

# Uncommon Schools | Change History.



Uncommon Schools:  
Turning Urban Schools  
Into Springboards to College



# About This Report

This report illustrates the successful college preparatory practices of Uncommon Schools, a network of 38 public charter schools in New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts that serves nearly 10,000 low-income students and students of color. During the 2013 Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools review process, a panel of national education experts chose Uncommon Schools as the best among the nation's 27 largest urban charter management

organizations in closing achievement gaps, graduating its students and preparing them for college. The policies and practices highlighted in this report were drawn from a week-long site visit to Uncommon Schools conducted by RMC Research Corporation in November 2013 and a review of Uncommon's quantitative student achievement data from 2008-09 through 2011-2012

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## Uncommon Schools

The mission of Uncommon Schools is to open and manage high-quality urban public charter schools that close achievement gaps and prepare low-income students to graduate from college. Uncommon highlights three reasons why its college-prep schools are consistently among the highest-performing in their home states:

- Uncommon Schools staff know all students have what it takes to go to college. Staff are fiercely committed to cultivating the intellectual curiosity and grit that will spur their students' success in the classroom and in their communities.
- Uncommon Schools leaders create and constantly fine-tune their systems to help teachers teach and students learn.
- Uncommon Schools staff know that without great teachers and leaders, nothing else matters. They also know there's no limit to learning. That's why development of great talent is at the core of Uncommon Schools' approach.

[www.uncommonschools.org](http://www.uncommonschools.org)

Spring 2014

## The Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools

The Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools honors the public charter management organization that has demonstrated the most outstanding overall student performance and improvement in recent years among the country's largest urban charter management organizations while reducing achievement gaps for low-income students and students of color.

The Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools mirrors The Broad Prize for Urban Education, which is awarded to traditional school districts, and seeks to:

- Recognize those charter models that show the best academic outcomes, particularly for traditionally disadvantaged students;
- Create an accessible repository of high-quality data on student achievement, policies and practices in the largest urban charter management organizations across the country; and
- Showcase the best practices of successful public charter management organizations so that other public charter schools and traditional public schools can learn from their success.

[www.broadprize.org](http://www.broadprize.org)

# Executive Summary

Horace Mann, one of the founders of American public education, believed that building “common schools” for the nation’s young people was the single most powerful way to create a society of equals.

Yet today, too many students in low-income school districts struggle to get into and through college because they lack the same opportunities as students in wealthier neighborhoods.

A group of six charter school leaders banded together to create a new system of schools because they believed that Uncommon Schools were necessary to achieve education equality. Since Uncommon’s first school opened in 1997, the network’s philosophy that revolutionary teaching practices and tenacity—by educators and students alike—can lead all students to college has spread to more than three dozen schools in New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts. Today, Uncommon—winner of the 2013 Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools—educates 9,900 students, with plans to open at least eight more schools and serve approximately 17,000 students by 2017.

Uncommon’s challenges are daunting: some incoming fifth-graders enroll two or three grades behind, and one in 10 has special needs. Schools set high expectations and provide a bounty of support to students and teachers. All students who enter behind grade level are expected to catch up within 10 or 20 months—and the overwhelming majority does.

Uncommon’s students—97 percent of whom are African-American or Hispanic, with 80 percent receiving free or reduced-price lunches—are largely closing achievement gaps with their white and higher-income peers. More than 90 percent of Uncommon eighth-graders complete high school within five years. High school seniors score well above the national average on the SAT—with 100 percent participation—and *all* graduates are admitted to college.

The commitment to send every student to and through college extends beyond high school. In addition to strong guidance and extensive help with college applications, Uncommon offers graduates \$250 per semester to purchase textbooks and sends counselors to campuses twice a year to encourage alumni to stay in school and never give up on the dream of a college degree. Forty-nine percent of alumni from the classes of 2004-2007 have earned bachelor’s degrees—quadruple the national rate for low-income students.



The rigor of Uncommon Schools is evident in the emphasis even in the earliest grades on critical thinking and marshalling evidence—a practice that earned one Uncommon campus’s 15-year-olds a reading score on the international PISA exam well above the U.S. average and higher than students in all but nine countries. Brett Peiser, CEO of the charter school network, says Uncommon has discovered there is no single, 100 percent solution to the problems faced by urban schools, but rather a hundred “1 percent solutions that make a school work, all focused around time, structure, data and people.” Peiser’s credo has translated into a strategy that has made Uncommon one of the country’s top charter management organizations.

**Time** Nine-hour school days (typically 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) are the norm across Uncommon, two hours longer than the typical American public school day, and the school year runs 185 to 190 days versus the standard

180 days. The extra time allows Uncommon to offer double math and double reading periods daily in its 35 elementary and middle schools, along with a full roster of science, social studies, art and other subjects. Tight classroom management techniques give teachers more time for instruction.

**Structure** Uncommon’s schools are led by principals who are responsible for instruction and managed by directors of operations who oversee everything else, like budgets and transportation. The teamwork between these two leaders allows principals to focus entirely on supporting teachers.

**Data** Uncommon is expert at harnessing data to drive and improve instruction. Its own interim assessments, administered four times a year for most subjects and grades, are the linchpin for accountability. Principals, team leaders and teachers are schooled on sophisticated ways to analyze data. They dissect patterns of error to determine what needs to be retaught or taught differently. Managing directors in each of the five regions and home office leadership keep an eagle eye on the results. Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, who leads the North Star Academy middle and high schools in Newark, N.J., has authored a book, “Driven By Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction,” that offers a blueprint for adopting Uncommon’s methods.

**People** Teachers at Uncommon receive more coaching and support in a year than some teachers do in a lifetime. New teachers begin learning the techniques of effective teaching during a three-week summer orientation at workshops led by Uncommon leaders such as Doug Lemov, author of the best-selling “Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College,” a how-to book with video clips of master teachers in action. Instructors attend refreshers during the year, and principals and lead teachers observe and meet one-on-one with teachers weekly. Uncommon recruits teachers—often through Teach For America—many of whom are at or near the beginning of their careers but who share the network’s commitment to social justice. Again and again, Uncommon’s results show that great teachers are made, not born.

Uncommon has established itself as a thought leader in the movement to push American schools and students to world-class standards, both through its practical-minded books and videos used by its own teachers and by instructors throughout the country, and also by throwing open its doors and allowing a steady stream of curious education leaders and policymakers to witness how Uncommon achieves its results.



# Uncommon Schools: Turning Urban Schools Into Springboards to College

Biology teacher Amanda Vargo pirouettes around the lab, calling on her 20 high school freshmen wearing fluorescent goggles to calculate the surface and volumes of different sized agar cubes they are dropping into beakers filled with sodium hydroxide. After the solution turns pink, the students fish out the cubes, slice them and measure how far the color has penetrated each size. Vargo stays on-the-go throughout the fast-paced lesson on cellular diffusion.

The experiment over, students pull off the safety goggles and exit the lab while their young teacher reflects on her introduction to North Star Academy College Preparatory High School in Newark, N.J. “I’ve learned more in the couple of months I’ve been here than I did in all four (previous) years combined,” says the Marquette University graduate. “I’m kind of embarrassed by how incompetent I feel, because the teachers here are so good and the standard so high.”

But Vargo isn’t intimidated. “I’m really loving teaching right now,” she says. At North Star, “there’s so much support and so many resources. I’ve never had an instructional leader or anyone who worked with me on my teaching before.”

North Star Academy is part of Uncommon Schools, a network of 38 charter schools with 9,900 students in five cities: Brooklyn, Rochester and Troy, N.Y.; Boston; and Newark, N.J. The students are admitted by lottery, usually in kindergarten or fifth grade but also from the waitlist in other grades as spots open up. To keep families together—and to make the parents’ morning commute a little easier—younger brothers and sisters receive sibling preference in the lottery. Almost all of the charter network’s students are African-American (83 percent) or Hispanic (14 percent). Four in five qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 10 percent have learning disabilities or other special needs.

New or established, Uncommon’s schools have that look of success that is evident when you walk in the door and see dozens of college pennants hanging on the wall alongside inspirational phrases: Work Hard, Change

History; Education = Freedom; Be Uncommon/Change History; Integrity, Determination, Enthusiasm. School leaders stand at their doors every morning, shaking hands with and greeting every student by name. If this isn’t a morning for a pulsating, school-wide pep rally-type assembly in the gym, the students head off to homerooms named after prestigious colleges and universities and begin their nine-hour days (7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.)—two hours longer than peers in traditional public schools, some sharing the same buildings.

The children are in uniform: green or blue polo or oxford shirts, khakis and dress shoes, not sneakers. Principal Jessica Simmons keeps a box of black shoes in her office at Brownsville Collegiate, one of the dozen Uncommon middle schools in Brooklyn, for those who forget. Not far away, at Williamsburg Collegiate, posters on the wall show not only Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights heroes, but also the faces of Williamsburg’s own top-scoring students Photoshopped onto the brawny torsos of National Basketball Association stars. From kindergarten on, the message is hammered home to Uncommon students: They will go to college, and they will graduate. At Leadership Prep Canarsie, fifth-grader Khemani says, “They put up all these college flags in the hallway and make you feel like you are in college. You just sit there and start thinking about it and I was like, ‘Yeah, I really do want to go to college.’”

And not just any college. Parent Leslian Chetram says her fifth-grader came home one day and announced, “I’m going to an Ivy League school.” Not surprisingly, he has his eye on Columbia, after which his homeroom is named. A sign outside Columbia reads: Hard Work Beats Talent When Talent Doesn’t Work Hard.

Other high-performing public charter schools that are defying the odds in inner cities also set lofty academic goals and place heavy emphasis on preparing children for college despite poverty and other disadvantages.

What sets Uncommon apart and what has caught the attention of education reformers across the country and even abroad is not only how well, but also how consistently Uncommon is closing achievement gaps in the five cities where it operates. Its largely low-income, African-American or Hispanic students are catching up with and in grades and subjects exceeding the performance of white students and those from more affluent families.

That's why Uncommon won the 2013 Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools. An independent review board of prominent educators and experts that evaluated student achievement data from 27 large public charter school systems found that Uncommon made significantly more progress than any other since 2009 on improving student performance and closing those achievement gaps. The lessons offered by Uncommon for other schools and education reformers about fixing urban education is summed up by Uncommon CEO Brett Peiser, who says, "There isn't one single 100 percent solution, but a hundred,

*"There isn't one single 100 percent solution, but a hundred, individual 1 percent solutions that make a school work, all focused around time, structure, data and people."*



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Teachers receive extraordinary amounts of coaching, help and professional development in every Uncommon school. Principals and instructional leaders spend at least 30 minutes a week observing each teacher's classroom and meeting one-on-one with them afterward to analyze what was successful and areas for improvement. So accustomed are students to the observers that they don't even look up when strangers—often curious educators from other schools—walk in and take a seat.

While the results Uncommon students achieve on statewide assessments in New Jersey, New York and Massachusetts would by themselves draw attention, the public charter network's stature in the national education landscape has grown thanks to a series of books its leaders have written describing what they do and encouraging others to follow the Uncommon formula.

The foremost of these how-to guides is Doug Lemov's best-seller, "Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College," which captures in words and through video clips the nuts-and-bolts techniques that Uncommon uses to train teachers on how to deliver those crisp, stimulating lessons and maintain decorum in ways that maximize the productive time available for learning. Lemov, who is the former managing director of schools in Rochester and Troy, N.Y., and now head of the network's Teach Like a Champion team, has worked with his colleagues who have collectively authored six practical guides on such topics as Uncommon's data-driven instructional model and how leaders can build exceptional schools.

Uncommon has repeatedly replicated that success since opening its first school in 1997, demonstrating that urban schools can be turned into springboards to college instead of trapping students in a cycle of poverty. Uncommon was incorporated in 2005 with five schools and fewer than 600 students. Since then, Uncommon has opened new schools annually over the past four years. Now it is aiming to grow from 38 schools and nearly 10,000 students to at least 46 schools that will serve more than 7,000 additional students by 2017, in addition to a proposal to launch a new region of schools in Camden, N.J. Uncommon shares its school blueprints through its books and videos and also through teacher and public school leader training workshops.

Here's a closer look at how Uncommon is achieving results.

## Emphasis on Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teaching experience is preferred, but not required for most classroom openings at Uncommon. The network hires many instructors from Teach For America (TFA) (both first-year teachers and those like Amanda Vargo who have completed two-year TFA stints) and from Uncommon's own Summer Teaching Fellowship program for rising college seniors, which is aimed at convincing more African-American and Hispanic students to become teachers. Many of its principals and other leaders have TFA on their resumes.

But everyone the network hires must share Uncommon's bedrock commitment to social justice and its conviction

that low-income children of color deserve a high-quality education to get them to and through college. Uncommon recruiters and principals also look for candidates who display grit and determination and who buy into the philosophy that no excuses are allowed from teachers and students alike. As Uncommon's website states: "State certification is helpful but not required. Belief in and alignment with Uncommon's core beliefs and educational philosophy is non-negotiable."

For new teachers, the training starts during three weeks of summer orientation when Lemov, managing directors, school principals and other instructional leaders lead workshops where the newcomers learn and practice Uncommon's instructional and classroom management techniques over and over again. They attend refresher courses during the year, especially if the principal sees a teacher is struggling.

## How to Teach Like a Champion

"Teach Like a Champion" author Doug Lemov is quick to say that he is not the champion teacher others should emulate. His contribution has been finding and filming the techniques of great teachers, giving their approaches short, catchy names and putting it all down on paper and, of course, demonstrating it on DVDs.

Norman Atkins, an Uncommon founder, former CEO and current board chair, calls Lemov "the John Madden of professional teaching" for his ability to break down and analyze teacher "game films" much the way the colorful sports broadcaster did during his years commenting on National Football League games. There is nothing fancy or esoteric about Lemov's techniques, and the video clips are unadorned, rough cuts of actual moments in classes, shot from the back of the room. In the book, Lemov calls them "the tools of the teaching craft" and emphasizes their practicality. "I have tried to describe these techniques in a concrete, specific and actionable way that allows you to start using them tomorrow."

He has a name for each of the 49 techniques, such as "No Opt Out," which gives teachers advice on what to do when a student answers, "I don't know" (give a hint, let another

student answer and then make the first student repeat the answer), and "Normalize Error" (don't make a big deal about students' wrong answers but push them to try again). The book also includes techniques for setting high academic expectations, structuring lessons, encouraging good student behavior, and even practicing how to pick up classwork and take their seats at the start of class.

In workshops Lemov often shows a clip of Doug McCurry, co-founder of Amistad Academy and the Achievement First charter network, drilling his students on how to pass out papers. That may seem trivial, but if students take 20 seconds instead of 80 seconds to pass out papers, and do it 20 times a day, that frees up 20 minutes a day for more instruction, reasons Lemov.

A Newark teacher, Lindley Bell, says, "In learning all these taxonomies, I was so overwhelmed, but when you actually teach, the more practice you get, the more comfortable you become...It all blends together once you have more experience."

"Teach Like a Champion" has been "a game changer for us because it provided a common vocabulary between everybody that didn't exist before," says Uncommon CEO Brett Peiser. "It allows young teachers and new leaders to get classroom management down very quickly. Videos have to play a big role in your professional development."



Back on campus after orientation, teachers receive ample help with lesson plans and practice the lessons before delivering them in the classroom. Instructional leaders, deans and teachers whose students perform highest on assessments take the lead in crafting lesson plans. If a teacher prepares a plan of her own, she is required to submit it to the instructional leader for feedback before the actual classroom delivery. At least once a week the principal or an instructional leader observes each teacher, sometimes videotaping the observation, and meets afterward one-on-one for 30 minutes to discuss what they saw and suggest ways to improve the instruction. A new or struggling teacher may be observed and advised every day. The team leader and the teacher may watch that video or a video of a master teacher delivering the same lesson, or they might observe when a mentor delivers that lesson to another class.

“The collaboration within schools is just constant,” says Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, managing director of the North Star Academy middle and high schools in Newark. “You cannot teach in an Uncommon school and live in isolation. It’s not possible. You will be observed, pushed, supported and motivated by your peers across all of our networks.”

Peiser adds, “We think teacher training has a key role in retaining people. They are more likely to stay when they feel they are growing consistently. When your organization

*“Great teachers are made, not born.”*  
— CEO Brett Peiser

doesn’t continue to make you better, people who are hungry to be good go somewhere else.”

Teachers welcome the feedback and help. “I’m pushed to develop professionally,” says Michael Pavlis, who teaches eighth-grade history at Brooklyn East Collegiate. “I don’t feel like I’m stuck doing the same thing again and again. And I feel a lot of trust from my leadership team—trust to manage my classroom, trust to teach what I teach. That means a lot.”

“Teaching can be a very isolating profession,” says Derrick Bell, a sixth-grade math teacher at North Star Academy Clinton Hill Middle School in Newark. “Here you feel like you’re more than a classroom teacher.”

Uncommon has multi-day retreats for leaders twice a year, and the instructional leaders from the schools in each of

Uncommon's five regions train together on a regular basis. It all creates a culture and system of continuous improvement.

"We don't just try to hire all-stars," says Julie Kennedy, managing director for the middle schools and high schools in Brooklyn. "Part of our goal is to make everyone better... and we believe everyone can and will get better."

The training is essential since Uncommon—which typically pays teachers above the local public school scale but with longer hours and a privately run 403(b) retirement plan rather than a more traditional public pension—is growing and also needs to make new hires as teachers become leaders or leave the organization. "We

have to hire 2,100 teachers over the next five years, 850 of them likely to be brand new rookies, which is why it behooves us to spend as much time as we do on professional development," says Peiser.

## Rigorous Curriculum, Frequent Assessments and Sophisticated Data Analysis

Uncommon's curriculum is now aligned to the Common Core State Standards and, in its three high schools, to the Advanced Placement tests. Before the Common Core, each region's curriculum was built around its state assessment standards. States now have raised those standards to the

## Uncommon Students Achieving Uncommon Results

- Uncommon operates 20 schools in Brooklyn, nine in Newark, six in Rochester and Troy, N.Y. and three in Boston.
- Uncommon Schools outperform other traditional school districts that serve students with similar family incomes.
- 100 percent of students who graduate from Uncommon high schools are admitted to college.\*
- As of 2013, 49 percent of Uncommon's high school graduates have earned bachelor's degrees six years after graduating from high school, more than four times the national rate of students in the lowest income quartile—and higher than even that of the second and third income quartiles. Adding in students who have not yet had six years to complete their degree, 71 percent have either completed or remain enrolled in four-year colleges.\*
- Every Uncommon senior took the SAT exam in 2012. They scored 1570 on average—20 points above the college-readiness benchmark established by the College Board and 72 points higher than the national average.
- Half of Uncommon's juniors and seniors in New Jersey took an Advanced Placement exam in 2012, and 75 percent scored 3 or higher, a score that qualifies a student for college credit, on at least one AP exam.
- Across the network, Uncommon has closed 56 percent of achievement gaps between African-American and white students and between low-income and more affluent students on reading, math and science assessments.
- As of 2012, Uncommon schools in Newark had closed achievement gaps between its African-American students and white students in New Jersey in elementary, middle and high school math and science. Similarly it closed the gaps between low-income and more affluent students.
- African-American students in Uncommon middle schools in New York ranked in the top 20 percent in reading, math and science among all African-American students in the state. In Uncommon's Massachusetts middle schools, African-American and Hispanic students ranked in the top 30 percent compared with their fellow students of color statewide.
- Students usually attain higher achievement each year they spend in Uncommon classrooms. Uncommon says that in the 2011-12 school year, 90 percent of grade school cohorts enrolled in its schools for at least two years closed the achievement gap in math.\*
- North Star Academy College Preparatory High School students ranked among the top 10 countries in reading on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam that compares the knowledge of 15-year-olds in dozens of countries.\*

\* Results provided by Uncommon Schools

Common Core bar, which in turn means fewer students are scoring at proficient and advanced levels. Uncommon still stands up well in most comparisons to neighboring traditional districts and in their states, and network leaders embrace the tougher standards wholeheartedly.

Previously, Peiser says, Uncommon was hitting home runs over Little League fences. Now it's knocking fewer balls out of the park, but the fences are set at major league distances. "Common Core is changing a lot of things. It's really bringing us together," says Peiser, whose education career began teaching history at Brooklyn's Midwood High School in the 1990s and who later was founding principal of a Boston charter.

The charter school innovators who came together to form Uncommon did not want to vest all instructional control to a central office. They came up with, in one leader's phrase, "a quirky federalism." There has never been a chief academic officer or director of curriculum over all the schools in the New York City office. But the emphasis on college preparation, strong discipline and tightly supervised instruction bound them together from the start. And now the schools are moving even closer together on their lesson plans and interim assessments. The interim assessments, administered four times a year for most subjects and grades, are Uncommon's linchpin

for accountability. Principals, team leaders and teachers are schooled on sophisticated ways to analyze data. They dissect patterns of error to determine what needs to be retaught and pinpoint what teachers need to do differently. Principals and managing directors see the data as soon as it's ready. They know not only which schools, but also which teachers are achieving the best results.

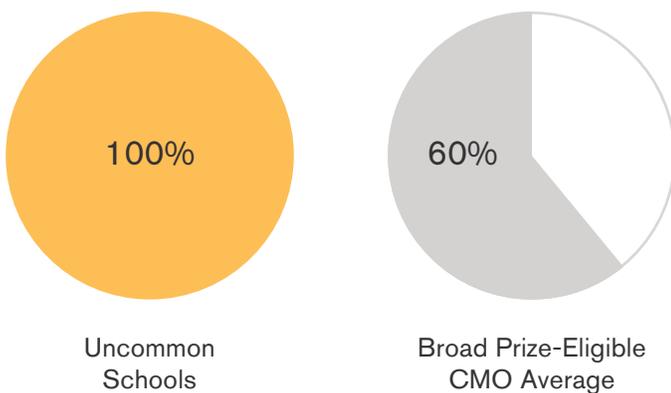
In Uncommon's second guiding tome, "Driven By Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction," author Bambrick-Santoyo calls the interim assessments "the lifeblood of data-driven instruction. Without well-thought-out and carefully written tests, effective analysis of student strengths and weaknesses is impossible."

Traditionally, each Uncommon region prepared its own interim assessments, which made sense when the schools operated under different state standards, "but that's changing with the Common Core," says Josh Phillips, managing director of the Rochester and Troy, N.Y., schools. "The Brooklyn schools and my schools upstate are using the same interim assessments. We're looking into Uncommon-wide assessments."

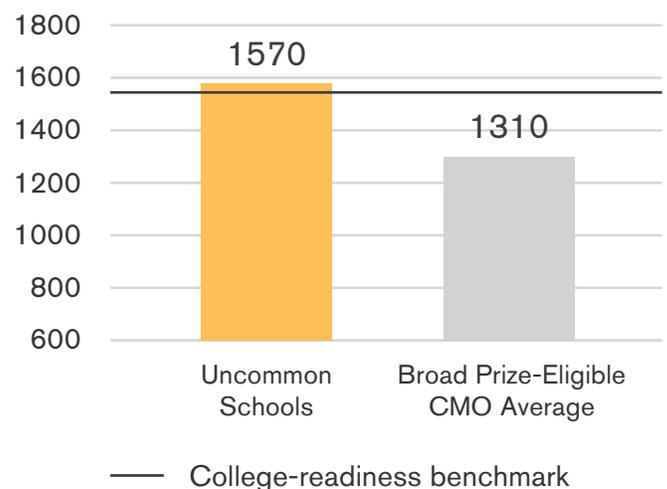
Teachers already know from the "exit tickets"—a short question or two students must fill out at the end of class—how each student is doing on a day-by-day basis. Parents

## College Readiness Indicator: SAT

SAT Participation Rates



Average SAT Scores



Source: Analysis performed on 2012 data provided by the College Board and the Common Core of Data.



receive weekly or biweekly progress reports and must come to school in person—day or night—to pick up the report cards issued three or four times a year. “This is an excellent system,” says Leslie Chetram, the Brooklyn mom of a fifth-grader. In her son’s old school, “you had to wait until the end of the year to realize what the heck is going on.”

Uncommon has a data warehouse system that generates reports for home office and school staff. Four of the 17 teams at the home office in lower Manhattan focus on data and information technology. The interim assessment results are fed into “dashboards” of performance data for managing directors and other school leaders, along with attendance, attrition and other information. Bambrick-Santoyo, the chief proselytizer for data-driven instruction, cautions against throwing in too much. “More data doesn’t necessarily mean better schools. You have to pick the right data,” he says. “Driven by Data” offers not only case studies of high-performing charter schools around the country that are making smart use of data, but also shares examples

of math and literacy assessments and rubrics and templates for analyzing and acting upon what they show.

Rather than emphasizing a long laundry list of things to fix, Uncommon encourages teachers and leaders to concentrate on just a few areas of improvement. “When a teacher is struggling in a classroom, we go back to, ‘OK, what is that bite-sized action step? Let’s just focus on that,’” says Adam Cobb, principal of Leadership Prep Canarsie Middle Academy. Reaching for a sports metaphor—as Uncommon folks often do—he adds, “If someone comes in and doesn’t know how to play basketball at all, you’re just going to work on a lay-up.”

### **Strong Dual Leadership and High Behavioral Expectations**

Uncommon schools are organized, top to bottom, to maximize the amount of time devoted to instruction and learning. The network frees principals to devote almost all

## **Signature Features of Uncommon Schools**

Emphasis on Teacher Training And Professional Development

Rigorous Curriculum, Frequent Assessments and Sophisticated Data Analysis

Strong Dual Leadership and High Behavioral Expectations

Joyful Community-Building and College Guidance

their time to instruction through an unusual dual leadership structure. Each school has a director of operations as well as a principal, both of whom are considered equals and who undergo one-year apprenticeships before assuming their duties. While the principal concentrates on instruction and learning, the director of operations runs everything else in the school, from budget and discipline to fire drills, lunch menus and building maintenance. The two positions collaborate on hiring new teachers and staff, usually choosing the former from a list of prospects pre-screened by the recruitment team at Uncommon's headquarters.

At Leadership Prep Canarsie Middle Academy, Director of Operations Mary Katherine Flynn says she and Cobb "have equally shared responsibilities in very different buckets. He shoulders a number of things that I never touch and similarly I shoulder a number that he never touches."

Flynn, an attorney with a master's degree in social work, says both are charged with "creating and driving the vision for the school. It's like starting and running a small business within a (larger) educational enterprise.

"Adam and I are very much aligned in wanting to use people, time and data strategically so that we can be as efficient as possible" and create a positive environment for teachers and students and for learning, Flynn says.

Flynn's bailiwick includes mundane matters such as the homework collection system and assigning teachers for lunch duty, as well as "much bigger picture" tasks such as "how are we building our staff for next year and what personal characteristics we're looking for in people who we're going to add to the team."

Chrissy Burgess took on the director of operations role for North Star Academy College Preparatory High School in 2012 just weeks after receiving her master's degree in public administration from Princeton University. "It was a very steep learning curve, but it worked out," she says. Employing a football phrase that is another Uncommon favorite, Burgess says she "blocks and tackles" for her principal "and pretty much does everything non-instructional in order to ensure that instruction is the main area of focus for students and teachers."

Uncommon enforces a strict code of behavior spelled out in its Student Handbooks and Accountability Contracts. Few things go unnoticed, right down to small infractions

*Few things go unnoticed, right down to small infractions.*



and the dress code. "We make a big deal out of little things so big things don't happen," says Dana Lehman, the Boston managing director.

"I can't tell you how many times a day I'm like, 'Tuck in your shirt. Fix your tie,'" says Kathryn Baxter-Greene, a fifth-grade writing teacher at Bedford Stuyvesant Collegiate. "We have laser focus for the smallest details...If you pick on the small things, then nothing big can really erupt. They roll with it."

Most students are introduced to Uncommon in fifth grade. Teachers and school-based social workers say some arrive two or three years behind but are expected to catch up, whether that takes 10 months or 20 months—and the vast majority does. Uncommon only loses 5 percent of students each year. And even though they live in cities with dropout rates as high as 40 percent, 91 percent of Uncommon's eighth-grade graduates complete high school in five years.

Edward Nkosi, whose older son graduated from North Star Academy and now attends Franklin and Marshall College and whose younger son is a sophomore, says he never wavered when his children groused about the strictness. “My wife and I were adamant: ‘You’re going to finish this school because that’s how the world is,’” he says.

## Joyful Community-Building and College Guidance

The discipline at Uncommon is leavened by “the joy factor” or “sparkle” that teachers inject into classes, especially in the elementary and middle schools. There are frequent assemblies where teachers lead students in clapping, chants and songs. At a North Star elementary school, students participate in what they call “Morning Circle” to sing:

*North Star, North Star,  
Justice, justice.  
Teaches you right,  
Teaches you wrong,  
Teaches you respect  
And makes you strong.  
Fairness for you, Fairness for me,  
Changing our world and community.*

And at another school, students repeat:

*We have courage, we have courage  
At North Star Academy.  
We are not afraid to speak up,  
We are strong enough to stand up.  
We are brave enough to move up.  
We have courage at North Star Academy.*

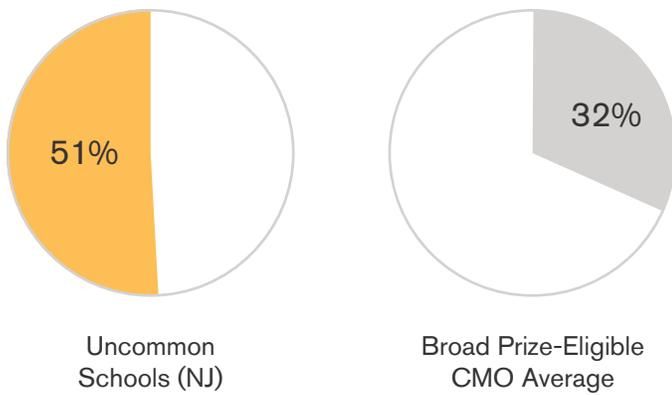
Teachers and students alike see themselves as part of a struggle for social justice. “It’s hard work,” says Lehman, the Boston director, but “what keeps me going is knowing that we are part of something bigger than our schools.”

Kelly Dowling, principal of North Star’s Downtown Middle School, says, “Our students understand that they are essentially the freedom fighters of their generation. It’s amazing to be part of this movement if you’re an adult, but especially so if you’re 10 or 11 years old... Every day when they put on their khakis and matching shirts, they are fighting against injustices and showing the world what they are capable of.”

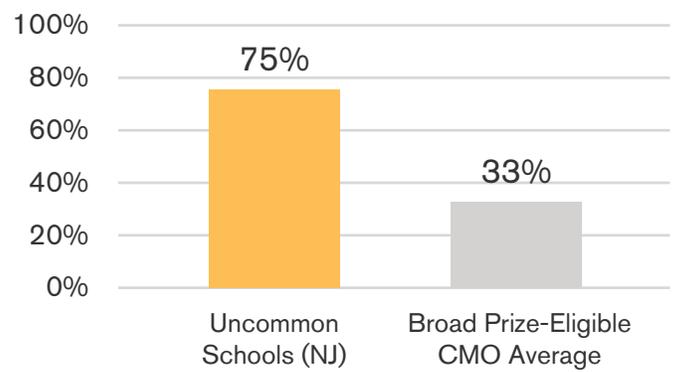
Pep rallies with teachers in ninja costumes, banners and awarding a disco ball-like baton to the class where 100 percent of children raised their hands to every question are all part of the Uncommon approach to injecting joy into the curriculum along with rigor.

## College Readiness Indicator: Advanced Placement

AP Participation Rates



AP Passing Rates



Source: Analysis performed on 2012 data provided by the College Board and the Common Core of Data.

While the morale-boosting is more pronounced at the elementary and middle schools, “theater is an element in all of our schools,” says North Star Academy High School Principal Michael Mann, who has two theater and arts teachers on his staff.

The high school students in Brooklyn and Newark describe the work load as heavy, noting it’s not the high school experience they anticipated from watching “Glee” and other television shows. Elementary and middle school students receive homework daily.

The students also possess esprit de corps. “We’re like a family,” says Jose, a senior at Uncommon Charter High School in Brooklyn, who hopes to become a veterinarian. Classmate Areeb calls the school “perfect. They really prepare us for college and the future,” and there’s none of the “drama and conflicts and stuff” that occur at other high schools.

Summer internships and even opportunities to travel abroad and learn about European history in the continent itself help motivate the students.

Students receive copious amounts of college counseling and preparation, including help with financial aid applications and senior seminars to write and hone application essays. Seniors are required to apply to several colleges and average 12 college applications. “They give

*“ Our students understand that they are essentially the freedom fighters of their generation. ”*

you all the information and things you need on a silver platter,” says one North Star Academy senior.

The help doesn’t end when they graduate. Counselors fan out to campuses across the country and visit alumni twice a year during freshman and sophomore years. They also offer \$250 stipends per semester to help pay for textbooks.

Parents often are reluctant to see their child attend college too far from home, but Uncommon pushes students to aim high and apply to schools with high retention and graduation rates as well as generous, need-based financial aid. It also impresses upon students what Patrick Rametti, North Star Academy’s director of college readiness, calls “the real life consequences” of dropping classes or spending an extra year in college, namely thousands of dollars in more loans. ■



For more information about Uncommon Schools' student achievement outcomes, visit:

[www.broadprize.org/publiccharterschools/2013.html](http://www.broadprize.org/publiccharterschools/2013.html)

[www.broadprize.org/publiccharterschools/reports2013.html](http://www.broadprize.org/publiccharterschools/reports2013.html)

For more information about The Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools, visit:

[www.broadprize.org/publiccharterschools.html](http://www.broadprize.org/publiccharterschools.html)

## The Broad Foundation

Founded by entrepreneur Eli Broad and his wife Edythe, both graduates of Detroit Public Schools, The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation is a philanthropy that seeks to ensure that every student in an urban public school has the opportunity to succeed. Bringing together top education experts and practitioners, the foundation funds system-wide programs and policies that strengthen public schools by creating environments that allow good teachers to do great work and enable students of all backgrounds to learn and thrive.

## RMC Research Corporation

RMC Research Corporation is a nationally recognized research and professional services organization. RMC leads a team of researchers and practitioners in a site visit to the winner of The Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools. The team analyzes the winner's organization-wide policies and practices related to student achievement, using a research-based rubric for effective school and organizational practices that was developed exclusively for The Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools.

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