



Everything New Orleans

Sci Academy a bright spot in New Orleans school landscape

Published: Sunday, November 07, 2010, 7:00 AM



Cindy Chang, The Times-Picayune

The ninth-graders in Isaac Pollack's physics class at **New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy** were eagerly participating in a lesson on displacement and distance.



[Enlarge](#)

John McCusker, The Times-Picayune

John McCusker/The Times-Picayune New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy is the highest-performing non-selective high school in the city. eginald Flemming is greeted by Ben Davis at the start of school Wednesday, October 20, 2010.

Sci Academy success gallery (10 photos)

"The total distance is 63," Kayla DeSalle said, to the sound of approving finger-snaps -- a Sci Academy substitute for applause, used freely by students during class.

Another student, Alicia Lherisse, questioned Kayla's answer: If a person went from Metairie to eastern New Orleans to Metairie and then back to the East, wasn't that 21 times ... She trailed off as she realized her classmate was correct: 21 should be multiplied by three, not four.

The displacement is 21 miles, because the subject ended up in eastern New Orleans, not back at his home, a boy volunteered.

Principal Ben Marcovitz, who was observing the lesson, singled out Alicia for praise.

"I'm impressed with Alicia asking questions when she was confused," he said.

Pollack followed that with a shout-out for the whole class -- again, not about getting the right answer, but about the students' attitudes toward learning. He liked that they stuck to their opinions until they were convinced otherwise.

A demanding school culture

Two months into the school year, Sci Academy's newest crop of freshmen were just beginning the arduous journey of bringing their academic skills up from four, five, even six or more grade levels behind. In the meantime, they were acclimating to Sci Academy's demanding norms, where even looking grumpy can be cause for a demerit.

MAKING THE GRADE

New Orleans Charter Science and Mathematics Academy – commonly known as Sci Academy – is posting the highest test scores outside of Lusher and Franklin, even though most of its students start out reading at a fourth-grade level or below.

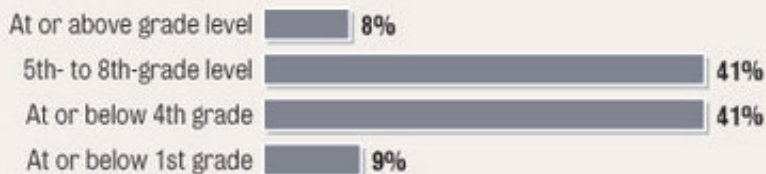
PERCENT OF STUDENTS WHO PASSED 2010 GRADUATE EXIT EXAM

| High school | English | Math |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Benjamin Franklin High School* | 99 | 100 |
| Lusher Charter School* | 96 | 99 |
| New Orleans Charter Science and Mathematics Academy | 80 | 88 |
| Warren Easton Senior High School* | 66 | 80 |
| O.P. Walker Senior High School | 33 | 79 |
| Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School | 77 | 69 |
| McDonogh #35 Senior High | 56 | 68 |
| Abramson Science & Technology Charter School | 50 | 63 |
| New Orleans Charter Math and Science High School | 50 | 61 |
| Eleanor McMain Secondary School | 62 | 59 |
| Sophie B. Wright Institute of Academic Excellence | 71 | 59 |
| Edna Karr Secondary School | 67 | 57 |
| Thurgood Marshall Early College High School | 60 | 49 |
| Greater Gentilly High School | 41 | 44 |
| Sojourner Truth Academy | 29 | 42 |
| Algiers Technology Academy | 47 | 38 |
| Priestley School of Architecture/Construction | 30 | 35 |
| Sarah Towles Reed Senior High School | 19 | 35 |
| Miller-McCoy Academy | 34 | 34 |
| G.W. Carver High School | 21 | 29 |
| Walter L. Cohen High School | 17 | 27 |
| John McDonogh Senior High School | 17 | 21 |
| Joseph S. Clark Senior High School | 14 | 10 |

*Selective admissions

Source: Department of Education

Reading levels of Sci Academy freshmen, measured at beginning of 2010-2011 school year:



Source: New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy

THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

A visitor to Sci Academy's eastern New Orleans campus needs a small glossary to understand the lingo. Students are referred to as scholars. Teachers command their charges to "track" -- focus their eyes on the speaker -- and "spark" -- show energy and enthusiasm.

Positive reinforcement is doled out liberally, not just for academic achievement but for qualities like helping others. Talk of college is unrelenting, with coursework supplemented by weekly seminars on what to wear to an interview and why it is important to know how to use formal speech.

The result is a school where teenagers sit bolt upright in their seats -- no surreptitious napping here -- and getting good grades is considered cool. Sci Academy's track record suggests that Alicia, Kayla and their classmates will pass the Graduate Exit Exam and have a shot at college, unlike many of their peers at other schools.

Just over two years after Marcovitz then 28, founded the school, Sci Academy is posting the best test scores of any high school in the city outside of Lusher and Ben Franklin, both of which have selective admissions. Many of the city's other non-selective high schools, particularly those run by the Recovery School District, are languishing.

As a rule, students do not enter Sci Academy any better-prepared than their counterparts at Carver, Clark, Cohen, John McDonogh or Sarah T. Reed. Most are tragically behind, with years of catching up to do in the 20-month span before they sit for the GEE.

Through an all-consuming school culture, rigorous coursework and the dedication of teachers who are required to field phone calls from students until 9:30 every night, Sci Academy seems to be on its way to solving what many consider the most intractable problem in American education.

As New Orleans moves forward with its unprecedented post-Katrina educational experiment, impressive results in the lower grades have yet to be replicated at the high school level. Many educators have opted to start elementary schools rather than take on the challenge of 15- and 16-year-olds who can barely read. But as Marcovitz and a handful of other charter school leaders are showing, the city's high schoolers, even when they're far behind grade level, are not necessarily a lost cause.

Last year, 80 percent of Sci Academy students passed the English Graduate Exit Exam, compared with 19 percent at Cohen and John McDonogh. Sci Academy's passing rate in math was nearly 90 percent. In September, **Oprah Winfrey's Angel Network** awarded Sci Academy \$1 million as one of six schools nationwide that are doing well despite the odds.

Recovery School District Superintendent Paul Vallas had so much confidence in the school that he enrolled his son there last year. The teen is in Chicago with his mother this year because of his father's travel schedule, but hopes to return to Sci Academy for his senior year.

While the school is academically rigorous, its most distinctive qualities are its character-building regime and method of enforcing strict standards with a sense of caring, not harshness, Vallas said.

"Sci Academy got my third boy to pull up his pants," Vallas said of his son's penchant for low-riding pants. "They're really deconstructing these kids so they can reconstruct them -- the way they dress, the way they act, the way they act toward one other, their willingness to support one another. They figure, if you've got a child who has manners, has self-control, is courteous, is amiable, has good social skills, is polite and respectful, the whole classroom environment is better. The teachers spend more time teaching, and the kids spend more time learning."

Teachers are a team

Every day at Sci Academy begins with a staff meeting. Teachers and administrators gather in a circle, slapping

their thighs in an insistent rhythm that will form the backdrop of a praise session worthy of a religious revival.

"Soraya has shown such persistence and enthusiasm with her volleyball girls. They're so joyful and they have so much pride in the school," a faculty member said one recent morning of ninth-grade math teacher Soraya Verjee, before the whole group chanted "Soraya" in unison.

Someone else followed with a compliment for Pollack, the physics teacher: "I like how Isaac uses a calm tone of voice."

Marcovitz made some remarks about overcoming the October slump -- the period when the excitement of the new school year has worn off and the drudgery of routine sets in. It helps if students are empowered to solve problems on their own, rather than having solutions dictated top-down, he said.

Several teachers shared information about individual students, including a pregnant girl who was not in school because she was about to give birth. One boy is "dealing with a painful issue, so his behavior is disgusting. Just keep your patience with him," a teacher noted.

As school buses arrived, Marcovitz stood outside in the rain, greeting each student with a handshake. Other staff members did uniform checks, sometimes making students recite Sci Academy's core values: "achievement, respect, responsibility, perseverance, teamwork, enthusiasm."

Freshman Dean Ben Davis admonished a student who had been spotted smoking cigarettes off-campus, spitting out the words only inches from the ninth-grader's face. The boy protested, and Davis ordered him to the back of the line. Just then, a scuffle broke out.

Teachers immediately shooed the other students to their homerooms. The combatants were separated. As Marcovitz stood in the breezeway chatting with a visitor, something went wrong. One of the boys had escaped from the room where he was being held and hunted down his adversary. Marcovitz rushed to break up the fight. A fist went through a window. Glass shattered.

Later, it took two teachers to keep the ninth-grader confined in a restroom as he pounded against the door, raging to be let out.

Inside the classrooms that morning, it was business as usual, students brightly raising their hands to volunteer answers, no one talking back to teachers, no one wandering the halls without permission -- a marked contrast to some of the city's other high schools, where disorder is the norm.

Obstacles to overcome

Most Sci Academy students are from eastern New Orleans or Gentilly, but they also come from elsewhere in the city. Since Hurricane Katrina, families can theoretically choose any school, regardless of geography. Nearly three-quarters of city schools are now independently run charter schools like Sci Academy.

This year, Sci Academy is housed in modular buildings at the old Abramson campus on Read Boulevard, after moving during the summer from another set of modular buildings on Dwyer Road. A permanent facility, to be built with a share of the \$1.8 billion FEMA settlement recently awarded to New Orleans schools, is several years away. If it rains too hard, the makeshift hallway coverings are not enough to keep students dry, and classes have to be delayed.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Sci Academy's growing reputation has not translated into a long waiting list or a higher-achieving entering class. In early November, the school still had openings for ninth-graders.

If anything, this year's freshmen were even further behind than earlier classes, with a majority reading at a fourth-grade level or below. Assessment tests at the beginning of the school year showed only 8 percent reading at grade level or above. Forty-one percent had reading abilities comparable to fifth- through eighth-graders, 41 percent were at or below fourth-grade and 9 percent could read only as well as a first-grader.

Of the school's 225 ninth-, 10th- and 11th graders, nearly 90 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Administrators quickly refute the notion that they are "creaming" the top students and denying admission to others. They take anyone who comes through the door, they say, including special-needs students, who comprise 15 percent to 20 percent of students, compared with a district average of 12 percent.

Students bring with them the same set of social ills -- single-parent homes, violence-plagued neighborhoods, poverty-related health problems -- found at other urban high schools. Fights like the one that broke out that rainy October morning become less frequent once the faculty convinces new students that they are safe at school and do not need to prove their toughness, Marcovitz said.

Marcovitz, now 31, is a Yale graduate from Washington who founded the school after a stint as a teacher and assistant principal at the similarly named New Orleans Charter Math and Science High School, or SciHigh.

'There is no time to waste'

Sci Academy's instructional methods -- careful analysis of individual test results, splitting students into groups by ability within the same classroom, a long school day -- are not uncommon elsewhere. What sets the school apart is the individual attention and constant self-esteem boosts, which attempt to replicate what wealthier children tend to get at home.

An "advisory" system, which matches a small group of students with the same faculty member for all four high school years, ensures that each child has a surrogate parent at the school and helps to inculcate the values and behavioral norms associated with the college-bound upper middle class. Daily praise from teachers and a weekly "celebration" assembly convince students that they can be the first in their families to go to college, if only they work hard.

As with many fledgling charter schools, extracurricular activities are being added gradually, with the football team expecting to play its first games next year.

Marcovitz pays his teachers 20 percent more than the Recovery School District average, partly because of the extraordinarily long hours -- 12 hours a day, six days a week -- they will end up clocking. Most are young, white and from out of state. Marcovitz hand-selects them by traveling twice to California, New York or wherever they are currently teaching: once to give constructive criticism, the second time to see whether his suggestions have been incorporated.

Both students and faculty eventually "confront the honeymoon-less reality of how hard this place is," Marcovitz said. There is no time to waste: A ninth-grader reading on a third-grade level is "an emergency," requiring a "crisis mode" type of response, in Marcovitz's words.

Many students say they are thriving under the combination of strict rules and high expectations.

"I wouldn't have the good grades I have. I think I would have dropped out," said Darnisha Gordon, a junior who said she entered Sci Academy reading at a third-grade level and is now up to a sixth- or seventh-grade level.

"Here, they show you what's right. If you're ever thinking of failing or dropping out, they say, 'No, you're Darnisha, she doesn't drop out, she doesn't fail.'"

Next year, Sci Academy's first senior class will apply to college, the goal that is constantly drummed into the students through school pennants on the walls, classrooms named for teachers' alma maters, talk of GPAs and ACTs and admissions committees. Where the students end up going, and how well-prepared they are for demanding upper-level coursework, will be the ultimate indicator of whether the school has succeeded.

Meanwhile, Marcovitz and his team have applied to start a second high school. Vallas has announced his intention to charter the remaining direct-run high schools, which have improved but are still performing abysmally. Some other new charter high schools -- notably Dr. Martin Luther King and Sophie B. Wright -- are achieving good test scores, albeit with some students who have been with the program since middle school or earlier. KIPP, with its network of successful elementary and middle schools, opened a high school this year.

"I taught at Clark, and everything was wrong except for the kids," said Sci Academy freshman reading teacher Kaycee Eckhardt, tears filling her eyes as she remembered her former students. "All they wanted was for 'somebody to teach me something in a place that's safe.' It's great to be in a place where we can fix all those things and get them there."

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