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NY SCHOOLS

Bronx Charter School Caters to Students on the 'Margins'

Mott Haven Academy is designed for children in foster care or at risk of entering it



Kindergarten teacher Eric Lara talked with Elias, last name withheld, a foster child, at Mott Haven Academy Charter School in the Bronx on Monday. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Leslie Brody

Aug. 29, 2017 7:44 p.m. ET

At Mott Haven Academy Charter School in New York City, fifth-graders start the fall reading “Locomotion,” the story of a boy in foster care.

Every kindergartner gets a teddy bear to keep in school for comfort. And from time to time, class parties celebrate a student’s adoption.

The Bronx charter is believed to be the first in the U.S. designed for children in foster care or at risk of entering it, often due to parental addiction, abuse or neglect. It tries to support them with counseling and trains teachers to be especially sensitive to their needs.

“I feel an incredible responsibility,” said its founding principal, Jessica Nauiokas, “to make sure Mott Haven Academy is an environment that does not let kids down the way some adults have in their past.”

Housed in a renovated factory with a technicolor dove painted one side, the charter stands out in a low-income area dotted with public-housing projects.

On Wednesday, it will open with a new middle-school division, and will serve about 400 students in prekindergarten through sixth grade.

After a rough start in 2008, the academy has made academic progress: Although it teaches some of New York City’s most vulnerable children, 59% of its students passed state tests in math last spring, beating the 42% rate for the same grades in the city’s regular public schools. The charter’s scores in English almost matched the city’s 40%



Jessica Nauiakas, principal and founder of the Mott Haven Academy Charter School in the Bronx, spoke with middle-school students this week. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

pass rate.

The school helped K'jha, now in fourth grade, face deep disappointments, said her adoptive mother, Sharon. At one point when K'jha was a toddler and still with her birth parents, they were homeless, sleeping on park benches and rooftops.

Sharon said K'jha's parents struggled with drugs and incarceration, and the 9-year-old treasures a card her father made for her in prison, a picture of Minnie Mouse with sparkles.

Sharon became her foster mother and then adopted her. "A year ago K'jha wanted to test me, she thought I was keeping her away from her parents," Sharon said. "She tried to fight me, she said 'I'm outta here.' But she had counseling at school and outside and she's gotten so much better."

The charter is a "safe haven, the children know that," Sharon added. "They're loved here, they're wanted, they're special."



Bob Creager and his adopted son, Michael, 5, posed for a photograph during the first day of school at Mott Haven Academy Charter School in the Bronx on Monday. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

About a third of the school's students are in foster care and a third are in families that have been under the supervision of the city's Administration for Children's Services. Another third come from families in the neighborhood, where demand for seats is strong.

About 300 children were in a lottery for 15 spots open to kindergartners in the general community for the coming school year.

Wyasia, a 14-year-old graduate who was adopted from foster care, said she was grateful to go to school with other students who understood what she had been through. "Any time we would get frustrated we would go to each other," she said.

Leaders at New York Foundling, a nonprofit social service agency, opened Mott Haven Academy after seeing its foster children flounder in traditional public schools.

Paid for by a \$27-million capital campaign, the school building also has some of the agency's medical and dental clinics, therapists and caseworkers.

Experts say only 3% of foster youth nationwide finish college. Getting shuffled from one home to another—sometimes several times a year—can interrupt their education.

At Mott Haven Academy, if children are moved to a new address in the city the school arranges emergency transportation so they can stay with the same teachers and friends.

The charter spends about \$20,000 per student each year. That includes \$16,500 per pupil of taxpayer dollars, with the rest coming from the New York Foundling and the charter's own fundraising, a spokeswoman said.

Some charter critics say they drain resources from regular public schools.

The school's start was rocky. After five years, state education officials approved only a short-term renewal of its contract, warning it must improve its low test scores to remain open. The staff overhauled the curriculum, cracked down on absenteeism and intensified tutoring, said the principal, Ms. Nauiokas.

Students have a longer school day than district schools and usually two certified teachers are assigned to each class of about 26.

Four "behavior specialists" are on hand to soothe students who act out so they can return to class quickly. Each classroom has a "take-a-break" spot for children who need space to calm down. Point systems allow students to earn rewards for good behavior.

"We try to make it so discipline issues don't derail the academic work," Ms. Nauiokas said.



A mural of a peace dove has been painted on the Mott Haven Academy Charter School building in the Bronx. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Some students present real challenges.

At kindergarten orientation this week, a boy in foster care sat quietly with his hands on his lap, listening to a story, but his good manners hid a temper. In an incident last spring,

he was caught on video in a restaurant, hitting his foster mother, cursing and throwing gang signs.

In another kindergarten room on Monday, a foster child named Elias balked at joining his new classmates in a painting project. His teachers let him play with plastic blocks instead, and gave him a 2-minute hourglass of sand so he could track his time away from the group and rejoin when he was ready. Teachers said such techniques aim to give a sense of control to the students who often lead lives full of uncertainty.

By the charter school's analysis, its foster children fare much better than those in district schools. In fifth grade, for example, 58% of the charter's students in the child-welfare system passed the state math test in 2016, compared with 8% of New York Foundling's foster children who attended regular public schools.

After years of climbing upward, the charter's state test scores slipped slightly last spring, to 37% proficient in English and 59% in math. The principal said faculty believed that dip to be isolated and have modified curricula and instruction to address it.

Bill Baccaglini, president of the New York Foundling, said that in many regular public schools, busy teachers often "teach to the middle" of the ability range.

"My kids, because of all the things that have happened to them, don't exist in the middle of the room, they exist on the margins," he said. "Where you have populations like this it's foolhardy to think the straight academic program focused on the 3 R's will get them from A to Z."

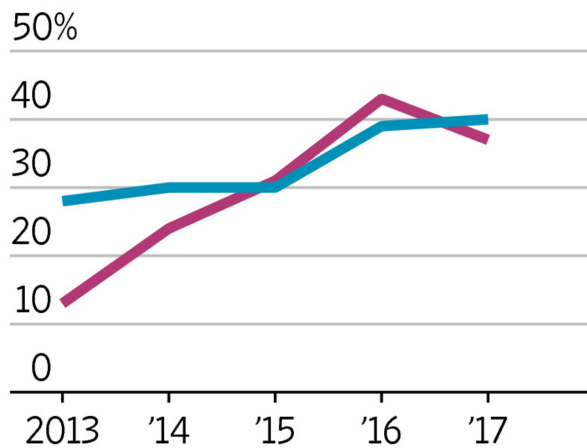
Trending Up

At Mott Haven Academy Charter School, the percentage of students passing state tests in spring has risen in most years since 2013.

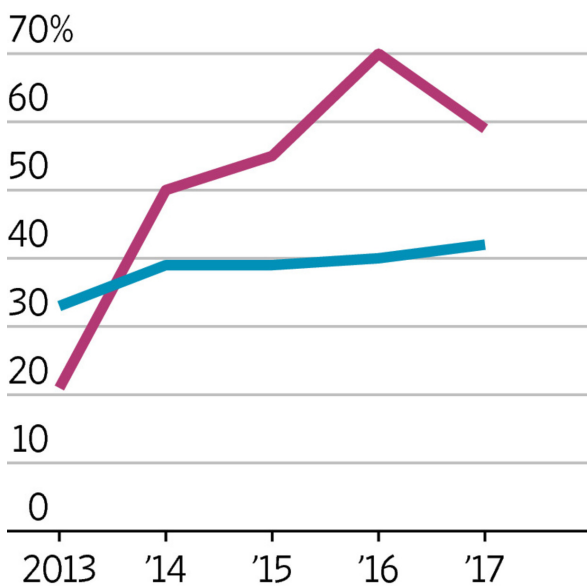
■ **Mott Haven Academy Charter School**

■ **New York City district schools**

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS,
GRADES 3 TO 5 COMBINED



MATH, GRADES 3 TO 5 COMBINED



Source: New York City Department of Education

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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