

## **“What You Should Know About Why We Succeed”**

**By C. Stephen Baldwin, Board Chairman**

What makes a successful charter school in the nation’s poorest Congressional District?

The public ought to know what we are doing that is working, hence this report.

South Bronx Classical Charter School (SBCCS) opened five years ago, beginning with Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> Grade. Since then, it has added one new grade each year, graduating its first 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class in June. We hope to extend through 8<sup>th</sup> Grade, again by adding on a single year annually.

In this year’s state-wide testing of its third, fourth, and fifth grades, the results show progress towards excellence, placing SBCCS seventh out of 171 public/charter Bronx elementary schools testing in the same grades, and leading all State and City rates in all grades, 3-5.

Here are five principles which, taken together, seem to account for our achievements.

### **Discipline.**

Most call it “classroom management”. It’s the first thing any visitor notices: our children (we call them “scholars”) are orderly, focused, and attentive, both in classes and everywhere else. This is achieved through vigorous, consistent, and uncompromising enforcement of school uniform, behavior, and ‘character’ policies, through a variety of means.

Teachers are rigorously trained in this methodology and backed up by an extremely active Dean’s personal intervention when necessary. The goal is simply to create and sustain an environment where effective teaching can take place. As every teacher knows, you cannot teach children who aren’t paying attention. At SBCCS, mostly they are.

### **Classroom Time**

As with many other charters, the SBCCS school year and school day are substantially longer than the public school norm: 43 weeks as opposed to 41, and 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM (vs. typically 8:00 AM to 3:00 PM for the rest of the NYC system.) This permits SBCCS to cover 7.5 years of elementary education in 6 years for the central system, and this alone permits teachers a great deal of latitude to perform effectively during any given school year.

### **Teacher Preparation**

At the base of scholars' achievement at SBCCS lies teacher effectiveness, and careful selection of staff is important. Some have been relatively inexperienced, young, but bright and motivated *Teach for America* recruits. But many others with more conventional backgrounds and experience have also been recruited and retained (teacher attrition over the five years has averaged a low 25%). A 2-week intensive teacher preparation workshop at the beginning of every school year introduces teachers to SBCCS procedures and curriculum and starts integrating them into its 'culture' and expectations of rigorous performance (supported by other teaching and administrative staff)—and results.

Throughout the academic year, every teacher is the focus of all efforts to improve scholar performance. At SBCCS this is achieved in an atmosphere of shared enthusiasm, rather than the often somewhat sour, even cynical 'supervision' typically provided by administrators in many schools.

### **Use of Data**

Data play a unique role in SBCCS results. Aggregated, they point out larger holes that may exist at the classroom and even school-wide level. But more important, every aspect of each scholar's performance in every area of his/her school life is scrutinized. It is constantly monitored, to a point where specific weaknesses are detected almost as they show up, and are subsequently remediated by the individual classroom teacher and, where necessary, through a range of complementary mentoring steps.

Data on student and teacher performance are obtained and used daily. Teachers help each other improve on an inter-class and whole school basis, using peer

mentoring and grade leadership experiments, which also serve as a vehicle for teachers who want larger roles in the school if they stay on.

At the same time, attention is given to teachers' own performances including widely-available videos of classroom teaching used both to review their own practices and to learn "better practices" from colleagues. All data are posted in easily-digested form for visitors and staff alike in the school "war room".

The result is an inbuilt, almost automatic and deliberately self-conscious attention by all teachers to actual achievements, including where they are less than successful (at the individual scholar level.) In this process, while some scholars inevitably lag in some areas, despite all efforts, no child is truly left behind.

### **Curriculum Integration**

Another factor accounting for SBCCS successes is the continuing integration of its entire K-5 curriculum, both vertically and horizontally, with New York State Performance Standards. Already it allows all teachers, and especially new ones, to know each and every day, in every class, what is supposed to be learned, and what's coming up, and when, during the school year ahead. It also refers them to a collective data base of lesson plans available for use for every session, for further development/embellishment by each teacher. This base is dynamic, as all teachers contribute to keeping it reviewed, adjusted at its margins, and constantly improved. In the future, we'll extend this alignment to possible national standards for every grade.

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We're still learning a lot, every day, and each scholar, every new teacher, presents a new challenge to that process. Anything but complacent, our school is filled with high energy, a shared desire to improve everything, and—above all—profound enthusiasm for the work being done.