

Issue Brief

The Color of Success: Black Student Achievement in Public Charter Schools

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INTRODUCTION

As educators across the country work to improve educational opportunities and results for Black students, they have an emerging tool at their disposal: public charter schools. In numerous communities throughout the nation, these innovative, tuition-free public schools – which provide administrative flexibility to a school's staff and a rich learning environment with high expectations for its students – are making notable strides in advancing Black student achievement.

The need for these new kinds of public schools is great. While Black student achievement in public education has made significant strides over the past four decades – for example, 82 percent of Black adults in 2007 had completed a high school diploma or more as compared to 30 percent in 1967 – there is much to be concerned about when looking at Black student achievement in today's public schools.¹

Although results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), known as the Nation's

Report Card, show a shrinking Black-White achievement gap in reading and math from 1971 to 2004, Black achievement in reading for 17-year-olds is equivalent to results for White 13-year-olds.ⁱⁱ Black SAT and ACT scores in 2007 were also pitifully low when compared to their peers.ⁱⁱⁱ And, for the national high school class of 2005, 55 percent of Black students graduated, compared to 78 percent of White students and 81 percent of Asian students.^{iv}

Much has been tried over the past four decades to put a dent in these numbers – from magnet schools to curricular changes to state takeovers of chronically struggling districts and schools. While some of these reforms have been more successful than others, it has become clear that solely relying on these efforts to turn around the existing public schools won't be sufficient to close the achievement gap between Black students and their majority counterparts. We need to substantially increase our efforts to create new public schools to help meet the needs of Black students.

One of the most promising efforts on the new schools front has been the public charter schools movement. As the studies and stories in this issue brief indicate, public charter schools are making a positive impact on Black students. If we are truly

committed to closing the learning gap in America, we must pay more attention to these findings and re-double our commitment to making these public school options available to more students across the country.

ENCOURAGING NEWS FROM FOUR MAJOR STUDIES

A growing number of charter school studies are analyzing student performance by race and ethnicity. In terms of Black student achievement in charter schools, the evidence is encouraging, although not yet definitive. Four major reports illustrate the encouraging news.

Proficiency Advantage for Black Charter 4th-Graders

In a national comparison of student achievement in charter schools and regular public schools on 4th grade reading and math state tests, the average charter school had a “proficiency advantage” – the difference in the percentage of students who are proficient on state tests in charters versus non-charters – of 4.2 percentage points in reading and 2.1 percentage points in math. Charter schools located in areas where a high percentage of students are Black had a proficiency advantage over regular public schools of 4.5 percentage points in reading and 2.6 percentage points in math.^v



Florida Charters Closing the Gap for Black Students At A Faster Rate

In Florida, about a quarter of both the public charter school and traditional public school population is Black. This report, by the Florida Department of Education, shows that public charter schools in Florida are closing the achievement gap between Black and White students at a faster rate than traditional public schools in key subjects and grade levels. Between 2002 and 2006, the gap between Black and White charter students in middle school math decreased by nine percentage points (36 percentage points to 27), as compared to the four percentage point decrease in traditional public schools (36 percentage points to 32). In addition, the gap in elementary school reading decreased by seven percentage points (30 percentage points to 23) in charters versus six percentage points in traditional public schools (32 percentage points to 26).^{vi}

Black Students in Massachusetts Charters Overtaking Regular School Peers

A four-year study done by the Massachusetts Department of Education examined charter school students' performance on state tests. When the study found a significant performance difference between a charter school and its sending district, it more likely favored charter schools. Although that pattern existed for all student subgroups, it was most prevalent for Blacks, Hispanics, and low-income students.^{vi}

Attending a charter high school in Chicago increases a Black student's chances of graduating from high school and enrolling in college.

According to the study, Black students at 33 percent of charter schools performed significantly higher in 2002 than their sending district counterparts in English. By 2005, that number was 43 percent. Moreover, no Black subgroup performed significantly lower than their sending district counterpart between 2003 and 2005. In other words, Black students at almost half of the state's charter schools performed significantly better in English than their district peers, with the Black students at the other schools performing at a comparable level as their district peers.

In math, Black students at 25 percent of Massachusetts charter schools performed significantly higher than their sending district counterparts in 2001. In 2005, that number had grown to 38 percent. In addition, no more than one Black subgroup per year performed significantly lower than their sending district peers in math. To put it another way, Black students at over a third of the state's charter schools performed significantly better than their district peers, with the Black students at all but one of the other schools performing about the same as their district peers.^{viii}

Chicago Charters Producing Significant Advantages for Black Students

A 2008 Mathematica and Rand Corporation study evaluated the performance of students enrolled in public charter and non-charter schools in Chicago. The study produced two notable findings for Black charter students. First, the study found that charter schools serving elementary and middle grades had a positive impact on Black students in math. Second, researchers also found that attending a charter high school in the city increases a student's composite ACT score by half a percentage point, increases a student's chances of graduating from high school by seven percentage points, and increases the likelihood that a student will enroll in college by 11 percentage points. Eight in 10 of the charter high school students studied are Black. Researchers claim that these positive results are "solidly evident" only in charter high schools that included middle school grades.^{ix}

PROFILES OF SUCCESS

The studies summarized above show that Black students enrolled in public charter schools are often succeeding. The reasons for such success are varied, but usually include providing a safe learning environment, having high expectations of all students, hiring high-quality staff who are willing to go above and beyond the call of duty for their students, and involving parents and the surrounding community in the life of the school. Here are the stories of seven public charter schools from across the country that exhibit these and other characteristics of a successful school.

KIPP West Atlanta Young Scholars Academy (KIPP WAYS Academy),

where one of the co-authors works, was founded in July 2003 and authorized by the Atlanta Board of Education. KIPP WAYS Academy educates approximately 320 students in grades 5 through 8. 100 percent of the students are Black, with a majority coming from low-income families. Students attend KIPP WAYS Academy from 7:30 am to 5:00 pm Monday to Thursday and to 4:00 pm on Friday. Saturday and summer session participation are part of the educational environment. Thus far, the KIPP WAYS Academy model has proven to be successful.

In 2007, KIPP WAYS Academy was the highest performing middle school in Atlanta Public Schools and the 11th highest performing middle school in Georgia. This year, the school continued to improve and was named the 2nd highest perform-



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ing middle school in the state. On the Georgia 5th-grade writing test, 86 percent of KIPP WAYS students passed the test compared to 70 percent for the state and 68 percent for Atlanta schools in 2006-07. On the Georgia 8th-grade writing test, 95 percent of KIPP WAYS students passed the test compared to 67 percent for the state and 63 percent for Atlanta schools. On Georgia's Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT), an

impressive 100 percent of KIPP WAYS 8th-graders passed the reading, language arts, math, science, and social studies examinations.

According to Faye Hammonds, mother of a KIPP WAYS student, high expectations and dedication of staff make the difference: "Teachers are available to me and other parents. This is important." When asked how she learned about KIPP, Hammonds said she watched an Oprah show

and initially concluded that KIPP was all pie in the sky stuff.” However, after learning about KIPP WAYS and speaking to school staff, she realized this opportunity was real and enrolled her son. David Jernigan, KIPP WAYS principal, believes that his teachers are a major reason for the school’s success. “Research indicates that the number one predictor of student success is the quality of teachers.” Jernigan also believes one benefit of leading a charter school is the ability to hire the best teachers and to have the financial flexibility to make the necessary data-driven-decisions to benefit students.

The Chicago International Charter School (CICS) manages 11 public charter school campuses throughout the Windy City. CICS-Longwood Campus was one of the first CICS schools authorized by the Chicago Board of Education. Longwood opened its doors to elementary students from Chicago’s South Side in August 1997 and has since grown into one of the few K-12 charter campuses in Chicago. Longwood currently educates over 1,400 students in its Elementary Academy (K-5), Junior Academy (6-8), and Senior Academy (9-12). Approximately 98 percent of Longwood students are Black and 84 percent qualify for the federal free and reduced price lunch program. The waiting list for the school is 1,400 students.^x Edison Schools, Inc. manages the Longwood Campus.

In terms of student performance on the Illinois Standardized Achievement Test (ISAT) in 2007, 90 percent of the elementary and junior academy students met or exceeded state standards in reading and 74 percent met or exceeded standards in science. As for results by specific grade, 88 percent of 8th-graders met or exceeded ISAT standards in reading, a gain of 12 percentage points from 2006. For 3rd-graders, 87 percent met or exceeded ISAT standards in math, and 96 percent of 6th-graders and 91 percent of 7th- and 8th-graders respectively did the same in math. Longwood high school has a four-year graduation rate of nearly 90percent, with all seniors graduating by year five.^x

Several factors play a role in Longwood’s success: good teachers, strong leadership, and a powerful mission. Supportive of all three factors is Longwood’s Male Mentoring Program. Robert Lang, director of schools, launched the mentoring program in fall 2006. His goal is to provide a constructive environment for Longwood junior and senior high school male students between 3:30 pm and 5:30 pm from Monday to Thursday. The program’s focus on improving academic and social skills has resulted in a decrease in school suspensions and an improvement in attitude, self-esteem and school culture. For Longwood, male mentoring is an important ingredient to school success. Also, according to Longwood leadership, the school’s K-12 grade configuration provides “less stress” on students, as

compared to the grade configuration at traditional public schools, because students experience uninterrupted school support and high teacher expectations from grade to grade while maturing along the way within the school’s culture.

Boston Preparatory Charter Public School (BPCPS) opened its doors in fall 2004 after being authorized by the Massachusetts State Board of Education. The school currently serves 270 students in grades sixth through nine, but plans to expand to grade twelve. Approximately 76 percent of the BPCPS students are Black and 76 percent of the students qualify for the federal free and reduced price lunch program. The goal at BPCPS is to provide urban students with an education model focusing on college prep and ethics. The school is open 8½ hours a day for 190 days a year and requires Saturday school for students needing additional academic help.

In 2007, 98 percent of the BPCPS 8th-graders scored proficient or advanced in MCAS language arts, compared to 69 percent for the state and 55 percent for Boston schools. For math, 84 percent of BPCPS 8th-graders were proficient or advanced, compared to 45 percent in the state and 27 percent in Boston schools. BPCPS also administers the Stanford-10 Achievement Test, which is a nationally, norm-referenced test that allows school leaders to compare BPCPS student achievement with peers across the country. Between 2004 and 2007,



BPCPS students have shown impressive double-digit gains on Stanford 10 tests in reading comprehension, math problem solving, and math procedures.^{xii}

Scott McCue is the head of BPCPS and Amanda Gardner is the principal. This two-leader arrangement allows for continual support and feedback between the leaders, while giving each person the flexibility to do their own jobs well. According to McCue and Gardner, an ideal teacher for BPCPS is someone who has urban teaching experience, is extremely intelligent, is committed to working hard, is comfortable with receiving direct feedback, and is continuously looking to improve their craft. As evidence, many of their staff members hail from elite colleges and have been involved in competitive sports teams.

The school culture rests on a relationship between building the right habits and attitudes for all BPCPS stakeholders that are consistent with the mission of the school. This relationship, according to BPCPS leaders, is the bedrock of everything. Mark Culliton, a BPCPS board member, joined the BPCPS team because of the school's goals and because it would not "relegate students to failure because of race, class, or location."

Roxbury Preparatory Charter School (RPCS) in Boston is a public charter middle school founded in 1999. The school serves 198 students in grades 6 through 8, 67 percent of whom are black. The school day includes a reading period, rigorous college prep work in several core subjects, athletics, and art enrichments. The school has 29 staff

members, and nearly one-third are racial minorities.

On the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) 2007 tests, 94 percent of 8th-graders were proficient or advanced in math while 92 percent were proficient or advanced in language arts. Only 45 percent and 75 percent of 8th-graders in the state scored proficient or advanced in math and language arts, respectively, and 27 percent and 55 percent of 8th-graders in Boston schools achieved the same level of results, respectively. While the RPCS 6th- and 7th-graders' scores were not at high as the 8th-graders' scores, RPCS students still surpassed state and local results on the majority of tests administered for each grade level. These results are one reason RPCS ranked as the highest performing middle school in Massachusetts from 2004-05 to 2006-07. Success of this type resulted in RPCS receiving the Intel and Scholastic School of Distinction Award in 2006, making it one of 16 schools in country to receive this award.^{xiii}

Joshua Phillips and Dana Lehman, co-directors at RPCS, agree that teacher quality matters to the school's success. "The number one ingredient [for school success] is the teaching staff, but in addition to that is the curriculum development process." RPCS requires a three-week training and curriculum development summer session for teachers. Equally important to success at RPCS is the co-director model. This allows one person to focus on learning and achievement, while the other leader is able to focus on administrative duties.

While RPCS is considered a “no excuses” school (that is, a school that will not accept any excuses for why students aren’t learning), it believes that school achievement drives school culture, which is the opposite of many other “no excuses” schools. Because RPCS focuses on academics, curriculum, and the process of good teaching, the result is a school culture of academic rigor. “We don’t explicitly do culture, we do school, and the culture is a result of that” said school leaders.

Greg Shell, an RPCS board member, joined the RPCS family because of the school’s mission for its mostly urban minority student population. “I see education as a national strategic imperative with long investments and long payoff periods,” said Shell. He believes the school’s focus on high expectations, a focus on academics, and a culture of success are three reasons the school is closing the achievement gap for Black students.

The Sisulu-Walker Charter School (SWCS) of Harlem was founded in August 1999, making SWCS the first public charter school in New York. The school is named after Walter Sisulu, the former Secretary General of the African National Congress and colleague of Nelson Mandela, and Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, a pastor and civil rights leader. SWCS educates 220 students in grades kindergarten through 5, has a 25-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio, and is managed by Victory Schools, an educational management organization based in New York City. 92 percent of the school’s student

The SWCS principal believes the schools’ success over the years is based on... a “community approach” to education and the “responsibility of giving back” to Harlem.

population is Black and 87 percent qualify for the federal free and reduced price lunch program. SWCS is governed by the themes of achievement, honor, and service, which are reinforced through its afterschool and summer programs.

SWCS accomplished much in the 2006-07 school year. For example, 98 percent of SWCS 3rd-graders met or exceeded standards on the New York math exam, compared to 69 percent of New York City District #5 3rd-graders. And, 66 percent of SWCS 3rd-graders met or exceeded standards on the New York English Language Arts exam, versus 40 percent of New York City District #5 3rd-graders. The New York State Department of Education honored SWCS with a “High Performing/ Gap Closing” designation in 2007 for this work.^{xv}

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS: THE STATE OF THE MOVEMENT

The public charter movement remains one of the boldest efforts to improve public education over the past quarter century. Seventeen years into this path-breaking movement, here is where things stand in public charter schools:

- More than 1.2 million students are enrolled in over 4,300 public charter schools in 40 states and D.C. California has the most charters (almost 700), while Mississippi has the fewest (1).
- In 29 cities across the country, at least 13 percent of the public school students are enrolled in public charter schools. Notable examples include New Orleans (57 percent), Dayton and D.C. (27 percent), Detroit and Kansas City (20 percent), and Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee (17 percent).
- Public charter schools enroll a higher percentage of minority students (60 percent vs. 46) and low-income students (52 percent vs. 40 percent) than traditional public schools.
- There are a wide variety of charter schools open across the country. A sizable number have a college preparatory focus, particularly for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Others create dropout prevention and recovery programs. Still other charter missions include arts, Afrocentricity, entrepreneurship, and math, science, and technology.
- A vast majority of studies are finding that charter schools are improving achievement at a faster rate than other public schools. In fact, public charter schools are usually among the top performers in school districts. These high performers are setting important examples about what public schools can achieve, often with disadvantaged students. They’re shattering low expectations and breaking through long-standing barriers that have prevented large numbers of students from achieving educational success.



Karen Jones, SWCS principal, believes the schools' success over the years is based on two factors: a "community approach" to education and the "responsibility of giving back" to Harlem. William Allen, SWCS board chair, believes "a culture of success and achievement" is what SWCS promised to the Harlem community and his team is working hard to make it a reality. "Good teachers" are also important to Principal Jones. In 2007, Manhattan Media, Inc. named SWCS reading teacher Doris Fleming "Teacher of the Year."

Opening in 2003, the **Memphis Academy for Health Sciences (MAHS)** was the first public charter middle school to open in Tennessee, largely due to the sponsorship of Reverend Derrick Joyce and members of The 100 Black Men of Memphis, Inc. MAHS educates 300 students in grades 6 through 8, over 90 percent of whom are Black and 84 percent qualify for the federal free and reduced price lunch program. MAHS is a year-round school that is open 8½ hours each day. The goals of MAHS are to prepare urban students for high school and for participation in the burgeoning health sciences market in Memphis.

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In terms of student achievement, 91 percent of the MAHS students scored proficient or advanced in math and reading/language arts on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program in 2006-07. Each score was one of the highest in the state. In May 2008, the president of the Education Consumers Foundation presented an award to MAHS for producing one of the best three-year achievement gains for math and reading/language arts. The Foundation also ranked MAHS the 5th best middle school in Tennessee.^{xv}

MAHS principal Curtis Weathers, former All-SEC football player at Ole Miss and member of the Cleveland Browns, is proud of his school's success. "Many of our students do not enroll in MAHS to study health science," he said. "However, when they come to the school, learn the materials, and listen to our guest speakers, many of them become interested in various aspects of the health profession." A major factor to the success at MAHS is its working relationships with 100 Black Men of Memphis and Volunteer Memphis. Parents also play an important role. "Many of my parents work two or three jobs so they are unable to attend all of our activities," said Principal Weathers. "But when I really need them to come through for our school, I can count on them" because of the wonderful things MAHS provides to their children.

Milwaukee College Preparatory School (MCPS) is an independent public charter school authorized by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. MCPS serves almost 500 students in grades kindergarten through 8. 99 percent of the school's students are Black, 75 percent live in low-income homes, and 66 percent come from homes headed by a single parent. MCPS was formerly a private school that participated in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program – the nation's oldest and largest publicly funded voucher program – before it converted to a public charter school in 2002.

In 2006, MCPS 4th- and 8th-graders outperformed their peers in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) on state tests. For example, the reading proficiency rate for 4th-graders at MCPS was 79 percent compared to 63 percent for MPS students. For 8th-graders, 83 percent of MCPS students were proficient in reading as compared to only 37 percent for MPS students. Because of the success of MCPS, 8th-graders receive numerous offers to attend a competitive high school located in Milwaukee and elsewhere. The school received the 2007 New Wisconsin School of Promise Award for being a high-poverty school with outstanding results in reading and mathematics on the state tests.



...public charter schools serving Black students create a foundation of high expectations that is focused around a mission-driven curriculum and quality teaching.



MCPS principal Robert Raul, who has been at the school since it was founded, is a strong believer in the power of partnerships. MCPS is successful because of its link with the Milwaukee business and philanthropic community, its access to competitive high schools and colleges, and its focus on college and moral values. Equally important is having a strong board of trustees. The MCPS board, which includes two parents, raised \$6 million to support the school building campaign. Ron Sadoff, a founding board member of MCPS, said he and others support the school because it “operates based on results.”

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As the studies and profiles of success highlighted in this issue brief indicate, public charter schools – with their flexibility in hiring teachers, managing a budget to make data-driven decisions, and designing a high-quality curriculum – are making a positive impact on Black students. Because of these promising results, we must support steps that strengthen these innovative public schools.

We recommend that founders and operators of public charter schools serving Black students create a foundation of high expectations at their school that is focused around a mission-driven curriculum and quality teaching. We also recommend that these founders and operators engage their surrounding communities for opportunities to partner with

long-established and highly credible community organizations. For those serving high school grades, we recommend examining the possibility of expanding to serve additional grades, such as middle school grades.

We also suggest that policymakers, foundations, and others invest in creating the next generation of founders and operators of public charter schools serving Black students, particularly from those communities where public charter schools are having the greatest impact. Such investments should be focused around several items: leadership training and development; support for writing a charter application,

including an immersion in the research around what works for Black students; assistance with funding for the school's operations and facilities; and, support for replicating high-performing public charter schools serving Black students.

In conclusion, the American public education landscape is shifting every day, as are the demands placed on it by business leaders, policymakers, and parents. Too often these erupting fault lines trap Black students in schools that fail to provide a quality education. Public charter schools are one answer to address the education crisis facing Black students nationwide.

FOUR FACTS ABOUT PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter Schools Are Public:

The state laws that allow for the creation of charter schools specify that these schools are public schools. They cannot teach religion nor charge tuition, for example. When the public nature of these schools has been challenged in court, state after state has ruled that charters are public schools, including in California (1997), Colorado (1999), Michigan (1997), New Jersey (1999), and Ohio (2006).

Charter Schools Are Accountable:

Charter schools operate within a multi-tiered accountability system – to parents, to authorizers via a performance-based contract, to the state, and to the federal government. If parents are unhappy with a charter school, they can enroll their children elsewhere. When authorizers (such as a local school district or a state university) find that charters fail to live up to the terms of their contract, they can close the school. Students in charter schools are required by law to take the same state standardized tests as traditional public school students. The provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals With Disabilities in Education Act apply to charter schools.

Charter Schools Typically Enroll Students Who Are Struggling Academically:

Public charter schools tend to enroll, on average, students who are academically behind their peers in traditional public schools. Not only is there plenty of anecdotal evidence to back up this claim, but studies of three of the largest charter states (California, Florida, and Texas) included similar findings.

The Public Overwhelmingly Supports Public Charter Schools:

Seventeen years into the charter school movement, it is clear that public support for charters is growing while opposition is declining. In fact, between 2000 and 2007, support grew from 42 percent to 60 percent, while opposition declined from 47 percent to 35 percent.

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