

# **K–8 Charter Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap**

## **Innovations in Education**

### **Carl C. Icahn Charter School Bronx, N.Y.**

a Unless otherwise indicated, these data are reported by the school and are for the school year 2006–07.

b These data are drawn from the Carl C. Icahn Charter School school report card for 2005–06 posted on the New York State Education Department’s Web site.

#### **School Profile: Selected Variables <sup>a</sup>**

Year First Chartered	2001
Grades Served	K-7
Enrollment	278
Student Ethnicity <sup>b</sup>	59% African-American, 41% Hispanic
Special Education	5%
Free or Reduced-price Lunch <sup>b</sup>	89%
Annual Cost per Student	\$9,829

### **Mission and Founding**

Known as a "turnaround" principal, Jeffrey Litt has been working in the same five-mile radius of the South Bronx for most of his 38 years in education. "I won't take an easy assignment," he says. "I always work with the population that most people run from." Given the opportunity to build a charter school from scratch, Litt jumped at the chance and has created a new elementary school based on E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge curriculum, which focuses on key concepts of western civilization in mathematics, language, science, history, music, art, and more. With the financial backing of billionaire Carl C. Icahn, the eponymous school received its charter in March 2001 and opened in September 2001 with grades K–2.

Constructed in three months out of modular portables on an empty lot, the Carl C. Icahn Charter School has outgrown its original space. As of 2006–07, the child care and K–1 classrooms were located across the street in the Icahn Homeless Shelter\* while the school was completing building an \$11 million, five-story facility that will accommodate eight classrooms, a library, and multipurpose rooms. Once this building is finished, the school will be able to expand from a K–7 to a K–8 school.

\* This shelter also is funded by Carl C. Icahn but as a separate entity from the school.

The school's portable buildings are protected by a locked metal fence with curled barbed wire at the top. A television monitor in Litt's office enables him to view the entire campus at any time.

Understanding that, as he puts it, "A reputation is everything in the inner city," Litt has worked tirelessly to ensure that the school has a good reputation and commands respect. Prior to opening the school, Litt walked floor to floor in neighboring high-rise housing projects to introduce himself, spread the word about Icahn Charter School, and encourage parents to send their children to the new school.

Litt sets high expectations for school and students alike. The school's mission is to prepare its 278 students to be productive citizens through rigorous academics. As Icahn Charter School board member Seymour Fliegel, president of the Center for Educational Innovation, underscores, the school is dedicated to giving kids from the South Bronx the chance to succeed at high levels: "Carl C. Icahn has a big thing for poor kids," Fliegel explains. "He cares about the leadership of the school."

Based on Litt's previous positive experience with the Core Knowledge program at another school, he selected it as the path to implementing the school's mission. Visiting a model Core Knowledge program in Florida, Litt was told the curriculum would not work in the Bronx because "the kids are too poor." Undaunted, Litt listened and learned, ultimately choosing to use the curriculum, but to make some adaptations that would render it more accessible to his particular inner-city students. For example, Litt made sure to emphasize minority history and culture and connect those areas to mathematics and science. In addition, Litt decided to extend both the school day and the school year (September through July) to increase teachers' opportunity to teach necessary skills and instill a love of learning in students.

As the school looks forward to initiating an eighth grade, it intends to prepare students for the New York City high school admissions tests for selective public schools, as well as for applications to prestigious boarding schools, such as Connecticut's Choate Rosemary Hall. Students accepted to Choate may apply to become an Icahn Scholar, thus receiving full scholarship.

## **School Operations and Educational Program**

Icahn Charter School is a safe oasis in a tough urban neighborhood. Litt describes the school as "a huggy, kissy school," adding that "students don't want to leave us at vacation." Parents comment that Litt respects their families, noting that Litt always signs his letters, "Thank you for your wonderful children."

During the school year, many students attend Icahn Charter School's Saturday Academy from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. and almost half the students stay for extended care Monday through Friday until 6 p.m. The school population is 59 percent African-American and 41 percent Hispanic. Eightynine percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. It also has a 95 percent attendance rate. In the lower grades, students work at group desks in classrooms with colorful displays on the wall and engaging materials on the shelves. In the older grades, students sit in individual desks, lined up in rows, and focus on workbooks or textbook assignments. Every classroom has three computers and a library of books for students to use.

Siblings of current students are automatically enrolled in the school, and a lottery assigns the remaining slots. In 2006, 652 students were on the waiting list. Older children may apply for openings in later grades. While many who enter in an upper grade must catch up to their peers, those who have worked hard have been successful. Litt points to a third-grader who entered Icahn Charter School unable to decode or read and ended the year passing the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) on grade level. "After the Iowa results in June, I called his mother to tell her his results," Litt says. "She was screaming and crying into the phone, 'Mr. Litt, I love you,' and I told her, 'No, love him. He worked hard.' "

The Core Knowledge program accounts for about 50 percent of the Icahn Charter School curriculum. It is used in all subjects, and teachers supplement it with the McGraw-Hill reading and mathematics program, an internal writing and literacy program, and manipulatives in science and mathematics. As one teacher points out, Core Knowledge is about "exposure, introducing students to phrases, art, music, geography, science, giving them a well-rounded education." The program offers teachers a clear outline of what to teach, as well as a sequenced grade-to-grade learning map that promotes consistency in instruction.

Teachers send home monthly syllabi that detail the topics or themes to be taught in the month, a list of nightly homework assignments with due dates, and a schedule of quizzes and tests. One parent refers to the school's no-nonsense approach. The school's teachers have developed detailed rubrics to assess literacy and writing at every grade level. Whether talking about a writer's notebook, looking through a writer's poetry portfolio, or grading bimonthly assignments, such as literature responses, research reports, and narrative memoirs, teachers, students, and parents are all in sync about how work is assessed. Thus, it's easy for parents to understand how their children are progressing.

To be promoted to the next grade, students must demonstrate 90 percent attendance, satisfactory growth, a score of average or better on the ITBS, or a level 3 or 4 (out of four) on the New York State English language arts (ELA) and mathematics exams, and be judged by teachers as able to succeed at the next level. A full-time director of assessment monitors academic progress using pre- and post-ITBS results as a baseline. Because the New York state exams begin in third grade, the school has K–2 students take the McGraw-Hill Fox-in-a-Box literacy assessment and uses the Waterford Early Reading Program to monitor these younger students' reading progress.

The assessment director also identifies students who need skill development in the same area and places them in four- to five-member groups for 40 minutes of remediation work five times a week with the targeted-assistance teacher. These students also may receive help from a paraprofessional during school, after-school tutoring, homework assistance, and weekend tutoring. When all is said and done, the school will retain students who are not considered ready for the next grade. As Litt says, "We don't hesitate to hold them if we need more time." For the 5 percent of students who qualify for special education services, there is a part-time special education teacher. Students who are referred to speech therapy can receive help from an afterschool speech teacher.

Icahn Charter School also offers after-school activities, including a step team, cheerleading, school newspaper, Girl and Boy Scouts programs, and mathematics and ELA targeted- assistance tutoring. Students can play on basketball, flag football, volleyball, and softball teams. Through the Charter School Athletic Association of New York, on Mondays, its students can play flag football in the fall and run track in the spring at Icahn Stadium on Randall's Island.

## **External Partnerships**

Parents or guardians are instrumental to their children's success in school, and school staff are in constant contact with them. If a student is absent, parents know to expect a phone call checking up on their child's well-being and asking why the child missed school. The school sends narrative progress reports to and holds conferences with parents six times a year, but teachers stay in touch more frequently by phone. Because 87 percent of the students are brought to school by their parents, teachers see and speak with parents in person. At a schoolwide open house at the beginning of every year, Litt makes clear that he wants to meet and talk with parents. He starts by saying, "Don't ever call the office to make an appointment with me." After waiting to see the concerned expressions pop up on parents' face, he cracks a big smile and continues, "Come in, make yourself a cup of coffee. ... Wait [and] I will make myself available as soon as possible to meet with you. I am here every day until 7 p.m."

Parents also contribute their time to the school. They organize class parties, chaperone field trips, and sign the reading logs, homework, and tests sent home. The school PTA meetings are standing room only and have been known to last five hours. When seventh-grade teachers wanted each of their students to have a calculator at home, all of the families found money to purchase them. "You give parents a school that takes care of their kids, and you will get all the parental support you need," comments board member Fliegel. Icahn Charter School also has created opportunities for parents. At the school's math fair, students present research on professions to their parents, and then the parents learn how to navigate Excel spreadsheets to look at information students compiled and engage in learning with their children.

Within the community, the school also partners with several organizations. Staff can refer students to the Bronx Children's Psychiatric Center for counseling. Grants from the Charles Hayden Foundation support both operating expenses and camp opportunities for students. The school also arranges summer camp experiences through the New York Times' Fresh Air Fund, and it connects students to twice-yearly arts programs at Columbia University.

Community partnerships also support professional development for teachers. Icahn Charter School contracts with the City University of New York's Creative Arts Team to conduct storytelling and questioning skills workshops with teachers. Lehman College provides five scholarships for graduate school and, together with the New York City Mathematics Project, the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College, CUN Y, provides two mathematics consultants.

## **Governing for Accountability**

Authorized by the Charter Schools Institute, the school's charter was renewed for five years in 2005. A 10-member charter school board led by chairperson Carl C. Icahn oversees the school, which is supported by collaboration between the Foundation for a Greater Opportunity (which Icahn created in 1997) and the Center for Educational Innovation-Public Education Association. Representatives from area foundations and institutions, as well as from the PTA and the school management team, have positions on the board. In contrast to the school principal who concentrates on curriculum and school operations, the board focuses on accountability, advocacy, and long-term planning.

The principal, the assistant principal of operations, the director of assessment, and the staff developer meet daily as the school's management team. There is also an administrative team, which consists of the principal, the assistant principal of operations, the director of assessment, the staff developer, the math coach, and the ELA coach. The teaching staff is made up of two teachers at every grade level, three targeted-assistance teachers, two cluster teachers for history and geography, three paraprofessionals, and one school aide.

Teachers have a designated common planning period every day, during which they can plan together, develop instructional units, compose the monthly syllabi, and meet with support staff to coordinate student assistance. The staff developer and curriculum specialists provide in-depth support to teachers who submit their weekly lesson plans every Monday. The team of coaches and the staff developer maintain a log of consultations to keep track of areas needing improvement. There are also ongoing professional development workshops for teachers on such topics as differentiated mathematics classrooms, research and grade-level rubrics, and teaching grammar. Together, the teachers and staff developers have created high-frequency word lists as well as rubrics for ELA standards, expository writing, poetry and narrative, research reports, literature responses, and grade-level writing mechanics.

The school operates on a budget of \$3,006,721, of which \$198,884 comes from federal categorical sources, \$2,766,764 comes from the state, \$32,173 comes from grants, and \$8,900 comes from donations. The school expects to spend \$10,815 per student during the 2006–07 school year. Teachers are paid a salary on par with the public school district, but are not eligible for the district's pension, its housing allowance for math and science teachers, or the larger salaries given to experienced teachers. To help compensate for this discrepancy, the school offers teachers a 401(k), life insurance, and bonuses based on schoolwide student performances.

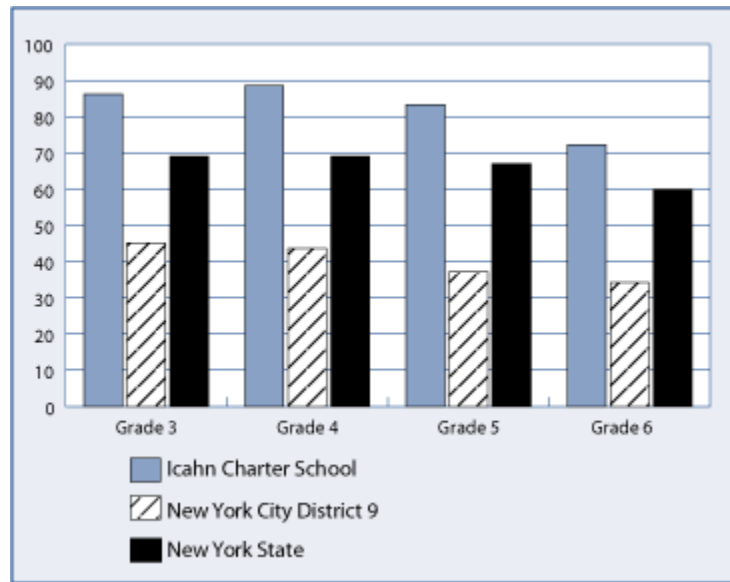
### **Student Achievement at Carl C. Icahn Charter School**

- The 2005-06 English language arts results on the New York State Testing Program (NYSTP) show that Icahn Charter School students outperformed those at all other New York charter schools in grades 2-5 and were second to students at only one other charter school in grade 6 for mathematics.

- As shown in figures 14 and 15, Icahn Charter School students scored at least 40 percentage points higher on the 2006 NYSTP than students in other district public schools.
- In May 2006, the New York Board of Regents and the New York State Department of Education recognized the Carl C. Icahn Charter School as one of the state's 795 "high performing gap closing" schools out of 1,658 public schools and 288 school districts.

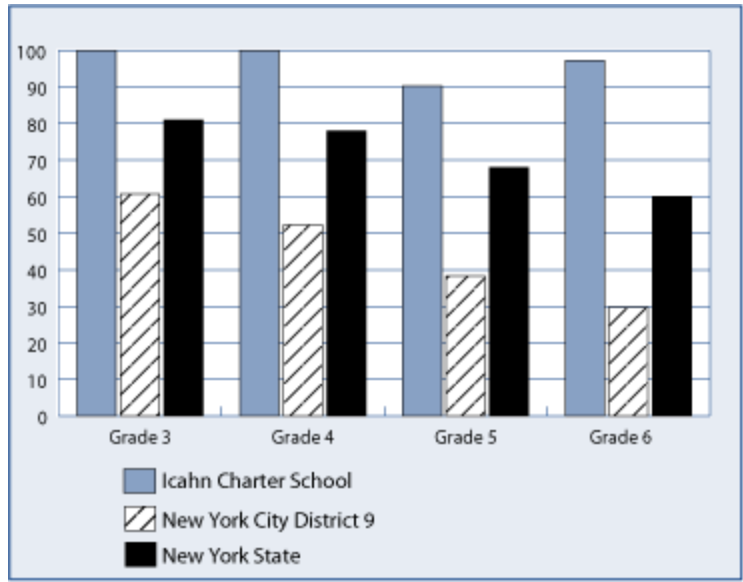
Source: New York State Education Department, School Report Card 2005-06

**Figure 14. Percentage of Carl C. Icahn Students Scoring Proficient and Above on 2006 NYSTP English Language Arts**



Source: New York State Education Department, School Report Card 2005-06

**Figure 15. Percentage of Carl C. Icahn Students Scoring Proficient and Above on 2006 NYSTP Mathematics**



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