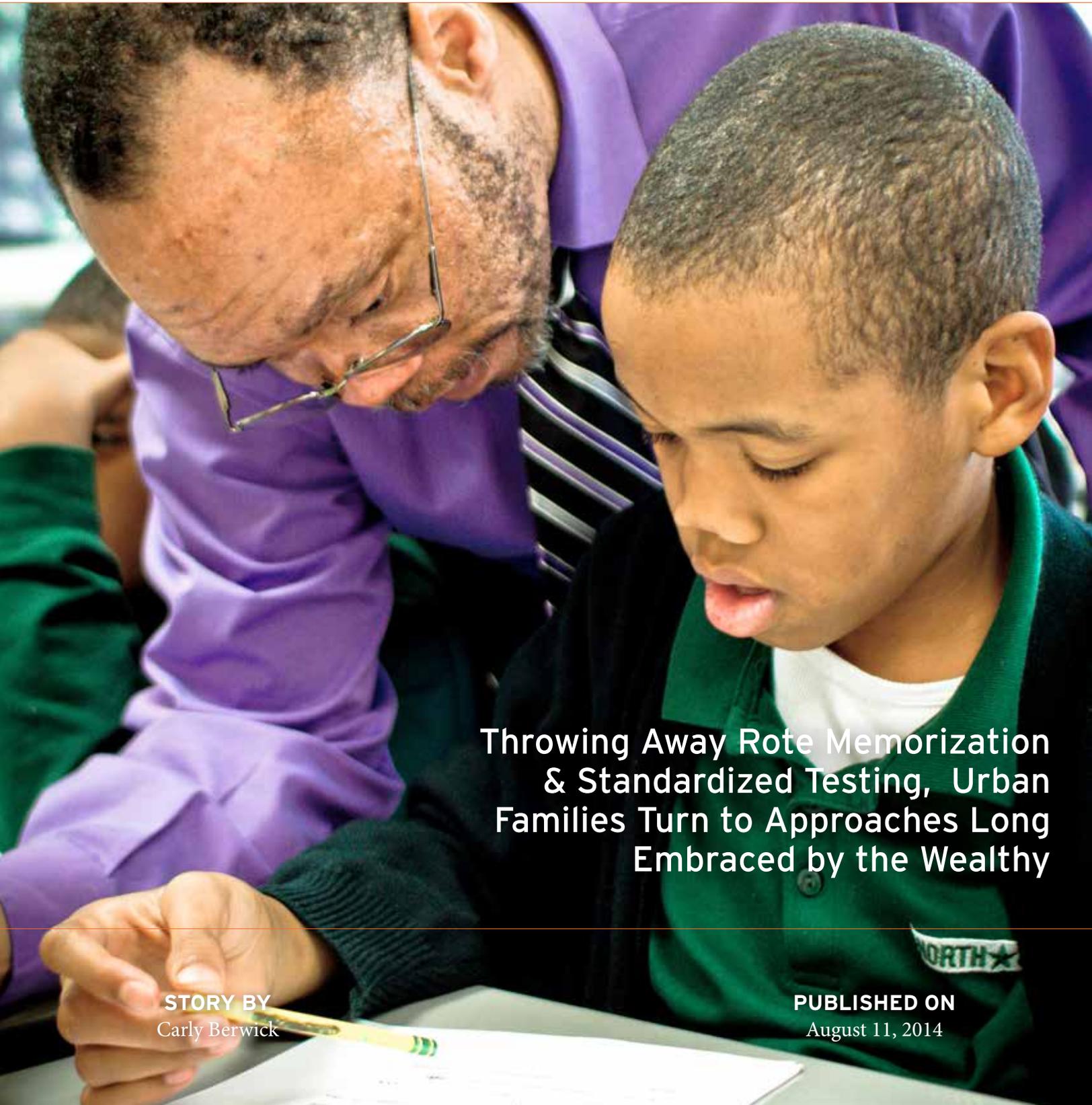


The Elite Private School Model Changing How City Kids Learn



Throwing Away Rote Memorization
& Standardized Testing, Urban
Families Turn to Approaches Long
Embraced by the Wealthy

STORY BY
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THE BOY, WISPS OF FACIAL HAIR TRACING THE LOWER HALF OF HIS FACE, STARES AHEAD INTO SPACE. It is first period, A-block, at New York City’s Humanities Preparatory Academy High School, just shy of 9:30 a.m. His eyelids are half-lowered, as if he is suspended between sleep and meditation.

The agony of the writing process can do that to someone, especially if your process is on display in a classroom of your adolescent peers for an hour a day, as it is here at Humanities Prep in the busy final days of the school year. Students are preparing to finish their summative assessments in English, a 10-page literary analysis that should prove they know how to “provide deep insight and create meaningful interpretation of texts” — one of many criteria at Prep for an A paper.

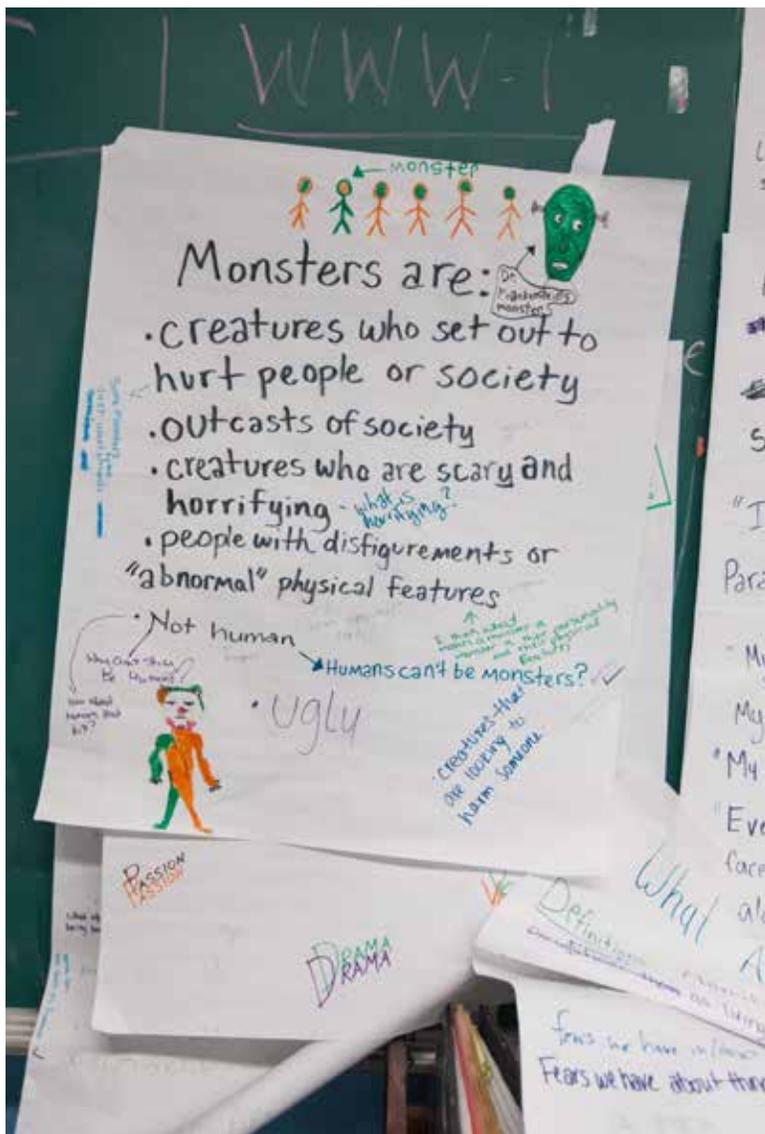
The other 13 students in this junior English class are busy typing on class computers or taking notes in hushed concentration. The boy’s notes sit in front of him. Occasionally he moves his hand to add something. The teacher, Dorian Herron, a genial, soft-and-swift-speaking African-American man, invites a visitor to ask the students about their papers. They are writing about the idea of the monster in society, having read Greek myths, Bible excerpts, “Beowulf,” *Frankenstein* and *Grendel*, John Gardner’s contemporary update of the Beowulf tale, told from the perspective of the monster. Class observations fill a handwritten poster on the wall. Monsters are: outcasts, abnormal, creatures who hurt others.

Humanities Prep shares its hulking, pre-modern building on West 18th Street in Chelsea with five other small public schools. It is a transfer school, which, in the language of the “[NYC Department of Education](#)”, means that it accepts students in the middle of high school: They may have been kicked out of, have failed out of, or have been disillusioned by other city schools. Three-quarters of the students are low-income — that is, they qualify for free or reduced lunch subsidies, because their families make less than 185 percent times the federal poverty line. (A family of four makes less than \$43,568 to qualify.) And 85 percent students are black and Hispanic, in a city where 70 percent of public school students are as well.

The heavy-lidded boy explains his project, his eyes lifting to focus clearly on the visitor, “Monsters are something-ed by society.” The something-ed is inaudible to the visitor, a blur of vowels. The visitor asks him to repeat himself. He straightens and tries again. “Ostracized. Monsters are ostracized by society.”

“It’s like being ill-nurtured, because society is like another parent. In *Frankenstein*, Victor [Frankenstein, the scientist who created the monster] just leaves the monster and doesn’t teach him what to do. Then when the monster goes to the house of the blind man and his son, he’s just talking with the blind man, and the son attacks him.”

It’s a deft analysis, as well as a poignant metaphor.



Humanities Prep emphasizes creative analysis and expression in its lessons.

Around the country, children in cities go to school every day in school systems that replicate the problems in their neighborhoods: crumbling infrastructure, overcrowding, low-wage single parent households, poor access to high-quality food and healthcare. In New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Miami and many other smaller cities nationwide, the majority of the public school children are poor — and in many, they are poorer than the average family in their cities. For decades, their educational outcomes likewise have been anemic. Five-year graduation rates in these cities range from a dismal 54 percent in New Jersey’s capital, Trenton, to 64 percent in Philadelphia to a relative high of 79 percent in Houston, approaching the national four-year, graduation-rate average of 80 percent, a historic high.

Only a few majority high-poverty schools or districts have witnessed such strong achievement gains in the past 15 years — measurable not just through test scores but through graduation rates, college admittance rates and college persistence rates. Of those that have, many, including dozens operated by the leading charter organizations, Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), Achievement First and Uncommon Schools, are called “no-excuses schools” — referring to the idea that all children can get to college — and are distinguished by longer school days, intense teacher recruitment, data-driven instruction, and measurable goals for

students, teachers and administrators. For students, “no excuses” has a double meaning since many of these high-achieving charter schools have strict behavioral discipline policies and high suspension and expulsion rates.

At a time when widening disparities between Americans of different economic classes are the stuff of headline news, the top-down, no-excuses method has become a go-to example for those seeking new solutions to persistent achievement gaps. The pedagogical approach has attracted praise from conservative institutions such as the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (which published a 2000 book called *Sweating the Small Stuff* that extolled the “new paternalism of inner-city schools”), from mainstream writers such as [Paul Tough](#), who found an answer to the problem of “failing” schools in training poor kids for “grit” — despite the fact that they are well acquainted with grit and persistence outside academia, and from the federal government, which has offered financial incentives in the form of grants to schools that demonstrate rising test scores.

Humanities Prep is not, however, a no-excuses school. Rather, it is part of a nascent movement of high-achieving urban schools pushing back against the idea that low-

income students can only learn one way and finding support in communities frustrated by a culture of testing and rote memorization.

These schools, including a growing number of public Montessori schools, are working to prove that poor children of color can learn as well as anybody else — and, as important, in the same way and manner and depth as the wealthiest children just a few miles or blocks away. They teach poor kids as rich kids are taught, with small classes, empowered school leaders, and teachers who reflect and amplify the student’s background and culture back to themselves. There are hands-on projects and critical reflection and defined performance goals — with the biggest being four-year college graduation — instead of regimented lessons and standardized testing.

At Humanities Prep, teachers seek inspiration in constructivist teaching methods, which reach back to early-20th-century educators such as John Dewey and argue that students need to discover knowledge through hands-on learning. It is one among an increasing diversity of models for achievement in city schools.

One of Prep’s more famous graduates is Liz Murray, who wrote the 2010 book, [*Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey From Homeless to Harvard*](#), later made into a movie. “The two years I spent at Humanities Prep unfolded like an urban-academic-survival study marathon, and it took everything I had to get through it,” she writes. “With the Prep staff, my negative feelings about school began to dissolve, replaced by an actual love of learning.”

CULTURE OF “HIGH EXPECTATIONS”

There are many reasons poor city kids do less well in school, on average, than their wealthier suburban peers. Poverty itself compounds every challenge, from finding after-school care to achieving early literacy. Many states continue to rely solely on property taxes to fund their schools, which means cities with lower per capita tax bases have less school funding.

The sentiment at the heart of the no-excuses movement seems unassailable: Kids who, as a group, are not doing well academically deserve a better chance. Predominantly, the kids who are not doing well are poor kids, and those are concentrated in the largest numbers in our cities. (Suburban and rural poverty exists and is growing, but urban poverty is both deeper and more concentrated.) “No excuses” plays conveniently into the bootstraps narrative: If schools wished hard enough that their students would learn college-level material, and if students had enough grit and tenacity, they would put nose to textbooks, and student achievement in the cities would suddenly rise like mist on the water.

But would it? Critics have long countered that carrot-and-stick approaches may not always prepare students well for independent, higher-order thinking required by universities and employers.



Humanities Prep Principal Jeannie Ferrari sits in a classroom.

“Students are not necessarily learning how to express themselves or to negotiate with teachers,” says Joanne Golann, whose working doctoral thesis at Princeton is an extensive study of the culture of a self-identified no-excuses charter school. Though the movement is still too young to have amassed enough data to definitively judge its success, the KIPP charter network in 2011 famously uncovered and publicized that its four-year college completion rate was not as high as desired — at 33 percent — but was still much more than the 8 to 10 percent for low-income students in general. Elizabeth Green’s new book, *Building a Better Teacher*, discusses at length the internal deliberations within KIPP and

other no-excuses schools about this very problem: Teaching for the test-based success required by many states is not the same as teaching for deep thinking and questioning.

In contrast, Humanities Prep demands less testing and more student-generated analysis. Along with 27 other schools, Humanities Prep is part of the New York Performance Standards Consortium. These schools are exempt from having to pass state tests required for graduation, called the Regents, other than the English exam. Instead, students must develop projects in major disciplines, usually incorporating a lengthy paper and an oral defense. Students know about and work toward these projects, called PBATs (performance-based assessment tasks), throughout their years at the school, with other assignments developing the knowledge and skills necessary to complete them.

Consortium schools on average graduate students at higher rates than New York City — and graduate much higher rates of students with disabilities and black and Latino students. The average [five-year graduation rate for consortium schools](#) in 2009 was 10 points higher than the New York City average, while more students from consortium schools stay in college compared to state or national averages, with 93 percent of college matriculants from the school still enrolled in a four-year college by their second year post-graduation. Even more striking, 86 percent of African-American male and 90 percent of Latino male consortium school graduates matriculated into college, compared to 37 and 42 percent nationally.

Their success is not because the standards are easier than state tests but because they are harder. “You have to think and be a creative teacher and students have to work much harder — and they are ready for college,” says Phyllis Tashlik, director of the Center for Inquiry, which works with the consortium. Tashlik is wary of saying that the performance assessments work well for disadvantaged kids in particular. She has encountered critics who say that the kids in the consortium schools don’t take the state tests only because they can’t.

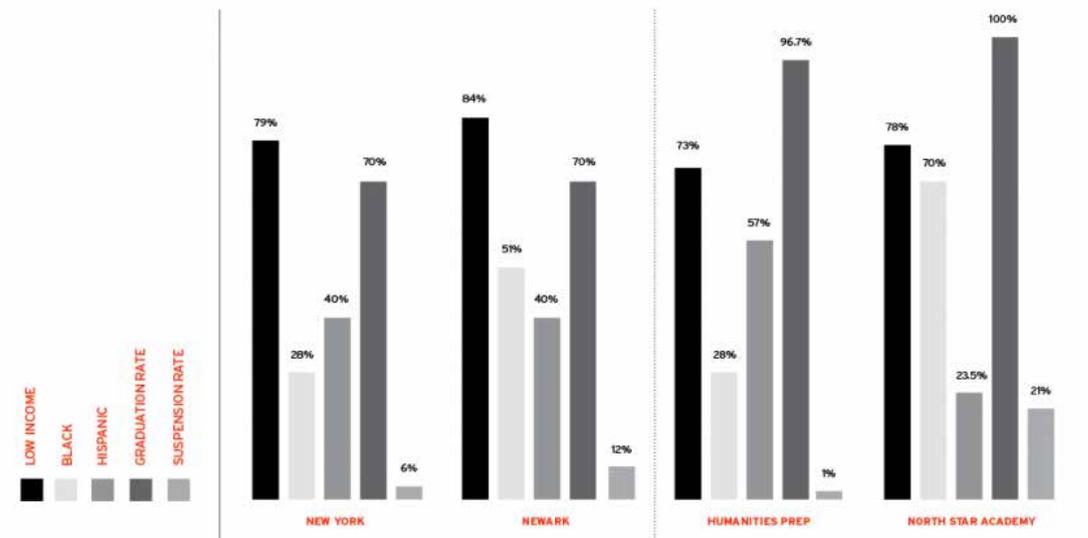
UNCOMMON TEACHING

The noiselessness of quiet concentration was striking. Two dozen 10- and 11-year-olds at North Star Academy Charter School of Newark, New Jersey faced computer terminals, typing diligently on their final performance assessment of fifth grade. Hands shot up every few minutes to summon over one of two teachers in the room, the history teacher Marie Frost, a middle-age white woman, and Clarence McNeil, an African-American native Newarker who teaches science but was helping out. The students had chosen a historical figure and were writing an argument paper on how that person related to the core value of justice or caring.

North Star sits in a newly renovated and expanded building at the edge of downtown Newark. Students wear uniforms, and they take state tests every year. With its tight discipline and regular testing, the school stands in stark contrast to Humanities Prep in almost every way except for its similar demographics and success rates. Seventy-eight percent of students are low-income, 94 percent are black or Hispanic, and 90 percent to 100 percent graduate, according to state figures. At the same time, 21 percent of North Star high school students have been suspended, compared to Humanities Prep's 1 percent.

Unlike Prep, where students can enter any year, students usually only enter in fifth grade and stay through middle and high school. There is no criteria for admission at North Star, which is a charter school, where parents apply for their children and are admitted by lottery. This spring, in Newark's new citywide choice system, more families put North Star as their first choice than any other school.

TWO SCHOOLS, TWO CITIES: A LOOK AT DEMOGRAPHICS AND PERFORMANCE



NEW YORK VS. NEWARK: SCHOOL AGE POPULATION

NEW YORK POPULATION 8.4 MILLION



NEWARK POPULATION 278,427



“There’s been a movement in the last five years to create urban public Montessoris, district or charter, with the specific idea of creating high-performing schools that give districts alternatives to [more scripted curricula] schools and will attract a diverse population.”

One of the earliest charter schools in New Jersey, operating since 1997, North Star has tracked the persistence of its students through college — that is, how many finish, particularly a four-year college — and found that 49 percent of students in classes through 2007 had finished a four-year college. The school’s rate of college matriculation is higher than the national rate for low-income students and far higher than rates of other taxpayer-funded schools in Newark.

North Star is run by a charter network called Uncommon Schools. Over the last decade, Uncommon has gained attention in the media and among strapped city districts such as Camden, NJ, where several new Uncommon schools are opening this fall. It promotes its success vigorously. There are videos, teacher training academies in New York and Newark, and popular teacher and administrator training books written by its top administrators. The 2010 teaching manual, [Teach Like a Champion](#), written by Uncommon executive Doug Lemov, is handed out to first-year teachers by school districts across the nation.

Lemov’s aim was to make a taxonomy of good teaching. His book gives teachers a list of 49 techniques to implement in their classrooms. The techniques can read as commonsensical. Taken together, they create the backbone for a particular breed of classroom with established daily routines for regular procedures like handing in homework, classroom discussions and one-on-one teacher-student conversation.

At a fifth-grade math class at North Star this spring, students sprung into action during a lesson that mirrored many of Uncommon’s videos of best practices, but also felt genuine and unscripted. The young, African-American female teacher got the students moving in unison with two claps and three stomps and then began a lightning-fast round of what the school calls “mental math” — or literally thinking on your feet.

“How do you find the mean?” she asked the class.

“You add all the numbers, then divide the numbers by the total,” answered one girl.

“How can you flip that last part?” said the teacher.

“I mean, you add all the numbers, then divide the total by how many numbers there are.”

“Two snaps for self-correcting.” The class snapped quickly, non-verbally praising the girl, who at 11 had taken on the very challenging task of fixing a mistake in public.

“How do you find the mode?”

“It repeats itself more than once,” a boy named Jon answered.

“You are almost there. Who can help Jon? Sandra, can you help Jon?” the teacher prompted.

“Jon, it repeats itself more than any other number.”

“It repeats itself more than other numbers,” repeated Jon loudly, making sure he can say the formula now.

The exchange was striking as much for what was not said as what was: No student giggled or snickered when Jon was off. Both Sandra and Jon spoke loudly, without embarrassment.

Both the teacher and the students are new to North Star this year. But throughout the year, the teacher gets almost weekly feedback from the principal and master teachers on how to improve classroom management or student assessments.

“They are constantly talking about college,” says Jada, a petite and enthusiastic recent North Star graduate, now at Marist College, who was at the school to watch her former principal, Mike Mann, win an award. She started in fifth grade, as most of her classmates did. “The academics were very rigorous. I’m considering coming back and working here.”

MISINTERPRETING RESULTS

In part because of the phenomenal publicity around North Star’s success — it has been written about in several books and chronicled in [The New York Times Magazine](#), all among other places — many schools (district and charter) try to emulate the school. They may attempt to copy the look of a no-excuses school, demanding total quiet of students or implementing clear routines for classwork, without implementing the intensive goal-driven lessons and assessments.

THE TAKEAWAY

- Many of the highest-achieving public charter schools are called “no-excuses schools” – referring to the idea that all children can get to college – and are distinguished by longer school days, data-driven instruction, scripted curricula, strict discipline policies and measurable goals for students, teachers and administrators.

- Other high-achieving schools, such as Humanities Prep in New York City, work under a different model that eschews many of the hallmarks of the “no excuses” model for a freer approach closer to the progressive models embraced by teachers serving more affluent populations.

- These schools, including a growing number of public Montessori schools, are working to prove that poor children of color can learn in the same manner and depth as wealthier children just a few miles or blocks away.

- High performing schools don’t adopt one strategy alone and expect it to be enough.

Often, the efforts backfire in tragic ways. Strong classroom management can curtail discipline problems, but can't eliminate them, and in many districts, management of students turns into exercises of control. This spring, a local civil rights group in New Orleans [filed a lawsuit](#) against charter group Collegiate Academies for "authoritarian discipline at the expense of learning," due to a high suspension rate as well as the highly symbolic offense of making students walk within lines between classes. Other curricula or approaches such as "Whole Brain Teaching" engage in elaborate call-and-response routines to show students have "mastered" material. The effect is more of a military demonstration than that sustained quiet hum of collective thinking.

There are solid structural reasons why most schools don't succeed like North Star and Uncommon schools. There aren't enough master teachers on staff. The principal doesn't have the time to offer weekly feedback. There is no established system of continual assessments of learning goals. And there simply aren't the resources, a situation Jonathan Kozol described with piercing detail in his 2005 book, [The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America](#).

The book abounds with descriptions of scripted curricula within schools across the country, such as the reading program "Success for All," that ask teachers and students to repeat back memorized answers that correlate with state standards. Elaborate rubrics exist not only for student answers or writing that can be classified on a scale that correlates with a particular state standard, but for lining up. In classrooms with rote pedagogy, students themselves repeat the standards, without necessarily understanding what they are meant to represent. Kozol recounts asking a student what the standard of "word mastery" actually meant. The student responds, "If you are told to memorize something and you memorize it right, that's mastery." Kozol again asks the student what "mastery" means. He answers, circularly, Kozol notes, "100 percent."

In 1991, Martin Haberman, an education professor (now deceased) at the University of Wisconsin, coined the term "the pedagogy of poverty." He wrote that he first noticed it in 1958. He listed 14 acts that constitute teaching in urban schools, most of them revealing a desire by the teacher (or school) to control students, among them giving directions, giving tests, settling disputes, punishing noncompliance and giving grades. The list sounds suspiciously like everyday teaching in American schools as we know it, and that was Haberman's point. "The pedagogy of poverty requires that teachers who begin their careers intending to be helpers, models, guides, stimulators, and caring sources of encouragement transform themselves into directive authoritarians in order to function in urban schools," he wrote. But, Haberman observed, this method of spoon-feeding information doesn't work — if by work, one means developing thinkers who excel in higher education and life. Instead, the pedagogy of poverty allows learners to "succeed," he writes, "without becoming either involved or thoughtful."

Some aspects of Uncommon's approach, as described in Lemov's book, feel uncomfortably close to the pedagogy of poverty. One of Lemov's tips is to ask students to be familiar with SLANT: sit up, listen, ask and answer questions, nod your head, track the speaker. The idea, adapted from another successful charter school network, is to make practices of active learning explicit. But it can seem to attempt to control students' bodies in ways that would meet with automatic derision or parental outrage



North Star classes tend to be active affairs with lessons split into multiple segments designed to encourage all students to participate. (Photo Credit: North Star)

for student achievement, some people rush to assume that measurable results are the only thing you care about,” he muses in a May 30 [post](#) about a great art teacher at an Uncommon School in Troy, New York. In an earlier post on April 15, he extols a master math teacher for keeping a warm and positive tone as she guides students through the varied answers they gave for a problem. “It’s a critical part of an effective classroom to let students know it’s safe, even useful to make mistakes,” he writes. In *Building a Better Teacher*, Elizabeth Green also discusses the disconnect between what Lemov advocates in his book — ideas like positive framing and precise praise — and schools that depend on excessive applications of rules, without any discussion of how they fit into a broader pedagogy. Silent hallways, writes Green, are impressive but give no indication that the rules are meaningful to students in the absence of an authority figure, or that learning gains will persist over months.

“That kind of teaching is more effective than bad teaching — disorganized, chaotic,” says Pedro Noguera, professor of education at New York University. “A lot of times the advocates of ‘no excuses’ get praise because it looks better than really poor teaching. Is it the best teaching? No. The best is going to generate a sense of intrinsic desire to learn and taps into critical thinking and results in kids taking greater ownership for their own learning.”

NOT YOUR MOTHER'S MONTESSORI

Some urban schools are looking to an approach that worked for poor children 100 years ago in Italy: Montessori. The legend of Maria Montessori is that she developed her hands-on “manipulatives” for barely literate children in Rome to sustain focus for an hour or more at a time. Until recently, as Noguera notes, the child-centered Montessori approach has been mostly limited to high-income parents who can pay for it. Yet in Hartford, New Haven, Washington, D.C., Chicago and elsewhere, new public Montessoris for children in pre-K through middle school have taken root within the past five years.

in a wealthy, suburban district — and that mimic some uncomfortable historical controls on black and brown bodies, who even under Jim Crow laws were told by whites where they could walk or even look. Uniforms, too, so pervasive in city schools today, replicate the attempt to make blue-collar or service workers look neat, as if their bodies were tainted by poverty.

But on his [blog](#), Lemov distances himself from schools that attempt to imitate the surface appearance of discipline without teaching thoughtfully. “It’s strange, sometimes, that as soon as you start talking about measurable results

“There’s been a movement in the last five years to create urban public Montessoris, district or charter, with the specific idea of creating high-performing schools that give districts alternatives to [more scripted curricula] schools and will attract a diverse population.”

In any Montessori classroom, children move around at their own pace choosing “works,” which may look like sand trays or building blocks but are in fact specially designed sensory learning tools to help make concrete concepts such as number order or base 10. In Hartford, three public Montessori schools draw families from the suburban-urban district, reconfigured in the wake of a 1996 Supreme Court of Connecticut decision mandating racial integration. They are open to all families, based on Hartford’s district-wide magnet choice plan, and have lottery-based wait lists. At Montessori Magnet, which opened as a full school for pre-K3 through grade 4, with 45 percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch, all children learn to choose their own areas of interest and work independently, says principal Carolyn Havrda.

The idea that low-income children need more direct instruction, she says, is “completely not proven in my experience.” Almost uniformly, the students “become more engaged because they are learning on their own.”

Hartford’s experience is part of a growing trend toward public Montessoris. Far from elite preschools catering to families who can pay upwards of \$20,000 a year, these schools more closely reflect their cities’ demographics. According to data compiled by Yale doctoral student Mira Debs, who works with the Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, nearly half of students at public Montessoris qualify for free and reduced lunch. Of the almost 500 public (including charter) Montessori schools nationally, half have opened within the past 10 years, says Keith Whitescarver, director of the center.

“The driving force is that Montessori has an appeal across the spectrum [of economic groups],” he says. “So if districts are looking to desegregate or draw across groups, it works.” The Montessori brand is well-known to middle-class families, who eagerly apply to Montessori magnets or charters in urban centers.

“There’s been a movement in the last five years to create urban public Montessoris, district or charter, with the specific idea of creating high-performing schools that give districts alternatives to [more scripted curricula] schools and will attract a diverse population,” says Debs, who is helping to open New Haven’s first public-charter Montessori this fall. Eighty percent of the students at the new school will be non-white. “Many schools in the no-excuses model are finding that they can do well on test scores but the kids are not doing as well in college. In Montessori, kids learn executive skills, they are in charge of choosing their own work, they learn to be intrinsically motivated.”



Humanities Prep team members plan for the fall. From left, Christina Kemp, Dorian Herron, David Fulco from MS/HS 223 visiting from south Bronx.

The 36-year-old Lumin East Dallas Community School, with 55 percent free- and reduced-lunch enrollment, has found that 90 percent of its former students graduate high school and nearly 90 percent enroll in college, despite the fact that the school only goes through third grade. In Milwaukee, one of the oldest public Montessori systems in the country has found similarly strong effects on later higher math and science scores.

The growing presence of public Montessoris in cities undermines the assumption, pervasive and unstated, that poor kids need a different kind of learning than rich kids. If Montessori — a brand name for progressive, constructivist education — can work in Hartford and Dallas, then the urban poor may not be so different from the middle-class after all.

“People think it’s harder to engage high-poverty kids than rich kids,” says educator Deborah Meier, who started two progressive urban schools in New York and Boston. “Rich kids may be willing to tolerate more frustration because they think that the people running this are on their side. Low-income kids have had tons of messages that the people in school look down on us or the parents.” But, she emphasizes, “the school I first started teaching in had both rich and poor children, and they all found water and sand fascinating. All children respond to being talked to respectfully and like interesting things.”

THE SUSPENSION BRIDGE

Creating a terrific school is in many ways a feat of engineering, akin to building a suspension bridge — and then rebuilding it every year. “It’s not for everybody, it’s for

those communities that want to embrace it,” says Tashlik of the rigorous performance-based approach. Teachers at performance-based assessment schools work hard, she says, to design curriculum and projects. That kind of work takes staff and personnel who are not only willing to put in extra time but know it’s necessary and know what to do with that extra time.

“Giving students more independence meant that teachers had to do more work, building more intricate systems with more deliberate supports — the stuff teachers call ‘scaffolding,’” writes Green of a school that chose to invest in student-based “culture conversations” over zero-tolerance discipline policies. At Humanities Prep, under principal Jeannie Ferrari, teacher turnover is low, indicating the approach appeals to talented staff as well as students: 100 percent of staff stayed on this year.

Those schools that help low-income city kids do well are typically small, with manageable class sizes and no academic tracking (meaning all students can take the same general education, college-prep classes); they enroll students citywide and have a strong mission and empowered school leader. The best of them have regular time for staff to meet and share plans, and regular and well-designed interim assessments that lead to a final performance task. One of the elements alone is not enough: A school with many interim assessments but no strong mission drifts with the tide of each teacher’s or administrator’s whims; a small school drawing on students citywide could easily flounder without a defined goal and staff development.

Humanities Prep and North Star have also taken on the nearly invisible but time-sucking work of developing good assessments and supporting teachers with regular observations and conferences. “We have a rubric for teacher observations. But a rubric never changed anyone’s performance,” says North Star Newark’s managing director Paul Bambrick-Santoyo. “You learn by watching and doing and having masters by the sides.” This applies to the teachers, who get weekly conferences and feedback, as well as the students. While students at Humanities Prep are parsing *Frankenstein* and “Beowulf” for larger meaning about the social creation of monsters, students at North Star might be writing a paper about agitators for justice or taking a multiple choice exam about *Macbeth*, with questions about how the phrase “barren sceptre” contributes to an understanding of Macbeth’s power. In either scenario, they are working toward a defined end goal by completing interim assessments that lead toward that goal.

The existence of high-performing, high-poverty, unscreened-admission public schools that embrace their students as learners rather than potential deviants proves — as if it needs proving again — that low-income minority students are different only from middle-class and wealthy students because of the experiences and privileges that come with money.

Ehsan Ali graduated from Humanities Prep last year, just two years after arriving in Brooklyn from Bangladesh. Prep was one of the few schools that would take him mid-year. Now he is a college transition advisor for this year’s graduates and studies chemical engineering at City College of New York. In Bangladesh, he had taken only science and math, as well as his full share of tests. It was at Prep that he learned to write, he says.

“What helped me a lot was I discovered my passion for poetry.” He continues: “I also liked that we are waived from Regents. Tests don’t really show how your brain thinks. PBATs are a better way of evaluating. We write and explain ourselves. You have to make what’s in your mind clear to others.”

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