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A New Charter Challenges Popular Paradigms

Many popular charter schools in New York City, which are highly rated, are known for being heavy on test prep and rigid in structure. Success Academy, the largest charter network in New York City, is the paragon of this type of model. But these models, known as "no-excuse" charters can burn out teachers. Critics also say they squelch students' creativity and their desire to be in class. A New York Times article from April 2015 described Success' "polarizing tactics," which lead to high teacher turnover. Six months later, The Times also reported on a Success Academy charter in Fort Greene that compiled a list of kids it wanted to force out of the school. A PBS NewsHour report, "Is Kindergarten too Young to Suspend a Student?" profiled another Success charter that issued 44 suspensions to its 203 kindergarteners and 1st graders. A public school located in the same building issued none.

Leadership Prep Canarsie is a three-year-old charter in east Brooklyn. It is less heavy on test prep and not as harsh on discipline as the "no-excuse" charter model. The principal, Emily Hoefling, says that she is pushing back against the "no-excuse" model to build a school that is more connected to its community. She even drives one of her students to school every morning who wouldn't be able to attend otherwise. When another student's family fell on hard times, she opened up her apartment to them rent-free while they work on finding a more permanent solution. Hoefling's goal is to create a school where she and her staff would want to send their own children to. Her philosophy is to see students and teachers as of greater importance than scores and "bottom lines," she says.

And according to Inside Schools, a nonprofit that rates New York City schools, this model seems to be working. Not only do the students do well on state tests, the school has an unusually high attendance record and the entire staff reports that the principal is an effective manager.