduated (the others are finishing coursework). The successes on the vocational side have been no less impressive, mostly due to first-rate faculty. Moon says that Charter Vocational is “one of the only schools going that’s bringing in top-level expertise. I have an architect on staff, a custom home designer.” In 2004, Moon entered some of his students in the State Skills