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A Sustainable “No Excuses” Charter School Model

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A SUSTAINABLE “NO EXCUSES” CHARTER SCHOOL MODEL

by

Kelly Lerash

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in MALS in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Liberal Arts.

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Abstract

A Sustainable “No Excuses” Charter School Model

By

Kelly Lerash

Advisor: Susan Semel

As a participant observer working in a charter school and researching charter schools, I critically examine a particular charter school in New York City. I begin with my educational journey and the challenge of being a participant observer. I transition to focus on a general overview of “No Excuses” charter schools in NYC, looking closely at Uncommon Charter Schools, Achievement First Charter Schools, KIPP NYC, Success Academy Charter Schools and Democracy Prep Charter Schools. Next, I share my experiences working for five years in a “No Excuses” Charter School, using a specific lens to examine what makes that school different than other schools and why it is a strong model. Finally, I propose areas of growth for this school and further research that needs to be conducted.

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Tables and Charts

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Glossary of Charter School Vocabulary

Achievement gap: disparity of educational outcomes of low SES students to affluent peers

Coaching: Individualized teacher support that is typically school leader (lead) and developed

CMO: Charter Management Organization

DEAR: Drop Everything and Read

Deductions: Negative behavior points

Demerit: Negative behavior points

DREAM Dollars: Behavior tracking system

EMO: Education Management Organization

Grade Level Meeting: Time for each grade level to meet separately

IEP: Individual Educational Plan

Merit: Positive behavior points

No Excuses: highly structured school environment that does not allow for scholars or families outside circumstances to excuse in school behavior or grades

Observation: watching a teacher's classroom

Participant Observer: being part of the group you observe for research purposes

Professional development: targeted instruction practice to develop teacher and staff in a particular educational area through a particular educational lens

Scholar: Student

SETSS: Special Education Teacher Supportive Systems

Sweating the Small Stuff: Caring about every issue that affects student achievement, small and large

Taxonomies: General teaching principals

Townhall: Weekly school wide celebration, similar to a school assembly

Chapter 1

I began my journey in Education working in a maximum-security prison as a Volunteer Educational Assistant. My view of the world quickly started to change as it became apparent that not everyone was being served equally in their k-12 educational experience. At this point, my major in advertising did not seem as appealing as it did before I started college. My passion with the daily grind of figuring out how to convince someone to buy a materialistic product fizzled. I adapted my coursework to ensure I could earn a minor in English, a core-teaching subject, to allow for more educational opportunities.

In 2010 I joined Teach for America. With equality on my brain and opportunity for all in my heart, I ventured to Dallas, Texas for three of the hardest years, both personally and professionally, of my life. I knew the educational system was unequal, disproportionately catered to serve wealthy communities, broken. Although my TFA training was rigorous I had no idea of the poor conditions and harsh realities I was about to experience. After three years of teaching in a school where I was observed once a year by the principal, then expected to close achievement gaps of children who were 5 years behind grade level without using a lower level curriculum. In addition, students were literally paid to come to Saturday Academy to pass the state test. I felt defeated, deflated and hopeless. Education was too big of a problem for me to combat.

Spring 2013, I received a call from a recruiter working for a charter school in New York City. As a beginning young teacher, I discounted charter schools, thinking, “that’s not where real change is happening.” However, I was at my wits end in the school I was working. My options were to take a job with a charter school or leave education all together. I accepted the offer and have been working at an urban charter school in Harlem for almost five years. I started as an English Language Arts teacher and moved to Assistant Principal in 2016.

I propose to look at the evolution of charter schools at large, and specifically, look at one corporate charter school that I have worked in for the past five years. I will be completing a case study about one charter school that is part of a larger charter network. The research will show what successful charter schools have in common, what sets them apart and what and how they are contributing to public education.

I will be a participant observer of a group for observation and research purposes. This will allow me to step back from the daily grind of my present environment and take a critical look at the details of charter School operation and organizational procedures to ensure and maintain excellent standards in teaching. In addition, I hope to discover where we need to change and grow; where our future lies (Litchman, 2010, p. 168). Being a participant-observer adds unique challenges to the research as I am deeply involved in the work of education from a variety of my educational experiences and studies. As Susan Semel (1995) states, “this type of research is to some degree a psychoanalytic journey, in which I have to constantly make sense of my own subjective experience as they relate to the larger,” educational experience (p. 8). This project will allow me to take a historic look at where the roots of the movement began and where it is now. Specifically, I will attempt to look at how charter schools add value to public education. This will help me demonstrate how the practices of the school in which I work adds value to public education and what might be replicated in district schools. Finally, I will offer suggestions for further implementation of ideas generated through this project. However, I will be able to suggest further avenues of research that should be conducted to continue the work that has begun. This work will contribute to the knowledge of charter schools through a broad overview, personal experience and studies at the Graduate Center CUNY.

Chapter 2

Charter schools developed because people wanted choice. According to Stetson (2013) in 1991 Minnesota was the first state that began the process of allowing families a free choice, not private or parochial, as to where they wanted to send their children to school (p. 70-75). Twenty year later, in 2011, with pressure from American families, who were demanding choice, over 41 states changed their policies and allowed charter schools to flourish (p. 70-75). Part of the charter appeal was their ability to shape the education of the school to best fit the people that were part of the neighborhood they served. Charters began to flourish because American people like choice and choice they think will cater to their needs and their family's needs.

Albert Shanker was one of the first educational advocates who helped in pioneering charter schools to gain momentum, however he quickly changed his views when charter schools did not match his original vision. In 1988, Shanker began publically advocating for charter schools. According to Karanovich, (2009) Shanker's vision would allow the teachers union to work with schools and school districts to allow any group of six or more teachers or parents to open a school within a school (SWS) which would run autonomously (p. 209). His vision quickly flourished with charter schools becoming a reality in just a couple short years. However, Shanker's vision of charter schools and what he was advocating for quickly diverged from his original vision. Chubb and Moe famously proposed vouchers, money to choose a school that better fit the child's need, as an educational system that became synonymous with charter schools (p. 205). Then Minnesota, the first state to flourish with charter schools, deemed it lawful for charter schools to separate from the distract and abandon teacher unions i.e., collective bargaining rights, which is not aligned to Shanker's vision (p. 205). One other piece that deflected from Shanker's vision was the rise of for profit charters. When Albert Shanker was

proposing charter schools as an option, the point was to stay in line with the district vision and offer alternatives to traditional public schools. For profit organizations traditionally are meant to deviate from the aligned mission and proceed with self-fulfilling monetary motives. While Albert Shanker is one of the founding thought provoking advocates for charter schools, he quickly became publically anti-charter school in 1994, but his passion and drive for charters flourished even without his continued support.

The types of charter schools are vast, from freestanding schools to supporting entities, such as Education Management Organization, EMO, and Charter Management Organizations, CMOs. The vast majority of charter schools are freestanding schools. According to *The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools* (2010) a freestanding charter school is a school that was created by an individual, group of individuals, often time former educators, parents, and community groups (p. 1). According to Miron (2007), these schools are responsible for creating their own school model, staffing, financing, curriculum, evaluations, reporting to the state. Enrollment CMOs and EMOs were created due to the vast amount of schools growing and needing support. EMOs are for profit companies that help build more than one school using public funding (p. 477). EMOs can be district or charter schools and their goal is to produce significant results with less resources. A CMO is a non-profit organization that creates more than one school with a similar vision and mission and helps to support them with the oversight of the schools' functionalities and it has a cooperate structure (NAPCS, 2010, p. 1). Democracy Prep Public Schools, DPPS, the organization I work for, is part of a CMO. The CMO for DPPS helps with hiring, evaluations, enrolment, finance/budgeting, and professional development for teachers and leaders, maintaining a board for each campus, and reporting. In 2009-2010, about 30 percent of charter schools were operated by a CMO or EMO (NAPCS, 2010, p. 1). CMOs are

primarily based in cities, whereas EMOs spread between cities and suburbs. The population and makeup of CMO, EMO and freestanding charter schools also vary. The makeup of most CMOs are black and Hispanic students and a majority qualify for free and reduced lunch whereas EMOs and freestanding charters have a higher number of white students and nearly 50 percent or less qualify for free and reduced lunch (NAPCS, 2010, p. 4). According to the New York City Charter School Center (2017) in 2016, New York City had 113 freestanding charter schools, 91 affiliated with a CMO and 19 affiliated with an EMO. New York City has one of the largest populations of charter schools and it continues to grow.

New York City has a very diverse educational model. In the 2016-2017 school year, there were 216 charter schools. Throughout the boroughs there were 85 in Brooklyn, 61 in the Bronx, 49 in Manhattan, 18 in Queens, 3 in Staten Island. The desire for charter schools continues to grow in areas with a high population of minority students. In Harlem and South Bronx, there were four applicants for every one seat available in charter schools. Across the city, there were 44, 400 students waitlisted for a seat in a charter school. Much of the parents' desire for their children to attend a charter school in New York is tied to performance on ELA and Math State tests. Students are outperforming district schools in both ELA and math; specifically looking at black and Hispanic students in charter schools there is a pass rate of 48.1% compared to 22.8% in district schools for math. For ELA there was a 42% pass rate compared to 27% in district schools (2017, p. 1).

Many successful charter schools have similar founding principles and ideas that help them stay afloat and stand out from others (Stetson, 2013, p. 73). Some common themes of successful charters include high expectations for students and families, longer school day, unique curriculum, teacher training and professional development and a strong leadership model. High

expectations include adhering to ridged rules and expectations both academically and behaviorally for students when they enter the school building. It applies to both for students and parents because families are expected to help the school support these norms and systems both inside and outside the school building. This is often very different from what families are used to at traditional public schools. Many charter schools have an extended school day, sometimes as long as ten hours and a longer school year starting in mid-August and ending at the end of June. Many charters create their own curriculum in house instead of using standard text books. This might be done through curriculum specialists for the network or it can also be teachers creating all of their own lessons from scratch. They are expected to follow state standards, but they are not given a textbook or national curriculum to create lessons. The teacher training and coaching model is often very rigorous and intensive. Most successful charter schools have teacher professional development weeks before students, commonly referred to as scholars at "no excuses" charter schools, come back to school, half days of professional development every week, and whole school data and professional development days throughout the year when students do not have school. CMO leaders and principals create much of this professional development themselves. Lastly, the leadership model is often created within, developing leaders who have been teachers and/or spend one year+ training to be a school leader within the organization. Many leadership programs involve leaders spending weeks observing other successful schools, attending several week long intensive professional developments, completing initiatives and data tasks while in training and spending time shadowing other leaders before stepping into their own schools. While these are not the only components that contribute to successful charter schools, these trends seem to be true of many successful charter schools

around the nation and New York City including, but not limited to KIPP, Achievement First, Uncommon Schools and Democracy Prep.

One argument against charter schools is that they “cream” their students, meaning they pick out the students they want to teach as opposed to educating all students. While this is true for some organizations it is not true for the vast majority. According to the New York Charter School Center, 76% of students attending charter schools are from economically disadvantaged families, usually qualifying them for free and reduced lunch. Further, 18% of students have individualized education plans, IEP’s, and qualify for special education services. The demographic of the schools is 54% African American, 36% Hispanic, 6% English Language Learners. While all charter schools have their own individual make up, and some do “cream” their scholars in a variety of ways which I will discuss later, that is not the obvious trend (NYCCharterschools.com, 2017, p. 1). Charter schools in New York City tend to educate a diverse population, with diverse needs and are working to educate a similar population to the district schools.

I am going to take a closer look at the major, well-known charter schools in New York City and schools similar to DPPS. Some of the most well-known schools that I will be looking closer at are Uncommon Schools, KIPP, Achievement First and Success Academy. I will then discuss DPPS and specifically at my campus, which is part of a CMO, but is unique within the CMO. While charter schools have a collective identity, it is important to look at each CMO as a whole, and examine their models with a critical eye in order to have a more complete understanding of New York City Charter schools as a whole.

Uncommon Schools is a CMO built to create educational opportunities for scholars across the country, they have become a household name in the charter school community.

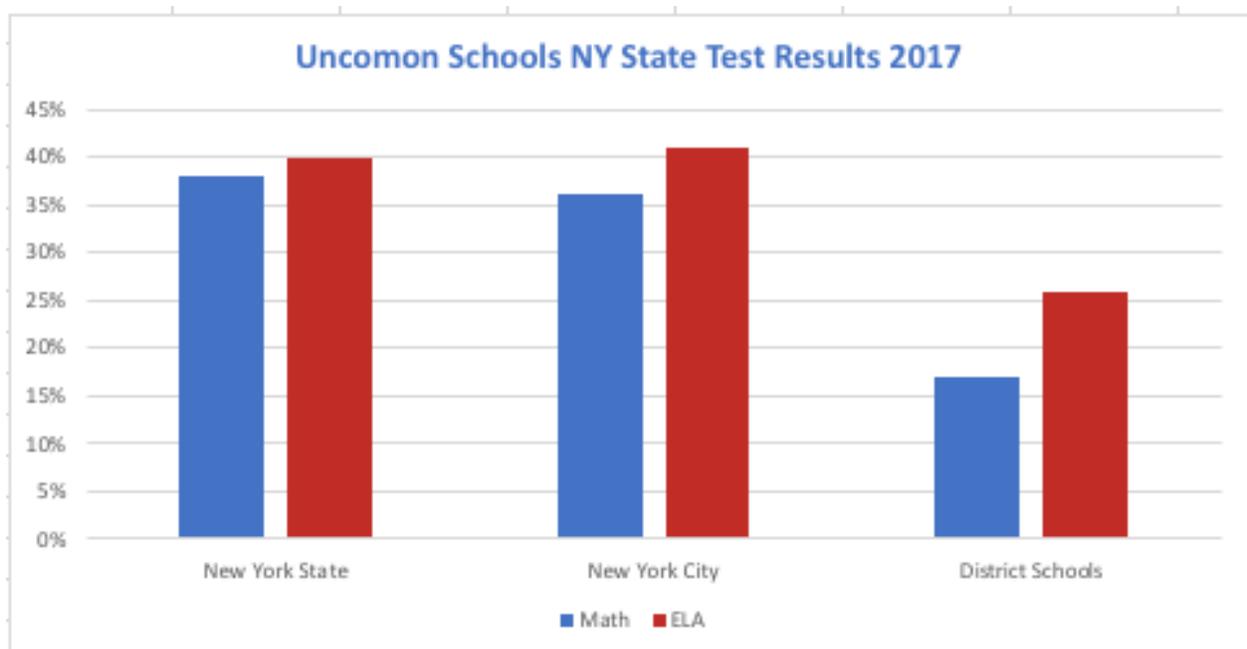
According to Myer (2013) Uncommon was founded by a group of former school leaders from the east coast, headed by Norman Atkins and supported by Doug Lamov, Brett Peiser, Evan Randal, John King, Paul Brambrick-Santoyo (p. 1). Many of the men have gone on to start educational companies or write education books. Like most charter schools, Uncommon was created with the goal in mind to close the achievement gap for low income students. Uncommon has seen immense success, expanding to 52 schools and serves over 18,000 students across six regions: Boston, Camden, New York City, Newark, Rochester, and Troy (as stated by uncommonschools.org). Each region is supported at minimum by a managing director, similar to a superintendent, a principal and director of operations per campus and teachers (Meyer, 2013, p. 1). Uncommon Schools uses intense coaching mechanisms to develop their teaching staff. It is very common to see video cameras in each room, practice sessions of lessons before and after, and a variety of data points to drive instruction. While I could not find exact teacher turnover rate, I think it varies from campus to campus, but is not unheard of up to a 50% turnover rate per year, which I have heard anecdotally from a friend who used to work for Uncommon Northstar, but left after such intense teacher coaching caused her too much stress.

Both student and teacher expectations are very high at Uncommon schools as they expect their teachers to work incredibly hard to ensure that all scholars have an opportunity to attend college. Meyer (2013) explains, “It seems part Catholic Church, part army, combining a laser-like loyalty to certain key principles with a keen devotion to individuality in the trenches” (p. 1). One of the most important components when hiring teachers is a teacher’s ability to receive feedback (2013, p. 1). Additionally, it is expected their teachers and students live by the CMOs core values: Take a Stand, Right is Right, All Hands, Stretch It and The J-Factor. These values are instilled through daily practice of students trying their best and being pushed to their limits as

stated by their website. With many of the students enrolling potentially years behind grade level, the schools believe they need to do whatever it takes to ensure teachers are equipped and prepared to close the achievement gap through extreme educational measures.

The extreme measures taken to achieve student success are seen with success at varied levels across both grade level and city. According to Uncommon Schools website (2017), Uncommon Schools are closing the achievement gap in both math and ELA. (See chart A.) There is no individual data provided on their school website of their middle school performance across the state or specifically New York City. There is data provided for NYC elementary schools which demonstrate exemplary work in comparison to the district schools, there is also data for Rochester and Troy where they are outperforming district schools. It can be inferred that the NYC middle schools are not performing at the same exemplary level as the institution has not made this information public. There is no data provided for their high school Regent's reports or the transfer rate from the high school.

Chart A



KIPP Charter schools is a national CMO school network. KIPP, which stands for Knowledge is Power Program, was started in Houston, Texas by two men Mike Feinburg and Dave Levin who were striving to create a school that was not only academically rigorous, but also focused on character development. According to the KIPP NYC website (2017) KIPP is now serving over 88,000 students in 20 states and Washington DC, across 209 schools. As with many charter schools, KIPP has a set of principals they pride themselves on and work towards achieving. The seven principals KIPP focuses on are:

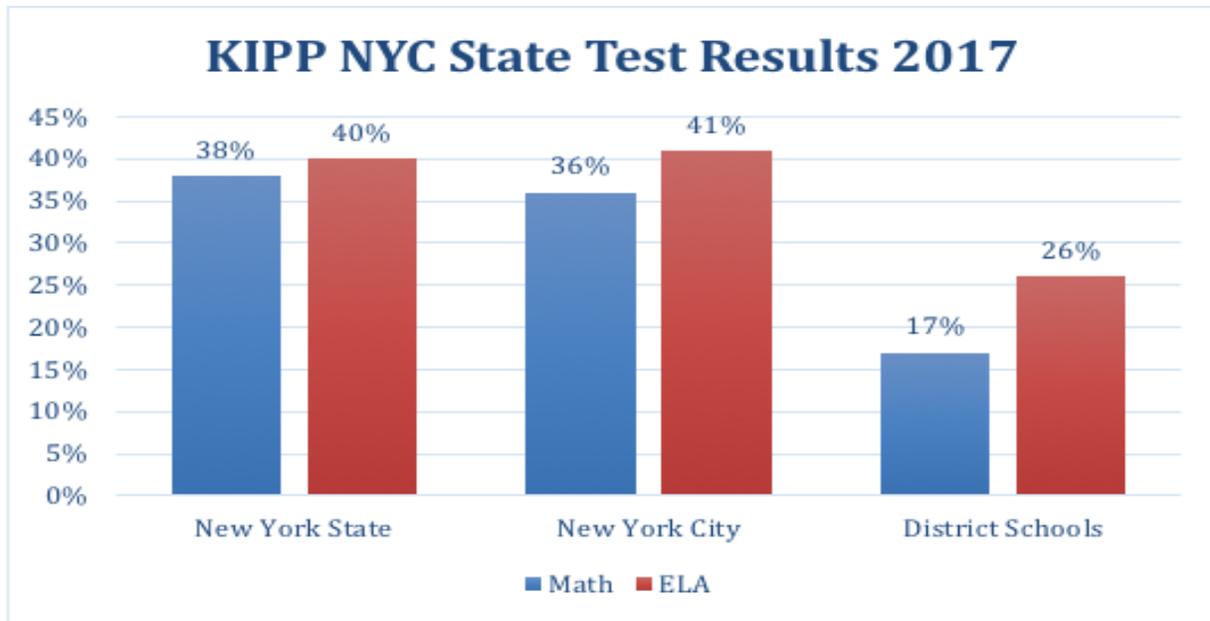
1. A belief that all students can learn and achieve
2. A focus on college graduation as the ultimate goal
3. An emphasis on providing rigorous academics while simultaneously developing student character
4. A belief that visionary, empowered leaders are central to the development and operation of successful schools
5. A belief that excellent teachers are critical to help students succeed in school and beyond
6. A belief that empowered leaders and teachers should leverage existing knowledge and resources when exercising their autonomy
7. A focus on continuous learning and improvement (KIPP NYC, 2017)

KIPP nationally is invested in students performing at a high standard and maintaining their success. KIPP is a lottery based acceptance school, meaning as long a child lives in the district and there is a seat open, they can apply to enroll at that school. KIPP has demonstrated success across states through achievement and the above values; when schools are not

performing to their national standard the CMO will shut the school down. Nationally, many of their schools are performing above district level, but not all. According to Clark et al (2015) KIPP has shut down at least 15 schools nationally not meeting academic and character expectation (p. 3). Angrist et al (2010) found that KIPP's No Excuses Model "produce noteworthy achievement gains" based on performance of the state test (p. 243). KIPP nationally is primarily Hispanic, 49% and black 51% with many of their students coming from low SES (p. 3). They accept all students, including special education students; in 2015 they enrolled 18% special education students nationally (p. 4).

Overall, in New York City, KIPP seems to be performing above the local standard. (See chart B.) The website does not offer a comparison to white peers and does not offer a school by school or elementary/middle breakdown of the results. The KIPP NYC website (2017) shares five high school regents: Algebra I, English, Global History, Living Environment, and US History for which KIPP is outperforming the city and state. They do not share the other classes or scores. To qualify for an advanced regents diploma in New York students also need to pass with a 65% or more score in Geometry, Algebra II and a language other than English, but it is not stated if KIPP scholars qualify for this as stated by NYC department of Education (2017, p. 3-5). The website also shares 96% graduation rate (p. 2). It does not state what qualifies as graduation, meaning if this is taking into account the students who started with KIPP in 9th grade and completed graduation or if this is the number of seniors that graduated.

Chart B



Achievement First Public Charter Schools was created and continued to flourish with the goal to prove that inner city, low-income students could be as successful as affluent peers. It was co-founded by Dacia Toll and Doug McCurry in New Haven, Connecticut. In 1999 they started with one school, Amistad Academy, which proved to be a model school with their exceptionally high pass rates and ethic for success. This success encouraged Toll and McCurry to create a network of schools that became Achievement First in 2003. Achievement First has grown to 34 schools, in 5 cities, serving over 11,600 students across the country. The schools are located in New Haven, CT, Bridgeport, CT, Hartford, CT, Providence, RI, and Brooklyn, NY. All schools use a lottery model for incoming students. Officially, Achievement First operates with a local superintendent for most of their regions, a principal, and director of operations. They pride themselves on the separation of responsibility so that principals can focus on making the school the most functional place for students to learn and grow. According to their website, the network

strives to allow teachers and principals to focus on the classroom by hiring network positions at the CMO or operations team for recruitment, budgeting, food supplies, field trips and many other tasks that can distract teachers from concentrating on student achievement. The network also prides itself on having a shared vision, while allowing individual schools and school leaders have autonomy to make choices that are best suited for the children in their building; if it is in the nature of student success, leaders to have the ability to adapt as they see fit. As Hess (2010) states, Achievement First is known for “hiring extraordinary teachers, extending the school day, and creating disciplined cultures. In other words, these schools do what good schools have always aspired to do, but do more of it and do it better” (p. 50). With that in mind, the network is eager to demonstrate the ability to function with fewer expenses than its local counterpart, traditional public schools this demonstrating that their model is replicable for other schools to emulate.

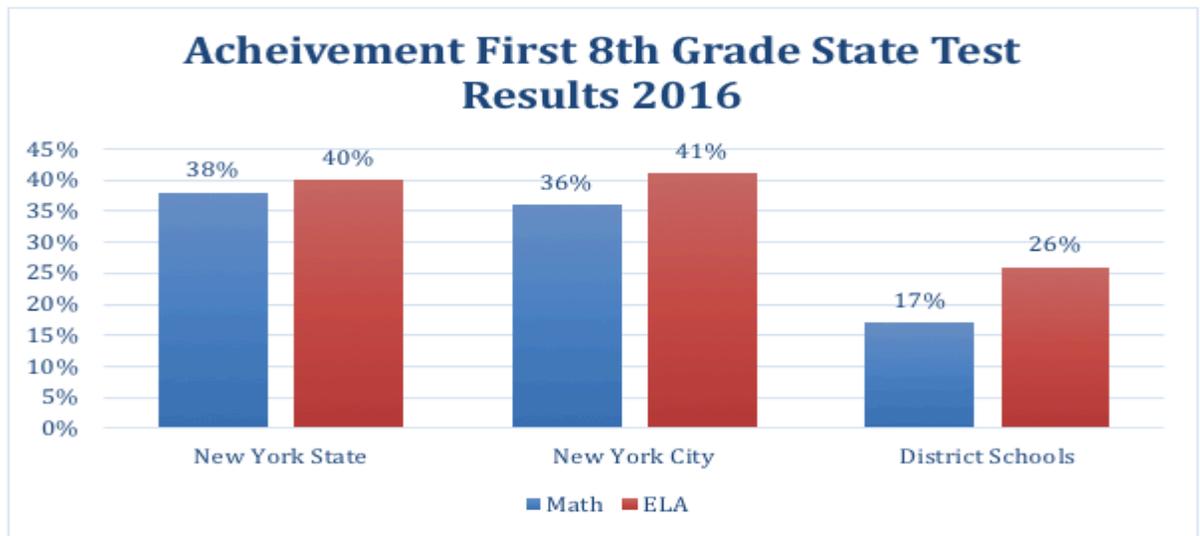
Achievement First is both rigorous for teachers and students. The network is dedicated to finding hard working adults who are unwavering in their belief that all children can succeed. After a rigorous recruitment process, all new teachers are called in for 4-5 weeks of professional development before the school year starts. Professional development continues into the school year with a half day of professional development once a week. Additionally, each teacher has a coach on staff who will observe teachers weekly and have biweekly coaching meetings. The school day is also longer than traditional public school, which allows teachers to focus on differentiation, scaffold grouping; thus ensuring that students are mastering the standards, not just mindlessly going through content. These groupings are often formed through intensive testing and teacher professional development data days, thus the staff is making the most informed decisions on how to best serve their students. Students are expected to perform

utilizing the school's core values: respect, enthusiasm, achievement, citizenship, and hard work. This is followed through with a college driven mission and "sweating the small stuff". The network believes that in order to set students up for success, every aspect of their performance in school matters and if they ask for something of students, they will make sure the student follows that direction. This is achieved through a merit and demerit system. This model also includes the belief that families are partners and they strive to communicate with families regularly. Much of this is achieved through their advisory model, in which every child is assigned to a homeroom advisory in which their homeroom teacher builds a special and unique bond with a small cohort of children they see and communicate with throughout the day. It also allows for a subgroup to pay closer attention to attendance. The school's goal is 97% in school a day; thus calls are made home for when students are absent. Lastly, they prioritize joy. Joy in school does not always have to be silly joy, it can also be seen in completing a very challenging word problem or reading a book that is above their reading level and succeeding (Achievement First, 2017). Achievement First is working to create an environment where children want to learn. Most of this information can be attained from their website, I have also spent time in several of their Brooklyn campuses and these values are clearly evident when walking the halls.

Across the five cities, Achievement First is surpassing their counterparts, both traditional public schools and many no excuses charter schools, in both ELA and Math in elementary and middle school for the 2016 school year. As stated by the Achievement First website (2017) elementary schools are outperforming both district and the state on the state test. Also, the website demonstrates that by 8th grade, Achievement First is outperforming both district schools and the state. (See chart C.) However, there is no information shared about how other middle school grade levels are performing, it can be assumed the results are not as notable as they are

with elementary and 8th grade. None of the data is compared to white students across the given state. The website does not share data for NYC specific schools, either. The website does not disclose their New York Regent's high school pass rates.

Chart C



The final charter school discussed here is one known across the city and country for its unique and seemingly intense leader and tactics is Success Academy Charter School. Success Academy is a CMO with 46 schools around 4 of New York Boroughs. According to their website, 93% of their students are students of color and 73% come from homes that are low SES (2017). Eva Moskowitz founded the school in 2006 and is Executive Director. Success has developed its own curriculum for teachers to use for ELA and math. The two hour a day ELA program that all students take part of is called Think; the program is composed of 4 components: reading workshop, guided reading, read aloud and shared text as stated by Sahm (2015, p. 1). Moskowitz believes that ELA is not just content and skills; that children need a variety of methods to build the background knowledge and the skills needed to be successful in reading and writing (2015, p. 1). The math curriculum is also developed for teachers with precise questioning

built in so that teachers can adequately cover a topic in one day and move on to a new academic standard the next day. Success claims to have history and science built into their curriculum for one hour a day starting in kindergarten; however, when speaking to teachers who work there, unless it is a testing year for science, 4th or 8th grade, students stop taking history and science until state testing is over. The schools participate in multi hour test prep sessions, taking multiple practice tests for months in advance to ensure their students are prepared for the test. According to Charles Sahn, Moskowitz justifies this extreme test prep through the “lens of equity” claiming that she does not want children to be intimidated by the test so she wants them to go in feeling confident (Sahn, 2015, p. 1).

The high expectations are taxing on both students and teachers and there is a high turnover rate for both. Success Academy does not backfill seats of students when they transfer out of the school after 3rd grade. According to Charles Sahn (2015), “Success opened in 2006 with a 1st-grade class of 73 students; only 32 remained to graduate 8th grade in June 2014--a 56 percent loss of students over eight years” (p. 1). While they claim to not explicitly cream their students, unlike public schools, they do not have to take any children that did not start with them from a very young age. However, according to Baker (2016), many parents are not pleased with their experience due to reports of a “got to go” list of children the school is trying to push out (p. 29). Also, a video was leaked of an “abusive” 1st grade teacher ripping up a child’s math work and screaming, “go to the calm down chair” (2016, p. 29). On the other hand, if a parent has “bought into” the school and its approach then it will make developing that child academically and socially less challenging as the parents and teachers are on the same page. The school also does not have to work through deficits that new children might be bringing in as they know the child’s entire academic history, which is again an advantage traditional public schools do not

have. Additionally, the teacher turnover rate is exceptionally high. Given the intense coaching model and long work days, the staff turnover rate has been as high as 70%. Some of this number does include teachers moving to CMO roles and switching schools, but nonetheless a very high rate of turnover (Sahm, 2015 p. 1).

In addition to academics, Success does try to build character using the acronym ACTION according to their website. (See list below.)

A stands for action, the school and students want to ensure they are taking action to meet the highest standards.

C stands for curiosity; they want students to develop the art of questioning.

T stands for try and try, meaning keep trying even when it is hard.

I stand for integrity meaning they want students to be open and honest with each other and staff.

O stands for others, meaning be aware of others and the impression you are making on others.

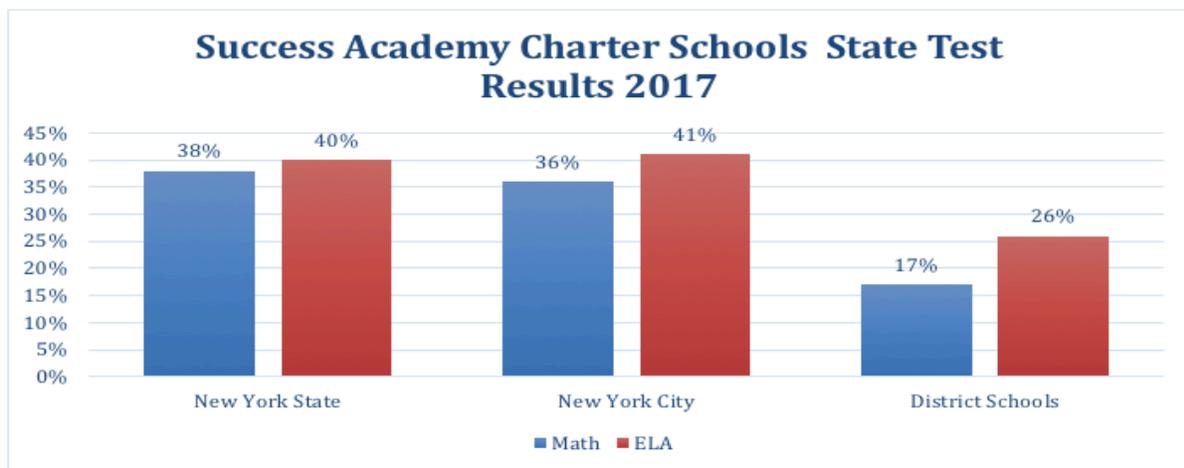
N stands for no short cuts, meaning education is a long path and it takes a long time to reach excellence.

These values are similar to most “no excuses” charter school models, which are trying to build character while maintaining high academic standards for the students.

Success Academy does have high state data scores to support their extreme teaching tactics. According to their website, in 2017 of all the students eligible to take the state test outperformed both the state and NYC at high margins. (See chart D.) The website does not offer pass rate information by grade level specifically, middle/elementary or in comparison to white or affluent students. Although their test scores are exceptional, it is worth keeping in mind that their

students have been attending Success since at least 3rd grade or earlier and the class sizes become smaller and smaller after that year. This does give them an academic advantage with small classes of students who are invested in the no excuses, extended school day, test prep model of education.

Chart D

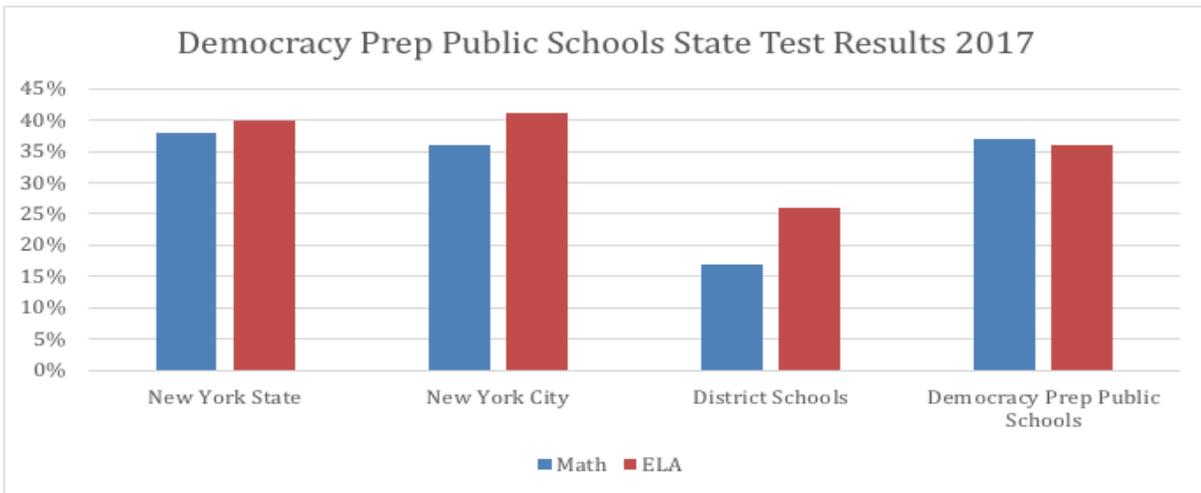


Democracy Prep Public Schools is a CMO created by Seth Andrews in 2006. It is now serving 5,000 scholars across 17 schools, in 4 states and Washington DC: New York, New Jersey, Louisiana, and Nevada. Democracy Prep was created and inspired through Andrews’ time spent teaching in South Korea and he modeled DPPS after South Korea. His vision that was paralleled to South Korea, included working hard, which would lead to success, education as a number one priority and teachers as valued and respected individuals. Seth Andrews shared with the New York Amsterdam News (2012), “Teachers in Korea are respected with the utmost dignity. It’s also a place where everyone works very hard to achieve, where people do not believe that talent is fixed” (p. 33). This revelation became the roots for Democracy Prep. DPPS, similar to many no excuse charter school models follow an extended school day, have a rigorous

hiring process, care deeply about academics, have a culture of joy, and are tremendously data driven. What make DPPS different is they pride themselves on being publically funded, they accept all scholars through the lottery process and have a deep commitment to civic engagement. Each campus has a civics coordinator that helps develop civics minded scholars with activities throughout the year around community service, voting, and being informed about political issues nationwide. DPPS also prioritizes arts education. Every child will take some sort of arts course every trimester k-12 and this course will not be taken away for test prep. They have a robust extracurricular program that not only includes sports, but also many arts including national debate teams and partnerships with Broadway companies.

Overall DPPS data is not as competitive as other charter networks in the 2016-2017 school year, but does show growth from grade level to grade level. According to DPNY State Exam Performance 2016-2017 (2017) the middle schools are outperforming the district, and the city, but not outperforming the state. In ELA the middle schools are outperforming the district, but not city or state. (See chart E.) There is no data provided for affluent or white students. One hypothesis for the proficiency rates being lower is most DPPS schools start in 6th grade. The model of the school was to prove that DPPS could close achievement gaps starting in 6th grade; 6th grade is when every traditional public school starts middle school in order to not cream students as everyone is looking at a school this year. Out of the six middle schools, only two have elementary schools. The schools do not publish how many freshmen start and how many graduate.

Chart E



In all schools examined here, there is limited amount of published information available about graduation rates, suspension rates, how much backfilling each campus or school network does and teacher turnover rate but there are some measures available to access. Although the author has not been able to authenticate the enrollment vs. graduation rate it (might) is possible to assume 50% who begin in the schools actually graduate. One of the ways students fail to graduate is when parents pull them when they fail to make satisfactory progress from grade to grade and will be retained multiple times to ensure growth. While all the schools officially do not cream, one way of natural creaming is to retain children at higher rates so the family chooses to pull them. Again, this information is not published, but can be inferred through observation. Another tactic for creaming is high suspension rates for students not performing at adequate rates. This information is also not readily available, it may be inferred because many of the schools suspend at higher rates than district schools and the more challenging students un-enroll due to this inconvenience on the family. Many schools claim to backfill for seats that are open, but this does not always happen at the rate the school promises. Many schools turnkey backfilling by enrolling higher numbers of students in the lower grades so on paper the

enrollment numbers of the school match up, but the seat that was lost is not necessarily filled. Most schools do not offer this information to the public, so there are not official numbers here. Lastly, schools do not readily offer teacher turnover rate, but many of the schools listed, particularly Uncommon and Success, have been purported to have notorious teacher turnover rate due to the stress put on teachers through long hours, intense coaching models, and high academic standards. On paper, many of these schools show success rates on their test scores, however these scores do come at a cost and are not always as bright as they appear.

Chapter 3

A successful charter school is not only defined by the pass rates on state tests, but also should take into consideration if individuals feel valued and the happiness of the people in the building. A great school ensures that both students and faculty are challenged by the work they complete, and are pleased within the environment they are in every day. Many children spend more waking hours in the school they attend than their own home. Families need to feel safe, satisfied, and supported by the institution to which they are trusting their children. The school I work at in central Harlem, exemplifies what an excellent school should look like because it is determined to create an environment that allows both scholars and faculty to excel by creating an atmosphere that works to develop the entire person while maintaining college driven standards.

Background Information

The urban charter middle school grades 6-8 in central Harlem is part of a CMO that subscribes to and practices a philosophy that all children deserve the opportunity to go to college and change the world through hard work no matter the background or circumstances they are born into, a no excuses philosophy. The campus I am focusing on serves low income families, with over 90% of our scholars receiving free and/or reduced lunch. 100% of the students are minority: 73% black, 26% Latino and less than 1% Asian. Just over 23% of the scholars have an IEP. The majority of the students attending this campus are from central Harlem, East Harlem and the Bronx. The school population is selected by the NYC public school lottery program. A family must apply to come to this particular campus. They cannot apply to the network of schools as each school is a separate charter. If a scholar has siblings that are of an eligible grade, they have preferential seating and will be pulled from the waitlist first. The school continues to backfill seats in all grades 6-8 if seats become available. It continues to backfill throughout the

year until February if seats become available. No matter the reason, the school deeply believes in ensuring they are opening doors and changing lives of all children who want an opportunity to change the world and go to college.

Teachers and Staff

The middle school has the strongest teaching faculty to ensure the school is upholding its mission of creating an institution that will change the trajectory of lives of the children in the building. Thus, to make this happen the school works hard at ensuring that the strongest teachers are hired. To work at this school, a person either needs to be referred by a staff member or apply on the network's hiring website. About seven out of ten employees of the school are referrals from current staff; the school prefers referrals because teacher referrals tend to last longer in education than candidates that have no connection to the school. Both referrals and applicants go through a screening process with a recruitment team. If the recruitment team and leadership of the school approves of the applicant, they will invite the candidate to come in for a demo lesson. For a demo lesson, the candidate will be given an academic standard in the content they are applying for and are asked to create a 25-minute lesson. The candidate comes to the school for a half a day to observe, meet staff members, deliver the lesson and interview with the school leadership team. Most teachers who are hired have at least two years of teaching experience, charter school experience preferred. If they are novices, they are often offered an associate teacher position. An associate teacher supports a more experienced teacher, gradually taking on more teaching responsibility as the year progresses. The supporting teacher will coach them on their teaching practice, meet with them daily to discuss lessons, planning, execution; in essence, support them to ensure they are successful according to this school's evaluation standards when

they are teaching solo. Associate teachers are not the only teachers with academic coaches helping to develop their practice at this campus.

Teacher Development

Prioritizing teacher development is incredibly important to retaining teachers; teachers advocate to be pushed in their practice, and in order to continue to challenge the staff they need to be pushed in different ways as they gain experience and expertise. According to the Fall Insight Campus Report (2017), teachers rated the school's professional development a 8.3 out of 10 demonstrating they find value in the learning opportunities offered (p. 1). Most new teachers to the campus are considered "emerging" teachers. They are observed at least twice a week for 15 minutes, have at least bi-weekly, but often weekly, coaching meetings, turn in scripted lesson plans for review, and are live coached while they are teaching. During coaching meetings, the teacher and coach always start with highs and lows to gauge how the teacher is feeling in order to identify the teacher's wellness. Understanding a teacher's wellness is important because leadership wants to ensure that the teacher is able to put the best version of themselves in front of scholars and if they are struggling with some aspect of work, it is important to address that before it hinders their performance. After that, they review lessons taught and look at mastery of standards assessed, discuss and practice upcoming lessons.

Being data driven is important to ensure scholars are mastering work and if/when they are not, the coach supports by dissecting where the lesson was taught inadequately and brainstorm how to approach the lesson in a new way to make the material more accessible to the scholars. This data analysis also helps teachers make informed decisions for tutoring material and Saturday school if the teacher is planning to host a Saturday session. The purpose for reviewing and practicing upcoming lessons is so that teachers are fully prepared to execute the lesson when

they are in front of scholars. Practicing the lesson allows the teacher to anticipate where they need more clear directions, where scholars might have a misconception, and making sure the teacher is using economy of language, as little words needed to be said to affirm their point, to ensure scholars have plenty of time to do the deep thinking they need to do to ensure they are successful on assessments.

The next level of teacher is “advanced” and they have typically been with the school for two or more years. An advanced teacher is observed at least bi-weekly if not weekly by their coach. The observation is more targeted on a specific skill, goal or growth area developed between the coach and the teacher. Observations are a mix of planned and unplanned observations to ensure the teacher has a voice in their development and also to ensure they are being developed around school wide goals. The coaching meeting is more data and observation driven than practice driven as seen with emerging teachers. Similar to an emerging teacher, the meeting always starts with highs and lows to gauge the teacher’s wellness. The conversation is advanced to observation outcomes. During the discussion of observation outcomes, they discuss if the goals of the lesson were met, what the teacher did well and what can they see as areas of growth. Then, they discuss future lessons and when they want to be observed next as it pertains to their individual goal and development. Last, they will discuss data on recent assessments or exit tickets, end of lesson mini quiz, to ensure that the teacher is thinking critically on how to enhance scholar performance.

The final stage of teacher development level is “master” teacher. This is typically a teacher that has been with the school for over five years and is a master of their craft. They will receive bi-weekly observations for 30-45 minutes that are planned and are based around individual goals. Master teachers will also have a bi-weekly coaching meeting that is mostly

driven by the teacher and where the teacher wants to be developed. Becoming a master teacher is very challenging, but comes with incentives.

Sustainability

One sustainability effort this school has made is creating a masters teacher program: this program is designed to incentivize high performing teachers to stay in the classroom and help make long-term teaching more sustainable while challenging the best teachers intellectually. One area of growth this school saw was teachers with 5+ years of experience, teachers who identified as lifelong teachers, started to feel stagnant – they were not being intellectually challenged in the same way they were in previous years and wanted to be pushed. From “The Internal School Review, “Teacher Interviews” (2017) one teacher stated, “We need more differentiated PD” (p. 8). This is one of the reasons the master teacher program started, to meet the needs of advanced teachers. To apply for this program, teachers had to be identified as a “master teacher”, have at least three years of experience, but typically five, and they needed at least a 3.3 overall quantitative and qualitative evaluation score. The program not only gives the teacher public recognition of their hard work, it also offers incentives that either challenge them professionally or make their work more sustainable in the long run. For example, teachers can choose two fully paid outside of network professional development conferences, preferential schedule, a resident teacher – similar to an associate teacher, but the teacher is hired by the network and supported by the network- coaching and observations with network curriculum specialists, a shortened work day by two hours once a week, or a fully paid international trip with one of the high schools. This school cares very deeply about ensuring that strong educators continue to stay in the classroom and this program is one way they are encouraging the best teachers to continue to

make the difference in scholar's lives, feel personally and professionally challenged, while making the work more sustainable.

An incentive for all staff members is a tuition reimbursement program. To be hired at the school, in any position, teaching or operations staff, the staff member must have at least a bachelor's degree. If the teacher is not yet certified and does not yet have a master's degree, the school will reimburse up to \$15,000 over the course of five years towards a master's degree leading to teacher certification. For master teachers, another incentive they can choose is for their degree to be paid for over a two-year program. While the initial teacher certification is not required to be hired, it is highly encouraged and incentivized once the faculty is hired. There is also a person on staff to assist in navigating teacher certification, particularly teacher certification tests and support with the Ed TPA. These supports are all efforts to encourage teacher sustainability and assistance while continuing to do the work on the ground with the scholars which can be overwhelming in and of itself.

One issue facing teacher sustainability in high performing charter schools is the long days and longer school years, however this school in central Harlem has thought critically about how to make the hours more bearable in the day to day duties. The Monday through Friday school day is compiled of eight 48-minute class periods, a morning and afternoon advisory time, 30-minute lunch/recess and 15-minute DEAR. All staff is expected to be at school at 7:15 AM prepped and ready for the day. The entire staff huddles at 7:20 AM for morning updates and announcements for the day. Doors to the building open at 7:30 AM: all teachers go to their homeroom advisories, welcome post or uniform check, and leadership is outside shaking the hands of all scholars entering the building. After advisory, teachers teach for only four of the eight class periods and have four prep periods. This time is their free time to lesson plan, grade,

call families, check in with scholars, or even leave campus to get lunch or coffee. Leadership does not micromanage this time: this time is sacred time to ensure teachers have the opportunity to complete all of tasks that they are often made to take home in traditional public schools. Additionally, two times per week, teachers must tutor or support with special education teacher support systems (SETSS), but the other two days of the week is additional prep time that teachers can use however they see fit. This additional time built into the day allows for teachers to get the majority of their work done while in the building, so they are bringing less work home and therefore making the workload more sustainable for a long-term teaching career. On Friday, students have a half day and are released at 1:00 PM. The Friday schedule starts the same, but advisory time is longer in the morning. On these mornings, teachers are given lessons to execute that help build character for students; the lessons are about anything from bullying, to equity vs. equality for special education students, to internet safety. After the advisory lesson, there are four class periods, break instead of drop everything and read (DEAR), and a townhall. Townhall is a whole grade community building time lead by a member of the leadership team. While teachers are present, they are not expected to execute lessons in front of children during this time. Teachers teach every other Friday. On the Fridays they are not teaching, they have four prep periods to get caught up on work and their only in school responsibilities are advisory time and break. During break, scholars are practicing typing with an online typing program so teachers are only expected to monitor for 20 minutes; they are not expected to plan or execute a lesson for scholars. Teachers not teaching on all Friday's helps create sustainability because they have a chance to get ahead on their workload before the weekend. This time is valuable to ensure that faculty have a balance of time in front of scholars and time to recharge and complete the extremely lengthy to do list that teachers have.

One way to help teachers with workload and sustainability is by giving teachers lesson plans that are already created so they can focus on refining, re-teaching and differentiating lessons. Most of the lessons are given to teachers by the network with a do now, guided practice, independent practice and exit ticket. All the lessons are state standard aligned and aligned to the in-house trimester exams. According to the Insight Survey (2017), 100% agree that the curriculum is academically rigorous (p. 6). With strong lessons already created, teachers can spend more time ensuring the lesson is catered to their scholars needs and deficits. As a school, teachers are asked to differentiate lessons for low and high scholars. To meet the needs of the lower scholars behind grade level or scholars with IEP's, teachers are expected to scaffold in teacher questioning, add sentence starters for open ended questions, adapt the reading without lowering the rigor, add in multiple choice questions or add in annotation focuses. For higher level scholars, teachers are expected to add in higher level teacher questioning, discussion-based learning, and longer written response questions. Teachers have the autonomy to spiral in mini lessons or adapt the do now to reteach missed skills as they see fit. With the lessons pre-prepared, teachers can focus their lesson planning time on adapting to their individual scholar needs while retaining a strong baseline for the next standard to be taught. This minimizes the initial planning time to allow them to use data to drive their instruction in a meaningful and purposeful way. In addition, teachers are also allowed and encouraged to develop project-based learning initiatives as they see fit. As teachers gain experience and content knowledge, they are more adequately equipped to push the rigor and high-level thinking of their scholars through extended projects. This autonomy is released to teachers as they prove their ability to manage the classroom and attain student achievement. The lessons provided are intended for any level teacher to be able to execute with fidelity; they are a floor not a ceiling and the school leaders

want to ensure that teachers are not feeling stifled by their curriculum. All general education teachers are expected to turn in rough drafts or a syllabus depending on the level of the teacher of their adapted lesson plans two weeks in advance. This allows leadership to give feedback on the lessons and allows for special education teachers to further adapt the lessons for the scholars with IEP's. Final lesson plans are to be turned in the Sunday before they are taught to ensure that the teachers are fully prepared to execute strong lessons in advance. This also allows for families to access the lessons if their scholar will be out of school. With the lesson's created for teachers, these deadlines are reasonable and achievable for most teachers. Teachers are able to focus on pedagogy and execution with the support of the strong lessons they are given.

Professional Development

Scholars are released for a half day on Friday's to allow for targeted, in house, professional development. On Friday afternoons, all staff has a lunch break from 1-2PM. From 2-3 PM, there is grade level meeting time; this is where the grade level meets to discuss areas of strength, areas of growth, operational concerns, cultural concerns and scholar concerns. This time can also be used for parent meetings if the parent requests to meet with the entire grade level. At times, this meeting time is used to meet with the staff social workers if they need to check in with the entire grade level. There is a grade level leader who conducts these meetings. The meetings all take place during the work day to ensure that teachers are not asked to sacrifice personal time outside of the long work hours to discuss pressing and pertinent issues. The school believes these meetings are valuable to ensure the quality of the grade functioning in a cohesive manner and therefore prioritizes this time. After grade level meeting, there is a professional development around a cultural or operational push for the entire team as determined by leadership. This focus can be something like aggressive monitoring of student work during class

time or revamping a time of the day that could be stronger such as DEAR for example. Most professional developments are scaffold by skill level of the teachers to ensure that all teachers are being met where they are at professionally and are being challenged in appropriate ways. For example, when the school was working on aggressive monitoring of student work, the developing teachers were practicing scanning to ensure all scholars were working, the emerging teachers were practicing circulating the room and the advanced/master teachers were watching and analyzing videos of their own practice and critiquing where they could improve themselves. Leadership has found differentiated professional development to be a valuable resource to ensure that staff is not overwhelmed or underwhelmed with what they are expected to execute. It would be naïve to operate under the assumption that all teachers were performing at the same level and could execute at the same level. On the Internal School Review, “Staff Interviews” (2017), one staff member stated, “I do look forward to Friday time because I've learned a lot and I like to learn about all areas of the school” (p. 7). To ensure the school is not stagnant in its practice, they have found it is important to develop teachers at their individual level. For the last fifteen minutes, the leaders end with a teacher feature, announcements, and shout-outs. The teacher feature is a short clip of a teacher executing the focus of the week with fidelity; the teacher that is shown is not always a master teacher, it is a teacher who is demonstrating mastery in an area they are focusing on. Leadership has found that it is important to showcase all levels of teachers to build investment in their practice and showcase growth. After announcements, the school always ends with shout-outs. Shout-outs are a time for all staff to celebrate one another and the hard work they were seen doing throughout the week. This is a special time for staff to show one another that they appreciate each other and the helping hand they give one another. It takes a whole community to have the school run with fidelity and this allows staff to show one another

that their hard work and efforts were noticed. According to the Insight Survey (2017), 81% of teachers feel that professional development is “committed to improving my instructional practice” and 77% of teacher believe that “professional development opportunities at my school are well planned and executed” (p. 4). Staff feels empowered and stronger after this time; it helps build a unified community.

Friday half days are not the only opportunity for teacher professional development, the school also holds professional development for staff before school begins in August to ensure everyone is prepared for the day scholars walk through the door. Professional development in August is also differentiated for the different needs of the staff. During the first week of professional development, all new staff to the network meets for half of their day together to work on basic taxonomies and pedagogy that the network decides is a baseline for all staff and the other half of the day is spent at the school level learning the intricacies of the campus; this time is spent at leader’s discretion. This campus spends a lot of time sharing the history of the school, demonstrating the unique joy factor for scholars and staff, and practicing systems that make the school function. During this time, new staff is also given their technology. All new and returning staff members are given a Macbook Pro and iPhones; each classroom is equipped with a smartboard or Apple board and staff is given training on how to use these during this this time. When the entire staff returns, there is one day of professional development dedicated to staff team building, fully paid for by the school. In past years the staff has gone white water rafting, to an amusement park, to trapeze school, and completed a high ropes course. The leadership believes it is important that the staff is challenged together and has an opportunity to depend on one another to build trust. As a school that functions as a unit, it is important that staff has multiple opportunities to bond and work together in efforts to complete a like-minded goal.

Other professional development time is used to plan curriculum, meet in grade levels, practice the school wide management system, meet with advisory partners to plan for the year, analyze previous year's data, and meet in innovation circles. Innovation circles areas of growth for the school that teachers have identified as wanting to spend time problem solving around. For the 2017-2018 school year the innovations circles are sunshine committee (teacher joy and happiness), culturally responsive pedagogy, everyone's an ACT teacher (supporting teachers on differentiating for their scholars with IEP's), cultural committee, family communication, restorative justices and shared space. These committees are special are integral to professional development because these are directly corresponding the areas staff deems important to push our school in order to best serve our scholars. Staff is invested in these committee's which ensures that they feel their time is being well utilized and driven to further fulfilling the mission of changing the world. In order for professional development to be impactful, the staff must understand why they are spending their time completing the work. The leaders of this campus are constantly reevaluating the why behind their choices to ensure that every minute matters for their staff in order to create investment in the school and the school community. Professional development needs to feel purposeful and driven towards student achievement and teacher performance in order for staff to be bought into the hard work and long hours they are putting in when scholars are not in the building. The leadership thinks critically about balancing the amount of work time, pedagogy practice and meeting time that is put into these days to ensure that staff is being challenged and being set up for success for the first days of scholars. Part of the purpose for summer professional development is setting a strong foundation to ensure when scholars are in the building teachers workload is sustainable.

In addition to the work hours during the business week, building sustainability and building a strong foundation during summer professional development, the school is making efforts to make the long school year more sustainable with built in breaks, three-day weekends, doctor days, half days and data days without scholars. Most charter schools have a summer break, winter break and spring break, but this school also has an additional week-long break in February. In the 2017-2018 the school started to give off the Friday before all week long breaks off, also. This is to help with the number of people who call out sick on the Friday before breaks. This extra day allows for more flexibility with ten full days off including weekends and leads to less staff calling out sick before a break. Along with the longer breaks, there are more three-day weekends built into the schedule than many schools. This school has off Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Presidents Day, and Memorial Day. For each three-day weekend, instead of PD on Friday, the staff also has a half day as a doctor's day. This allows for staff to take time to go to the doctor or other appointments that are challenging to go to throughout the regular workday. These days are all on the calendar at the start of the year in order for the staff to have adequate time to book appointments well in advance. Staff is encouraged to use this time however they see fit in order to recharge themselves. Furthermore, after each trimester there is a seven-day period for trimester testing for which teachers are given half days. Each day there is a different content exam given and scholars are released at 1 PM. On the day of the teacher's content, they are required to grade the test, but each of the other six days they are allowed to use the after-school time as they see fit. This is a time for teachers to finish grading, planning their next unit for the start of the next trimester, or using this time for themselves. This time is extremely valuable for teachers to ensure they are recharged for the next trimester. After trimester testing, there is a full

day of professional development. This time is allotted for teachers and leadership to analyze data and to ensure that the staff is presenting meaningful lessons rooted in data in the next trimester. This time is appreciated by staff as they have a dedicated time to work on their lessons so that they are targeted for their scholars needs. Giving teacher work time is a huge incentive for all staff because their time is precious and stretched very thin. To retain the best teachers, it is imperative to demonstrate to them their time is connected to their success.

Behavior System

Teachers receive behavioral support in addition to curriculum support to ensure that class time is spent focused on academics. This campus has two DREAM coaches, who are similar to behavior specialists, and two social workers; the supports team's role are to ensure that scholars and teachers are set up for a successful learning environment. Each day when a scholar comes to school on time, in complete uniform they earn \$30 DREAM. If they misbehave in class such as, but not limited to, call out when the teacher or other scholar is talking, get out of their seat without permission, throw something across the room, are off task during instruction or independent practice they will earn a deduction which takes away \$3 of their dollars. If they earn three deductions in class, this is considered a disruption or distraction to the other scholar's learning, they will be referred to the DREAM room to reflect on their actions. If a scholar is openly disrespectful to a staff member or another scholar in the room, uses vulgar language, or put their hands on another scholar, they will be immediately referred for disrupting the learning environment in the room. If a scholar is referred, they will fill out a reflection and check in with a DREAM coach about their actions and making better choices. The DREAM coach will call the scholars family, and the scholar will serve detention after school. They will not return to the same class they were sent out of. The teacher is than expected to circle back with the scholar

about the incident to ensure they both have a clear understanding of what lead to the referral and the teacher is expected to follow up with the family within 24 hours. This system is helpful for teachers because they can focus their efforts on ensuring the vast majority of the classroom is focused on learning and is not focused on other distractions in the room. According to the Insight Survey (2017), 77% of teachers agreed, “School leaders provide me with the resources and support I need to maintain high standards for student behavior in my classroom” (p. 3). It is important that teachers can focus their energy on executing the highest level of instruction to scholars so they are mastering the standards they need to be successful. Minimal in-classroom distractions allow for this practice to take place and ensure the learning environment is focused. The school also has social workers for scholars who have social and emotional needs that are mandated by their IEP, are considered at risk to be harmful to themselves or others, or need support due to circumstances outside of the school. Social workers have designated counseling loads to support scholars who have weekly or bi weekly check ins. They are also available via text or email to support as needed. These supports are also important to the teacher, so they can focus on the teaching and executing of the lesson for the rest of the classroom while the scholars who need extra support have adults in the building designated to help ensure their safety inside and outside of the building. As a school, the leadership wants to support their teachers, so they are able to focus on what brought them to this profession: educating children and helping them get to college. Creating systems to allow teachers to focus on that, allows teachers to challenge themselves in upping the rigor of the curriculum, and problem solving around educating scholars ensuring that teaching is sustainable. Teachers have plenty of issues to think through while planning how to best reach their scholars; thus having supports in place to assist with management and social, emotional needs.

Joy and Scholar Incentives

An exceptional school does not only focus on teacher sustainability and job satisfaction, its leadership also must prioritize the children in the building and their satisfaction with the school. When the children, the reason the school exists, are happy, grateful to attend the school, feel safe, yet challenged academically, and supported emotionally, the school has done something right. According to the Internal School Review “Scholar Interviews” (2017), when asked the question, “I feel like the adults at my school care about my learning and want to see me succeed” students averaged a 4.3 out of 5 (question 1). When scholars are pleasant to be around, it makes teachers a lot more willing to go above and beyond to ensure the kids have a phenomenal educational experience. The urban middle school in Harlem has worked to build a school that children want to be at by creating authentic joy, developing the whole child, build systems into the day that is predictable and makes family communication frequent and consistent.

Ensuring that the scholars are happy and feel safe is one of the aspects that makes this school unique and way they make this happen is building grade level and advisory spirit. When scholars were asked, “I feel like the adults in my school care about me as a person and as a student.” scholars rated that 3.9 out of 5 (“Scholar Interviews”, 2017, Q. 2). Each child starts the first day of school in a homeroom advisory named after a college. Each grade level has an HBCU, a large state school, a liberal arts school and a New York state or city school. From the first day, the advisory starts to build pride for being in that class by giving scholars a warm welcome through letters, personalized swag, and the start of their school family. All scholars are with the advisory through the entirety of the day, so is important that they start the year feeling a sense of pride and companionship. During advisory, the class will play ice breaker games,

celebrate each other's accomplishments, share each other's hardships and be an overall support system. One way the class starts to build a support system is through their class "DREAM blocks" During each class period, the advisory earns "DREAM blocks" which are a point system based on the classes behaviors; the more "DREAM blocks" they earn as a class, the more privileges they can earn during advisory time and throughout the year. The system is created to help build a team spirit and help them understand the importance of working as a team. One big incentive the class can earn with their "DREAM blocks" is a special prize at townhall.

Townhall a special time each Friday's where each grade goes to the auditorium for 30 minutes to build community spirit and joy. Overall, staff rated townhall a 8.2 out of 10 when asked "How is townhall?" ("Staff Interviews" 2017, p. 4). All advisories come to townhall dressed head to toe in their advisories colors, swag, and spirit. It is their time to show their pride. One of the greatest celebrations of townhall is winning the grade level mascot for the week; the class with the highest "DREAM blocks" for the week wins the mascot. Each mascot is based on a book the grade has read either the current year or the year before. In 6th grade, they win a giant stuffed rabbit, Edward Tulane, from *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by Kate DiCamillo, in 7th grade they win a giant wolf, Ronu, from *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell and in 8th grade they win a giant stuff pig, Piggy, from *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. Some may argue that middle schoolers are too old to enjoy stuffed animals, but we have found that to be incorrect. The kids go wild when they earn this prize and carry the animal with pride walking through the halls. Townhall also celebrates individual scholar achievement. The teachers give away five awards: PETSU, (please, excuse me, thank you, sorry, your welcome), Belayer (a helpful teammate), Endurance (a scholar who has worked extra hard that week), Spirit, and Big DREAMer. Big DREAMer is the highest award of the week for a male

and female scholar going above and beyond showing their greatness; they win a special t-shirt they can wear on Fridays. After each award is presented, the entire grade does a special cheer to show support for their team. After the award ceremony the grade plays a game, each advisory competing against one another for bragging rights for the week. The games are sometimes an entire class game or sometimes there are representatives chosen to compete. This is a very special time for scholars to build authentic joy around being in school, supporting one another, building a team spirit, and ending the week on a high note. One teacher noted, Teachers are extremely invested in it. Kids come in with all kinds of swag. Everyone is super bought into the games.” (“Staff Interviews”, 2017, p. 5). This is also a special time for scholars to have fun with school leadership as the principal or vice principal orchestrates townhall so teachers can focus on having fun with their class.

Townhall is not the only time the school builds in time for silliness and joy, they dedicate two full months to building joy and happiness during times that are historically challenging for both staff and students. Part of the reason for the wear of these months is that they are about a month after a long break and another break seems far off; the terrain seems bleak. The middle school has renamed October, ROCKtober and February, FUNbruary. During these months, there is a series of dressdown/dress up days, spirit days, and prize giveaways. Instead of focusing on how historically hard these months are, the school has offered distractions to make the month fun filled. At the end of the month, there is a dance party that scholars can earn based on their DREAM dollars. If they earn 80% of their DREAM dollars during the month of ROCKtober or FUNbruary, they are invited to a costume dance in the gym with food, DJ, face painting, and other games. This is a time to celebrate the scholars who are constantly on good behavior and have been focused on embracing the joy during the month.

The scholars can earn a variety of big prizes with their DREAM dollars throughout the year; at the end of each trimester there is a big event for them to use their DREAM dollars. At the end of trimester one, the top 80% of DREAM dollar earners attend a day at SkyZone, a trampoline park, the 50%-79% DREAM dollar earners attend a day of bowling and pizza and the bottom 50% stay at the school for movies and snacks. The school is very challenging, and they believe that every child deserves some sort of reward for their hard work. However, the harder you work, the bigger the payoff. After the end of trimester two, the scholars attend a DREAM dollar auction. They get to bring 10% of their earned DREAM dollars for the year to bid on a variety of prizes and trips. Each staff member is allotted a budget of \$50 to take scholars on a trip around New York. Scholars can bid on these trips or they can bid on other prizes such as school swag, sports equipment, hats, candy, toys, bags, etc. Every scholar is given at least \$10 to spend at the auction. Again, everyone gets some sort of prize, but the more money you have accumulated throughout the year, the better the payoff will be during the auction. After trimester three, scholars can earn an overnight trip to Washington DC in 6th grade, Boston in 7th grade, and Canada in 8th grade. The top 80% of DREAM dollar earners automatically earn a seat on the trip. For scholars who did not earn 80% of their DREAM dollars, they can apply to the trip by filling out an application and asking for teacher endorsements. The leadership team makes the final decisions on which scholars are chosen off of the application list. The trip is 90% paid for by the school, the school asks for a 10% contribution from the family. If the family cannot afford the 10% contribution, the school has a scholarship fund the family can apply for as we do not want any scholar who has earned the trip to miss out on the opportunity. The trips are compiled of a variety of experiences from visiting government and political institutions, to museums, to some thrill experiences like boat rides and ropes courses. Each night, they stay at a different college

dormitory. For scholars that do not earn the trip, they attend school for half days and complete character building workshops at the school and can earn smaller field trips around NYC based on behavior. All of the DREAM dollar incentives are built in to demonstrate to scholars that their hard work adds up and the more focused they are, the greater the rewards they can earn. These bursts of joy build a special experience for scholars that might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience and the school believes that all children should have opportunities to see and experience the world.

The school in central Harlem also believes that all scholars can and should have the opportunity to attend college; therefore they take all of their scholars on two college trips each year. In 6th grade scholars go on a tour of NYU and SUNY Binghamton, in 7th grade scholars go on a tour Columbia University and Fordham University and in 8th grade scholars tour City College and Brooklyn College. The leadership believe it is important to expose scholars to a variety of institutions, some local and some further away, to show them their options. It is never too early to start instilling collegiate values and goals in scholars. These trips build academic joy and demonstrate to scholars the reason they work so hard every day, to ensure they are earning a spot in one of those college seats.

A different joy infused day created to help demonstrate the college experience for scholars, is hosting “college day” to give scholars a sense of what college feels like. On this day, all the staff turns into college professors and the scholars turn into college students. Before the day, the scholars are given a brochure of all of the “college courses” available on this day, these are the courses the staff has created which are emulated around college course they have taken. Courses include everything from Economics 101, to Engineering 101 to Feminism 101. A week before the event, scholars get the opportunity to sign up for their classes; each scholar fills out a

form with their top 5 courses. The morning of “college day” each scholar receives an individualized schedule with two courses. Very similar to college, sometimes they get their top choices and sometimes those courses are filled up and they don’t get their choices. The school wants to show them that while they might not always get their top choices, some classes they did not expect to enjoy can transform what they thought they were interested in. Each course is 1 hour and 40 minutes. Scholars get to walk freely in the halls to transition classes, which they do not normally get to do, they get to dress down, and they get to bring snacks to school with them. The idea is to show scholars some of the freedoms they will have when they are in college and create joy around attending college. College seems very far off to a 6th grader, so the school is thinking creatively on how to create investment early on during pivotal years in a scholar’s academic development.

Arts and Extracurricular

Along with building joy, the school and leadership are deeply invested in developing the whole child through a variety of experiences they might not naturally be inclined to try such as the arts. This school in Harlem values the arts and having all scholars participate in the arts in some capacity. In each grade level scholars will take one semester of dance, one semester of music, and one semester of physical education. Some schools cut these programs during times of testing or when funding is tight, but this campus believes that all children deserve the opportunity to be exposed to the arts and need to try different activities. Arts electives are also never cut out of a scholar’s daily course work to give supplemental studies in other subjects such as math or ELA. The school believes that arts are pertinent to the development of the child. The music and dance programs also partner with Broadway in order to give all scholars the opportunity to see at least one Broadway show while they attend this school. The program not

only sends scholars to see a show for free, it also sends real Broadway actors into the classroom to work with the kids around building their acting and singing skills. These opportunities are valuable for the scholars because they might not otherwise have the chance to be exposed to professional arts if the school did not offer these programs. In addition, the arts teachers also host a variety of after school arts programs including dance company, choir, speech and debate, and two plays. In the fall, the play is a drama and in the spring the play is a musical. While all scholars are not required to participate in these after school programs, they are encouraged to audition for a role. The teachers also create opportunities for backstage positions such as set building, lighting and costume design for those that do not want to be in the spotlight, but want to participate in arts in other forms. These projects help develop the whole child because they are gaining exposure to aspects of school other than academics, which are important to help children discover their interests.

In addition to the arts, the school offers a variety of other after school programs hosted by staff after tutoring hours. If a teacher is interested in hosting a team or a club, leadership is very open to the possibility. Some clubs that exist in the 2017-2018 school year include Pop Art Club, Anime Club, Gentlemen's Club, Girls Group, Step and LGBTQ alliance. The school also has some sports teams who compete against other charter schools around NYC including, girls volleyball, girls basketball, boys basketball, co-ed flag football and co-ed soccer. All competitive sports teams are on a try out and eligibility basis; if scholars make the team, they need to maintain a 70% average in all of their classes in order to play in the games. The school believes it is important to offer these opportunities to scholars because it helps build their character and it allows for staff to engage with scholars and families outside of the academic setting thus building strong relationships and investment in the school and community.

Independent Reading

Although the afterschool programming is very important to cultivating a love of school and community, the school also believes part of building the whole child is instilling a love of reading. Studies show that the more scholars read independently the more successful they will be in college and beyond. The way the school helps support building this love of reading is through DEAR (drop everything and read) Monday-Friday, word count incentives and word count promotional criteria. Each day Monday through Thursday, scholars have 15 minutes a day to read a book of their choosing. During this time, they can build their love of learning by reading, taking a quiz over a book they have read, or visiting the school library. Students can check out up to three books at a time to read in and out of school. Scholars are required to read at least 40 pages a night in the book of their choosing. When they read one million words, tracked by the quiz system, they earn a t-shirt that they can wear on Fridays and they earn a spot on the millionaire's boat cruise. In June, all scholars grades 6-8 who have reached the goal of one million words attend a half day boat cruise during the school day on the Hudson River. On the cruise, they get to enjoy an all you can eat buffet, DJ and dancing, and a sun roof. Any scholar can earn this trip regardless of their DREAM dollar count. This unique experience celebrates scholars who have worked hard all year in reading. The school requires that all 6th grade scholars read 1 million words and all 7th and 8th graders read 1.2 million words by the last day of school. If they do not reach these goals, they will have to attend summer school to build their wordcount. Being a fluent reader is an important life skill that the school believes can help change the trajectory of the scholar's life. This aspect of building the whole child is pertinent to their ability to be informed about the world around them by building the skill of being a critical reader which comes from reading a variety of information both presented academically and personally.

Civics

Furthermore, the school believes that being an informed citizen is important to personal development and cultivates a pride in civics throughout the year. Part of changing the world is being an informed citizen who critically thinks about issues facing the community, state and country in which a person resides. The school has a scholar Senate who are activists in issues facing the school community; they host fundraisers, canned food drives, and are working on publishing a newspaper discussing issues facing scholars and families. Also, the school as a whole, focuses on civics initiatives throughout the year. During election seasons, scholars are on the streets encouraging people to go vote and showing them how to register to vote if they are not already. In the spring, the entire school participates in a day of service for which the scholars and staff work together to give back to the community. In past years the school has worked with Harlem Grown, an urban garden in the community, with local elementary schools around reading and tutoring and has raised money for clean water. Instilling a sense of investment in the scholar's community is important because the children than appreciate the importance of giving back and community service. Building the whole child is showing kids that sharing your knowledge and participating in the world around you help others when they need support. The civics engagement in demonstrates to scholars that the community they come from deserves their love and support just as the community has invested in them. To make the world a better place, the scholars needs to give back.

Family Communication

Another way the school coheres with families and scholars is through the vast communication efforts the school makes to ensure scholars families are informed about what is happening with their child in school. Starting the second week of school, scholars are sent home

with a progress report with their grades and with a behavior report. Every Monday all year long, scholars are sent home with this report and required to bring it back signed by their parent. If the scholar does not bring it back signed, their homeroom advisory teacher will call home and inquire where the progress report is. The school believes it is important that families have a clear understanding of how their child is performing academically and behaviorally throughout the year so they understand the implications of their progress throughout the year. Tutoring, Saturday school and ultimately retention decisions are made around these reports and the school leadership does not want families to be surprised at the end of the marking period. Additionally, the school has online systems that families have access to in order to track scholar's grades and missing work. All families can access this site on a smart phone or computer. The site shares grades, missing work and gives access to missing assignments. If the scholar is missing work, the family can click the link to the assignment right on the site. If the family does not have a printer, the scholar can complete the missing work on loose paper and turn it in. The site also gives texting and email access to all of the scholar's teachers so families are one click away from communicating with the necessary faculty members around the work. Furthermore, the school hosts several events for families to attend throughout the year including back to school night, family teacher conferences, game nights, and family appreciation events. These events are created to ensure that families always feel welcome the building to support their scholar. Beyond these events, the school has an open-door policy for which families are encouraged to come to school and observe any class their scholar is in. The school is proud of the work they are doing and want families and outside community members to be part of the experience the scholars are having. Families are also contacted by the school if the scholar is absent, late or out of uniform. The school wants to ensure that scholars are at school, on time and dressed to learn everyday and

when this is not the case, the family will be contacted. Lastly, families are given a contact list of all staff members at the start of the year with emails and school phone numbers. Staff is encouraged to email, call or text families as families see fit. When a family reaches out to a staff member, the school requires the staff member contact that family member back within 24 hours. The school's number one priority is serving scholars to the best of their ability and part of serving scholars is being in open and honest communication with the families. Teachers are also required to personally reach out to families if they send a scholar out of their classroom to the DREAM room. It is important that the family is hearing from the teacher exactly what happened and that the teacher is working to repair the relationship with the scholar and family around the incident. Leadership also requires staff to keep an open line of communication around wordcount with families. Because this is a unique feature of the school that many other schools do not have, it is important that teachers are being transparent around their scholar's progress towards meeting their goals. For scholars and families to be successful in this rigorous school environment, communication is essential. Ensuring the school is supporting the whole child academically, behaviorally, and personally requires a partnership with families. It takes a community to raise a child and this school believes that having clear lines of communication early and often are essential to the success of the scholar. This communication leads to a stronger school environment because families feel comfortable sending their children to school here which, overall, sets a better tone in the building as satisfaction is high by all stakeholders.

I believe that the school which I work in, in Central Harlem, is a model of excellence for public education. Scholars, families and faculty are invested in the school, in the leadership, and in the systems created to ensure student achievement is possible in an environment where people enjoy being. School is not only about tests and standards, school should also be about building

character and developing the whole child. Being challenged academically and professionally while maintaining a sense of joy and partnership are key to making this school stand out from the rest.

Conclusion

Overall, high performing charter schools, including the one I work at, are providing an excellent education for many students living in the New York area, but they are not for every student and every family. Charter schools require a lot of commitment by every person who is part of the organization. The hours are longer than traditional public schools, the workload is more intense, the behavior expectations are very high, and the goal to have every child reach college can be extremely daunting. When a family and scholar win the lottery to attend a college driven charter school, they are signing up for earlier mornings and later afternoons. If their scholar has tutoring or detention after school, their day will be even later. When a scholar is struggling behaviorally, families are called upon by several people in the school for support. Sometimes the family is asked to come in for meetings during the school day which can be challenging with work and other personal situations. When scholars need extra academic supports, they are required to come in on weekends, which can be taxing on families who are planning to go out of town or have their child contributing to work around the house. Most of these schools give homework every single night and packets over breaks; these practices require scholars to continue their heavy workload when they get home and requires families to support with their success. High performing charter schools are hard on both the family and scholar because the commitment is beyond the school day. Families are asked to play a very active role in their scholar's education and that is not always possible for everyone.

High performing charter schools are also hard on the faculty because the schools ask a lot of the educators in the classrooms; they expect a more active role of teachers than most traditional public schools. Not only are the hours longer than traditional public schools, but teachers are also expected to support their students throughout the day. Teachers are expected to

support during transitions, meals, advisory time or when other teachers call out sick. Everyone in the building is expected to use the same behavior management system as the consistency is helpfully for scholar development, but can be challenging for new teachers or teachers who are used to creating their own system. The behavior management can also be challenging because many of these schools sweat the small stuff, every direction is expected to be followed the right way, all the way, every time and if it is not there is a consequence. This is challenging for some teachers because they either do not believe in this policy or they do not have the radar to identify when scholars are not meeting expectations. Moreover, the workload expected for scholars to complete at a very high standard can be overwhelming. Constantly using data to drive instruction and being critical when the standards were not met adds extra work to a teachers already exhausted planning. Lastly, the extensive coaching and feedback model many of the schools use is not for every teacher. It can feel overwhelming to be constantly receiving feedback around best teaching and cultural practices of the school. Some teachers would rather be left alone and achieve how they best see fit and not be aligned with an entire school of educators. The pressure is high to perform.

It does work for many scholars and educators. High performing charter schools, particularly ones like mine that try to find a balance of rigor, high standards, team work, and joy, are a spectacular educational experience for most scholars and teachers. Schools like mine work hard to maintain a learning environment that is focused, productive and life changing. With dedication, heart, and drive some high performing charter schools are a fantastic option for those that want to see students from low income neighborhoods succeed in grade school, college, and beyond. Overall, even my school has some critical growth areas to ensure that all have an equal opportunity to success.

One area that charter schools need to continue to think critically around is special education. The school I work has made tremendous strides to serving all children, and does accept all children, but it does not provide all the services the child is granted on their IEP. With the college driven, high academic standards, longer school day, and tightly woven schedule, there is not as much room for remediation as some scholars need to achieve the growth to continue with the school in high school. The current model for the school I work states that all scholars will attend college and that is not realistic for all children. The school needs to think critically and honestly about how they are serving all scholars and what that looks like to serve all scholars.

Another area that my school and many high performing charter schools need to think critically about is culturally responsive pedagogy academically, behaviorally and whom they hire. The school for which I work has taken strides to ensure history and literature classes are more responsive to covering curriculum that identifies with the population of students in the classroom. History classes show multiple sides of history, sharing the often-silenced voices of history, but that curriculum is a work in progress and is only crafted for my school specifically, not New York curriculum. Additionally, the behavior management systems are very rigid and there is not much room for scholar voice, particularly in the moment. The school is working to teach scholars how to productively use their voice in society, but too often silences it in the building. The school needs to think critically how they are implementing their own ideals to support scholar voice. Lastly, the schools need to consider how to hire a more diverse staffing population that is more representative of the scholars they teach while maintaining the high standards they expect of their teaching staff. For the school to be practicing culturally responsive pedagogy, it needs to be acting on being culturally represented in staff to the student population.

Schools need to take more initiative to recruit staffing that is similar to the population they educate. The school in which I work, this year has begun a hiring program for students who attended the schools to come back and teach. This is a step in the right direction, but there needs to be a more valent effort by the recruitment teams and leadership.

Further research needs to be conducted around barriers to success in high school and beyond. Very few schools publish their true graduation rates and college success rates and there is very little information available about these numbers and why the drop in success after middle school. It would be important for research to start at the matriculation rates from 8th to 9th grade, 9th to 10th grade, 10th to 11th grade, 11th to 12th grade and college success rates and where they start to taper off. Part of the research should include questioning why scholars and families left the school, felt unsuccessful and how change of school effected the outcome of the scholar. Additionally, studies should look at the success rates of scholars who join high performing charter schools in high school or mid high school and their success rate in comparison to scholars who have been with the school since 6th grade in my schools case, or elementary in other schools circumstances. There should also be more specific research around the success rates of scholars with IEP's. Tracking if they succeed through the charter school system and college or what grade the most scholars leave the school. Looking closer at their long term outcomes if they choose to leave the schools could help inform the schools how to better serve them in the high performing charter schools.

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