What Explains Success AT SUCCESS ACADEMY?

Charter network focuses on what is being taught, and how

"What's going on at Success Academy?" Lots of folks are asking that question, thanks to the eye-popping test scores achieved by students at Eva Moskowitz's network of New York City charter schools.

Last year, 29 percent of New York City kids were considered proficient in English and 35 percent in math on the state's challenging Common Core–aligned exams. For Success students, the proficiency rates were 64 percent in English and an astonishing 94 percent in math. Success students in the city's poorest communities outperformed kids in the wealthiest suburbs. If the network were a single school, it would rank in the top 1 percent of the state's 3,560 schools in math and the top 3 percent in English.

Success's first school opened in 2006. Today, the network has 32 schools serving 9,000 students: 24 elementary schools (K–4), 7 middle schools (grades 5–8), and a new high school. Over the next two years, 13 additional schools will open. Success could soon be educating 21,000 students—about 2 percent of the 1.1 million children in New York City public schools. No other charter network has grown this fast and achieved such stellar results.

I've been endeavoring to figure out what is happening at Success for some time. I've visited four schools and interviewed two dozen teachers and principals and the network's directors of literacy and math, as well as Eva Moskowitz. I've spoken with parents, critics, and former Success teachers. I've exchanged scores of e-mails with the network's indefatigable communications director, Ann Powell. I read Moskowitz's 2012 book (coauthored with Arin Lavinia), *Mission Possible: How the Secrets of the Success Academies Can Work in Any School.*

So what's going on? Outwardly, Success is similar to other "no excuses" (Moskowitz dislikes that term) charter schools: students are called "scholars" and wear uniforms; a longer school day and year allow for about one-third more instruction time than district schools provide; rooms are named after the teacher's alma mater; a culture of discipline

by CHARLES SAHM

Eva Moskowitz, founder and chief executive officer of Success Academy Charter Schools, visits one of the network's classrooms

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As part of the blocks curriculum, kindergarteners at Success work together in small groups on a crude architectural sketch before constructing a project.

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and high expectations reigns. What separates Success, in my opinion, is a laser focus on *what* is being taught, and *how*.

The What: Content Is King

At Success, content is king. Take blocks: kindergartners everywhere play with wooden blocks, but Success has a blocks curriculum. Children work together in small groups on a crude architectural sketch before constructing a project. One child from each group explains what they've built to the other students. Bookcases contain wonderful books—*13 Buildings Children Should Know, My New York, Architects Make Zigzags, Block City*—that expose children to great buildings, past and present, from around the world. (Teachers are quick to tell me that block play should remain fun and kid-driven, so they don't overuse the books, which are there for inspiration rather than a "blueprint.")

The thoughtful way Success approaches a simple thing like blocks reflects the ethos that infuses the entire network: everything has a purpose. Moskowitz calls it "joyful rigor"—an apt description of what I saw in every Success classroom I visited.

Success has developed its own English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum, THINK Literacy. At first, Success used Success for All reading but felt it wasn't rich enough. (The network still uses Success for All's "Reading Roots" program to teach decoding skills in kindergarten and 1st grade.) THINK Literacy is based on the controversial "balanced literacy" Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop model, which emphasizes independent reading (see "The Lucy Calkins Project," *features,* Summer 2007). Research conducted in New York City's traditional schools indicates that balanced literacy doesn't build the knowledge and vocabulary that children—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds—need to move beyond basic literacy, but Success adds tons of content to it.

"THINK Literacy is balanced literacy on steroids," Moskowitz writes in *Mission Possible.* She believes that the choice between content and skills is false: "The two approaches are not mutually exclusive," she tells me. "Kids need to be excellent and avid readers.... For that, you also need to have context and background knowledge." THINK Literacy includes Reading Workshop (independent reading and small-group direct instruction); Guided Reading (students read more-challenging books, with help from teachers); Read Aloud (teachers read books aloud, and students discuss the major ideas); and Shared Text (close reading of short texts, emphasizing central meaning and literary techniques). Each day, students spend two hours on some combination of these four components.

Elementary students complete two "project-based learning" units in each grade, where students read and write about a particular subject for six weeks. In 4th grade, for example, children learn about the American Revolution. This year, Success is piloting two additional two-week "mini Core Knowledge" project-based learning units. "We love [Core Knowledge founder] E. D. Hirsch," says Michele Caracappa, Success's director of literacy.

In middle school, Success adds independent reading time and includes a literature class. Students receive iPads loaded with books. Middle-school students must read seven key texts, typically comprising four novels, two nonfiction books, and one of poetry. (I saw middle-school students in Harlem reading *The Block,* which combines poetry of Langston Hughes with paintings of Harlem Renaissance artist Romare Bearden.)

Writing skills are emphasized in daily workshops from kindergarten through 8th grade. In later grades, students produce longer pieces across several genres, going through the entire writing process. Much focus is on revision; teachers are trained to give targeted feedback.

Success's children's literature expert, Sara Yu, fills the schools with rich, engaging books at all levels. Yu worked for many years at the highly regarded bookstore affiliated with the Bank Street

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College of Education. She notes that the books aren't selected only to produce competent readers, but also to expose children to "relevant, important, beautiful material ... diverse cultures, economic backgrounds, settings, and characters."

This devotion to content pays off. At the Success Academy in Bedford-Stuyvesant (one block from the Marcy Houses, the public housing complex where Jay Z grew up—still a tough neighborhood), 81 percent of 3rd graders were proficient in ELA last year (98 percent in math!). A 4th-grade English class dissects *How My Parents Learned to Eat,* the story of an American sailor learning to use chopsticks to impress his Japanese girlfriend. They learn words like "kimono" and distinctive features of Japanese culture. A 3rd-grade class closely reads the poem "Two Lives Are Yours," and, with skillful guidance from the teacher, a young boy is able to discern the poem's meaning: "reading lets you escape reality and enter new worlds."

Success's math curriculum is equally rigorous. As with ELA, Success found no off-the-shelf curriculum that met the needs of all students, so it developed its own. According to Stacey Gershkovich, director of math and science, the math scores are stellar because teachers "plan the lesson with a clear goal and use precise questioning and a carefully designed set of activities to lead scholars to learn, develop, or master a new concept each day."

The Success ELA and math curricula are well aligned with Common Core State Standards, although Moskowitz notes that "Success was doing the Common Core before there was a Common Core." Its math curriculum is constructivist. Besides encouraging student-generated strategies to solve math problems, Success devotes considerable effort in the early grades to honing students' arithmetic skills. Its ELA curriculum focuses on getting students to read more (especially, challenging nonfiction that builds background knowledge), write more, and cite evidence for their ideas rather than just state opinions. (New York's second-highest performing charter network, the seven Icahn schools in the Bronx, uses the content-rich Core Knowledge ELA curriculum, which is well aligned with the Common Core—further evidence that curriculum counts.)

Some suggest that the Common Core's focus on English and math narrows the curriculum. But at Success, every student, beginning in kindergarten, takes a full-period, experiment-based

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science class daily. (Most public schools in New York don't teach science daily until middle school.) No wonder 100 percent of Success 4th graders and 8th graders passed the 2014 state science exams, 99 percent scoring an advanced rating.

Success uses experiential learning to bring history to life. Second graders, for example, take part in a multiweek unit on the Brooklyn Bridge. They conduct experiments to learn the engineering principles behind bridge construction, read a biography of the project's field engineer, Emily Roebling, and visit the bridge to record their observations. Success students participate in many field studies each year and take advantage of New York's museums and cultural offerings.

Detractors suggest that Success is a test-prep factory where students are constantly drilled in English and math; but that's not what I saw. I toured a Success middle school in Harlem during a 90-minute "flex" period. In one room, the chess team prepared for the national tournament; in another, students worked on the school newspaper; down the hall, students rehearsed a musical; in other rooms, students worked on art projects or learned computer coding. Success's debate and chess teams have begun to win national awards.

Undoubtedly, there's a focus on preparing for the state tests. Students take practice tests, results are posted in school hallways, and teachers are ranked according to how well their students perform. Students scoring poorly attend extra work sessions on Saturdays. Success holds "Slam the Exam" rallies to motivate students. No detail is overlooked: teachers wear quiet soft-soled shoes on test days and keep classrooms at a cool temperature.

Moskowitz views test prep through the lens of equity. "We think it's our moral obligation to prepare kids for these tests," she says. "[The tests] do have a bearing, not only on one's future but on one's relationship with tests. If kids do very poorly, we worry that they'll think they can't do it. We want our kids to go in confident." She contends that test prep doesn't crowd out authentic learning. "If you look at the scope and sequence of our curriculum, it is very, very robust. You cannot ace these Common Core tests with test prep. Our kids can interpret the meaning of a poem because they've read so much poetry.… When we are prepping for math, it's open-ended math questions."

Her response raises an interesting question: If tests are high quality and well aligned with a high-quality curriculum, is "teaching to the test" necessarily bad? I visited a 4th-grade English class where a boy was asked to identify the main idea from a short story. He started to retell the story. The teacher corrected him, and, with gentle prodding, he identified the author's central point. Some might call that "test prep" because there are main-idea questions on the state exam. But it's also a skill that'll make that boy a better reader and communicator.

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The How: Quality Conversations

Moskowitz credits her (nonunion) teachers for the network's impressive results. "It really is the level of preparation of the teacher and the teacher really understanding the book, the poem, the read-aloud...how much feedback the teacher gets." Teacher preparation is another area where Success, not satisfied with the status quo, is forging its own path. In 2011, Success launched its own teacher-preparation program: Teacher Success Academy, or T-school.

New teachers participate in a four-week training session. One week is off-site at a college campus where teachers attend seminars and work with school leaders on mock lessons. Three weeks are spent working with Success's summer-school students, under the watchful gaze of school leaders. Returning teachers participate in a two-week course before classes start, to sharpen their content knowledge and classroom-management techniques. New principals ("school leaders"), who have usually already worked for a year as "leadership residents," also take a four-week course.

T-school is intense. Instructors place teachers on the hot seat, asking them, for example, to precisely identify the main idea in a college-level text. In *Mission Possible,* Moskowitz notes that a big part of T-school is "understanding the why"—the purpose behind what's taught and the way Success handles instruction: "You can't ask people to do something and take it seriously if they don't know why they are doing it." In T-school, teachers learn that "a good lesson flows like a quality conversation."

Moskowitz hopes to open T-school to other charters, and even district teachers, and wants it someday to become a state-certified graduate school of education. Currently, Success teachers must attend an education school to obtain a master's degree. But Success pays for promising college graduates to get a master's in education from Touro College while teaching at Success.

Teachers at Success work hard and are paid fairly well: compensation is generally above what district teachers make, but Success teachers work many more hours. Unlike at many district schools, teachers are given preparation periods and collaborate frequently and practice lessons together. Rather than having a rigid evaluation system, school leaders regularly visit classrooms and quickly offer targeted feedback and recommendations on improving practice.

Principals act as their school's instructional leader, in stark contrast to district schools, where principals, though accountable for school outcomes, have limited control over what's being taught and how. (Recently, the New York City teachers union won an arbitration decision mandating that "lesson plans are for the personal use of the teacher" and that supervisors may not "mandate specific elements of lesson plans.")

Teachers at Success access loads of technology. SMART Boards are in every classroom. Teachers are given MacBook Pros, and Success has an impressive IT system: everyone in the network can communicate with one another. Teachers and network leaders share videos of effective (and ineffective) lessons. Shortly before a lesson is taught across the network, an experienced teacher delivers (and video-records) the lesson early to her students, and shares the recording with other teachers.

Class sizes vary. Each kindergarten class has a lead teacher and an assistant. In all other grades, floating assistant teachers are shared across the grade. Generally, recent college grads and novice teachers cannot be lead teachers at Success; they must first serve as associate teachers, supporting lead teachers by helping with classroom management and working with students individually.

All the teachers I spoke with agree that Success prepares its teachers well. "You know the material at such a high level that it gives you a real confidence in the classroom," one teacher stated. Even critical former teachers credited the network with having improved their craft.

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Teachers spend much time on parental engagement, via e-mail, phone calls, and meetings. One mother of two Success students told me that her child never had homework at the district school she attended and that she "had to chase the teachers around to get a meeting." At Success, she meets with her daughters' teachers regularly, reviewing their "action plan."

Teachers do complain about 10- to 12-hour days. The staff is young, and burnout is a factor. Critics have claimed that the teacher attrition rate at some schools is as high as 70 percent. But these absurdly high figures misread how charters differ from traditional public schools. When a teacher transfers from one Success school to another or takes a position at the network level, the state counts that teacher as "leaving." Success insists that, across the entire network, the retention rate was 83 percent last year.

Some complain that Success has "teacher-proofed" its instruction. Lessons and materials are the same in each grade across all schools on any given day. With Success's inquiry-based approach, however, teachers actually spend more time working individually with students than at other schools. Teachers often spend only ten minutes delivering direct instruction; the rest of the class period is devoted to hands-on learning, as students participate in guided reading and writing or grapple with a math problem.

Education news web site ChalkbeatNY featured a piece by a (non-Success) teacher who argued: "What each school needs is what Success has: a team of people whose primary job is to create a high-quality curriculum for their own school." At Success's headquarters, that support is evident. Folks scurry about the stark, modern offices on two floors of an office building in Lower Manhattan. (Success was formerly headquartered in Harlem, the location of its first schools. Its new offices are more centrally located for the growing citywide network.)

Miracle or Mirage?

So is Success a miracle? Or, as critics suggest, are the test scores a mirage? It's too early to tell. Most schools are just a few years old and still adding grades. Although the network has 32 schools and 9,000 students this year, only 9 schools had 2,250 students in tested grades last year (only 340 in grade 6 or higher). And Success detractors do raise issues that warrant attention.

Critics assert that Success "creams" the best students. In 2013–14, 77 percent of Success students received free or reduced-price lunch, compared with 79 percent for city schools overall; 12 percent of Success students received special education services, compared with 18 percent for the city; 4 percent of Success students were English-language learners (ELL), compared with 13 percent for the city. Success officials note that 4 percent of their students are former special ed and 5 percent former ELL, and that Success students are declassified at a higher rate than kids in district schools. However, Success has relatively few students in the most acute categories of learning disability and English proficiency.

New York law instructs charters to place "special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students who are at risk of academic failure." But what exactly does that mean? Is it enough that Success serves low-income minority children exceedingly well? (In the quintile of highest-poverty schools in the state, four of the top five schools in English language arts and math are Success schools.) Or does it have to serve exactly the same percentages of special-needs students as district schools? Can different charters

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serve different types of students? When a network reaches a certain size, should it be held to a different standard?

Student attrition is another big issue. 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. However, the student population in New York City—mostly low-income, heavily immigrant—is highly mobile. Traditional public schools annually lose about 14 percent of their students, while Success loses about 10 percent. The difference: Success doesn't accept new students after the start of 3rd grade, claiming that its restrictive backfill policy is necessary to build its unique academic culture. (Success recently loosened its backfill policy; for 2015 admissions, it'll accept applications for kindergarten through 4th grade.)

The backfill issue is dividing the charter community. One prominent figure told me: "Eva runs around the city…telling parents 'don't steal possible.' But she doesn't backfill after 3rd grade, so she gives up on kids when they are eight." Success, however, is following state law, which mandates that charters accept students when seats become available through the beginning of 3rd grade. Charters aren't required to disclose backfill policies or attrition rates (a policy that should change), but most say that they accept new students when a spot opens in any grade.

Seth Andrew, founder of the Democracy Prep charter network, has been calling for charters to backfill in all grades whenever a spot becomes available. He recently offered an analysis that shows the average number of proficient students increasing at Democracy Prep and declining at Success in later grades. But the comparison is imperfect because Democracy Prep started as a middle school, while Success is just now starting to see significant numbers of students in those grades.

Percentages of proficient students remain consistently high from grades 3 through 8 at Success. It's not attrition that's driving achievement. (In fact, local district schools probably benefit by gaining high-scoring students who leave Success.) Success's model—starting with kids at an early age, getting them on grade level by 3rd grade, and keeping them there—works. Some claim that Success weeds out low performers before they begin to be tested in 3rd grade, alleging that low performers are subject to multiple suspensions to force them out. But there's no empirical evidence for these claims. In fact, attrition rates at Success are lower in early grades than in later grades.

Success suspended 11 percent of its students last year, triple the district school rate but similar to those of other charter

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networks. (Data report only whether a student has been suspended at least once during the year—not how many times.) Moskowitz, noting that Success charters are much safer than district schools, states that creating a safe learning environment, instilling discipline and values, and building social and emotional skills are part of the Success model.

Critics point out that none of the few dozen Success Academy 8th graders who took the entrance exam over the past two years did well enough to get into one of the city's eight selective public high schools. Although the test is difficult, and less than one-fifth of applicants are admitted each year, it is perplexing that no Success students, many of whom scored at the advanced level on the state exams, made the cut. Only 10 percent of students admitted this year were black or Latino (52 percent identified as Asian), and the wisdom of basing admittance entirely on this one exam is being debated in New York City.

It will be interesting to see what happens with test scores as Success's enrollment grows; how its high school performs (some suggest that Success's elementary schools are outstanding but that instruction weakens in later grades); and how Success graduates fare in the college admissions process and in college. As Success expands into more affluent neighborhoods, will upper-income parents support its program? Or will they bristle at the amount of test prep and the strict codes of behavior? Hopefully, Success can help lessen the segregation in New York's schools.

Many say that Success is overly secretive, but that criticism seems unwarranted. The network hosted tours for 275 educators from 70 organizations last year. Moskowitz wrote a book (embedded with 23 videos) about the Success model. Recently, Success organized a daylong forum, open to all district and charter principals, to share information. Disappointingly, two-thirds of the 60 principals who attended were from other charters. "I have no interest in what [Moskowitz] does," one district principal who stayed away told me.

As the above comment suggests, Moskowitz has become a polarizing figure. Her battles with the teachers unions and New York mayor Bill de Blasio are well chronicled. Although de Blasio has backed off his anti-charter rhetoric and actions lately, relations between the network and city hall remain strained. The animosity shown toward Moskowitz by de Blasio and other self-described "progressives" is ironic because her education vision is essentially progressive. The curriculum (although infused with content) is Montessori-like, stressing experiential learning, problem solving, and critical thinking. Instead of formulaic evaluations, teachers receive continual feedback and support. Parents are involved. A longer school day and year allow for extracurriculars, helping build the "whole child."

"Eva Moskowitz is a force of nature." I heard variations of that phrase from nearly everyone I spoke with about Success. Some criticized her salary (now more than $500,000), but it seems a bargain from a return-on-investment standpoint. Moskowitz is deeply involved in every aspect of the schools; her passion and energy are extraordinary. So is her knowledge of education theory and practice. (Don't get her started on Piaget's theories that it's not "developmentally appropriate" for young children to read, do math, or learn history.) But her hands-on style, along with the fundraising juggernaut she has built (last year, Success raised $22 million in private support), does raise questions about replication and equity.

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More time and data are needed before Success can be declared an unqualified success, but clearly, there are lessons to be learned. According to Andrew Malone, principal of Success's Harlem Central middle school, "There are things that everyone can do, even within the [teachers union] contract and the shorter school day ... the quality of the literature, the way that we work with teachers, the curricula themselves." He adds, "It seems so pessimistic and cynical that the first reaction by many is to say, 'Oh, they must be cheating, they must be counseling out special ed kids.'"

Here's hoping that Success skeptics will open themselves to the possibility that the network is actually getting some things right, and that Success supporters will consider how the rapidly expanding network can do everything possible to attract and retain the kids who most need its help and share best practices with other schools, charter and district. If Success can help chart a course back to the original vision of charters as laboratories of innovation and reform, that would be an even more amazing success story than the one already being written.

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