



Student Attrition And "Backfilling" At Success Academy Charter Schools: What Student Enrollment Patterns Tell Us

by [Leo Casey](#)-- February 18, 2016

This is the second of two posts on Success Academy Charter Schools. The first post was entitled "[Student Discipline, Race and Eva Moskowitz's Success Academy Charter Schools](#)."

Last fall, at a press conference called to respond to a *New York Times* [exposé](#) of efforts to "push out" targeted students from New York City's Success Academy Charter Schools, Eva Moskowitz, the charter chain's founder and CEO, [described](#) those practices as "an anomaly."

"Our goal in suspending children or issuing any consequences," Moskowitz told reporters, "is not to get rid of children or to have them leave our school. It is to have them have high standards of conduct."

Last week, at a press conference called to respond to the *New York Times* publication of [a video of a Success Academy model teacher berating a child for making a mistake](#) in arithmetic, Moskowitz [reiterated her claim](#) that such practices were "anomalies."

The notion that students were being "pushed out" in order to boost Success Academy scores on standardized exams was "just crazy talk," Moskowitz told journalist John Merrow in a [PBS interview](#).

Does the available evidence support Moskowitz's claims? In search of an answer, I examined the student enrollment patterns at Success Academy Charter Schools, using the data currently available in the New York State Education Department's [school report cards](#).

The following charts capture those data. The first chart pools the student enrollment numbers across all Success Academy Charter Schools; the subsequent charts (below) are for the individual Success Academy Charter Schools that have four years or more of data.¹ I have color coded the charts to make it easier for readers to follow the student cohorts as they pass through different grades.

Enrollment by Grade and Year, Success Academy Charter Schools (pooled), 2006-07 to 2013-14

	Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
ALL SCHOOLS (n=18)	2006-07	83	73							
	2007-08	123	80	73						
	2008-09	443	360	79	62					
	2009-10	451	458	353	63	59				
	2010-11	726	802	496	327	53	47			
	2011-12	735	922	909	507	307	50	40		
	2012-13	1018	979	925	778	430	291	46	36	
	2013-14	1760	1504	1102	892	695	384	263	50	32

Enrollment by Grade and Year, Success Academy Charter Schools, 2006-07 to 2013-14

	Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Harlem Success I	2006-07	83	73						
2007-08		123	80	73						
2008-09		130	127	79	62					
2009-10		145	130	127	63	59				
2010-11		114	156	130	117	53	47			
2011-12		94	122	183	136	112	50	40		
2012-13		85	94	121	159	119	97	46	36	
2013-14		111	125	112	124	149	109	84	50	32

	Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Harlem Success II	2008-09	106	77						
2009-10		147	125	91						
2010-11		135	128	130	82					
2011-12		112	140	166	135	72				
2012-13		86	113	158	133	114	64			
2013-14		110	99	122	134	124	100	56		

	Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Harlem Success III	2008-09	108	78						
2009-10		76	103	70						
2010-11		136	128	132	68					
2011-12		87	164	156	143	68				
2012-13		57	97	143	141	116	77			
2013-14		88	64	111	112	118	104	68		

	Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Harlem Success IV	2008-09	99	78						
2009-10		83	100	65						
2010-11		82	78	104	60					
2011-12		82	82	91	93	55				
2012-13		83	86	88	79	81	53			
2013-14		92	93	95	85	70	71	55		

	Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Harlem Success V	2010-11	84	102						
2011-12		61	78	106						
2012-13		77	83	88	80					
2013-14		88	88	88	92	76				

	Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Bronx Success I	2010-11	88	104						
2011-12		55	93	103						
2012-13		83	77	95	90					
2013-14		119	88	88	84	78				

	Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Bronx Success II	2010-11	76	106						
2011-12		50	92	104						
2012-13		83	83	93	96					
2013-14		121	87	92	91	80				

The general pattern is unmistakable. In the early grades, student enrollment in Success Academy Charter Schools increases: Whatever losses the schools may suffer through student attrition are more than compensated for by the enrollment of new students. After Grade 2, however, the enrollment numbers begin to decline and do so continuously through the later grades. There are only small variations in this essential pattern among the different Success Academy Charter Schools.

In New York State, high stakes standardized exams begin at the end of Grade 3.

Success Academy Charter Schools has made a conscious decision to **not** fill seats opened up by student attrition in the upper grades of its schools. And this is a deliberate, network-wide practice, as evidenced by Success Academy's own website. When one compares the grades in each Success Academy Charter School, as listed on its website, with the grades in each school, as listed on the website of the New York City Charter School Center, one finds that the Charter School Center lists all the grades currently being provided under the school's charter, while Success Academy lists many fewer grades – only those in which it is willing to enroll students.²

In effect, the Success Academy website has the equivalent of a “do not apply” sign posted for each unlisted grade.

In New York City (NYC), the policy of refusing to fill seats vacated by student attrition is known by the unfortunate construction metaphor of failing to “backfill.” On a number of occasions, Moskowitz has **forcefully defended** Success Academy's refusal to “backfill” the upper grades in which students take the state's standardized exams. The full effect of this policy to not “backfill” can be seen in the only Success Academy cohort in the data that completed all eight primary school grades: the graduating class of Harlem Success Academy I had 32 students, less than half of the 73 students who started in the cohort eight years prior.

How does this policy of not filling the seats left empty by student attrition shape the student population of Success Academy Charter Schools? Since the New York State Education Department's school report cards do not disaggregate demographic data by grade level, it is not possible to track changes in the composition of student cohorts precisely. But we do know that the policy of refusing to “backfill” open seats does not fall randomly across all Success Academy students. The differentiated impact is self-evident in the case of “pushed out” students the schools do not want, such as those described in *New York Times* **exposé**, but it is also present in the case of students who leave without a “push” from the school. Transience is a central feature of poverty, and the greater the intensity of the poverty in which a student lives, the greater the transience she will experience: Homelessness is the ultimate expression of this reality.³ The poorest students are thus significantly overrepresented among school “leavers,” as are students who score poorly on high-stakes standardized exams.⁴ Indeed, the two phenomena are related.⁵

In response to criticism that the Success Academy Charter Schools “cream” their student populations to boost standardized test scores, Eva Moskowitz has argued that the attrition rates in her schools are lower than the average attrition rate for both NYC district schools and other charter schools. But the attrition rate is not the fundamental issue here; rather, it is the policy choice to not fill the empty seats left by student attrition.⁶

To the extent that leaving students are not replaced with similar students, the student population will have fewer students living in poverty, fewer high needs students, and fewer students who score more poorly on standardized exams. Other schools may well have higher rates of attrition, but if they “backfill” their empty seats, the profile of their student population remains essentially the same.

Moskowitz also insists that her schools should not have to accept students from district schools who have received what she considers to be an inadequate education. Even if one accepted her questionable characterization of education in district schools, it is worth noting that she is insisting on a “one way” street: district schools should have to enroll the students who leave Success Academy Charter Schools, but Success Academy schools should not have to enroll students who leave district schools.

Even within the NYC charter school community, Success Academy's policy of not “backfilling” open student seats in the exam-taking upper grades has its critics. For the most part, other charter school leaders avoid any public censure of Moskowitz (although there was a notable lack of Success Academy defenders from the city's charter school ranks last week and during last fall's media firestorm). But Democracy Builders, a charter advocacy

organization established by Democracy Prep Charter School founder Seth Andrew, minces no words in criticizing the failure of Success Academy Charter Schools and other “no excuses” charter networks to “backfill” empty student seats. “Some schools boast tantalizing proficiency percentages (on standardized tests – LC) and make easy exemplars,” Democracy Builders notes in its report *No Seat Left Behind*. “However, there is a wide variation of performance across the charter sector that is distorted by mobility and masked by the lack of backfill. Schools who lose students and gain percentage points give parents the false impression that a schools’ absolute number of proficient students is increasing each year. It isn’t.” Democracy Builders estimated that, during the 2013-14 school year, there were 2,500 empty student seats in NYC charter schools left unfilled by the refusal of Success Academy and like-minded charter networks to “backfill.”

Recent developments may well put Moskowitz’s defense of Success Academy’s discipline and enrollment policies to the test. The authorizer of the Success Academy charter schools, the SUNY Charter School Institute, has **announced** that it is launching an investigation into the disciplinary practices at Success Academy. And the U.S. Education Department’s Office of Civil Rights, responding to **a complaint** by the New York City Public Advocate, the Legal Aid Society, and a group of former and current Success Academy parents, will investigate claims that Success Academy schools illegally discriminate against students with special needs. The reaction to last week’s video publication by the *New York Times* can only increase the scrutiny of Success Academy Charter Schools.

Eva Moskowitz, New York City Charter School Center, and national charter school organizations such as the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools are now caught on the horns of an ethical and political dilemma. Under their tutelage, the charter school brand has been promoted around the claim that charter schools significantly outperform district public schools, with students’ standardized test scores as the “proof point” for this argument. When national studies made it clear that charter schools, as a whole, do not outperform district schools on tests scores, the focus of comparison was shifted to “high performing” charter school networks such as Success Academy. The most prominent elements in this polarized charter advocacy discourse – the continuous drumbeat of attacks on district schools as educational failures, with the call for mass closures of these schools; the demands for the continuous expansion of the charter sector at the expense of district public schools; the denigration of public school teachers and their unions; the fiercely adversarial and confrontational rhetoric – all ultimately rely upon this single foundational claim: that charter schools academically outperform comparable district schools, as demonstrated by student test scores. If this claim is lost, if the center of the discourse cannot hold, the entire discursive edifice comes apart.

But now the very policies that have allowed “no excuses” charter schools such as Success Academy to manipulate the contours of their student populations to produce high scores on standardized exams are under unprecedented investigation. There is increasing attention on the discriminatory effects of punitive discipline and excessive suspensions on “pushing out” students considered undesirable. It is hard to see how the U.S. Education Department can require district schools to move away from such policies and practices, while ignoring a high profile charter chain that employs them on an order of **seven magnitudes greater**. As the New York State legislature is confronted with demands to raise the cap on charter schools, it is hard to imagine that they could ignore the fact that the state’s charter schools could provide families with thousands of open seats right now, under the existing charter law, but choose not to do so.

To resolve these issues, Success Academy and similar charter school chains would have to make changes in policy and practice that would strike at their ability to engineer student populations to achieve high test scores. And this would put the charter school brand itself at risk. Do not look for Eva Moskowitz, the New York City Charter School Center and the National Association of Public Charter Schools to willingly travel down that road. A major political battle is in the making.

¹ Readers should exercise caution in interpreting the data for Kindergarten and Grade One on the pooled chart. When Success Academy opens new schools, they start with both grades. As a consequence, there are substantial increases in the cohorts as they transition from Kindergarten to Grade One, as they include students from new schools that did not exist in the prior year. In subsequent grades, the cohorts reflect the same group of schools captured for Grade One.

² The following list include all Success Academy charter schools in operation in spring 2015, when the most recent New York State report card was published and parents were looking for schools to enroll their children for September 2015. After each school, one finds the school year that the school started, the grades listed on the Success Academy website in spring 2015 and the grades listed on the Charter Center website. The contrast can be seen in the first school, Harlem Success I, where the Success website listed only grades K-4, even though it would be operating grades K-9 in September 2015, as the Center website indicates.

- HARLEM SUCCESS I; STARTED: 2006-07; SUCCESS GRADES: K-4; CENTER GRADES: K-9
- HARLEM SUCCESS II; STARTED: 2008-09; SUCCESS GRADES: K-4; CENTER GRADES: K-7
- HARLEM SUCCESS III; STARTED: 2008-09; SUCCESS GRADES: K-1; CENTER GRADES: K-7
- HARLEM SUCCESS IV; STARTED: 2008-09; SUCCESS GRADES: K-4; CENTER GRADES: K-7
- HARLEM SUCCESS V; STARTED: 2010-11; SUCCESS GRADES: K-4; CENTER GRADES: K-5
- HELL'S KITCHEN SUCCESS; STARTED: 2013-14; SUCCESS GRADES: K-2; CENTER GRADES: K-5
- UNION SQUARE SUCCESS; STARTED: 2013-14; SUCCESS GRADES: K-4; CENTER GRADES: K-4
- UPPER WEST SIDE SUCCESS; STARTED: 2011-12; SUCCESS GRADES: K-4; CENTER GRADES: K-4
- BED-STUY SUCCESS I/BROOKLYN SUCCESS I; STARTED: 2011-12; SUCCESS GRADES: K-4; CENTER GRADES: K-4
- BED-STUY SUCCESS II/BROOKLYN SUCCESS II; STARTED: 2011-12; SUCCESS GRADES: K-3; CENTER GRADES: K-4
- COBBLE HILL SUCCESS/BROOKLYN SUCCESS III; STARTED: 2012-13; SUCCESS GRADES: K-3; CENTER GRADES: K-3
- CROWN HEIGHTS SUCCESS; STARTED: 2013-14; SUCCESS GRADES: K-2; CENTER GRADES: K-2
- FORT GREENE SUCCESS; STARTED: 2013-14; SUCCESS GRADES: K-2; CENTER GRADES: K-2
- PROSPECT HEIGHTS SUCCESS; STARTED: 2013-14; SUCCESS GRADES: K-2; CENTER GRADES: K-2
- WILLIAMSBURG SUCCESS/BROOKLYN SUCCESS IV; STARTED: 2012-13; SUCCESS GRADES: K-3; CENTER GRADES: K-3
- BRONX SUCCESS I; STARTED: 2010-11; SUCCESS GRADES: K-4; CENTER GRADES: K-5
- BRONX SUCCESS II; STARTED: 2010-11; SUCCESS GRADES: K-4; CENTER GRADES: K-5
- BRONX SUCCESS III; STARTED: 2013-14; SUCCESS GRADES: K-2; CENTER GRADES: K-2

³ According to a recent New York City Independent Budget Office [study](#), over 80,000 of New York City's 1.1 million students are homeless – 7.5% of all students. The report does not break out the numbers of homeless students in the district schools and in the charter schools.

⁴ The latter point has been confirmed in [research](#) done by Marcus Winters for the conservative Manhattan Institute to counter arguments that charter school students cream their students. Transience multiplies the other negative effects of poverty on academic achievement, as it disrupts the educational process itself.

⁵ In the district schools, students who, during the middle of the school year, move into New York City or are forced to move from one city school to another are known as “over the counter” students, as they do not go through the normal admissions process. “Over the counter” students are disproportionately found in high needs categories – the poor, the homeless, new immigrants, English Language Learners, students with special needs, and students returning from incarceration. If a district school does not enroll “over the counter” students, it gets a bye on educating many of the city's neediest students. The same is true of charter schools that do not “backfill.”

⁶ Indeed, a lower attrition rate could well be – at least in part – a reflection of a lower rate of poverty and transience in the student population. We do know that Success Academy Charter Schools have [a lower rate of student poverty](#) than the average for all NYC district schools, as measured by the economic disadvantage index on the New York State Education Department report cards – despite the fact that most of the Success schools have been located in the city's poorest communities in Harlem, the South Bronx and central Brooklyn