



## City jumps on charter bandwagon

*Winning over kids and teachers; city quickly uses up state quota*

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The middle schoolers at KIPP Academy Charter School in the South Bronx are used to getting ribbed by other kids who say that KIPP stands for Kids in Prison Program. But by now, they've learned to ignore the taunts.

"Who's the one who's going to go on to be something?" asks Zanyl Farrell, a self-assured eighth grader who has been accepted at Loomis Chaffee, a Connecticut boarding school.

Compared with many other public schools in the city, KIPP Academy is an oasis of calm. Housed on the fourth floor of an otherwise nondescript middle school, the academy has halls papered with college pennants, photos of its 180-piece student orchestra, student merit certificates and mottoes exhorting students to "Be Nice and Work Hard."

"It's not rocket science," says KIPP co-founder David Levin. "We develop a strong school culture, and we meet every kid where they are."

Welcome to the front line of New York City's charter school movement. But for its cramped quarters and its almost exclusively minority student population, KIPP--an acronym for Knowledge Is Power Program--looks more like Scarsdale than the South Bronx. It is one of 47 charter schools that are beginning to make waves in the city's moribund educational establishment by using public money--but private management--to help reverse the public schools' dismal record in teaching children to read, write and do math.

Today, charter schools serve 12,000 mostly at-risk children in New York City. For 2006, the state has approved another 13 charters in the city for 3,000 students, maxing out the Legislature's 100-school cap for the state.

Despite some clear successes, however, charter schools in New York City remain an anomaly. Supporters worry that unless state legislators equalize the funding between charter and public schools, lift the cap on the number of charter schools allowed and nix efforts to make teacher unionization easier, they will quash the ability of charter schools to drive improvements in the larger system.

"There's no one piece of deregulation that makes charter schools successful," says Robin Lake, associate director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University

of Washington. "It tends to be the little things that add up over time, the bureaucracy creep that makes them start to look more and more like the schools you wanted to free them from."

Charter schools start out with a simple formula: clear goals, high expectations and strict accountability. They believe that by being free of the top-down dicta that the public school bureaucracy imposes on everything from textbooks to toilet paper, charter schools can have the flexibility and incentive to do whatever it takes to help students.

"If we wanted to start a new reading program, before we might have had to go through the superintendent and the Department of Education," says Monte Joffe, principal of Renaissance Charter School in Jackson Heights, Queens. "Now we launch one initiative after another."

### **Green light in 1998**

Nationally, the charter school movement has been gathering steam for nearly two decades and now serves 1.1 million children in 3,648 schools. In New York, charter schools didn't get the green light until 1998, when Gov. George Pataki put the squeeze on lawmakers to pass enabling legislation over the objections of local school boards and the powerful teachers' union.

Even so, it has taken years for charter schools to gain a foothold here. Between 1998 and 2002, only 18 charter schools were established. Since 2003, however, the number has more than doubled after Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein put political and financial muscle behind the idea. Among other things, Mr. Klein earmarked \$250 million to help charter schools pay for facilities, brought in nonprofit real estate developer Civic Builders to help with facilities financing, and backed the establishment of the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence to stimulate the schools' growth with resources and advocacy.

Any group with a credible plan can submit a charter application to a local school board, the State University of New York or the state Board of Regents for approval. Founders sign a five-year contract that holds them accountable for meeting agreed-upon student performance standards. If they fail, they can lose their charters. Six have closed since 1998.

The early evidence shows that charter schools are working in the city. In 2005, a higher percentage of charter school students met or exceeded math and reading proficiency standards than students in the rest of the city's public schools. In 2004-05, 92% of KIPP eighth graders scored at or above grade level on standardized math tests, compared with 40% of eighth graders citywide. At Renaissance, more than 90% of fourth graders met state English proficiency levels.

However, in other parts of the state and in the country as a whole, student performance has been less impressive, with some charter students testing worse than public school

students. Critics point out that the charter schools that are held up as exemplary often have substantial private backing to help them succeed, such as the \$1.4 million foundation grant KIPP received. With the funding, KIPP employs a staff of 10 to help its students get into the city's best private and public high schools and later, into college.

School boards in the state complain as well that charter schools' finances are kept from public view and that charter schools siphon off money from the public schools without reducing the district's overhead costs. As a result, local boards want the ability to approve any charter schools in their district.

"Two unelected boards in Albany that may have little or no knowledge of local circumstances make a judgment that has huge financial consequences for the local community," says David Ernst, director of research for the New York State School Boards Association.

In the city, charter schools are scattered throughout mostly poorer neighborhoods in Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens, with a high concentration in Harlem. They were started for the most part by dedicated educators, such as Morton Ballen, a New York City public school principal who founded Explore Charter School in Flatbush after teaching stints in Louisiana, South Africa and on the Lower East Side. On his board of directors are lawyers, Columbia Business School professors, teachers and parents.

### **Management systems**

Other charter schools are the brainchildren of national nonprofits, such as KIPP, which operates 47 charter schools in the country, including four in New York City. Some schools have brought in for-profit managers, such as Edison Schools, to run their programs.

Incorporated as independent nonprofits, these schools are autonomous, deciding what to teach and how and when to teach it. They hire their own teachers and manage their own finances. Many are nonunionized and most operate on nearly a year-round basis, holding classes from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays and Saturdays. Often students are required to wear uniforms. Some have themes, such as the Hellenic Classical Charter School in Brooklyn, where in addition to the core curriculum students study Greek, Latin and the Socratic method. KIPP, for one, makes every kid learn to read music and play an instrument.

For the most part, these schools do it on a shoestring. According to Mr. Levin, KIPP gets about \$10,000 per pupil from public sources, about 20% less than traditional public schools, and raises \$425,000 a year in private funding. It spends \$10,900 per student, even though it has to pay its unionized teachers extra to work Saturdays and during the summer. It pares operations to basics--shared offices, cheap pens, no secretaries and a principal's desk made of a plywood plank resting on two file cabinets.

"Money alone is not the difference," says KIPP's Mr. Levin.

While the basic skills of charter school students are improving at a faster rate than those of their counterparts in the city's public schools, evidence is also accumulating that the competition is beginning to have a salutary effect on the city's education behemoth, including the teachers union. In 2002, the United Federation of Teachers negotiated a simple, six-page contract with Amber Charter School in Manhattan that includes salary increases based not just on seniority, but also on improvements in teaching practice. The standard UFT contract runs to more than 200 pages.

The UFT last year even opened its own kindergarten and first grade charter school in East New York, Brooklyn, with the help of \$1 million from the Eli Broad Foundation. Next September, the school will add second grade, and the UFT will start another charter school for grades 6 through 12.

"It bothers us that the major criticism of public schooling is that union contracts are the greatest obstacle to anything innovative happening," says Michelle Bodden, UFT vice president. "This will prove that is not true."

### **BRIDGING THE GAP**

To ease the way for charter schools, the city formed a partnership in 2004 with private foundations to launch the nonprofit City Center for Charter School Excellence. The center has been given a total of \$41 million over five years by the Robertson Foundation, the Robin Hood foundation, the Pumpkin Foundation and the Clark Foundation.

Headed by former YMCA President Paula Gavin, the center acts as an advocate in Albany and provides training and technical assistance to help charter schools find facilities, raise money and manage their operations effectively.

"Charter schools have the potential to reach kids who most need it and bridge the achievement gap," says Ms. Gavin.