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Harlem Kids Rising

Gotham's first generation of charter-school kids is on its way to middle school.

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"It is too soon to say whether charter schools . . . will work, or be one more broken promise for families who feel they have been betrayed before," the *New York Times* intoned in a front-page article nearly six years ago, upon the opening of Gotham's first two such schools, including the Sisulu-Walker Charter School of Harlem, in September 1999.

Is it still too soon? Seventy-three kids who entered Sisulu-Walker as kindergarteners in 1999 left as newly minted fifth-grade graduates last week. The school has now educated part of New York's first small generation of elementary charter-school kids. And the kids have done well—quite well, as Principal Norma Figueroa-Hurwitz reminded cheering parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends during a graduation ceremony held June 22.

A full 90 percent of those fifth-graders could read at or above grade level this year. By contrast, only 69 percent of the fifth-graders who attended the regular public schools citywide did as well. In math, 77 percent of Sisulu-Walker's kids scored well, compared with 54 percent of regular public-school kids.

Sisulu is a public school, but not one run by the city. Each New York charter school receives about 70 percent of the public funding that a traditional public school gets. Each school must rent its own space; Sisulu's kids learn in makeshift classrooms owned by a neighborhood church. Sisulu-Walker chose its inaugural kindergarteners through a citywide lottery, from several hundred five-year-olds whose families had applied. Nearly 90 percent of the kids are poor.

These are kids who normally would have attended failing local schools. Why did they outperform their neighbors so dramatically? For a clue, just listen to their cheers, and see for whom they cheer the loudest. Last week, teachers Michelle Haynes and Leslie Fuller-Hope each got standing ovations. But the fifth graders were also vocally grateful to

Sisulu's management. In addition to clapping for their principal, the kids cheered the education entrepreneurs who took a chance on them.

Sisulu's teachers and principal are accountable to a small board of directors, not to a giant City Hall bureaucracy, as is the case with traditional public schools. The board, in turn, contracts with a private-sector school management company: Victory Schools Inc., founded by Steve Klinsky, a private-equity capitalist and a veteran of Goldman Sachs (and a *City Journal* publication committee member).

Klinsky started Victory to attract talent to education-management that might otherwise have gone into banking or law. But public-school veterans aren't shunned. Sisulu's principal came straight from New York City's public schools, and those who run Victory won their positions based on past successes, often in public-sector education.

Sisulu, like each New York charter school, must live or die by its performance. Some schools have done poorly—indeed, the state has already closed the other charter school that opened in Gotham in 1999. Does this mean New York's first two charter schools already have a 50 percent failure rate? No—it means that the system worked. The state government held a failing school accountable and shut it down, so that it couldn't fail more kids. How often does that happen with traditional public schools, where failing schools fail more kids year after year?

Overall, the experimental charter schools aren't doing badly relative to Gotham's other public schools. Sixty-three percent of fifth graders at New York City's charter schools could do math at or above grade level this year, above the citywide average. Three-quarters of the charter-school kids could read at or above grade level, also above average. That's why Governor Pataki lobbied the State Legislature to amend a law last week to raise the mandated cap on charter schools from just 100 statewide, so that more parents could choose to send their kids to these competitive schools. (There are now 32 charter schools open in New York City, with 15 new ones slated to open this fall.) But the effort to hike the cap failed; kids who don't get into one of the new schools this fall will have to wait until next year, at least.

The existing charter schools' overall successes so far are all the more impressive considering that, as administrators and teachers recounted at the Sisulu ceremony, the charter schools started from scratch. Sisulu already had to move once in a quest for more space. Fifth-grade teacher Haynes started out as a teaching assistant. But Sisulu's managers, teachers, parents, and kids succeed partly because they know they must make do with what they've got: They don't waste time agitating about class size, for example, as Gotham's teachers' union does. With two teachers and one teaching assistant for the fifth-grade class, the student-teacher ratio for the class that just graduated from Sisulu was about 24 to one. "Smaller classes would be nice, but you do with what you can," said one administrator.

Thanks to Sisulu, several students are on their way to New York's best traditional public middle schools (including the rigorous Frederick Douglass III Academy in Harlem, which is exempt from the New York City curriculum, offers Advanced-Placement classes to its high-school students, and sends most of its graduates on to college). Others will attend parochial schools.

And some will attend regular public middle schools, where, with their high expectations, they'll challenge their fellow students—and their teachers—to perform. They'll challenge, too, the Department of Education—which must now assume responsibility for their continued success.