

# L.A. charter school reboots into a military institute

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North Valley Military Institute eighth-grade student Andrew Ruiz (front) waits for a command as students stand in line on Oct. 2, 2013, at the first military charter school in Los Angeles. Photo: Al Seib/Los Angeles Times/MCT

LOS ANGELES — On a soggy field in Granada Hills, eight units stand at attention, ready to salute the American flag as it rises toward a cloudy morning sky.

The bugler lifts the brass instrument to his mouth and waits. A short delay gives away the deception. Then a recording of “Reveille” blasts out from stereo speakers as the flag moves up the pole.

The call finishes, and the 17-year-old lowers his bugle.

“I’m taking lessons,” Jesiah Samora says. “I’ll be able to actually play it soon.”

Then the bleary-eyed middle and high school classmates march, mostly in step, toward their homerooms.

## **A Military Transformation**

They are the first students at North Valley Military Institute, a Los Angeles Unified School District charter school. A charter school is a public school operated by a private company. This year, North Valley was transformed from a traditional school to one loaded with military values and structure.

The change came about because enrollment at the school known as North Valley Charter Academy began falling. Principal Diane French and other administrators sought a way to boost the number of students. But they still had to accomplish the school's mission — educational excellence, democratic leadership and personal growth.

French visited the Oakland Military Institute, a charter started in 2001 by then-Mayor Jerry Brown. Impressed, she sought to replicate the program, which boasts a 95 percent college attendance rate for its graduates.

In its first year, North Valley Military Institute has enrolled 260 students, up from about 190 last year. Latino students make up about 80 percent of the attendees, 82 percent of the school's students are low-income and about 25 percent are special-education students.

The military part of the school is overseen by the California Cadet Corps, the youth program of the California National Guard. Students enter the school as pledges. They rise in rank as they master skills and develop leadership traits, said Steve Diab, California Cadet Corps captain. Diab is also the school's commandant.

Students are taught military courtesies. They use "sir" and "ma'am" when addressing their elders, for instance. They operate under a rank structure and wear uniforms. Students lead units of their peers, do physical training twice a week and follow a demerit system that penalizes them for violations.

### **"I Can Feel The Burn ... Sir!"**

"We're using the military structure to get kids to go to college," French said. "It teaches them self-reliance, self-discipline, leadership — all attributes needed for success in college."

L.A. Unified's charter school division initially had some concerns about the program. Among them were that students needed to be able to work off disciplinary demerits. The school also had to be open to all students who wished to attend, said Jose Cole-Gutierrez, the division head.

North Valley officials agreed to those conditions.

Each morning, four students — one representing each company: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta — stand watch over the front entrance of the school.

They eye the students, searching for flaws in uniforms and looking for short hair on the boys and tightly pinned-back hair on the girls. Colored nail polish is prohibited, but makeup is allowed in moderation. Any violation is a demerit. Each demerit lands a student 15 minutes of detention, which the school calls a “reboot.”

The demerit system is strict but geared toward conversation, French said. “It’s a valuable way of tracking the kind of behaviors for which we need to intervene and talk to the student about,” she said.

On a recent warm afternoon, a class of high school students headed out to the field for physical training, where they did dozens of push-ups and jumping jacks.

“Sit-ups!” Diab ordered, firmly, as the students hit the deck. After a few minutes, one student jokingly shouted, “I can feel the burn ... sir!”

The military influence has led to some confusion in the surrounding neighborhood. Some parents believe the school is a boot camp for troubled teens or is run by the military.

## **Learning Leadership And Responsibility**

But there are no recruiters on campus, and the focus is college preparation, officials said.

Christian Rubalcava, 17, said that despite rising to the top student leadership position at the school, battalion commander, he has no plans to join the service. Christian has attended the school since sixth grade, and when it began converting to a military-style campus, he decided to help with the change. The program has taught him leadership and responsibility, he said.

“I have a lot of respect for the service,” he said, adjusting his red beret. “But I still don’t want to join. I want to go to USC. That’s the whole mission of the school, to get us to go to college.”

But North Valley has sparked the interest of some students in a military career.

Last year, junior Mireya Orozco said, she would ditch class nearly every day to drink and get high. Her grades were falling and she figured she’d soon drop out, and the change to the military school made her even less interested in school. “It was so annoying,” she said. “I didn’t want to do any of the military stuff.”

But slowly, Mireya said, she fell in line. Her mother noticed she was more polite at home, her grades got better and she ditched the bad behavior. She now wants to enlist in the Navy after graduating. “I like the discipline of it,” Mireya said. “It has taught me self-control.”

At the end of each day, the students return to their formation on the field to lower the flag. Jesiah raises his bugle once again as a recording plays.

For most, this marks the end of the school day. But for some — those who have fallen behind on classwork — the day continues. They march, mostly in step, to after-school tutoring.