

MI

# DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

HOW SCHOOLS CAN RISE TO THE TOP

*A collection of articles produced from the Manhattan Institute*



Charles Sahm

*Director, Education Policy*

Max Eden

*Senior Fellow*

# DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

## HOW SCHOOLS CAN RISE TO THE TOP

### Introduction

— Charles Sahn

MANHATTAN INSTITUTE\*

SchoolGrades.org, a website launched by the Manhattan Institute in 2015, provides the only comprehensive evaluation and comparison of all U.S. public elementary and middle schools based on the performance of their students in core subjects. How does SchoolGrades work?

We start with the percentage of students in each school who qualify as proficient on their state's math and reading exams, and then adjust these numbers to align with a rigorous national standard, using the latest scores in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This allows us to accurately compare schools' performance across state lines. Next, in recognition of the correlation between family income and student achievement, we award extra credit to schools serving economically disadvantaged students. Finally, we assign each school a letter grade, "A" through "F," that correlates to where students would rank in comparison with students in 60 countries on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) exams.

As one might expect, the quality of schools across the country ranges from excellent to abysmal. Of the 70,000 public elementary and middle schools across 50 states, 26% earn an "A," putting them on par with the average performance of schools in countries at the top of the international education rankings, like South Korea and Finland. Seventeen percent earn an "F," meaning that the school's performance is similar to the average performance of schools in countries like Serbia and Thailand.

"A" and "F" schools are not evenly distributed. When perusing SchoolGrades interactive maps, one will often find areas that are dominated by "D" or "F" schools. But almost always, there will be an "A." Over the past few months, Max Eden and I visited a handful of these islands of excellence in the hope that we might draw lessons from their success. We wanted to discover the basic tenets that allow these schools to stand out among their neighbors and give some of America's most disadvantaged students a truly world-class education.

The schools we profile in this report include traditional district schools as well as charter schools in five cities: Baltimore, Cleveland, Philadelphia, New York City, and Yonkers, NY. All these schools received an "A" from SchoolGrades while surrounded by many "D" and "F" schools.

---

\*The Manhattan Institute gratefully acknowledges the philanthropies that have underwritten SchoolGrades.org and this journalism project: the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the Kern Family Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation.

**They include:**

- ✓ **Philadelphia’s Young Scholars Charter School:** A high-scoring, high-poverty 260-student middle school that offers personalized attention and focuses on community and character — “the real skills in life.”

---

- ✓ **Cleveland’s Citizens Academy:** A K–8 charter school serving more than 400 students that breaks through with extensive family support and high expectations for teachers, students, and parents.

---

- ✓ **Baltimore’s Thomas Johnson Elementary/Middle School:** A traditional public school serving 550 students that has blossomed from a struggling institution at risk of closure into one of the strongest public schools in Maryland.

Certain common characteristics of these schools help us understand how they beat the odds to deliver such stellar student achievement.

***Strong Leaders***

These schools are all run by strong leaders who are provided a certain degree of administrative flexibility and freedom from bureaucratic red tape and restrictive work rules. At Citizens Academy, Principal Kimberly Peterlin notes that when she taught at a district school, “it would sometimes take two weeks to get sign-off to do something different with a student. Here, we can make adjustments daily.” At P.S. 172, veteran principal Jack Spatola is able to finagle the school budget and teachers’ work schedules to create collaborative team-teaching environments in classrooms. All the school leaders we interviewed are intimately involved in what is happening in the classrooms and know every child in the school by name. At Young Scholars Charter School, for example, Principal Melissa Campbell shakes each student’s hand every morning.

***Engaged Parents***

These schools recognize that parents are indispensable partners in their children’s education and make every effort to engage them in meaningful ways. The Thomas Johnson School holds monthly events for parents, and its Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) raised more than \$20,000 this year via a fall festival. At all the schools we visited, teachers communicate with parents on a regular basis and provide students and parents with e-mails and cell-phone numbers. One parent at the Charter School of Educational Excellence noted that at her son’s former school, she rarely spoke with his teacher; but at his new school, the “teacher takes the time” and is in constant communication. Interestingly, these schools also make a conscious effort to get parents together just to socialize with one another—not to raise funds or discuss policies but to build community.

***Discipline and a Culture of High Expectations***

These schools provide a strictly controlled environment and also foster a culture of high expectations for staff, students, and family. This doesn’t mean that schools overuse suspension or employ overly harsh behavior codes. For example, at Young Scholars Charter School, every day begins with an hour-long community- and character-building exercise, either “Morning Meeting” in their homeroom or a grade-wide “Community Circle.” At Citizens Academy, for the first two weeks of school, students have “Culture Camp,” a crash course in the “CA Way” and the seven virtues that the school emphasizes: respect, responsibility, generosity, courage, perseverance, honesty, and loyalty.

***A Well-Mapped, Well-Rounded Curriculum***

P.S. 172, for example, employs the Eureka Math and Core Knowledge Language Arts curricula but with certain teacher-led modifications. Each month, one weekly grade-level meeting is devoted to tweaking the curriculum and reviewing a database of detailed and rigorous lesson plans. In addition, teachers spend a few days each summer revising the curriculum after discussing what worked best and what needs improvement. The schools we visited do not narrowly focus on math and English but provide a rich, broad curriculum that includes history, literature, science, art, music, and foreign languages. In order to turn Citizens Academy around, Principal Staci Pratt strategically employed a series of different curricula to help students catch up to grade-level work.

***Extended Learning Time***

The extended school days and years that these schools offer provide more time for classroom learning, personalized attention, and extracurricular activities. One of the basic features of many charter schools is a longer school day and year. The Charter School of Educational Excellence, for example, estimates that its longer year and school day translate into about 40 extra school days for its students. Interestingly, spurred on by the

✓ **New York City's P.S. 172/The Beacon School of Excellence:** A K–5, 600-student public school among the state's highest-performing, despite the fact that 31% of students require special-education services and 27% are English language learners.

✓ **Yonkers's Charter School of Educational Excellence:** A K–8 school serving 700 students that has not only become one of the highest-scoring schools in the city but a source of community pride and revitalization.

competition of charters, innovative district schools like P.S. 172 and Thomas Johnson are also finding ways to keep their doors open longer to provide the extra support that their students need.

### ***Frequent Assessment***

These schools give students frequent assessments, use data to guide instruction, and offer extra help for those falling behind. At the Charter School of Educational Excellence, Principal Cindy Lopez noted: “If we see that a student is achieving behind their classmates, we develop an action plan for that student. We put in more work and teach in smaller groups and come up with a way to catch them up.” This “data tracking” doesn't have to be high-tech. For example, there's no sophisticated student-tracking software at P.S. 172: each teacher keeps an old-fashioned notepad journal on each student to track progress. Weekly 80-minute grade-level meetings are held for all teachers, coaches, and specialists, at which the progress of each student is reviewed.

### ***Highly Effective Teachers***

These schools focus a great deal on the quality of their instructors, including efforts to attract highly motivated, effective teachers and help novice and struggling teachers improve their craft. Yet none of the schools we visited employs a rigid, prescriptive system for teacher evaluation. Nor do they frequently utilize professional development workshops. Instead, school leaders regularly visit classrooms and quickly offer targeted feedback and recommendations on improving practice. Teachers meet with coaches or small groups of colleagues to practice lessons or hone instructional practices.

Of course, these seven basic characteristics of successful schools are not pathbreaking. In fact, they closely echo the findings of a study that Harvard University economics professor Roland G. Fryer conducted of successful New York City charter schools. But as one principal told us, the real key to a successful school is “a lot of hard work.” Still, these schools reassure us that the solutions to education problems are achievable. We hope that their stories will inspire other schools.



PHILADELPHIA, PA

## “Don’t Judge a School by Its Building—the Inner Beauty of Young Scholars Charter School”

— Max Eden

THE SEVENTY FOUR, DEC. 11, 2016



Young Scholars Charter School

“At my old school, I used to get into a lot of fights,” Tajir tells me. “The kids thought I was a wimp. The teachers thought I was dumb.”

Tajir’s mom decided he needed a new school. After searching Great Philly Schools, she chose to enroll her sixth-grader in Philadelphia’s Young Scholars Charter School. “When we rolled up and I saw the building, I thought, ‘Ugh, that is so plain!’ I didn’t know if I could even walk in there,” Tajir said. “But do you ever get somewhere and it feels like you just belong? That’s what it felt like.”

Tajir is one of 260 students who travel from 28 different ZIP codes to attend the charter middle school. I traveled there in November from Washington, D.C., on a quest to find America’s best schools. Using School-Grades, an online tool built by my colleagues at the Manhattan Institute to evaluate schools with a consistent, meaningful standard, I searched the 20 largest cities for schools that received an “A” grade and were also surrounded by “D” and “F” schools.

Then I went to find out what sets these schools apart.

And though Young Scholars’ low, squat building looks plainer than a lump of coal, it truly is a diamond in the rough. In an era when charter schooling is becoming a more national and potentially more toxic conversation than ever, it’s important to take the time to highlight small local schools that provide the best education in their neighborhoods.

THOUGH YOUNG SCHOLARS’ LOW, SQUAT BUILDING  
LOOKS PLAINER THAN A LUMP OF COAL,  
IT TRULY IS A  
DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH.

Young Scholars prides itself as being among the highest-scoring high-poverty schools in Pennsylvania. Although some charter critics allege that schools

like Young Scholars excel because they “teach to the test,” what sets this charter apart is its focus on the whole child. Every day at Young Scholars begins with an hour-long community- and character-building exercise, either “Morning Meeting” in their homeroom or a grade-wide “Community Circle.”

The topic of discussion at this “Morning Meeting” was Donald Trump. To my pleasant surprise, the conversa-

tion was as informed as anything you'd hear in Washington and a great deal calmer than you'd encounter on a college campus.

Meanwhile, Mr. Tucker leads students in "Community Circle" through a recitation of an inspirational poem. Tucker says that his goal is to "give our students more 'at bats' at gratitude, empathy and the real skills in life."

Later, I ask Demaine, an eighth-grader, if he thought this might all be a bit too fluffy for a guy like him. "No, I'd never say that. You gotta do this stuff a lot. Look someone in the eye, shake their hand, then look them in the eye. When I meet new people, they tell me what a respectful young man I am," Demaine beams.

"Principal Campbell shakes everyone's hand every morning. She knows us. She knows what's going on with us."

Melissa Campbell spends nearly the entire day on her feet, and she isn't content to let her school rest on its success. "To be honest," she tells me, "it feels like we've been stagnant for the last couple of years. But this year it feels like we're really turning a corner and poised to take off."

Campbell says that in recent years her school had been sidetracked by its former charter management organization. CMOs are designed to help charters with their administrative work, but sometimes they can be more trouble than they're worth. According to Campbell, the school's CMO was trying to support too many school models in too many states. Campbell recalls that the organization would make decisions without consulting the school, and at times it made them feel more like middle managers than school leaders.

This is a useful and cautionary lesson for the charter sector. Policymakers and charter advocates often press the need for high-performing charters to "scale" and, in an attempt to drive quality, have put in place a raft of regulations that make stand-alone charter schools more difficult to get approved—and, if they are approved, more difficult to maintain operations. But the urge to scale through CMOs can sometimes wrap charters in the kind of red tape all too familiar to traditional district schools.

But just as ineffective charters can shut down, so too can inefficient CMOs fold. Young Scholars' CMO dissolved last year, and Principal Campbell is excited by what she can do with her newfound flexibility and freedom. The first order of business is to intensify the school's

focus on guiding graduates toward college-prep high schools.

"I want to go to a good high school," Demaine tells me, "because I want to go to a good college. Nobody, well, no boy in my family ever graduated college. Not saying we're poor, but we're not rich. If I can go to a good college and get a good job, then I can help my family out."

Demaine tells me that he's already seen some of his friends from elementary school fall through the cracks elsewhere. "It's hard if no one but your mom and your best friend believes in you. But here, everyone believes in me."

"IT'S HARD IF  
NO ONE BUT YOUR MOM AND  
YOUR BEST FRIEND BELIEVES IN YOU.  
BUT HERE,  
EVERYONE BELIEVES IN ME."

CLEVELAND, OH

## “The Citizen Academy Way”— Why a Cleveland Charter Succeeds in a Failure Zone”

— Max Eden

THE SEVENTY FOUR, JAN. 16, 2017



The Citizens Academy

When Staci Pratt, a math instruction specialist, came to Citizens Academy in 2003, the one proficient math student had just transferred out. But after more than a decade of hard work by Pratt and her colleagues, CA now boasts an 88% proficiency rate, serves more than 400 students and has spun off two sister schools.

Citizens Academy was launched in 1999 by Perry White, a social worker who concluded that “district bureaucracies like Cleveland’s can’t sustain real change”; he set out to create a charter school that would “disprove the racist excuse that ‘schools in Cleveland fail due to Cleveland’s dysfunctional families.’”

I visited CA in November because it was clear from halfway across the country that White had succeeded. My colleagues at the Manhattan Institute had developed a tool, SchoolGrades, that provides reliable “A” through “F” ratings, and I was on a mission to find the best schools in America. Growing up on the east side of Cleveland, I was lucky enough to attend an “A” school because my parents bought a house in an affluent suburb. But if I had been born downtown, CA

might have been my only shot; nine of its 10 nearest neighbors are “F” schools.

What sets CA so far apart are its administrative flexibility, its strong parent engagement and its high expectations for staff, students, and families.

Before joining the school, principal Kimberly Peterlin “had always been anti-charter.” But as a special education teacher in a district school, “it would sometimes take two weeks to get sign-off to do something different with a student,” she says. “Here, we can make adjustments daily.” Whether a student needs tutoring, enrichment opportunities or a different class, teachers can make it happen without friction or fuss.

Charters may have more flexibility, but they also receive less funding than district schools. Peterlin runs a tight ship and admits that she couldn’t do it without help from parents and the community. “We have about 50 people who come in to help on a regular basis,” she says. “Seven parents came in so much and were so helpful that we put them on staff!”

One mother-cum-teacher, Nichole Woods, tutors struggling readers but considers her unofficial role in the hallways every bit as important. “I’ll just give kids hugs,” she says. “When I was pregnant, I read that a child needs three hugs a day. For some of these kids, I know I’m their only one.”

Woods also dispenses tough love. “We see ourselves as the second parent,” she says. “And sometimes I have to tell a parent, ‘Let’s be 100% real—you’re failing our child right now, and here’s what you need to do.’” Though she doesn’t reach everyone, she says, “When I do, you can’t even pay for it. I had a graduate come back, and she told me, ‘Ms. Woods, I decided I want to live because of you.’”

The other teachers at CA are every bit as committed. “I tell the students,” says third-grade teacher Chandra Johnson, “you don’t have to be a statistic. Single mom? That was me. Dad in jail? That was me. I’m a teacher, and they can be anything they want if we all do this together.”

Ms. Johnson says that she’s not sure she could be as successful in another school: “In my last school, I was

so lonely. But here, we’re all on the same page, the same mission. And ... I don’t know why I’m crying right now ... I just love our school so much.”

CA takes great care to get everyone to share its vision. The school hits it out of the park on standardized tests, but it takes its moral mission every bit as seriously as its academics. For two weeks at the beginning of the year, students don’t take a single class. Instead, they have “Culture Camp,” a crash course in the “CA Way” and the seven virtues the school emphasizes: respect, responsibility, generosity, courage, perseverance, honesty and loyalty.

CA TAKES ITS MORAL MISSION EVERY BIT AS SERIOUSLY AS ITS ACADEMICS.

“I’ve been trying a while, and I just became Citizen of the Month this month,” Xavier, a fifth-grader, tells me shyly. “Now I’m going to try to get my little brother to get it. If he does, I’d be so proud.”

Xavier has plenty to be proud about, and the world-class Citizens Academy is a school that all of Cleveland should take pride in.





BALTIMORE, MD

**“Thomas Johnson Elementary’s Transformation”**

— **Max Eden**

BALTIMORE SUN, NOV. 23, 2016



Thomas Johnson Elementary School

Thomas Johnson Elementary’s declining enrollment once made it a target for school closure. But the Baltimore City Public School district chose to add middle school grades to boost enrollment and it’s a good thing they did. Today, Thomas Johnson Elementary/Middle, in the Federal Hill region of the city, has blossomed into one of the strongest public schools in all of Maryland.

I came across “TJ” through SchoolGrades.org, a site designed by my colleagues at the Manhattan Institute to grade America’s schools by a consistent, meaningful standard. Using this tool, I’ve gone on a quest to identify and visit America’s best schools.

I searched America’s 20 largest cities for schools that received an “A” grade that were surrounded by “D” and “F” schools. Visiting TJ, I learned that the school’s emphasis on parental involvement, consistent expectations around behavior and flexible administration are what makes it such a diamond in the rough.

After TJ’s close call with closure, “we knew that we

needed to sell ourselves to the community,” according to India Becton, the fifth-grade math teacher. The school brought on James Dendinger, known to all as “Mr. D,” as principal, and he teamed up with the Downtown Baltimore Family Alliance to convince young families that that they should stay in the city and send their kids to TJ.

The school hosted regular open houses to showcase itself to parents, many of whom came with newborn babies in tow, looking at schools five years early. TJ’s emphasis on bringing parents in has not only helped it nearly double in size, from around 300 students to 550, it has also profoundly strengthened the fabric of the school.

“At my old school,” says Rebecca McClure, a fifth-grade English teacher, “only a couple parents showed up to a back to school night. Here, we see more than 50 for each PTO [Parent-Teacher Organization] meeting.” The school hosts monthly events for parents, and the PTO has given the school major boosts, raising the funds for a whole new computer lab. Mr. D recalls that

when the PTO pitched him on a fundraising Fall Festival, “I’ll admit I was skeptical. But it’s just exploded. The rain forced it inside almost every year, but this year our parents raised more than \$20,000.”

There’s no sign at TJ of the misbehavior and social strife that plague so many urban schools. Teachers credit the students, rather than themselves, for upholding high standards of conduct. “I remember this one girl who transferred in,” says Laura Yacobucci, a fifth-grade teacher. “She was acting out. That’s what she had to do at her old school to get respect, to stay safe. One day, I took her aside and told her, ‘Look around, we just don’t do that here.’ She realized that what used to make her cool was making her look like a fool. She changed, just like that.”

There’s also no sign of the administrative dysfunction made infamous by “The Wire.” When I asked McClure about the famous scene where a teacher opens a closet to find dozens of unused computers, she said, “I saw that at my old school. The system used to be ‘use it or lose it.’ You had \$5,000 for textbooks. You lost the money if you didn’t buy them, so you had every reason to buy things you didn’t need.” But around the time Mr.

D started at TJ, former superintendent Andrés Alonso instituted the FAIR funding system, which ties money to students rather than line items, giving principals much more flexibility.

Ms. McClure has seen FAIR cause great disruption in schools that incorrectly estimate future enrollment and are forced to off-load or onboard teachers mid-year. “But Mr. D does this crazy thing I hadn’t seen other principals do—he actually asks parents if their kids will be with us next year.”

TEACHERS CREDIT THE STUDENTS, RATHER  
THAN THEMSELVES, FOR UPHOLDING  
HIGH STANDARDS OF CONDUCT.

Mr. D says, “FAIR is definitely the best way to fund schools. It makes principals accountable for attracting students, and we can no longer blame the district

for holding our school back or trying to make us something we’re not. Now, I look at other schools and see what I can learn from them. And when teachers come to me with an idea, I actually have the flexibility to help them pursue it.”

The future seems bright for TJ, with content and committed staff eager to build on their steady success. And the school certainly is a bright spot in American education—one that other school leaders could learn a thing or two from.

## NEW YORK CITY, NY

## “A Beacon of Excellence”

— Charles Sahn

U.S. NEWS &amp; WORLD REPORT, NOV. 16, 2016



P.S. 172, the Beacon School of Excellence

Too often, folks like me in the “education reform” camp look solely to charter schools for examples of “what works” in education. But if one peruses the website [SchoolGrades.org](#)—a site launched by the Manhattan Institute (where I work) that uses a common benchmark to assess all public elementary and middle schools across the U.S.—one will find many good old-fashioned district schools among America’s best.

For example, P.S. 172, the Beacon School of Excellence, in Sunset Park, Brooklyn: 86% of its 600 pre-K–5th-grade students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; yet according to [SchoolGrades.org](#), it’s one of the top 10 schools in New York State.

Last year, 38% of New York City kids were considered proficient in English and 36% in math on the state’s challenging Common Core–aligned exams. For P.S. 172 students, the proficiency rates were an astonishing 89% in English and 98% in math.

Even more astonishing, P.S. 172 serves a largely high-needs student population. While 86% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 78% of students meet the more severe low-income threshold for free lunch. Thirty-one percent of students require

special-education services, and 27% are English Language Learners. Seventy-seven percent of students are Hispanic. The vast majority of students are immigrants who speak another language at home.

P.S. 172’s principal, Jack Spatola, himself an immigrant from Sicily, speaks several languages. “I turned 14 on the boat,” he tells me. Spatola has been principal of P.S. 172 for 31 years, making him one of the longest-serving principals in New York. Much of his senior staff and teachers have been with the school for over a decade. The school’s strong and stable leadership seems to create camaraderie, resulting in low rates of teacher turnover.

What’s the secret of P.S. 172’s success? In a word: meticulousness. During a two-hour interview and school tour, Spatola must have used the word “meticulous” a dozen times. School staffing is “meticulously planned.” Teacher selection and development are “meticulous.” Teachers and school administrators keep “meticulous” notes on each student’s progress. Teachers should have “meticulous knowledge of material and pedagogy so that they can best reach each individual student,” Spatola explains.

One unique aspect of P.S. 172 is the meticulous way Spatola stretches school funding and plans teachers' work schedules to create collaborative team-teaching environments in classrooms. Every classroom I visited contained at least three, often four, adults: usually a lead teacher, a math or reading coach or special-education specialist, and one or two paraprofessionals.

In one third-grade classroom, students were engaged in guided reading (students read books slightly above their reading level, with teachers' help). Students were in three groups, according to their reading ability. And P.S. 172's assistant principal, Erika Gundersen, was sprawled on the carpet, working with one girl whose reading aptitude was far above grade-level.

P.S. 172 achieves astonishing results with its significant population of high-needs students. Last year, 85% of special-education students scored proficient on state English tests and 98% scored proficient in math. An amazing 97% of ELL students scored proficient on state English exams.

How does it achieve these miraculous results? Again: meticulousness. Collaborative team-teaching takes place three periods a day in general-education classes and during all five periods of the school day in the school's Integrated Co-Teaching classes. (In those classes about 60% of students are general education and 40% are special needs.) Most teachers at P.S. 172 are certified both in special education and in general education, which allows greater staffing flexibility. Spatola believes that teachers should be "pushed in" to classrooms rather than have students "pulled out" for special services.

P.S. 172 also integrates special-needs children into general-education classes. In one first-grade class, I saw a special-education teacher huddled next to a girl with obvious disabilities who had recently emigrated from Central America and had never attended school before. "She has a double whammy: a learning challenge and a language challenge," Spatola explains. "But we've got a strong IEP [Individual Education Plan] mapped out for her."

Teachers and staff at P.S. 172 also map out less formal "education plans" for each general-education student. The school frequently assesses where children are and the progress it hopes they'll make. There's no sophisticated student-tracking software at P.S. 172; each teacher keeps an old-fashioned notepad journal on each student to track progress. Weekly 80-minute grade-level meetings are held for all teachers, coaches and specialists, at which the progress of each student is reviewed.

The school works closely with parents, immediately informing them if their children are failing to meet goals and offering suggestions of how they can help. Starting in October, teachers are identifying struggling children in grades 3–5 and inviting them to attend special classes on Saturday mornings.

THE SCHOOL WORKS CLOSELY  
WITH PARENTS  
IMMEDIATELY INFORMING THEM IF THEIR  
CHILDREN ARE FAILING TO MEET GOALS  
AND OFFERING SUGGESTIONS OF HOW  
THEY CAN HELP.

P.S. 172 uses the publicly available free curriculum offered by New York State via its EngageNY website, which is based on Eureka Math and Core Knowledge Language

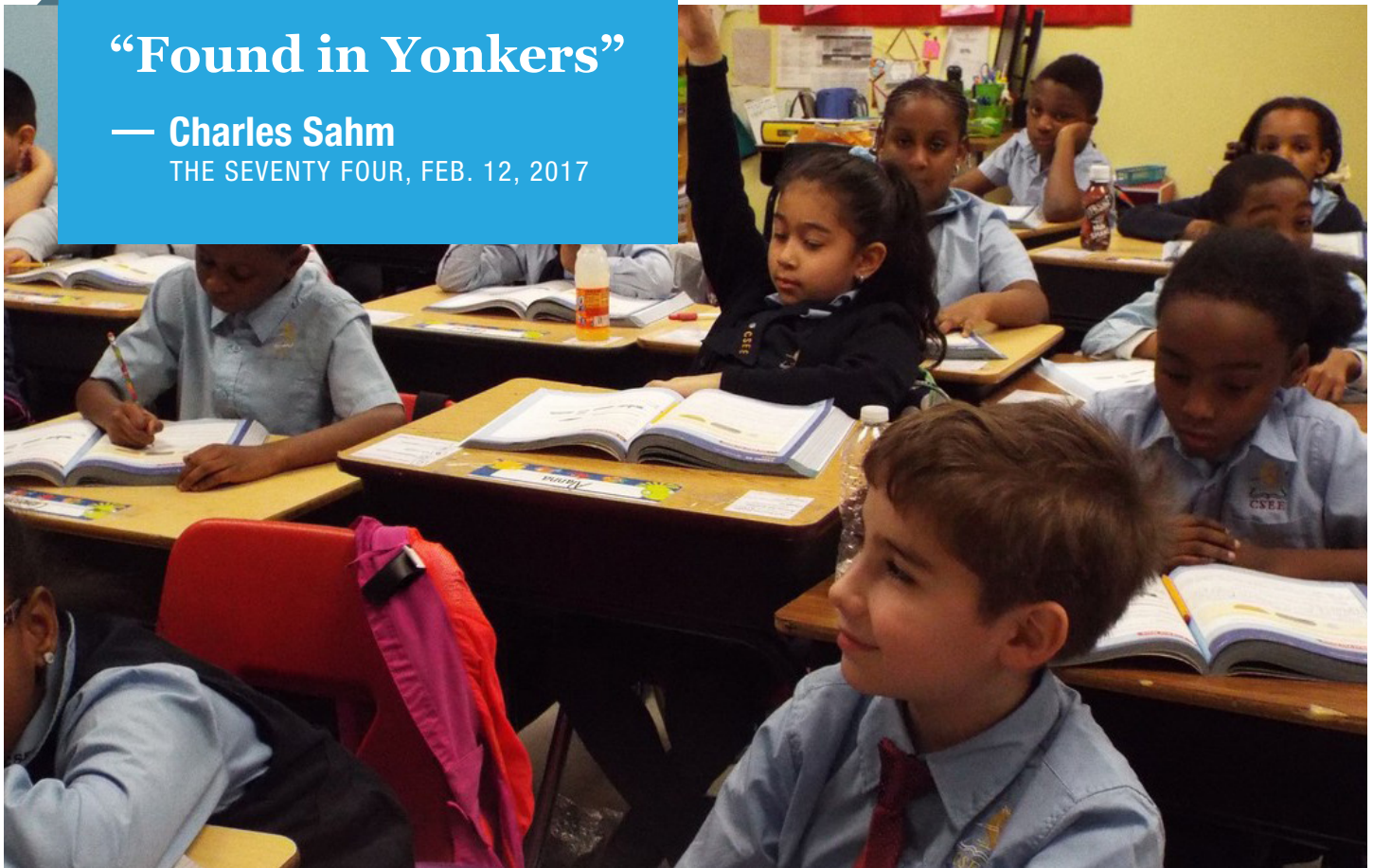
Arts. But like everything else at P.S. 172, the curricula are meticulously modified to meet students' needs. Each month, one of P.S. 172's weekly grade-level meetings is devoted to tweaking the curriculum and reviewing a database of detailed and rigorous lesson plans for every lesson in every subject in every grade. In addition, Spatola finds money in the budget for teachers to spend a few days each summer revising the curriculum after discussing what worked best and what needs improvement.

The amazing work being done at P.S. 172, the Beacon School of Excellence, should serve as a reminder to education reformers that beacons of excellence exist among both district and charter schools.

## YONKERS, NY

**“Found in Yonkers”**— **Charles Sahn**

THE SEVENTY FOUR, FEB. 12, 2017



The Charter School of Educational Excellence

New York City’s charter schools tend to dominate the attention of reporters, the education-reform community and the philanthropic world. However, just to the north, in the city of Yonkers, the Charter School of Educational Excellence (CSEE) is achieving results that rival any of Gotham’s better-known charters.

Sharing a boundary with the Bronx and, to the west, the Hudson River, Yonkers is a complex place. Part gritty city—with about 200,000 residents—part leafy suburb, it has a history of housing and educational inequity, as dramatized recently in the HBO series *Show Me a Hero*. CSEE is located in the city’s less affluent western section, where, in recent years, high-rise apartment buildings have sprouted among the multifamily row houses of the mostly low-income, minority, immigrant community.

When Eduardo LaGuerre, CSEE’s founder, moved to Yonkers in the 1990s, he was disappointed by the education his children received in public schools. “My wife and I were fortunate that we could supplement their education with private tutoring,” LaGuerre says. But it bothered him that many families didn’t have the resources to offer the same enhancement and that the district seemed “resistant to change.” A longtime New

York City social services provider and community developer, LaGuerre decided to “be the change that I was looking for.”

Education experts like Carlos Medina (who continues to serve on CSEE’s board) and others from the Center for Educational Innovation helped plan the school, and LaGuerre used his fundraising and construction expertise to launch CSEE in 2005. Twelve years later, the K-8 school serving 700 students is among the highest-performing schools in Westchester County. Last year, 70% of students in grades three through eight scored proficient on the state math exams, compared with 25% in Yonkers traditional schools, 39% statewide and 48% in Westchester. On the English Language Arts exam, 55% of students scored proficient, compared with 26% in Yonkers, 38% statewide and 46% in Westchester.

These numbers are even more impressive because CSEE serves a relatively high-needs student population. According to state Department of Education statistics, 84% of students are economically disadvantaged, 12% are English-language learners and 7% have a learning disability. Forty-seven percent of students are African-American. Forty-eight percent are Latino, including many recent immigrants. SchoolGrades.

org—a site launched by the Manhattan Institute (where I work) that takes students’ economic backgrounds into account—gives CSEE an “A” grade and ranks it among the top schools in New York State.

When asked the secret to the school’s success, CSEE’s principal, Cindy Lopez, simply responds, “A lot of hard work.” Lopez, born in Yonkers to Brazilian immigrant parents, started at CSEE as a fourth-grade teacher in 2007, advanced to assistant principal in 2011 and became principal in 2014. When pressed, Lopez cites the longer school day and year and the fact that its well-mapped curriculum allows the school to “take advantage of every minute that the child is here.”

For English, the school employs Houghton Mifflin’s Journeys reading program in kindergarten through fifth grade and Prentice Hall Literature in grades six through eight. For math, Houghton Mifflin’s Go Math is used in kindergarten through fifth grade and its Big Ideas program in grades six through eight. Science, social studies, music and art are taught in all grades. All students take Spanish, beginning in second grade, and though the school has a Spanish teacher, it also makes heavy use of the online Rosetta Stone program because it provides instruction targeted to each student’s level. At weekly meetings, teachers co-plan lessons.

Computer literacy is also a focus, and the school has invested a great deal in technology. “We basically have the technology infrastructure of a small college,” says operations director Stephen Henriquez. Children in all grades have access to a computer. Smartboards are in all classrooms. The school teaches coding via the Code Red program, and the online diagnostic program iReady hones students’ math and English skills.

Although CSEE doesn’t seem as test-score-obsessed as other charters, it gives students frequent assessments; those falling behind receive extra help. “If we see that a student is achieving behind their classmates, we develop an action plan for that student,” said Lopez. “We put in more work and teach in smaller groups and come up with a way to catch them up.” Although student retention is high, CSEE does backfill—taking a student off its waiting list whenever a spot opens—in all grades, which makes its test scores even more impressive, as students who enter later often need to catch up.

Unlike charters in New York City, CSEE doesn’t receive facilities funding, and the school pays municipal taxes in addition to security, utilities and many other costs that public schools don’t have to think about. CSEE would like to increase its fairly minimal fundraising, but the school mostly operates on the \$14,000 in per-pupil funding that charters get in New York State.

The school’s nonunion teachers are relatively young, and Lopez acknowledges that keeping them at CSEE long-term is a challenge. “Our starting salaries are competitive,” Lopez says, “but it’s hard to match the pay and benefits that more experienced district teachers get.”

LaGuerre notes the “interesting dynamic” that CSEE enjoys with the Yonkers public schools. While CSEE and the city schools collaborate a bit, the school still faces a great deal of opposition. According to LaGuerre, the state Department of Education recently asked CSEE to consider adding a few seats; the school found room for 26 more students. However, when public meetings to secure city approval began, the local teachers unions organized protests and CSEE decided it wasn’t worth the hassle. Recently, the school’s board has been exploring the idea of opening a high school, but it is again facing resistance from city hall. “We are looking at various sites, and we’re hopeful that the city will support us,” says LaGuerre.

The school seems to have good relations with the local community. CSEE replaced an abandoned supermarket that had been a neighborhood eyesore and a nexus of criminal activity. In 2010, CSEE expanded by building a three-story addition that included a gymnasium, which the school allows the community to use. CSEE’s local city council member, Christopher Johnson, told me, “Generally, I’m not in favor of charter schools, but this school really has been a difference maker. They work hard to connect with parents and the community.”

Parental involvement seems to be a key in CSEE’s success. The school’s sports teams have begun to enjoy success, and the fire marshal often has to monitor school events for fear of overcrowding. I spoke with a few parents, including Jasmine Colon-Figueroa, whose son spent the first few grades in the local public school before coming to CSEE. When asked what makes CSEE different, she said, “I got to see both worlds. ... With this school, I can honestly say they focus on each student and the teacher takes the time to make sure each child gets what they need.” CSEE’s waiting list of several hundred children shows that many Yonkers parents are yearning for the same choice.

As New York City schools continue to make progress, the education-reform and philanthropic communities need to turn their attention to the state’s other large districts—Yonkers, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse—that continue to lag far behind. As the Charter School of Educational Excellence shows, education reform doesn’t have to stop at the New York City border.

MANHATTAN  
INSTITUTE