



Woman of Distinction

Mary Searcy Bixby

President, and CEO of The Charter School of San Diego,

## Charter School Visionary Impacts San Diego's Kids

By: Cara Krenn

When you walk into the Altus Institute headquarters, housed in an impeccably tidy and polished corporate building, you may ask yourself, is this really a public school? Upon entering the lobby, your eye settles on a glass atrium filled to capacity with rows of books, then a large flat-screen television announcing school data, vision, and mission. On a wall of honor a portrait of the Founder, President, and CEO of The Charter School of San Diego, Mary Searcy Bixby.

As the school's leader, Bixby wears many hats—trailblazer, visionary, mentor, advocate. No matter which hat she is wearing, Bixby lives her motto "kids come first." Teachers at her schools provide personal, individualized, high quality education to local students who need something different.

The Charter School of San Diego was established by Bixby in 1994. Its charter was granted in 1993 and became the first charter approved by the San Diego Unified School District. Founded in response to the public's interest in educational reform, CSSD offers a hybrid, independent-study program that allows students who don't fit the "one size fits all" traditional model of education an option for reaching their fullest potential.

This intervention program often captures at-risk students before they drop out. It gives them an opportunity not just to catch up, but to gain confidence, motivation, and direction in their lives. "We have a deep commitment to the academically neediest students. Whether they've missed skills in the early grades and need to catch-up or whether they're a highly gifted student that lacks motivation, our program addresses their needs," Bixby says.

Bixby is a high energy individual with a quick smile and enough charisma to fill a room. She is intuitive, thoughtful, and direct—always remaining centered on that which is positive and productive. An angel or a minx, it's hard to know, but it's certain that she knows her stuff and that what some consider major constraints, Bixby calls "temporary inconveniences."

Her life motto is "Daring to Make a Difference." She knows no fear and whether she is speaking with students, parents, community

advocates, governors, bishops, legislators, CEOs, or the guy on the street. She is friendly, outgoing, and clear in no uncertain terms that she means business.

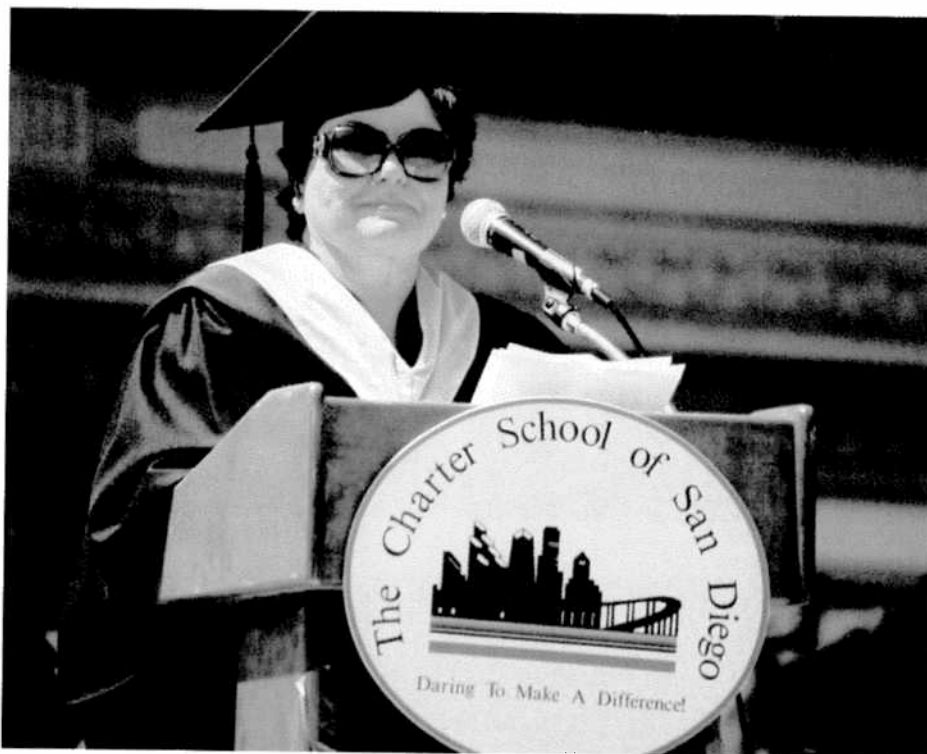
Bixby is passionate about cultivating the core values of commitment, leadership, and accountability amongst her faculty and staff. At its heart CSSD is almost spiritual in its commitment to positively impacting students and their family's lives. A recent parent of a CSSD graduate stated:

"My child was challenged with medical problems that the traditional school system could not and would not try to understand. After meeting with CSSD teachers, we both felt that angels had finally entered our lives. My daughter's teachers were the two most caring, considerate, compassionate, and helpful and loving individuals that my child and I have met in a very long time."

The Charter School of San Diego now serves approximately 2000 students in grades 7-12 in twenty locations throughout San Diego. In just the last fifteen years Bixby has influenced over 12,000 student lives in a very special way. Under Bixby's dynamic guidance, the school

continues to expand. CSSD's success has been replicated in other charter schools she has founded, including Audeo Charter School in San Diego and Mirus Secondary School in San Bernardino. Bixby's team is looking into the feasibility of opening charter schools in Hawaii, Arizona, and additional areas of California.

The Charter School of San Diego is unusual in many regards, one being its commitment to using business principles to guide the school's operation. Specifically, Bixby uses the Malcolm Baldrige criteria to inspire the management and values of the school. Malcolm Baldrige, Secretary of Commerce under President Reagan, was a proponent of quality management as a key to the country's long-term prosperity and strength. Following Congress' establishment of the Baldrige program in 1987, the award is widely recognized as the gold standard for quality and performance excellence. Since applying these principles, CSSD has been a two-time recipient of the California Award for Performance Excellence (CAPE) prestigious Eureka Award, a state-level Baldrige recognition.



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The school focuses on preparing its students for success in the real world. Students are encouraged to explore career interests and to fully prepare to enter either college, the military, or the work force. Bixby takes pride in nurturing responsible citizens who possess a clear idea of what goals they hold for the future.

What's the most rewarding aspect of Mrs. Bixby's work? "Interfacing with wonderful people who care about kids. Every day is guaranteed to be different—and that's what's exciting."

The Charter School of San Diego continues to exceed expectations, often creating success stories where success was not believed possible. Bixby is a believer, and one of San Diego's truly remarkable women leaders.

For more information on the school and Bixby's work, please visit [www.charterschool-sandiego.net](http://www.charterschool-sandiego.net).



Photos provided by: Cara Krenn