

# San Francisco Chronicle

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Photos by Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Above: Abisai Aguilar, 15, looks around the dorm room that he will be moving into at Life Learning Academy on Treasure Island. Below: The 6,000-square-foot dorm cost \$3.5 million. It will house 24 students.

## School to become home for some students in need

Treasure Island charter builds first-of-kind dorm in U.S.

By Jill Tucker

Abisai Aguilar, 15, walked into the dorm room, outfitted with two new beds, nightstands and armoires, and shook his head, his eyes wide.

"Some of us don't really sleep in a bed," he said, referring to sleeping on the floor of a room in a homeless shelter that he shares with his entire family.

"To finally be in a room and sleep in a bed ..."

He let the sentence drop off.

Abisai, who goes by Abi, will be one of the first students to move into the new public school dorm on Treasure Island, built to house many of the students attending Life Learning Academy on the same site. The charter school opened in 1998 to serve the region's most at-risk high school students — those who have failed in traditional schools and, in many cases, run afoul of the law.

The dorm, which resembles a



spacious mountain lodge with a vaulted ceiling, fireplace and large redwood deck, is the first of its kind in the country. The public charter school will offer free room and board to up to 24 of its 50 to 70 students, selecting those with the greatest needs. But don't call it

a boarding school.

"This is not a boarding school," said Teri Delane, the school's founding principal and executive director. "This is a home attached to a school."

The school expects to spend

*Dorm continues on A10*

## BART veteran to head system

After nationwide search, directors choose insider

By Dominic Fracassa and Ashley McBride

BART's Board of Directors on Thursday appointed a new general manager with an intimate familiarity with the transit system as it strains to address a host of challenges, from a multimillion-dollar fare-evasion problem to rider dissatisfaction.

Robert Powers, who previously served as the interim general manager, was elected to take over the position on a permanent basis.

At a brief news conference after the board's vote, Powers said he will focus on fully staffing the BART Police Department, rebuilding the agency's infrastructure and getting the fleet replacement program on track. He also addressed BART's dismal reputation with riders — fanned by fare cheats, filth, crime and rush-hour crowds that are particularly bad on the system's lone bay crossing.

"We have a problem. Our low customer satisfaction..."  
*BART continues on A11*

## Carmakers, state bypass Trump on fuel efficiency

By Alexei Koseff and Tal Kopan

SACRAMENTO — California has struck a deal with four major automakers to boost their vehicles' fuel-emissions standards, escalating the state's standoff with the Trump administration over federal efforts to freeze such improvements.

The deal announced Thursday commits the automakers to reducing emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants from their cars and light-duty trucks. That will require an increase in overall mileage to roughly 50 miles per gallon by model year 2026, one year later than fuel-efficiency targets that had been set by President Barack Obama's administration, which the Trump administration is moving to roll back.

Ford, Honda, BMW of North America and Volkswagen Group of America signed on to the deal with the California Air Resources Board,

*Autos continues on A10*

➔ **Online extra:** Visual essay gives a glimpse behind the scenes at Life Learning Academy for at-risk youths. Hear about the program from the principal and students: [www.sfchronicle.com/life-learning-academy](http://www.sfchronicle.com/life-learning-academy)

## FROM THE COVER

# Treasure Island charter school to offer housing

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\$800,000 a year to house 24 teens year round, or \$33,333 per student. San Francisco now spends, on average, \$374,000 per year to keep a young person in juvenile hall and more than \$100,000 for a group home.

That is a bargain, said Patti Lee, a San Francisco public defender who oversees juvenile cases.

"We always try to get our youth that are system-involved into Life Learning Academy," Lee said, adding that the dorm will enhance the school's benefits for children. "In terms of cost-benefit analysis, that's amazing that it's only \$33,000 a year."

The school is based on the belief that "every single kid, no matter what they've done or what has happened to them, can turn their life around," said Cassandra Blazer, director of strategy and evaluation.

Victor Moo-Yah knows this firsthand. He had been expelled from a San Francisco high school and was sitting in juvenile hall on weapons charges when Delane showed up and told the then-16-year-old she was going to change his life.

He didn't believe her.

Now 20, he's a high school graduate, working at two restaurants with plans to go back to school.

Delane, he said, was right.

"To be where I am at today, to have what I have, I can't be any more blessed," Moo-Yah said.

Life Learning credits the individualized attention students receive and a school-to-career focus. Class sizes are small — typically six to eight students — and all students participate in internships. As seniors, they are required to co-enroll in classes at Skyline College in San Bruno.

The school has a 95% graduation rate, with more than 220 students earning a diploma over the years. That might sound like a small number in a 20-year period, officials say, but the odds were against any

of them graduating given their backgrounds. Nearly half of Life Learning's students have been abused, most have spent time incarcerated and all have failed at other schools.

Officials also note that studies have shown that the school's program reduces recidivism, incarceration, gang involvement and drug and alcohol abuse, a claim backed by Lee, who called it a "magical environment."

While school districts typically see charter schools as competition, San Francisco Unified officials unanimously reauthorized the school's charter this year.

"They're saving kids that otherwise might not be saved. There is no downside," said school board member Rachel Norton.

The school has widespread support among city officials, including political rivals, Norton added.

"Everyone puts their axes aside and it's something everyone can agree on," she said. "Everybody agrees they're doing the right thing and how refreshing is that?"

Mayor London Breed is among the fans.

"The thing I love about this school and the program was even when these kids were a lot of times not respectful or difficult toward those who work there, (the staff) was like, 'I don't care, I'm not giving up on you,'" Breed said. "They've changed and saved lives for so many years."

But for Delane, that wasn't good enough.

Many of her students are fed, nurtured, supported and taught at the school during the day, only to return home to violent homes and neighborhoods, to empty refrigerators, or even to homeless shelters, like Abi.

"It became impossible for us to go home every night knowing we have kids in this condition," she said.

Delane, who recovered from addiction, earned a doctorate and then opened the school 21 years ago, long dreamed of providing a home for the stu-



Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Abisai Aguilar, who now lives in a homeless shelter with his family, talks with Cassie Blazer, director of strategy at Life Learning Academy, as he looks over the dorm room he will live in.

## SF HOMELESS PROJECT

Beginning Sunday, The Chronicle again joins other Bay Area news outlets in the SF Homeless Project, a media collaboration exploring causes of and solutions to our regional homelessness crisis.

► **Sunday:** We answer your questions on homelessness and offer a guide to ways you can help.

► **Monday:** We assess the effectiveness of a San Francisco program that offers homeless people a bus ticket home.

► **Monday through Wednesday:** Our "Fifth & Mission" podcast addresses the homelessness crisis.

► **Tuesday:** San Francisco Mayor London Breed and an expert panel discuss homelessness at the first of two public events.

► **Wednesday:** We present an in-depth report, "24 Hours of Homelessness."

► **Aug. 8:** San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo and an expert panel discuss homelessness before a live audience.

To purchase tickets to the public events and find all our reporting on this topic: [www.sfchronicle.com/homelessness](http://www.sfchronicle.com/homelessness)

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dents who needed stability while they finished high school.

She initially wanted to buy a mansion in Pacific Heights to house the dorm and even toured several. It was the kind of environment she believed her students deserved.

"I wanted that," she said, "I wanted that desperately."

But when a mansion didn't pan out, the school's leadership decided to build a big house on-site — and it wasn't going to be a prefabricated, boring, bare-bones structure, Delane said.

Instead, the house is designed to feel like a home, not an institutional setting. The front door opens into a spacious, high-ceiling living room, named after former Mayor Willie Brown, who has long

supported the school, Delane said.

A large Oriental rug — a ritzy gift from a donor — covers the floor in front of a big-screen television.

Off to the side, there's a gas fireplace in a library alcove, which will be stocked with books purchased with the \$11,000 donated by author Daniel Handler, a.k.a. Lemony Snicket.

Six students are expected to move in when school starts Aug. 19, after a grand opening with city dignitaries on Aug. 7. Additional students will be phased in later.

The school raised the \$3.5 million to build the 6,000-square-foot house, with then-Mayor Ed Lee securing \$1.5 million from an anonymous donor a month before he died.

This year, Breed set aside city funding to cover half the operating costs for the first two years, allocating \$400,000 this year and another \$400,000 next year, which the Board of Supervisors voted to approve this month.

When she heard the school needed help getting the dorm operational, Breed said she set aside the funding "without hesitation."

The school is "one of the most successful models of criminal justice reform in this city," she added.

"To have that kind of feeling and know that you are worthy of such a beautiful new place is going to be a game changer for these kids," Breed said. "Here's a chance to do something different that could lead to a better future."

Abi has already picked out his bedding on a shopping trip with Delane, and he plans to put pictures of his family up on his walls.

His goal, he said, is to boost his grade-point average to above a 3.0 this coming school year, up from a 2.4 GPA last year, and well above the straight F's he got at Balboa High School before he started at Life Learning.

He has already called dibs on the left side of his dorm room.

"Moving in, that's what I'm looking forward to," he said. "I'm just hella excited to move in."

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# Four automakers, state cut deal on fuel efficiency

Autos from page A1



needed regulatory certainty by allowing us to meet both feder-

"We will continue on the path that we're on," she added,