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Courtney Ross And Her Education Empire

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Sunshine streams through the windows of an airy school lunchroom in New York City. The students, dressed in pressed navy uniforms, are finishing a freshly prepared lunch that includes organic vegetables. The banquettes are upholstered, and the walls feature over-sized works of art and nature photos.

The children take music, dance and Chinese, and start the day performing either yoga or t'ai chi. But this isn't a tony private school on the Upper East Side. It is a charter school in the East Village, a neighborhood mostly populated by artsy hipsters and minorities, and most of its 420 students are black or Hispanic and come from poor families.

Meet the [Ross Global Academy](#) (RGA). When it was founded in 2006, it was the first offspring of the *very* expensive, *very* New Age and *very* state-of-the-art Ross School, a private pre-K to 12 campus in East Hampton, N.Y., started by Courtney Sale Ross and her late husband, former Time Warner chief Steve Ross.

If you're Courtney Ross, it could work.

Ross is a poised, attractive woman with the well-styled blond mane of a New York benefactress. She is represented by a public-relations firm and travels with an assistant. But she is neither a dilettante nor a prima donna. She is a steely woman of means who is using her wealth to bring opportunity and education to the masses, regardless of the challenges she confronts along the way.

"What she has done is remarkable," says Michael Duffy, the head of charter schools for New York City's Department of Education (DOE). "Before the first day of classes, she was hanging art on the wall and moving furniture around

by herself." Think of her as a Martha Stewart of 21st-century education. Sure, she has great taste, but she's also growing an empire.

Whole Child, Whole World



The Ross School in East Hampton has been famously lauded (and jeered) for its holistic country club atmosphere--from the trained chefs in the school cafeteria and the Cambodian deities dotting the classroom to "class trips" to the Great Wall of China. Students learn in an "integrated" fashion, meaning that every course in a grade relates to the other. The youngest students begin their education by learning about patterns, cycles and systems, starting with the prehistoric era.

As they progress, they advance further in history and begin to learn more sophisticated concepts like societies and cultures (in addition to standard academic subjects such as math and science). Armed with this 360-degree view of history and culture, the school hopes to give students an understanding of both past and present events, and both local and global issues.

Hamptons In the 'Hood



Perhaps Ross didn't calculate what she was getting into. The gifted students and their parents were outraged. **Said** one seventh grader, "They're trying to destroy our school." Ross, the city and the state were sued. The parents didn't want to have to share space with another school. After many public protests throughout the first half of 2006, including one staged at Ross's East Hampton campus, the DOE re-assigned RGA to a new space in the basement of the Tweed Courthouse, DOE's landmark headquarters. This fall--three years later with a new grade added each year--RGA re-opened in its current space.

The school may be attractive and full of resources--Ross herself bought furniture and lockers. She also removed the cages that covered the windows--like at most of the city's public schools. But, because the DOE insisted on window protection of some kind, she brought in a specialist who supplies bulletproof windows to U.S. embassies around the world to protect the windows. Still, myriad problems persist. The students, selected through an application and lottery system, vary greatly in preparation and commitment. There have been some half-dozen school heads since it was first opened, and in 2008 the principal resigned after being accused of tampering with student scores on a state test.

But true to form, she takes the jolts and expenses in stride. "All children learn," she says. "You just have to invest in them."

Many, in fact, are invested in Ross's success. The RGA is an experiment in taking the private public, and it is being closely watched by everyone from New York University's Steinhart School of Education, a collaborator, to the Tensta Gymnasium, a Swedish school that has also adopted the so-called Ross Model--not to mention a hyper-vocal local community. The most immediate selling point may be Ross herself. Which is why, perhaps, she keeps dear the motto: Know Thyself In Order To Serve.

Photographs: Adriel Reboh/PatrickMcMullen.com; Don Hamerman; Klaus Schoenwiese; Don Hamerman.