



class size matters

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Comments on the proposed New American Academy Charter School

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I am writing to express my objection to authorizing a new charter school, The New American Academy Charter School (TNAACS) in District 19 that would replicate PS 770, the New American Academy in District 17, based upon the record of the existing school.

The charter application states: "*The model draws upon research-based best practices from across the globe, and has been implemented with great success at P.S 770, The New American Academy at Lincoln Terrace Park, a NYCDOE district school in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.*"¹

Yet there is no research or independent evaluation to back up the instructional model of this school and in fact, objective evidence strongly suggests that the existing school is struggling and should not be replicated at this time.

Background

The New American Academy, PS 770 in Brooklyn, opened as a public school in District 17 in the fall of 2010, with 126 Kindergarten and 1st grade students, according to the NY Times.² The school was designed to assign four teachers in one open classroom to teach approximately 60 students, while giving them instruction in three languages: English, Spanish and French.

Lack of research evidence for instructional model

The charter school application states that "*A 15:1 teacher student ratio has been shown to increase student achievement .3-.45 standard deviation per year in grades K-2 and allows for more personalized attention for every student.*"³

Yet the research cited pertains to **class sizes** of 15, not a **student/teacher** ratio of 15:1 (the phrase quoted above reverses the word order.) The research is abundantly clear that class size is entirely different from student/teacher ratio in its implementation and expected effects. Indeed, there are no studies cited in the application or anywhere else that show positive results from instituting class sizes of 60, even with four teachers, and this model would seem to be especially risky for younger students.⁴

According to the same NY Times article, the school "*draws its inspiration... from Phillips Exeter Academy, an elite boarding high school in New Hampshire where students in small classes work collaboratively and hold discussions around tables.*" However, Exeter Academy is an elite high school where class sizes are capped at 8-12 students per class.⁵

¹ <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/psc/documents/NewAmericanRedacted.pdf>

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/11/education/11class.html?pagewanted=all>

³ <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/psc/documents/NewAmericanRedacted.pdf>

⁴ Finn, J.D. & Achilles, C.M. (1999). "*Tennessee's class size study: Findings, implications, misconceptions.*" Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 21(2), 97-109.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phillips_Exeter_Academy

Placing 60 plus Kindergarteners and/or first graders in one room, with four teachers, is unlikely to produce the same learning gains that occur with a class size of 15, and/or have the same effects of narrowing the achievement gap, lessening disciplinary problems, and/or strengthening non-cognitive skills that class size reduction has been shown to achieve.⁶

Indeed, looking at the New American Academy’s record so far, there is no indication that it has had any of these effects.

High levels of student attrition

According to the NY Times, because of the chaotic, noisy and unstructured learning environment, by January of its first school year, several children had already left the school:

“Sixty children in a first-grade class can get loud — sometimes too loud for a teacher to explain a lesson.... A high-pitched argument broke out over someone’s missing quarter ... Then another boy ran off to hide under an easel. Someone grabbed someone else’s pennies. The noise snowballed. ..The challenges have been considerable. Faced with out-of-control classroom situations, Mr. Waronker, 42, [the principal] had to rethink his idea that his model could work for even the most disturbed children. By January, three children who were violent had been moved to more-structured environments; seven other first graders moved away or withdrew, reducing the class size to 50.....”

According to the DOE demographic snapshot, by the time the initial Kindergarten cohort of 63 reached the first grade, the school had lost 11 students, a decline of 17 percent. By the time its first grade cohort reached second grade, it had dropped from 57 to 34 students; a loss of more than 40 percent.⁷

School Demographics and Accountability Snapshot

			Total Enrollment	K	Grade 1	Grade 2
17K770	P.S. 770 NEW AMERICAN ACADEMY	2010- 2011	120	63	57	-
17K770	P.S. 770 NEW AMERICAN ACADEMY	2011- 2012	131	45	52	34

If the New York Times article cited above is accurate, the school actually started with 126 students; by the second year, these two grade cohorts totaled only 86 students, a decline of 32 percent overall.⁸

Low Demand

The snapshot shown above also reveals that only 45 Kindergarten students entered the school in the fall of 2011, indicating a very low demand for this model among NYC parents. Last year, there were only eleven more students than the school started with, even after adding an additional grade level.

According to the school’s budget for the 2012-13 school year, the projected register was 158 students, indicating continued low parent demand and/or continued high attrition, with only 27 students predicted to be

⁶ See attached Class Size research brief.

⁷ <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/F318E6F9-5787-403E-8ABD-139656D7A06E/0/DemographicSnapshot2012Public.xlsx>

⁸ If the school “backfilled” with new 1st and 2nd graders, the attrition rate was even higher.

added, rather than the 60 per class that had been originally planned.⁹ In fact, as of October 18, 2012, the school's website was still advertising student vacancies in all grades.¹⁰

Low enrollment of high needs students, especially English Language Learners

According to the demographic snapshot, the school also fell in terms its enrollment of English Language Learners, one of its target populations, dropping from 6.7 percent students the first year, to 4.6 percent the second.¹¹ According to the CEP for 2011-2012, no new ELLs registered for the 2011-12 school year; and there were only six total ELL students in the school.¹² This compares to an overall district percent for ELL's of 10 percent.¹³

The number of students with IEPs also fell, from 16 to 14, totaling 10.7 percent. While the charter school application claims that the school has "high population of free and reduced meal (FARM) students (90%)", according to the DOE demographic snapshot, 66.7 percent of its students were free and reduced lunch in 2011-12, compared to 80 percent for the district as a whole.¹⁴

Failure to implement promised programs

The school initially promoted itself widely as offering instruction in English, Spanish and French. According to the 2010-2011 CEP, these were the goals for June 2011:

- *60% of all students will be able to engage in simple conversations and acquire basic vocabulary in Spanish and French by June 2011.*
- *20% of all students will be able to engage in simple conversations and acquire basic vocabulary in Spanish or French*
- *20% of all students will acquire basic vocabulary in Spanish or in French.*
- *Students will receive Spanish and French instruction daily in small groups.*

*Our focus on trilingual education is to celebrate the languages of our ELL students and acknowledge the cultural heritage of the families within the community.*¹⁵

Yet up to now there has been NO language instruction in Spanish and French, and none of the above goals were achieved, according to the 2011-2012 CEP:

*All parents are aware of the New American Academy school model, a feature of which is multilingual approach to education. This feature is not yet implemented. We welcome parent feedback and requests at all times to ensure that our programs are aligned with parents' wishes.*¹⁶

Assessment results

As of yet, there is no official state test score data for the school, though the school does give internal assessments. In its Comprehensive Education Plan, the school said the following goals would be achieved by the end of the 2010-11 school year:

- *60% of all students will be on grade level by the end of the year.*
- *20% of all students will be above level grade by the end of the year.*

⁹ <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/funding/schoolbudgets/FY13FairStudentFundingBudget.htm?schoolcode=K770>

¹⁰ <http://thenewamericanacademy.org/student-vacancies/>

¹¹ <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/F318E6F9-5787-403E-8ABD-139656D7A06E/0/DemographicSnapshot2012Public.xlsx>

¹² http://schools.nyc.gov/documents/oaosi/cep/2011-12/cep_K770.pdf

¹³ <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/files/2010-11/AOR-2011-331700010000.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/F318E6F9-5787-403E-8ABD-139656D7A06E/0/DemographicSnapshot2012Public.xlsx>

¹⁵ http://schools.nyc.gov/documents/oaosi/cep/2010-11/cep_K770.pdf

¹⁶ http://schools.nyc.gov/documents/oaosi/cep/2011-12/cep_K770.pdf

- 20% of all students will approaching grade levels by the end of the year.¹⁷

However, as reported in the following year's CEP, instead of 80 percent of students testing at or above grade level, by "June 2011, Fountas and Pinnell results indicated that 63% of students were reading below grade level as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment."¹⁸

The chart below, from the charter school application, shows that in both Kindergarten and 1st grade, the gains experienced were considerably below citywide averages.¹⁹

Per Grade/Cohort Movement	N	Benchmark Reading Level September	TNAA Reading Level September	Benchmark Reading Level May	TNAA Reading Level May	TNAA as compared to Benchmark May Reading Level	# Of Reading Levels Moved	Benchmark Reading Levels Moved	TNAA as compared to Benchmark Reading Levels Moved
Kindergarten	45	<0	0.66	4.5	3.88	-0.62	3.22	4.50	(1.28)
1st grade	30	4.50	5.23	10.00	9.43	-0.57	4.20	5.50	(1.30)
2nd grade	34	10.00	7.15	13.00	11.07	-1.93	3.92	3.00	0.92

Summary

In conclusion, the New American Academy, the existing public school on which the proposed charter school will be modeled, has met none of its academic or programmatic goals, either in terms of achievement gains or providing instruction in foreign languages.

Instead of offering class sizes of 15 that would lead to proven results, the school has chosen to put classes of 60 children in one room, with four teachers. Perhaps as a result of this experimental model, it has suffered high student attrition and low demand. There is no reason to believe that a charter school based upon the same instructional model will do any better.

I urge the State Education Department to hold off replicating this model until and unless there is evidence that there is a demand for it, that it works to improve the learning experience and student outcomes, and that it can attract and retain comparable numbers of high-needs students, including English Language Learners.

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¹⁷ http://schools.nyc.gov/documents/oaosi/cep/2010-11/cep_K770.pdf

¹⁸ http://schools.nyc.gov/documents/oaosi/cep/2011-12/cep_K770.pdf

¹⁹ <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/psc/documents/NewAmericanRedacted.pdf>