Sometimes, we all can benefit from a little TLC.

No, not THAT kind of TLC...The Learning Community, the thriving, shining charter school located on Broad Street in Central Falls. First off, let me get this out of the way right off the bat: I am biased. I have two kids there and I love the place. Also, I’m a pretty big cheerleader for Central Falls success stories in general. I guess I must like underdogs. Finally, while hardly an expert, I did once produce (yet never defend, alas!) a several hundred-page doctoral dissertation on charter schools nationally. So, hopefully, I know whereof I speak. And I’ve taught in Ocean State higher education, including Bryant and URI.

My sense is that there are still many Rhode Islanders for whom The Learning Community flies under the radar. Yet, the school has won awards too numerous to mention in their entirety (a main hallway has certificates including an award from Providence Business News, as well as plaque after plaque of recognition from state leaders), and has garnered national press (NBC, New York Times, Washington Post to name but a few) along the way to getting national and at times international attention and visitors. The school is now also a training center for teachers across the Northeast. And the scope has become national, indicating the growing, national reach of The Learning Community. Since The Learning Community celebrated its 10th year in existence just this year, it means that the first cohort in the K-8 school only recently graduated.

Sometimes, what the lightning in a bottle is that is produced here, and how that can be replicated elsewhere. A central message? High performance—and high poverty—are not mutually exclusive.

A few years ago, a group from Holland came. (No word on whether they were bearing cheese, or tulip bulbs!) Two years ago, anchored by major grants from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Rhode Island Foundation, The Teaching Studio at The Learning Community was launched. “Few schools in the country open their doors to become training centers,” says Kath Connolly, partnership director at the school. The performance of the students, most of whom are minority, relatively to very impoverished, and who speak a language other than English at home (Spanish primarily, Cape Verdean Creole or Kriulu, and others), mirrors the performance of some students at private schools and at public schools in school districts with deep pockets. Ninety percent of students qualify for free lunches by the government standards, compared with less than half that, 44 percent statewide. Yet, students at The Learning Community consistently outperform state averages, sometimes by a great deal. It’s pretty cool that kids walking to school from apartments in modest triple-deckers can compete equally with kids from half-million-dollar homes whose parents have the resources to provide private tutors. It reflects the American Dream that hard work and talent prevail above all. You can put $250 Air Jordans on someone walking down the street, and they are not suddenly NBA bound. But Michael Jordan could play in flip-flops. We’re seeing proof of this from Central Falls High School, where a senior has received full scholarship offers from Harvard, Yale, and other elite schools.

The message is clear: you can get to Harvard—or URI or Boston College or wherever—from Central Falls. Like the current mayor, you can come out of Central Falls High School and become mayor. You can come out of the public school system and become Viola Davis, world renowned actress.

It could be as if a La Salle (or Prout or Wheeler School, take your pick) education was made available, free of charge, in three communities that sorely need help: Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence. Since The Learning Community celebrated its 10th year in existence just this year, it means that the first cohort in the K-8 school only recently graduated.

The Learning Community began, as so many great ideas do, as a vision, something in the minds’ eye of the cofounders and co-directors, Sarah Friedman and Meg O’Leary. Architecturally unremarkable from the outside, the 4-story former nursing home (the ambulance lane and all letters but the “R” in the
“Ambulance Receiving” sign remain) opens up and shows its heart in the hallways and classrooms. Intricate, detailed, hand-painted maps line the hallways, courtesy of a former intern from RISD who reportedly wanted students to feel connected globally. There is a focus on technology and an ongoing fundraising campaign to provide more. There is a highly educated, highly qualified (often overqualified) staff — 92 by my count, resulting in reasonable, feasible teacher-student ratios of 21:1, as well as support both for students and their families. Many staffers are part time, some are interns, Americorps volunteers, and students, yet there are all sorts of specialists in place: social worker, counselor, speech therapist. Perhaps the future will bring a staff nutritionist and financial consultant! Does anyone remember when there was merely the teacher, the coach, and the Principal?

This ain’t your Daddy’s elementary school, to be sure.

Some things about The Learning Community are so cool to report that they seem almost unbelievable. Most days there are numerous kids clamoring to get in the moment the doors open at 7:45. When a teaching position opens, over 600 resumes are received. The school welcomes visitors frequently, goes on interesting and carefully planned field trips, and eats healthy food, including local produce like cucumbers and carrots, for afternoon snacks.

Coffee is perpetually provided, with real cream in a mini-fridge in the lobby area known as the Parent Cafe, providing a welcoming environment and encouraging parents to sit and discuss their children, the school, field trips, various projects and events and the like.

The excitement of learning is palpable everywhere you go within the school. It feels like a protected educational oasis. Some of us tend to get jaded as we age. Your take on life changes with experience, with children, now that I am 39 (yeah, right!). But in those hallways the kids imagine they could become President, and one of them might well do so. If you can get kids focused on school and opportunities and respect at an early age, and then continue to guide them, good things result.

So many potential ills: kids dropping out of school, getting involved in negative activities, can be headed off at the path. It’s an educational version of eating healthy and exercising to stave off illnesses later. Theoretically, the high blood pressure and cholesterol issues can be avoided, just as the truancy and dropout issues cause a different sort of damage to societal health.

Longtime Central Falls School District Superintendent Fran Gallo. had this to say about The Learning Community: “The Learning Community has been a longstanding partner, doing phenomenal work and positively impacting so many kids in Central Falls and beyond. They share their expertise so willingly, and their work has been proven. They provide the pillow for dreams.”

Here we are, smack dab in the middle of the state’s smallest and poorest city, dozens of professionals and some 540 students are helping to shape the next generation, with support from their families. In the school right now may be next generation’s Viola Davis, or Mayor Diossa.

Happily, there are numerous success stories like this in our state, region, and around the country.

But this particular one, this success? The Learning Community? Why, it is firmly situated only in ZIP code 02863 Central Falls. Bright future? Yes indeed.

Dan Klotz, of Central Falls, is a regular contributor to The Times.