

Uncommon



Brett Peiser is taking notes on an 8½" x 11" pad of paper. We are sitting in a small conference room of North Star Academy Vailsburg Middle School, in Newark's West Ward, one of this poor city's poorest neighborhoods. The former Catholic school still sports a large cross on an outside wall, and church pews serve as hallway benches outside the administrative offices.

"There's a huge need for great schools here," says the six-foot-two-inch 45-year-old veteran educator. Named chief executive officer of Uncommon Schools in July of 2012, Peiser, along with school principal Serena Savarirayan, was one of my tour guides.

"The way we approach our work at Uncommon Schools is [to recognize that] there are families who live in urban areas who usually have one option to send their children to school, and we've been trying to make sure that families have a second option. Or a third option."

And they do that, as Peiser would say over and over again as we toured the school and chatted, by believing in improvement, believing in practice. This is why he was taking "quick notes," as he told me later, while I interviewed him. "I wanted to respond to your questions and note things we needed to do better prompted by your questions."

There is no doubt that Uncommon Schools has given thousands of low-income students throughout the Northeast great options since the charter management organization (CMO) was created by Norman Atkins in 2005. But as Peiser's note-taking suggests, its leaders remain hungry, primed to improve. Atkins brought together five independent and already successful charter schools—in Newark, Boston, and New York City—and today the CMO operates 38 schools, and they are wildly successful (see sidebar).

"Our goal is to start schools that close the achievement gap and make sure that low-income students are prepared to enter into and succeed in college," says Peiser, who points out that Uncommon's kids are going to college—and finishing—at four times the rate of their low-income peers nationally. A 2013 report from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that

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Uncommon's schools "completely cancel out the negative effect associated with being a student in poverty," concluding that "it IS possible to take innovation to scale and maintain a focus on quality."

Last summer Uncommon earned the 2013 Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools (and \$250,000), beating out CMOs Achievement First and KIPP for having "the best overall student academic performance between 2009 and 2012." And the organization is not resting on its laurels: Uncommon is pursuing an ambitious plan to open eight more schools, for 6,000 additional students, over the next five years, not including several slated for Camden, New Jersey, where, in late January 2014, Uncommon became a finalist in a bid to open five schools and add a sixth region to its system.

As the sanguine Peiser explains, Camden, one of America's most troubled urban school districts, "is an opportunity for us to do more good, which has always been our goal." With or without Camden, Uncommon is on track to be larger than 97 percent of all public school districts in the country.

Starting Right

Peiser gives Atkins credit for Uncommon, but Atkins chose his partners wisely. Besides Peiser, who started Boston Collegiate Charter School in 1998, just after earning his master's in public policy from Harvard's Kennedy School, there was Doug Lemov, a founder of Academy of the Pacific Rim (also in Boston) in 1997 and later a best-selling author (*Teach Like a Champion*); Evan Rudall and John King of Roxbury Prep in Boston (Rudall is now CEO of Zearn, a new educational technology nonprofit, and King is commissioner of education for New York State); and Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, then managing director of North Star's middle and high schools in Newark (and later author of *Driven by Data* and *Leverage Leadership*).

"Norman's idea was that we could serve more students, more families, and provide more great options as a charter management organization," says Peiser, who came back to his hometown to become the founding managing director of Uncommon's New York City region. Thanks to the charter-friendly atmosphere created by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his schools chancellor, Joel Klein, Peiser oversaw the

Uncommon Schools at a Glance

Schools in 2014: 38

Elementary: 13

Middle: 22

High: 3

By region:

New York City: 20

Troy, NY: 2

Rochester, NY: 4

Newark, NJ: 9

Boston, MA: 3

Students: 10,000

80 percent low-income

90 percent black

Teachers: 900

Uncommon Achievement

Students outperform neighboring districts:

ELA: 18 percentage points higher

Math: 28 percentage points higher

Average SAT scores:

190 points higher than the national average

112 points higher than white students nationally

AP exams:

More than 70 percent achieved at least the passing score (3 on 1-to-5 scale) on one exam

Uncommon students outscored whites nationally on 5 of 7 exams



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Coaching teachers.
Developing teachers.
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Time. Data. Coaching teachers. Developing teachers. “That’s what makes a school successful,” says Peiser, “and it doesn’t matter whether it’s a charter public school, a district public school, or anything else.”

Practice Makes Perfect

Midway through our interview, Peiser opened his laptop, inviting me to watch a video. I demurred, not wanting to waste valuable talk time (among other clarion-clear personality traits, Peiser, the former teacher, exudes stopwatch precision), but when I finally watched, his point was clear. It was a training tape, showing a young, new teacher at the beginning of his career at Uncommon, trying to hold the attention of his students, then his meeting with the principal to review the tape of those early classes and to practice. (Peiser narrates for me: “They’re practicing what we call ‘to be seen looking,’ which means that the student has to see that the teacher is looking at her, and we use a little technique in which the teacher says ‘finger freeze’—asking the student to put her finger on the place in the book where she’s reading, then points at his own eye—‘track me’—so that the student knows very clearly that it’s time to listen to the teacher.”) The video shows the same teacher six months later, with the same students, all of them with eyes on him.

Uncommon is relentless in its focus on teaching technique (the subject of Lemov’s book), and that is why there are video cameras in all the classrooms. The collaboration and practice using video are so common that no one notices. “One of the biggest pieces of our teacher development is practice and feedback. If you practice a lesson plan and I give you feedback, you’re going to get better. It’s just like in sports or music: If you practice the violin you will get better at becoming a violinist. If you practice playing basketball, you will get better at playing basketball.”

Brett Peiser with Serena Savarirayan, principal at North Star Academy Vailsburg Middle School

creation of half a dozen new charters, including Williamsburg Collegiate, which has been the highest-performing public school in NYC since it opened in 2006.

Uncommon’s organizational structure gives its success a feeling of inevitability qua scalability. 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. Each Uncommon region is run by a managing director, the equivalent of a superintendent of schools; each school has a principal and a director of operations (church and state). Each region hires its teachers and administrators under the Uncommon rubric: that teachers and leaders are the most important part of what they do.

“All good district schools, all good public charter schools, all good independent schools, all good parochial schools do the same things,” says Peiser, who is intensely competitive and refreshingly ecumenical. “It’s a fierce focus on developing teachers, a fierce focus on developing leaders. Those schools never lose sight of that. Education fads come and go. And new ideas pop up all the time. But the focus on teachers and leaders as the most important variables never changes.”

That focus is not executed in a vacuum. “Data drive what we do,” says Peiser. “It isn’t instinct. And it’s not just about test data, it’s all sorts of data. It’s student survey data, it’s parent survey data, it’s teacher survey data, it’s the number of books students read.”

Smart Hiring and Lots of Support

Peiser is prepared for the next question: “What’s your teacher turnover?”

“There are still a lot of myths about working in charter schools,” he says. “You know, charter schools are just hiring and letting teachers go left and right. But that couldn’t be further from the reality. Who would work for an organization or a school that had that as an accurate reputation?”

Part of the secret to that loyalty is smart hiring; part is relentless training and practice. “We believe that all teachers can get to a great place,” says Peiser. “With enough coaching and enough development, the vast majority will be great in the classroom.” And in the instances where the coaching and professional development don’t work, where, as Peiser says, “it’s not the right fit,” they will try to find another role for the person within the schools. “But it is such a rare occurrence within our schools,” he says. “We’ve seen so many instances where teachers are struggling in their first year and by their second and third year are thriving.”

Most important when hiring, says Peiser, “We want to make sure our teachers want to get better. The number-one quality that probably binds all of our principals in hiring teachers is measuring the candidate’s willingness to self-reflect, which is why all of our teachers first have to do a sample lesson before they get hired. It’s not because we want to see them as being perfect teachers the minute they join us, it’s how they are afterward, when the principal sits down with them and gives them feedback. Are they open to the feedback? Are they reflective about what they did? Are they self-critical?” The improvement ethos at Uncommon is palpable, as the video training proves, along with Peiser’s note-taking during our interview.

It doesn’t hurt that Uncommon’s pay scale is 15 to 20 percent higher than those of the surrounding traditional public schools, but, as Peiser points out, “We pay more in part because we have a longer school year.” And that longer school year—and a longer school day—is another secret to Uncommon’s success. It is here that the impeccably polite father of two, who so far has refused to utter a critical word about any other school or its practices, will admit that having the flexibility, as an organization, to do what it wants to do is a help. Longer school days and school years do not have to be negotiated with powerful unions. Having teachers come to school three weeks before students arrive is not the subject of hard-nosed labor negotiations.

Why Schools Work

At one point in our conversation, I asked Peiser, who is the son of New York City public school teachers, what went wrong with Gotham’s school system, and he says, “It’s hard for me to speak to what happened [to the education system]. The best thing that I can say is, I think about why schools work.”

And that he does, relentlessly. “I actually don’t think the reasons schools work have anything to do with whether they’re a charter public, a district public, a private, or a parochial school,” he says. “Great teachers make a great school. Great



Seventh-grade students with teacher Julia Goldenheim at North Star Academy Vailsburg Middle School discuss To Be a Slave by Julius Lester

leaders make a great school. There are a ton of things that have to be done to get that. You can’t just snap your fingers.”

He admits, though, that “content is critical” to Uncommon’s success. So how do you put the two together—great teachers and great content—and make it work? “If you set a high bar for students,” he says, “whether it is behavior or academics, and you give them the support and the practice and the feedback to get there, they will get there. And so that’s why in this age of common core, ensuring that the curriculum is rigorous and aligns to the common core standards is more important than ever.”

This comment provoked a question on my part, “Why didn’t you mention it in the ‘secrets to success’ explanation?”



Taylor Martin instructs a performing arts class at North Star Academy Vailsburg Middle School

“Probably I leave it out because I don’t think the answer is you have to read *Esperanza Rising* or *Love That Dog*, this specific book in this specific grade. We don’t believe in that. But, having said that, the rigor of common core standards we think is critical.”

A common curriculum is a sore point for Peiser. A *New York Times* story last May called him out for Uncommon’s failure to do as well in reading tests as in math. “Math is very close-ended,” he told the *Times* and thus easier to teach. But reading is more complex, he said. “Is it a vocabulary issue? A background knowledge issue? A sentence length issue? How dense is the text... It’s a three-dimensional problem that you have to attack. And it just takes time.”

Shouldn’t that mean, I ask Peiser, that a consistent, content-rich, vertically and horizontally aligned curriculum would be in order? Uncommon applies detailed teaching techniques to classroom management. Why not do the same with curriculum, which is currently developed by each region and in each school?

Peiser dodges the question and talks about the common core. “The thing is, this achievement gap is ferocious,” he says. “The gap that our students are coming in with is going to take some unbelievable amount of work. We don’t disagree with anyone who says that common core is laudable. We’ve had to revamp our curriculum a lot in response to common core. We’ve obviously had to change our assessments. There isn’t a teacher at Uncommon who doesn’t embrace common core.”

Navigating the Politics

“Do you have any advice for schools of education?” I ask. “Traditional schools of education have not focused on teaching in urban schools,” he says. “There’s not enough teaching

Traditional schools of education have not focused on teaching...the basics: how to write a lesson plan, how to manage a classroom, how to engage students.”

the basics: how to write a lesson plan, how to manage a classroom, how to engage students. Those are the core pieces, and, traditionally, schools of education have not focused on those things to the extent they should.”

Is he worried about the new mayor of New York promising to stop giving charters free rent in public school buildings?

“Yes. Seventeen of our 20 NYC schools are co-located. It doesn’t make sense to us that P.S. 16 is on the first and second floors, and Uncommon is on the third and fourth floors, and both are public schools, and both are open to the public, and both are publicly funded, and one pays rent and one does not.”

It is a challenge in part because Uncommon wants to prove “not only are we able to close the achievement gap at scale, but also that we can do it on the public dollar” alone. It is one of the “guiding stars” at Uncommon, Peiser explains, to reach financial sustainability over time.

At the moment, two-thirds of its schools are financially self-sustaining. But that includes some fundraising. “New York City’s co-location policies don’t exist in our other places, and so we have to raise a tremendous amount of money to find,

interview

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purchase, rent, and/or renovate buildings,” Peiser explains. “The other reason we need to raise money is for a school’s start-up years, when the school has many fewer students than it will have at capacity. But it’s our expectation that when a school reaches its full capacity in grades, it will be self-sustaining.”

Growing Up Teacher

And what do his educator parents think of his career as an anti-establishment school reformer? “They love and support what I’m doing. Absolutely.”

Peiser, who has two siblings, was born in Queens and grew up in Manhattan. His parents were teachers, but his mother would become an assistant principal at Norman Thomas High School in Manhattan and his father principal of Sheepshead Bay High School in Brooklyn. Both schools were closed during the Bloomberg administration. “It’s just a shame that schools get to a point where they have to be closed. It’s unfair to the teachers and it’s unfair to the families and it’s unfair to the students. That fact motivates me daily to make sure our schools are the best places they can be.”

Young Brett attended P.S. 158 on the East Side of Manhattan, went on to Hunter College High School, one of the city’s select

schools, and then to Brown. He taught high school history in Brooklyn for four years, got the education reform bug, and checked in to Harvard. The rest is an uncommon history.

“I love the work that I do,” he says, “and I love doing it in the context of charters, because we have the freedom and flexibility to create the school that we want to create. But in exchange for that flexibility and freedom, we’re held strictly accountable for results. We have to renew our charter every five years, and we face consequences if we don’t deliver on our promise. My parents were teaching in a different time. Nothing like this existed, where you’d be able to hire teachers because they know their subject well and you can count on them being hardworking. We don’t have to worry about rules around seniority, and we don’t have to worry about who is next on the list to transfer from school A to school B. We love the fact that we can see a blank wall and paint it the way we want to see it painted in order to educate kids.”

Peiser and his colleagues have filled a blank wall with educational hope and helped thousands of poor children defy the odds.

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