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‘NO EXCUSES’ NO MORE? CHARTER SCHOOLS RETHINK DISCIPLINE AFTER FOCUS ON TOUGH CONSEQUENCES

BY MONICA DISARE FROM CHALKBEAT | MAR 08, 2016 | [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Tumblr](#) [Google+](#) [19](#)

A fourth-grade student does test-prep in his English class at Brownsville Ascend Lower Charter School in Brooklyn. PHOTO: Stephanie Snyder

A few years ago, if a student arrived at an Ascend elementary school wearing the wrong color socks, she was sent to the dean's office to stay until a family member brought a new pair.

Now, the school office is stocked with extra socks. Students without them can pick up a spare pair before heading to class.

It's a simple shift, but part of a revolution in the culture at Ascend, which oversees five charter elementary schools, three middle schools, and a high school in Brooklyn. Making sure students and parents were sweating the small stuff, once integral to the network's philosophy, was simply producing "too many unhappy children," Ascend's CEO Steve Wilson explained recently.

"We've moved sharply away from a zero tolerance discipline approach," Wilson said. "We believe a warm and supportive environment produces the greatest long-term social effects."

Parallel shifts are happening across New York City, as some charter school leaders take a second look at discipline policies they put in place when they opened. Those policies, connected to a broader set of ideas referred to as "no excuses," combine teachers' high academic expectations for students with strict behavior rules meant to ensure an orderly learning environment.

Some schools have tweaked those policies after seeing the effects on students, particularly as they exit their charter schools for more lenient environments. Others aim to distance themselves from the harsh practices that have grabbed headlines and generated fears that they could erode crucial political and parental support for charter schools. And some have changed simply because the charter sector's swift growth has made faithful implementation of original practices impossible.

The schools often reject labels like zero tolerance or no excuses. But they generally have firm guidelines for everything from how students walk down hallways to what they wear.

While some charter schools never subscribed to a similar theory, those ideas still form the backbone of the culture at the charter schools that belong to networks like Achievement First, KIPP, and Ascend. Teachers say they're key to allowing students to focus in class and net high scores on state tests. But as the sector grows — and issues of school discipline make [national headlines](#) — many schools are pulling back slightly as they search for the right balance.

"There is a broad movement away from no excuses discipline policies," said Mary Wells, the co-founder of Bellwether Education Partners, a nonprofit that advises charter schools. "I'm not privy to all [charter management organizations'] conversations, but I would say most are having conversations about how and how much should we adjust our culture."

The no excuses theory

During a ninth-grade physics class at Achievement First Brooklyn High School last month, students sat in silence as they worked on a problem. They had less than a minute to scribble an answer on their whiteboards.

"Twenty-four seconds," Alexis Riley warned the class. When her timer went off, students held up their answers and the teacher scanned the room. "85 percent mastery," she said.

The leaders at Achievement First, a network of schools in Brooklyn, see a rigorous, rule-based school culture as key to allowing students to be as focused as they were in physics that day. They also see it as part of a strategy for ensuring that students in poverty do not fall behind more affluent peers.

After all, if students are not required to pay attention, how will they learn the concepts they need to succeed in college-level science classes? If they are not ready to learn within 60 seconds of entering class, when will they catch up?

 John Huber teaches a class at Achievement First Brooklyn High School.

LA Block, a first-grade teacher at Achievement First Endeavor

PHOTO: Monica Disare

John Huber teaches a class at Achievement First Brooklyn High School.

Elementary School, noted that students sit in silence at lunch for the first six weeks of school. In the hallways, students are asked to walk with attention to the acronym “HALLS”: hands at your sides, lips locked, safely walking.

The idea is that strict guidelines for how students should behave in and out of class, enforced consistently over time, provide the basis for academic progress and can help close the achievement gap. Without them, schools become chaotic — the environment that the founders of Achievement First and other charter school networks set out to create alternatives to.

The threat of that environment, which charter leaders say remains common in district schools, is a reason to stay the course.

“People have understandably expressed concern that some students may have particular trouble meeting our behavioral expectations and ask why we can’t simply relax them,” Success Academy CEO Eva Moskowitz wrote in a Wall Street Journal [op-ed](#) last year. “The answer is that Success Academy’s 34 principals and I deeply believe that if we lessened our standards for student comportment, the education of the 11,000 children in our schools would profoundly suffer.”

The limits of a philosophy

The former leader of Brooklyn Ascend Lower School remembers a moment when he realized the school’s focus on rigor and discipline had gone too far.

“It was horrible for me to walk out to dismissal and the first conversation I would hear parents having with their children is, ‘What color are you on?’” said Brandon Sorlie, now the chief academic officer at Ascend, referring to a tool used to track students’ behavior. The conversations were always about behavior as opposed to learning, he said.

Achievement First now has 17 schools in the city; Uncommon has 21. Success Academy, the largest network in New York City, has 34 different schools. The growth of the networks has made it difficult to strike the delicate balance between rigor and warmth in every charter classroom.

 Tatiana Piskula teaches math to fourth-grade students at Brownsville Ascend Lower Charter School in Brooklyn.

PHOTO: Stephanie Snyder

Tatiana Piskula teaches math to fourth-grade students at Brownsville Ascend Lower Charter School in Brooklyn.

“Look at D.C.,” New York City Charter Center CEO James Merriman said, referring to the roughly 45 percent of students in the nation’s capital who attend charter schools. “Size has made these conversations about how the sector deals with discipline impossible to avoid.”

Harsh discipline practices at some schools have also made headlines, providing fodder for critics and concerned parents. A [Chalkbeat analysis](#) found that charter schools suspended students in 2011-12 at a rate of almost three times the rate of traditional public schools. Critics have long held that strict discipline prevents these charter

schools from educating the highest-needs students, since they [implicitly encourage](#) unruly students to leave the school.

That shift comes as charter schools face more pressure than ever to serve high-needs students. A “Got to Go” list of student names at a Success Academy school sparked widespread outrage last year. The teachers union has made it a legislative priority to pressure charter schools to do more. Even the governor, a longtime supporter of charter schools, has made reference to “troubling practices.” Plus, both Achievement First and Success Academy face lawsuits for their treatment of students with disabilities.

An Achievement First school in Hartford made students wear a white shirt over their uniform signaling they were in “re-orientation” as a discipline tool, according to a 2013 [Hartford Courant article](#). The shirt forbade students from interacting with their peers or participating in music and special physical classes. (A spokeswoman from Achievement First said the practice has changed.)

At KIPP Star Washington Elementary School, students were placed in a “[calm-down](#)” room, a padded room about the size of a walk-in closet, according to a 2013 New York Daily News story. A spokesman for KIPP said that as of January 2014, KIPP stopped referring students to the calm-down room.

Individual teachers have also occasionally crossed lines. Recently, the New York Times published a [video](#) of a Success Academy teacher harshly criticizing a student who answered a math question incorrectly.

Network leaders have said that cases like these do not represent their overall school culture. But behind the scenes, some leaders also began to question whether, in their quest to balance joy and academic rigor, the scale was too often weighted towards rigor.

"Size has made these conversations about how the sector deals with discipline impossible to avoid." New York City Charter Center CEO James Merriman

“You’ve got to get them all right like it’s a symphony,” said Doug McCurry, co-CEO and superintendent of Achievement First, about the principles at the core of Achievement First. “I think, over the last few years, we’ve been playing the focus and rigor notes maybe more loudly than the investment and thinking notes.”

One former Uncommon administrator explained the struggle of those at her school to balance enforcing consequences for small offenses without allowing rules to become the end goal. (She did not want to be named in order to maintain relationships with those at Uncommon.)

“When you carry a weight of anger with talking in the hallway, a child interprets that [as] being universally wrong,” she said.

Others have [raised questions](#) about whether the tight control of student behavior actually sets all students up for success, especially before heading off to college, where few people will be making sure students do their work.

If students are confined to a tight structure in elementary and high school, it is no wonder they might find college “unfamiliar and overwhelming,” Wilson said.

What’s actually changed

Some of the changes at schools are easy to see. The color boards that used to hang in Ascend elementary schools to designate students by behavior are no longer there. At its high school, Ascend has begun experimenting with restorative justice, an approach to discipline meant to focus on problem-solving instead of punishment. (A number of district schools are experimenting with those ideas, too.)

On a recent afternoon, one student addressed his peers for putting an inappropriate image on the desktop of student computers. His peers were then given the opportunity to ask why he would do that.

“It’s one of those things where in another school that had a different philosophy, he could have been suspended,” said Shannon Ortiz-Wong, an English teacher at Brooklyn Ascend High School, who previously worked at Achievement First Brooklyn High School and a district high school. Instead, his family members were brought in for a meeting, he apologized to his peers, and wrote a reflection.

 Ninth-grade students listen to their peers present a project in their literature class at Brooklyn Ascend High School.

PHOTO: Stephanie Snyder

Ninth-grade students listen to their peers present a project in their literature class at Brooklyn Ascend High School.

When Dakarai Venson, a ninth-grader at Brooklyn Ascend High School was in middle school, he said he would be sent to the dean’s office for reading in class. Now, the teachers would not respond in the same way.

“I’ve gotten older, so I know it’s not the time to be reading. But also, teachers — they wouldn’t just overreact now,” Venson said.

Years ago, KIPP schools used to have students eat lunch in silence, but that practice is gone. The paycheck system used to track student behavior and progress toward character goals has “dramatically increased” the number of ways students can earn dollars for positive behaviors, through showing character traits like curiosity and zest, said Allison Willis Holley, the principal at KIPP Infinity in Harlem.

Explore, a network of four charter schools, still has “soar sticks” in some elementary schools, which have student names on clothespins that move up and down based on a student’s behavior. But the practice is only used sporadically and schools are trying to find ways to eliminate extrinsic reward and consequence systems, chief academic officer Sam Fragomeni said in an email.

Still, across most networks, schools look and feel about the same as they did a few years ago.

Students still learn in rigorous classroom environments, adhere to strict uniform codes, and are held accountable for their behavior using rigid merit and demerit systems. An untucked shirt can still earn a demerit at Achievement First. Success Academy gives students infractions for slouching. Chewing gum means the loss of paycheck dollars at KIPP.

What has changed, many say, is how these rules are emphasized and applied.

Schools have taken steps to give more positive feedback, deemphasize the tiniest behavior infractions, differentiate how they treat student misbehavior, and ensure students are learning from their consequences.

In short, it’s about working within the network’s original framework to improve the balance between a “warm and demanding” learning environment, KIPP’s Dave Levin said.

“There’s time for kids to be kids and to wiggle and to have time to talk and have social interactions and do all those things which contributes to a happier place.” Allison Willis Holley, principal of KIPP Infinity
In terms of discipline, that means students are now taught to learn from their mistakes instead of simply receiving a consequence, KIPP principal Holley said.

Before, a student at KIPP might get a zero for failing to complete an assignment and that is still the reality today, Holley said. But now, teachers are more deliberate about following up with students and helping them learn from their mistakes, she explained.

KIPP schools also run their own advisory groups now called KIPP circles. Students are tasked with setting character and behavior goals — and also with having a little fun.

“There’s time for kids to be kids and to wiggle and to have time to talk and have social interactions and do all those things which contributes to a happier place,” Holley said.

At Achievement First, one change is that if students are off-task, teachers are now trained to tell students exactly how to fix the problem instead of simply scolding them, said Cristina Lopez del Castillo-De La Cruz, a dean at Achievement First Brooklyn High School.

“A lot of that shift is about helping [students] feel like we’re on the same team and we have the same goals,” said Chris Bostock, the principal at Achievement First Brooklyn High School.

Comments and concerns

It’s unclear whether rethinking these policies will lead to a total reboot of school culture or a series of small tweaks. The answer will likely vary at each network and within each school and classroom.

But some worry the high-pressure environment created both externally and internally at charter schools leaves little wiggle room for a seismic shift. Charter school renewal is based on academic results. Few charters leaders are interested in sweeping changes, either.

“I think that networks will continue that practice as long as they see it producing the outcomes that they are supposed to produce,” said Steve Zimmerman, the founder of two charter schools in Queens and the co-director of the Coalition for Community Charter Schools, which represents many smaller, independent schools.

“Networks will continue that practice as long as they see it producing the outcomes that they are supposed to produce.” Steve Zimmerman, co-director of the Coalition for Community Charter Schools
Success Academy, for its part, has not changed its discipline philosophy and does not plan to, according to a spokesman. Far from reforming the discipline code, Eva Moskowitz, the founder and CEO of Success Academy said it should serve as a model.

“The city could learn from Success’s code of conduct and provide the same safe, engaging learning environments that children need — and parents want,” she said.

Anthony Bush, who teaches special education, algebra, and dance at KIPP NYC College Prep High School, said he understands the practical problems with changing discipline policies. He said he would like to solve behavioral issues as the school suggests, hours after the fact in a calm and collaborative discussion with his students, but that can be challenging in the middle of a lesson.


It is especially difficult during state testing season, when the pressure to help students master the rigorous Common Core learning standards allows even less time to have conversations about discipline, he said.



“In the moment it’s very difficult to put into action because we’re human,” Bush said.


Stephanie Snyder and Fabiola Cineas contributed reporting.

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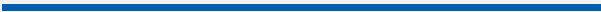
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