

THE CONTRIBUTION OF GOOD DISCIPLINE TO SUPERIOR STUDENT PERFORMANCE AT SOUTH BRONX CLASSICAL CHARTER SCHOOL

Charter schools have been given an opportunity to show that they can do better by students, particularly children in low-income communities across the nation. Various measures seem to show that they have, on the whole, whether standardized test grades or a variety of more qualitative assessments of teacher and student performance.

But as long as a substantial number of charters show significant improvement in the education of the children entrusted to them, their priority responsibility is to share whatever they can say to others about what they have been doing, and how, and how that can be shown (or at least seems) to be contributing to educationally significant, exciting new outcomes.

South Bronx Classical Charter School (“SBCCS” or “School”), is currently operating in its sixth year, and is educating some 320 children in grades K-5. Quantitative measures of its performance to date have been impressive, as shown below in Table 1 which summarizes the results of commonly-accepted educational measures at the elementary level **other than** the standardized tests beginning in Third Grade.

	TerraNova				DIBELS
	Reading	Language	Math	Average	Overall
June 2011	75%	71%	76%	75%	86%
June 2010	90%	92%	96%	93%	91%
June 2009	80%	94%	95%	90%	82%
June 2008	77%	87%	87%	84%	85%
June 2007	69%	68%	76%	71%	83%

In addition, summary results of standardized state tests administered in 2009, 2010, and 2011 are shown in Table 2.

	ELA	MATH
2008-2009	86%	100%
2009-2010	50%	83%
2010-2011	69%	92%

Tables 3 and 4 provide additional detail on the school’s performance.

**Table 3
2011 ELA STATE TEST PASS RATE**

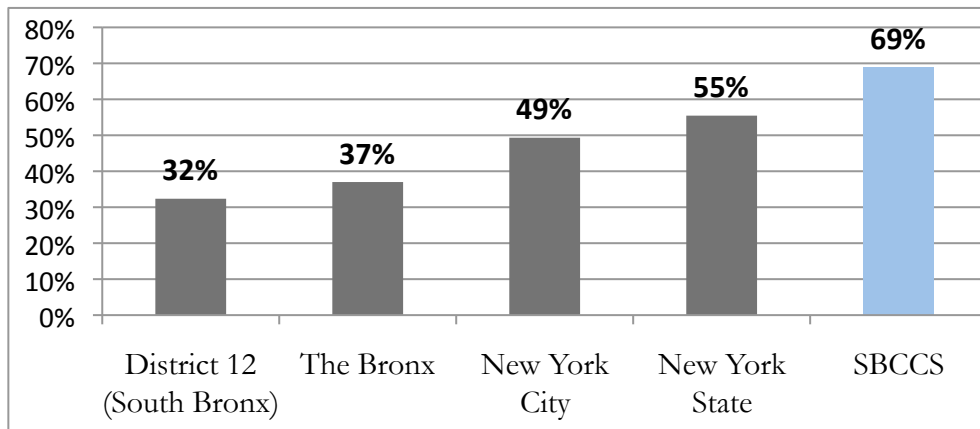
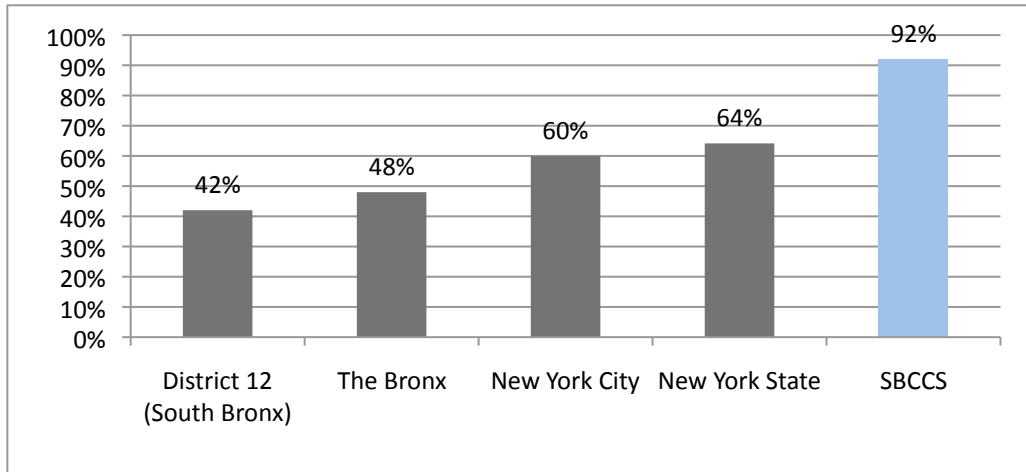


Table 4
2011 MATH STATE TEST PASS RATE



Clearly, something is going on to benefit children coming from the heart of the poorest Congressional district in the United States—regardless of what does or does not cost the system. The question is, what?

Luckily, a fair amount can in fact be said, although specifying precise causal values of the various factors involved is difficult. That does not, in our view, make their clearer specification unimportant. We hope that in clarifying this specificity in a number of areas, beginning here with discipline and “classroom management,” we will begin to repay a great public school system that has allowed, even encouraged, the charter experiment across our country. In doing so, we also hope to provide it with actionable advice for making mainstream public education better everywhere, and especially in the most needy areas of our cities.

There are two simple parts of this: Rules; and their enforcement. The trick is in making the rules as close to inviolable as possible, in the minds of both students and parents.

1. The Role of Discipline

a. The Code of Conduct

The framework for all efforts to establish and maintain the School’s overriding mission to “develop(ing) liberated scholars and **citizens of impeccable character**” (emphasis provided) is its Code of Conduct, which spells out the specific practices and rules established from the outset to “provide a safe and secure environment where students can focus solely on learning....”. The Code justifies its creation as a response to the need to

- ensure that our school is a respectful space for learning where all feel comfortable,
- allow students to focus on their learning, and
- prepare students to become engaged citizens who follow rules set by our communities.”

It goes on to list a fairly exhaustive set of ‘examples’ of behavioral infractions; a demerit system and other consequences for them, including detention and suspension and, as a last resort, expulsion. Overseeing this system, and emerging as a key element in its effectiveness, is a highly effective Dean of Students who is also charged with the increasingly robust and important, parent relations program.

b. Enforcement

There is nothing especially unique in having a disciplinary code, although uniforms are, in general, unfamiliar to large inner city public schools. The trick is making these rules a way of life—a non-negotiable, enforced in such a way that they become a daily rule of life for the vast majority of students. Otherwise, as any teacher knows only too well, rules, codes, and other guides to good conduct essentially beg the question of ensuring good student behavior and thus serious attention to being taught.

At SBCCS, orientation to expected standards begins with parents signing their adherence to the Code and, most functionally, with the first day a scholar shows up in an incomplete or nonexistent uniform and is politely denied access to class until his/her parent has obtained the missing item(s). Consistent enforcement of the uniform code simultaneously tells parents that the school “means business” when it comes to enforcing the Code and, to the scholars, sends the message that standards cannot be compromised.

For the rest, there is an arsenal of diverse weapons available to teachers and administrators who have contact with scholars. Some of this has been routinely borrowed from other charter schools from the outset of the charter movement, by newer charters like SBCCS, and some have been developed by individual teachers at our school and institutionalized through use. They include counting down from 10 or a lower number to 0, to bring unruly students in class back to attention; a variety of noiseless hand signals used by teachers as well as scholars; a standardized “at rest, at attention” pose of hands clasped in front, on the desk; a myriad of catchy chants and songs, around various themes; and individualized classroom systems of providing punishment and reward for lesser infractions that are kept out of the more serious, formal procedures mandated by the Code of Conduct.

New teachers are indoctrinated into this system and its uses at the outset of their introductory training, and they receive constant support to make its application effective throughout, especially, their initial year. This support is provided by grade-level colleagues and team leaders, especially, as well as from the Dean of Students, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and the Executive Director through their frequent classroom observations and help-oriented feedback.

The whole of this is remarkably greater than any possible sum of its parts, for it is the single most noticeable aspect of SBCCS, an atmosphere that any and every visitor to the school, especially those familiar with typical conditions in regular public schools, is struck by with incredible force. Any classroom visited, even at the Kindergarten level, and any class observed in transition in the corridors, to other classrooms, lunch, or the restrooms, is characterized by the students’ neat and clean appearance, quiet and attentive behavior, and overall attitude of being where they are for the express purpose of learning.

And learn they do.