



Success at Scale in Charter Schooling

By Steven F. Wilson

KIPP KEY Academy in Washington, D.C. North Star Academy in Newark. Roxbury Prep in Boston. Amistad Academy in New Haven. These, and perhaps two hundred other high-performing schools nationwide, are the bright lights of the charter school movement. Despite social and economic disadvantages, their students not only trounce their district peers on state tests but also top statewide averages and, in some cases, surpass students from surrounding affluent suburban districts. Among these “gap-closing” schools, one broad approach, frequently called “no excuses” schooling, appears to dominate. The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) network of schools is the exemplar, but this approach is proliferating in other networks, including Achievement First and Uncommon Schools, and in stand-alone schools, many of which aspire to replicate themselves in coming years. But to narrow America’s shameful achievement gaps, we would need thousands more such schools. Is the “no excuses” approach sustainable, and can it be widely reproduced?

To explore this question, I turned to a locale well known for its concentration of strong charter schools: Boston. Of seventeen charters in the city, seven are posting striking results on the state’s highly regarded MCAS test, with 75 percent or more of students in their final year at the schools proficient in math and English language arts (averaged across the two subjects).¹ All seven dramatically outperformed the Boston Public Schools in English and math, where proficiency levels range from 33 percent to 50 percent, depending on the grade and subject. In the three highest exit grades—seven, eight, and ten—all seven schools also outperformed the statewide average (students of all incomes) in all three tested subjects of English, math, and science, except for tenth-grade English language arts and eighth-grade science. Further, four of the schools outperformed students in the neighboring affluent Brookline Public Schools, where only 12 percent of students are from low-income families.² Recent longitudinal

research on Boston’s charter schools found that their effectiveness could not be attributed to a selection effect; students who failed to win admission to the new schools in the lottery performed only slightly above the Boston Public School average during the four years studied.³

All but one of the seven high-performing schools hew to something like the “no excuses” model: driven and highly educated teachers lead their students in a rigorous academic program, tightly aligned with state standards, that aims to set every child on the path to college. The approach has been dubbed “no excuses” schooling because teachers adopt high expectations for their pupils and stoutly reject explanations for low achievement from any quarter, whether from a child for failing to complete an assignment or from a district apologist’s appeal to demographic destiny.⁴

The one exception to the “no excuses” model is the MATCH Charter Public High School, whose program shares many of the “no excuses” characteristics, including support for standards, frequent testing, a much longer school day (from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.), extremely selective teacher hiring, and a rigorous “no shortcuts” work ethic. But the

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school also emphasizes small class sizes (the average is nineteen students) and a unique, daily, one-on-one tutoring component provided by recent graduates of top universities.

I examined whether the successful charter schools in Boston rely on privileged inputs of students or of financial or human capital. There is no evidence that the schools enroll a population demographically different from that of the Boston Public Schools (although they may benefit from more motivated families). Together, the seven schools educate about 2,150 students, just 4 percent of the 57,300 students in the Boston Public Schools. The average percentage of low-income students is 67 percent, compared to 71 percent in the Boston Public Schools. Seventy-eight percent of the charter schools' students are African American or Hispanic, compared to 76 percent in the district as a whole.⁵

The schools (with one exception) operate at lower cost than the district average (when occupancy costs are considered). With the exception of MATCH, these subject schools do not benefit from extra financial resources. Total per-student expenditures in these schools, calculated by dividing total expenses by enrollment, are similar to that of the Boston Public Schools. But this significantly understates the actual financial disadvantage for charter schools relative to district schools. Charter schools must pay for their facility costs out of their operating funds, while district schools occupy school buildings paid for by separate appropriations for which charter schools are not eligible. For charter schools nationally, this occupancy cost averages 12 percent of total spending.⁶

Human Capital

Do the “no excuses” schools depend on rare human capital? If so, what does that mean for bringing the model to scale? To explore the question, I examined the educational background of the faculty of the subject schools. At six of the schools (data were not available for Academy of the Pacific Rim), I was able to identify the undergraduate college or university attended by teachers. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges 2007* categorizes higher education institutions by their enrollment selectivity, with seven categories: most competitive, highly competitive, very competitive, competitive, less competitive, noncompetitive, and special.⁷ To classify each institution, *Barron's* factors in median entrance examination scores for the freshman class on the SAT and the ACT, the percentage of freshmen scoring above a certain threshold on the tests, the percentage of freshmen graduating from the upper ranks

of their high school classes, the minimum class rank and grade point average required for admission (if any), and the percentage of applicants accepted.

The highest *Barron's* category, “most competitive,” includes the eight Ivy League schools; elite liberal arts colleges like Amherst College; and top state universities including the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and the University of Virginia. The “highly competitive” category includes such institutions as Babson College, Bryn Mawr College, and Ohio State University. I found that more than half of the six schools' staff members had attended elite undergraduate institutions (*Barron's* “most competitive” rank), and fully 83 percent had attended at least a “very competitive” college (*Barron's* third-highest rank).

The educational background of staff in these schools is markedly different from that of public school teachers as a whole. One 2002 study found that 25 percent of New York City teachers who taught in urban schools had received their bachelor's degrees from *Barron's* “least competitive” institutions, compared to 2.5 percent of teachers in the subject schools here.⁸ Another study conducted in 2007 found that 19 percent of public school teachers attended a selective institution (“very competitive” or better) versus 83 percent of the subject schools' teachers.⁹

It is possible that the characteristics of the Boston schools are not representative of “no excuses” schools as a whole, but this appears unlikely. I examined the educational background of the academic staff of eight “no excuses” charter schools outside of Boston for which data were available.¹⁰ As with the Boston-based subject schools, faculty members were most likely (37 percent) to have attended institutions in *Barron's* “most competitive” category; 56 percent had attended “highly competitive” schools or better, and 77 percent attended “very competitive” schools or better.

The Scarcity of “No Excuses” Talent

Boston's “no excuses” schools draw their teachers from a labor pool with not only fundamentally different academic preparation for the classroom but also attitudes, expectations, and work habits different from (if not opposing) those of the traditional teacher labor pool. The qualities that “no excuses” schools seek in teacher candidates mirror these differences. For example, Achievement First places a candidate's attendance at a “top-notch university” at the top of its list of twenty-three attributes in its summary of teacher quality.¹¹ Second is a “high

grade point average” and “legitimate major.” Achievement First prefers two to five years of teaching experience, and candidates are sought who have a “history of getting high student achievement, tight discipline and culture”; believe that “measurable student achievement is the number one goal”; and “[like] standards, statewide testing, and accountability.” Student achievement is a part of a teacher’s evaluation.

This stands in stark contrast to urban school districts. In 2008, then-president of New York City’s United Federation of Teachers Randi Weingarten supported legislation passed by the New York State Assembly that would *prohibit* school districts from considering the test performance of a teacher’s students when evaluating whether or not to grant tenure.¹²

The number of candidates possessing the educational credentials and commitment required by “no excuses” schools is obviously few. To gauge just how few, consider only the educational credential. In 2006, approximately 1.5 million students graduated from four-year colleges.¹³ Of these, 9.5 percent, or about 142,000, attended a “highly competitive” to “most competitive” institution. This represents less than one-third of the almost 450,000 teachers employed by just the member districts of the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS).¹⁴ This disparity suggests a severe human capital constraint in bringing the “no excuses” model to scale.

In Boston, this scaling constraint is *already* being felt by the subject schools. Even though the metropolitan area boasts the world’s greatest concentration of colleges and universities, including several of the most selective, the city’s “no excuses” schools battle for scarce talent. Yutaka Tamura, executive director of Excel Academy, reports that competition over human capital is his greatest concern in contemplating expansion of his program’s current 178 students. Excel’s candidate teachers are all being recruited by Boston’s other star charter schools—and are often lost to them, he said.¹⁵

The First Solution: Expand the Teacher Pool

One potential solution to this constraint is to expand dramatically the pool of teachers who come from top-tier colleges and universities. Imagine that one in ten graduates of top colleges entered teaching on a short-term basis and served for two years, akin to the Peace Corps, before entering the more lucrative professions for which they are typically destined. Imagine further that this human capital were directed exclusively to the most

underserved population—students in the largest urban districts. CGCS represents the sixty-six largest districts—enrolling some 7.2 million students—which employ almost 450,000 teachers. At any given time, 28,000 corps members would be teaching. Therefore, even with such an initiative, only about 6 percent of the CGCS students would be taught by such a teacher. Even if *one-half* of all such graduates were to dedicate two years to teaching in CGCS schools—a wholesale change in the early careers of America’s educated elite—only one-third of urban students would benefit at any time from such a teacher.

The availability of teacher candidates who have attended the most selective colleges and universities and who are prepared to work extraordinarily long hours to ensure their students’ success is sharply limited.

Dramatic expansion of the pool is not inconceivable. Teach For America (TFA), which recruits college seniors to commit to two years of teaching in the nation’s neediest school districts, is one of the most popular destinations for students graduating from top colleges and universities. The reach of the program has grown substantially since its inception, from 500 corps members in 1990 to more than 5,000 current corps members and 12,000 alumni today. Wendy Kopp, the program’s founder and president, has set a goal of 7,500 corps members by 2010.

Recasting teacher preparation could also increase the number of candidates with the qualities that charter management organizations look for in their teachers. Norman Atkins, chief executive officer of Uncommon Schools, cites “people and the challenges of human capital” as his organization’s “single largest challenge.” Recognizing this need to reinvent teacher education, Achievement First, KIPP, and Uncommon Schools have joined Hunter College’s School of Education to create a new two-year training program, provisionally called the Teacher YOU Training Institute, which allows new teachers to receive a master’s degree and alternative certification in New York. Hunter College’s dean, David M. Steiner, is a blunt critic of education schools. While an education professor at Boston University, he conducted a study of sixteen education schools and described the coursework required for teacher candidates as largely “intellectually barren” and of little use in the classroom.

By 2011, the Teacher YOU Training Institute aims to admit five hundred students a year.¹⁶ Its founders predict that half a million children could be affected by the institute within the next ten years. Even if programs like Teacher YOU were to proliferate, and TFA were to realize its growth objectives, these initiatives alone would fall well short of the needs of the “no excuses” model at scale.

The Second Solution: Make the Job Manageable

A second approach would be to accept that the labor pool on which “no excuses” schools rely is too small to meet the needs of all the nation’s urban schools. The availability of teacher candidates who have attended the most selective colleges and universities and who are prepared to work extraordinarily long hours to ensure their students’ success is sharply limited. Even if more such graduates could be drawn into teaching, only a portion would stay beyond two years. The long hours they are expected to work become unsustainable once these teachers (mostly young women) marry and take on family responsibilities. Anecdotal evidence indicates that “burnout” and resulting staff turnover in many “no excuses” schools are high. These limits impose a challenge to scaling the “no excuses” model (and perhaps even to sustaining the results of existing schools). Could the engine of “no excuses” schooling be modified so that it could be fueled by more broadly available human capital?

Imagine the broad swath of career educators who, though they may not have attended elite colleges and universities, are nonetheless committed to rigorous academic standards, the continuous improvement of their craft, and a path to college for every child. Could they be equipped with a powerful set of tools that would permit them to produce gap-closing results and to enjoy a sustainable work schedule and pay scale that would permit them to remain teaching and raise a family?

Consider the job of the “no excuses” teachers. KIPP Bronx was one of the first to establish the expectation that teachers work very long days. Teachers arrived before classes began at 7:30 a.m. and stayed until the students’ day ended at 5:00 p.m. and then were expected to be on call by pager or cell phone as their students tackled two hours of homework. These schools often expect teachers to devise curricular and pedagogical systems largely for themselves: in the most extreme cases, starting from the year-end state learning standards, they backward-plan by

breaking down long-term goals into bundles of objectives and mapping these across the years, select from the materials available or develop their own, create or obtain diagnostics and periodic assessments, create pacing charts, and devise lesson plans that align with objectives. Granted, many teachers from top universities find such an assignment intellectually engaging. Many TFA teachers found it unavoidable given the curricular dysfunction of their school district placements. And the creation of intellectual property undoubtedly fosters a sense of ownership—especially for teachers of an intellectual bent. But is it necessary, and is it the most efficient way to organize schooling?

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“No excuses” schools must rely on nearly heroic efforts by teachers because they inherit students who have been promoted from grade to grade without mastering essential skills at each grade level. Each child presents his or her teacher with accumulated knowledge gaps that impede the acquisition of further knowledge and fuel a growing disaffection with schooling. Identifying and then filling these gaps across a class of twenty-five or more students, rebuilding their motivation to learn, and freeing them of destructive habits while also ensuring the mastery of new, grade-level material (which relies on mastery of prerequisite material) is indeed an extraordinary undertaking. It requires the teacher to possess unusual analytic skill, agility in shaping the curriculum, personal drive, capacity to engage students, and, not least, time. If teachers neither had to remedy years of prior failed schooling nor forge their own tools, then the job would be far more manageable.

Fortunately, the formation of learning gaps is largely avoidable if schools are willing to organize themselves for efficient learning. District schools typically assemble an array of instructional and assessment materials, each purchased from commercial purveyors or developed piecemeal by their own staff. Putting aside the poor quality of many of these materials, the loose couplings between components of various programs hobble learning through

gaps in content, sequencing errors, pedagogical differences, and idiomatic inconsistencies. Exacerbating these defects are placement decisions that enroll children in classes by age rather than prerequisite knowledge, not teaching content to mastery, poor pacing of instruction, subjective grading, poorly structured lessons, and lax behavioral expectations.

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Efforts to equip schools with comprehensive solutions to these problems have fallen out of favor in the education reform community. That is unfortunate because several such initiatives have shown promise. Schools equipped with and committed to the Core Knowledge program, for example, have posted striking outcomes. When P.S. 124 in Ozone Park in Brooklyn implemented Core Knowledge's highly specific instructional sequence, fourth-grade proficiency levels on state tests rose by fifty percentage points—this in a school of 895 students staffed by career educators.¹⁷

Another promising program has been developed by SABIS, an international operator of college preparatory schools. (Disclosure: I have started a nonprofit organization, Ascend Learning, which is licensing the SABIS education system; our schools aim to combine the SABIS system with the leadership and cultural practices of the “no excuses” model.) SABIS's established schooling model has much in common with that of the “no excuses” schools: a college preparatory focus; teacher-led, whole-class instruction; explicit lesson objectives aligned with state standards; frequent testing; tight discipline; clear staff accountabilities; schools structured as charters free of district collective bargaining contracts; and empowered school leaders. SABIS differs from the “no excuses” schools in its deployment of its proprietary instructional materials according to specific protocols (six hundred short books, spanning all grades and academic subjects, through advanced placement classes in high school), electronic weekly assessments that provide teachers prompt feedback on students' mastery of the material (so that concepts may be retaught as necessary),

pacing charts, and school management software that links the system's components. A schoolwide system of peer tutoring and school culture-building tools encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning and that of their peers.

In 1995, SABIS contracted with a founding board of trustees to open a charter school in Springfield, Massachusetts. Today, the SABIS International Charter School enrolls 1,500 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade (61 percent as many as that of all the subject schools combined) and has the largest waiting list, nearly 2,700 students, of any Massachusetts charter school. For the past seven years, every SABIS Springfield high school student has been admitted to an institution of higher learning. The school attracts a diverse population, measured by both race and family income. In the tenth grade (the last grade tested by the state), the percentage of SABIS Springfield low-income students proficient or above in math is thirty-seven percentage points greater than that of comparable district students (63 percent to 26 percent). In English language arts, 88 percent of the SABIS-educated students are proficient or above, versus only 32 percent of the district students—a fifty-six-point spread. One hundred percent of tenth-grade SABIS Springfield students who had been in the school for at least two years passed the English language arts portion of the test, and 97 percent passed the math portion.

Further, low-income SABIS Springfield students have closed the proficiency gap with their peers statewide—exceeding their performance on both the math and English language arts exams. In 2008, *Newsweek* named the school just one of three urban “top U.S. high schools” in Massachusetts. (MATCH was another.)

SABIS Springfield's results do not depend on faculty with exceptional educational backgrounds working unusually long hours. Just 21 percent of teachers attended a “very competitive” undergraduate institution or better. Teachers work an eight-hour, five-day work week, and turnover is low. They are experienced educators; on average, they have been teaching for nearly nine years. The school reports that twenty-eight teachers have been teaching at the school for ten or more years. None are former TFA corps members. The autonomy the school enjoys as a charter has permitted it to adhere rigorously to the SABIS model for more than a decade.

Ironically, such systematic approaches pose a challenge in recruiting teachers. Many career educators have a long-standing aversion, fanned by unions and schools of education, to external oversight. Powerful norms pro-

tect the teacher's "autonomous sphere of private discretion" and are more likely to celebrate teacher innovation than measurable effectiveness.¹⁸ Even TFA-style teachers, while embracing accountability and uniform standards of excellence, may greet such education systems not as an asset to their practice but rather as discordant with the individualistic challenges in which they excelled in high school and college.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Whatever the limits of scale prove for "no excuses" schooling, its impact on public education will be profound. Individual schools, the approach has demonstrated, can close the achievement gap. Even if only 5 percent of the students in an urban system are educated in "no excuses" schools, many others will benefit indirectly.

As important, the new schools have attracted highly educated and ambitious young graduates from top universities to teach in underserved communities, seeding a new generation of educational leaders. Many will go on to become principals, policymakers, and social entrepreneurs, engaged in the transformation of public education in their communities.

But the reach of the "no excuses" model will be sharply constrained by the limited availability of human capital on which it appears to rely. To bring the model to scale will require one or both of two measures: a dramatic expansion in the number of elite college graduates who teach (if only for a few years) in urban public schools, or the widespread deployment of educational systems that enable a more broadly available workforce to educate students to a high standard.

Both paths—expanding the pool of top-notch candidates and making the job of teaching more manageable—should be vigorously pursued. Legislative action should be taken to encourage highly educated students to go into teaching, especially in urban and rural schools. Certification requirements that mandate education school courses should be dropped and starting teacher pay increased. Teachers should be rewarded for their performance in the classroom, not for their seniority or degrees earned. Requirements and incentives to reduce class size, whether statutory or contractual, should be eliminated; there is no empirical evidence to support them, and hiring more teachers depresses teacher pay.

At the same time, policymakers and philanthropists should invest in the development of tools that foster teacher effectiveness, including school designs that work

with a broadly available workforce. While early sponsors of such designs like New American Schools failed to demonstrate strong and consistent academic results, the reason for their failure is now well understood—and avoidable. We know that precise adherence to a coherent design is essential to achieving consistently strong results. Obstacles in law and policy that degrade implementation quality—such as the prohibition on charter operators holding charters directly—can and should be removed.

Closing the achievement gap need not await wholesale transformation, the "no excuses" schools suggest. But unless we act to overcome imminent limits in human capital, it may prove difficult to sustain and bring to scale the "no excuses" model.

Notes

1. The schools are the Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter Public School in Hyde Park, Edward Brooke Charter School in Roslindale, Boston Collegiate Charter School in Dorchester, Excel Academy Charter School in East Boston, Boston Preparatory Charter Public School in Hyde Park, the Media and Technology Charter High School in Kenmore Square, and the Roxbury Preparatory Charter School in Roxbury.

2. Data drawn from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "2008 MCAS Report (District) for Grade 10 All Students," September 24, 2008, available at http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/mcas.aspx (accessed March 4, 2009); and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Selected Populations (2008–09)," available at <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00460505&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=305&> (accessed March 3, 2009).

3. Atila Abdulkadiroglu, Josh Angrist, Sarah Cohodes, Susan Dynarski, Jon Fullerton, Thomas Kane, and Parag Pathak, *Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot and Traditional Schools*, Boston Foundation, 2009.

4. David Whitman calls schools like these "paternalistic." See David Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008).

5. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "School District Profiles," available at <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu> (accessed July 14, 2008).

6. Susan Harper, "Funding Our Future: Charter School Finance 101," Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, available at www.frbsf.org/publications/community/investments/0405/article4pf.html (accessed March 30, 2008).

7. Barron's Educational Series, *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges 2007* (Hauppauge, NY: College Division, 2006).

8. Hamilton Lankford, Susanna Loeb, and James Wyckoff, "Teacher Sorting and the Plight of Urban Students: A Descriptive Analysis," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 1 (2002): 48.

9. Dan Goldhaber, Michael DeArmond, Albert Liu, and Dan Player, "Returns to Skill and Teacher Wage Premiums: What Can We Learn by Comparing the Teacher and Private Sector Markets?" School Finance Redesign Project, Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, March 21, 2007, 6–7. Although these data are from teachers who were freshmen in 1990, other studies show a decline in undergraduate competitiveness over the subsequent decade.

10. The schools are KIPP WAYS Academy in Atlanta, KIPP Academy in Houston, KIPP LA Prep in Los Angeles, KIPP Bayview Academy in San Francisco, KIPP DIAMOND Academy Charter School in Memphis, North Star Academy Charter School in Newark, Williamsburg Collegiate in Brooklyn, and Kings Collegiate Charter School in Brooklyn.

11. Achievement First, "Achievement First Teacher Profile."

12. Jennifer Medina, "Bill Would Bar Linking Class Test Scores to Tenure," *New York Times*, March 18, 2008.

13. U.S. Department of Education, "Condition of Education, 2008," 2008, Table 41-1, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2008/section5/table.asp?tableID=939> (accessed September 15, 2008).

14. Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), "Urban School Statistics," available at www.cgcs.org/about/statistics.aspx (accessed July 22, 2008). CGCS is a coalition of sixty-six of the nation's largest urban public school systems.

15. Yutaka Tamura, interview with the author, July 10, 2007.

16. Bess Keller, "College and Charter Groups Team Up to Train Teachers," *Education Week*, February 6, 2008.

17. Visit by Lisa Cohen to P.S. 124 Osmond A. Church School, S. Ozone Park, New York, February 8, 2006.

18. David K. Cohen and Deborah Loewenberg Ball, "Instruction, Capacity, and Improvement," CPRE Research Report no. RR-43, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Washington, June 1999, 11–12.