

Success Story

Founder and CEO of Success Academy recounts her journey

**The Education of Eva Moskowitz:
A Memoir**

by Eva Moskowitz

HarperCollins, 2017, \$27.99; 400 pages.

As reviewed by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

I almost loved this book. Of course I was predisposed in that direction because I'm a huge admirer of Eva Moskowitz's Success Academy charter schools—more than 40 of them now, in four boroughs of New York City—which are knocking the top off state test scores and providing terrific educational alternatives for thousands of youngsters, mostly poor and minority, who would otherwise be stuck in some of the country's worst urban schools. Disbelievers, critics—and those who can't stand the fact that Moskowitz's schools do so much better than their schools—keep trying to diminish Success's success by asserting that her schools take in only “good” kids and push out the “bad” ones. What they actually do is take in kids who win the lottery, a process that inevitably involves an element of self-selection, since parents who apply to have their kids attend these schools know in advance that much will be demanded of them and their children. Success Academy operates under perhaps the toughest set of norms and expectations for all participants—pupils, parents, teachers, and principals—of any New York City public schools, whether district-operated or charter. That, of course, is a key ingredient in their not-so-secret sauce.

I'm also a fan of Moskowitz herself, loving her blend of moxie, brio, strategic political thinking, gut-punching tactics, media savvy, ally recruiting, and students-first single-mindedness, not to mention her repeated outfoxing of Gotham's union-loving, charter-loathing mayor



Bill de Blasio. She's a first-rate education thinker, too, and the 16 “core educational values and practices” that conclude her memoir make up a time-tested and sagacious formula for running great schools—and the list includes those exacting norms and lofty expectations. (“Young children need to be molded. . . . Content matters. . . . Suspensions are a useful disciplinary tool. . . .”) On top of all this, she writes beautifully, salting her own clear, passionate, yet often analytic prose with quotes and references plucked from many sources, from Twain and Dickens to Carnegie, Fielding, and Hardy.

There's plenty more to commend in these pages: a clear analysis of what ails big bureaucratic education systems (and is probably unfixable); the tangled web of state regulations that envelops them; the pain in many children's lives, combined with their parents' yearning for better options; the central importance of school culture and the challenge of finding (and keeping) a compatible team of smart, dogged, passionate teachers and school leaders; the value of allies and benefactors with deep pockets and powerful connections; and the endless opposition of established adult interests—first and foremost the teachers union, but also

painters, cafeteria workers, custodians, and others—to anything that would disrupt their cozy status quo, even if it benefits needy children.

As much as I admire *The Education of Eva Moskowitz*, I do have three criticisms. (You knew a “but” was coming.) None of these objections has to do with the success of Success Academy or with the author's educational philosophy.

First, Moskowitz doesn't give much credit to a number of “environmental” circumstances that put a lot of wind in her (and her schools') sails. That's not to detract from her awe-inspiring efforts to launch, preserve, and scale Success Academy even as she maintained its integrity. And she does thank and acknowledge the help of a lot of folks. But charter-school people across the land would forfeit their front teeth if their schools could be financed at almost \$15,000 per pupil per year in public funds, plus the many millions in philanthropy that Moskowitz has mustered to finance start-up costs and important ancillary services. It's true that New York charters get several thousand dollars less in operating funds per student than the city's district schools do—and, even more important, they do not get separate capital funding for facilities in Gotham's extremely pricey real-estate market. (Indeed, many of her war stories involve battling for access to underused district buildings.) Yet money does matter, even in charter schools, and by national standards, New York City's charters get more than most.

They also benefit from a broad, deep talent pool in a city that has always attracted smart young people from far and wide. Try staffing a charter school in Dayton, St. Louis, or Lubbock and you'll swiftly learn what difference that difference makes.

And it helped a lot that Mayor Michael

Bloomberg and schools chief Joel Klein were in charge of the school system during most of the time Moskowitz was struggling to get traction, and that Success Academy benefited from umpteen favorable rulings from the city's education department. In most places, charter folks must contend with superintendents and locally elected school boards that are far more beholden to the teachers union and other adult interests than were Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein.

Second, Moskowitz uses these pages to settle a lot of scores, grind a bunch of axes, and sock it to some of those who have opposed her efforts over the years, including journalists, teachers unionists, de Blasio and his minions, and any number of charter-averse legislators and city council members. Her motivation here is totally understandable—these actors mostly did their best to stop her cold—but in places, the book reads like a vendetta.

Third, and purely a matter of book structure, the author interweaves her engaging personal story—thoroughly readable autobiographical vignettes, starting with her Polish-born grandfather—with the saga of Success Academy.

Too many educators think educating poor and minority children means not asking too much of them. Moskowitz shows that high standards and rigorous discipline yield life-changing opportunities for such youngsters.

That's a perfectly fine approach (I used a version of it myself in a memoir-cum-history a few years back). The problem is that her chronologies are so discrepant that one is in the midst of a school opening in 2008 and looking forward to the next chapter when suddenly one is cast back to her childhood trips with parents in a Plymouth Valiant in the mid-'60s. Then back to Success Academy in 2008. And so it goes. Kind of dizzying, says this reader, while recognizing that there's probably no good way to meld a 12-year

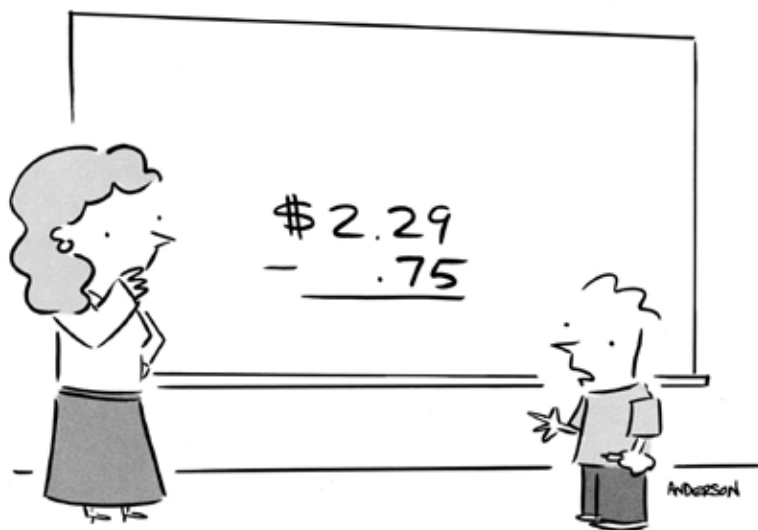
school-creating saga with a family history that's 10 times as long.

Now let me return to this book's many strengths. In a time of political correctness, Moskowitz is blessedly plainspoken. In a time when many assume that liberals and Democrats must resemble Bill de Blasio, she reminds us that it's possible to be a liberal Democrat who doesn't let adult interests and leftist shibboleths prevail over what's good for kids. In a time when too many educators think educating poor and minority children means not asking too much of them and supplying excuses for inexcusable behavior, she shows that high standards and rigorous discipline yield life-changing opportunities for such youngsters. And at a time when many policy wonks and politicians assert that any policy is flawed, even discriminatory and unjust, if it doesn't solve all the problems posed by the worst imaginable case (homeless disabled kid, addicted single parent, limited English), she shows that it's genuinely possible to devise policies and programs that alter the life prospects of thousands of very needy kids.

It's true that Success Academy may not be the right place for the worst-off child you can imagine. It may be true that no place short of a full-time boarding-school placement might yield a good outcome for that unfortunate youngster. But there are hundreds of thousands of poor and minority kids whose striving parents want them to succeed, parents who can get them to school in the morning and ensure that they do their homework in the evening but who cannot find or afford an acceptable school in the city where they live. Those kids need and deserve great schools, too, and if it's really a great school (check out the author's 16 precepts), it'll do them a world of good. Hurrah for Moskowitz for showing how—and now for describing it so well.

Chester E. Finn, Jr., is distinguished senior fellow and president emeritus at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution.

© MARK ANDERSON, WWW.ANDERSTOONS.COM



"I'm going to have Tommy come up and take care of this one. He's more the numbers guy."

CARTOON/© MARK ANDERSON