

Editorial: A Beacon in the Bronx

This article first appeared in the New York Observer on Oct. 8, 2007. It is reprinted in full, by permission.

Six years ago, in a poor, ill-served neighborhood in the South Bronx, the [Carl C. Icahn Charter School](#) opened its doors for the first time. The school, named for its founder and chief funder, is part of a nationwide attempt to create a new kind of public school, freer to innovate and experiment but with a strong sense of mission.

Fifty-nine percent of the school's 278 students are African-American; 41 percent are Hispanic. Eighty-nine percent are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches, meaning that they come from poor families, many of whom live in high-rise apartment buildings near the school.

The U.S. Department of Education recently discovered that those children and their teachers are working miracles in the South Bronx. Every student — every one of them — met state standards in language arts and mathematics in the 2004-05 school year. In 2005-06, 100 percent of the school's third and fourth graders — 100 percent! — were judged proficient or better on state math tests.

Those results led the Department of Education to designate the school as one of only seven charter schools nationwide, and the only one in New York City, to receive the agency's "Closing the Gap" award. The reference is to the stubborn achievement gap between white students and minority students on standardized tests.

At the Icahn school, the so-called achievement gap hasn't simply been closed. It has been obliterated. No child is being left behind; indeed, the children at this charter school are surging ahead of their peers.

All credit goes to the school's students, their families, their teachers and principal, and to Mr. Icahn, whose generosity and vision made so much of this success possible. Also deserving of congratulations are the school's board members, including legendary school innovator Seymour Fliegel, who heads the Center for Educational Innovation and who has been a strong advocate for public school reform.

The charter school is one of many that have sprung up around the city. It is located in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, in an area, the South Bronx, that remains associated with all of the ills that add to the burdens of poverty. And yet, despite the formidable obstacles placed in the way of the school's students, they are flourishing.

So what, exactly, is going on here?

It starts with leadership. The school's principal, Jeffrey Litt, is a fixture in the community and a tireless advocate for his students. But he is more than an administrator: He is an educator. The school's curriculum is based on author E.D. Hirsch's concept of core knowledge, which identifies content in the humanities and the sciences that every American child ought to know.

Teachers are expected to hold their students to high standards, and are accountable if their students fall behind. Apparently, the students — who are chosen by lottery, except for those who have a sibling in the school — love the challenge. Many of them attend special classes on Saturday mornings to work on the skills they learn during the week.

That hard work is paying off and creating a model of achievement in the South Bronx. The Department of Education's award is a fitting tribute to the students, faculty, staff and board members of the Carl C. Icahn Charter School.