

WINNER OF THE 2012 BROAD PRIZE FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

YES Prep Public Schools



Supporting Every Student to College and Beyond



Celebrating What Works in
Charter Management Organizations

About This Report

This report illustrates the successful college preparatory practices of YES Prep Public Schools, a network of 11 public charter schools in Houston that serves nearly 7,000 poor and minority students. During the 2012 Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools review process, a panel of national education experts chose YES Prep as the best among the nation's 20 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 collected during a week-long site visit to YES Prep conducted by RMC Research Corporation in November 2012 and a review of YES Prep's quantitative student achievement data over the past four years.

YES Prep Public Schools

The mission of YES Prep Public Schools is to increase the number of low-income Houstonians who graduate from a four-year college prepared to compete in the global marketplace and give back to their communities. The schools are designed around the belief that low-income students can achieve at the same academic levels as their more affluent peers when given access to similar opportunities and resources. Since YES Prep's inception in 1998, 100 percent of its seniors have graduated from high school and been accepted to four-year colleges and universities.

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 among the country's largest urban charter management organizations in recent years while reducing achievement gaps for poor and minority students.

The Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools mirrors The Broad Prize for Urban Education that 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
- 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

Executive Summary

YES Prep Public Schools, winner of the inaugural Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools in 2012, is a pioneer on a new frontier: supporting low-income, minority students all the way to college graduation.

Of the 6,700 students in YES's 11 secondary schools in Houston, 95 percent are Hispanic or African-American, 80 percent are from low-income families, and more than 90 percent will be the first generation in their families to go to college.

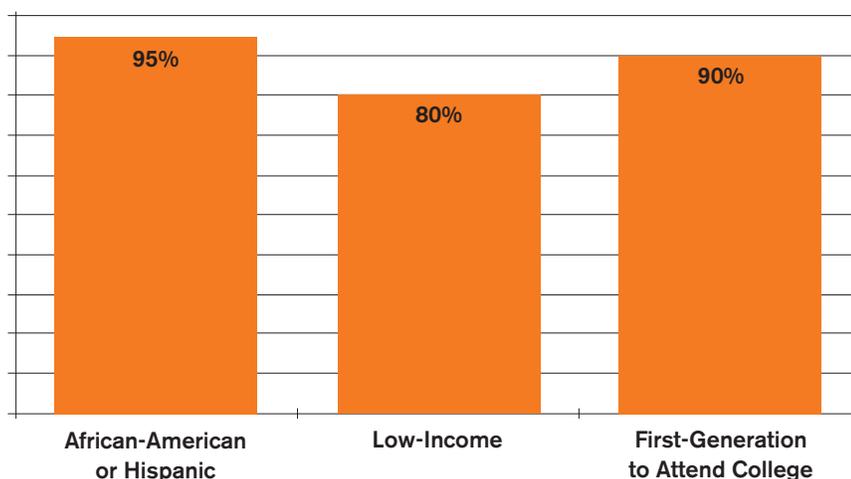
Defying the odds, 100 percent of YES seniors are accepted into a four-year college. Within a year of graduating, 99 percent of students enroll in college, 91 percent of them at four-year institutions. Seventy-two percent of YES alumni are currently enrolled in college or have earned their degrees. Nationally, less than a quarter of low-income students complete college.

A new YES school opens with sixth grade and adds a grade per year until it serves grades six through 12. Even with expansion plans, demand will still vastly exceed supply: The waiting list is currently 7,000 names long.

YES provides students with extraordinary opportunities, despite receiving less money from state and federal sources than the Houston Independent School District: \$10,059 per pupil versus \$11,279. About 10 percent of its \$60 million budget comes from private fundraising.

The YES network—which houses schools in locations ranging from portable classrooms to refurbished buildings to gleaming new buildings—uses a variety of strategies to foster students' academic, social and emotional growth in pursuit of bachelor's degrees. These strategies are rarely seen used in combination in urban public schools.

YES PREP STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



Academics: YES Prep determines what students must learn each year to pass Advanced Placement exams by the time they are seniors, and network and school administrators plan curriculum down to the sixth grade accordingly. The network administers thrice-yearly common assessments for all grades that are scored like AP exams. To ensure student mastery of the basics, each school has double periods of instruction in language arts and math. School is in session past 4 p.m., and teachers are available by cell phone until 9 o'clock to help students who need assistance with homework assignments—or anything else.



Nineteen-year-old Luis Ramos is pursuing his dream of becoming an architect at Connecticut College thanks to the opportunities he received at YES Prep Southeast. “Not many students have the opportunity to have the type of teachers that we had at YES. I feel privileged,” says Ramos, whose parents never finished middle school. He sees what a struggle it is for some of his childhood friends to attend college. “That would’ve been me if I hadn’t attended YES,” he says.

Staffing: In hiring teachers, YES relies heavily on bright, enormously dedicated and idealistic young talent with in-depth content knowledge. Administrators tend to be home-grown. Staff members are carefully selected based on qualities that are exhibited by the most successful teachers and administrators, such as perfectionism and ability to rebound after a setback. In addition to receiving regular training, coaching and support, all teachers meet for eight full days each year for self-led professional development. They say the time is invaluable for troubleshooting problems and getting inspiration for their classes. An in-house alternative certification program accredited to provide credentials to new teachers has a heavy emphasis on ongoing coaching and student data analysis.

Character building: While most high schools have the same counselors handling students’ college applications and social/emotional needs, each YES school has social workers in addition to college counselors. Character traits of successful college students, such as grit and tenacity, are heavily emphasized. Community service is mandatory, and students take pride in giving back to their neighborhoods. YES connects its students with opportunities to build the character traits of successful college students. This includes summer studies on college campuses, wilderness trips and opportunities to travel the world, which often lessens parents’ cultural resistance to their going away for college.

College-going culture: Because its students are almost always the first in their families to go on to college, YES offers a college seminar course every year of high school that covers everything from SAT prep to the financial aid process to how to write college application essays. Students take annual college tours

beginning in sixth grade, with groups of juniors visiting colleges in the regions of their choice. All seniors are required to apply to at least eight four-year colleges by mid-November. YES leaders convinced 24 colleges to commit to giving special consideration to qualified YES students and meeting 100 percent of their documented financial needs. Seniors ring a giant gong or bell upon receipt of an acceptance letter and participate in “Senior Signing Day” with a celebrity speaker.

Alumni support: Two full-time network staff members as well as school college counselors support alumni. Counselors conduct exit interviews with all graduates to prioritize post-YES services based on academic, social/emotional and financial needs. YES maintains a scholarship fund for alumni, sends care packages to freshmen and keeps up with graduates on social media. Some schools have parent support groups. Thirteen college campuses with a large number of YES graduates also have alumni designated as fellows to support their peers. Alumni are often eager to give back in exchange for the help they’ve been given. More than 30 of them have returned to teach for their alma mater; alumni provide the steadiest supply of quality Hispanic and African-American teachers. A 2002 graduate has been selected to lead the newest YES school.

The YES Prep story is one filled with lessons for charter and non-charter schools alike. ■



Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools winner YES Prep supports students to and through college graduation.

Back in the mid-1990s, when a young Houston teacher named Chris Barbic first considered opening a middle school, his goal was to prevent the poor, minority children he was instructing in their elementary years from falling through the cracks come seventh grade. No quality public middle school options existed in their neighborhood, the East End, and Barbic wanted to see them through those vulnerable transition years.

But after middle school, then what? Barbic quickly realized the necessity of extending his vision to include high school as well. Soon his eyes were set on a lofty goal for every one of his students: Graduate high school and be accepted into a four-year college. By 1998, he had secured state approval for his own public charter school.

Houston in those years was the birthplace of what's now known as the "no excuses" charter school movement. As Barbic was launching what has become a network of combined middle/high schools known as YES Prep, two of his fellow Teach For America corps members, other 20-something idealists named Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, were starting the first Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) school. YES and KIPP schools shared several features, including long instructional days and teachers committed to being on call late into the evenings. KIPP took its concept national, while YES chose to concentrate in the greater Houston area.

Over the past 15 years, no excuses charter schools have changed the national conversation about education by proving that with hard work and high expectations, large numbers of low-income African-American and Hispanic students can travel the road to college.

But getting to college is one thing. Completing college is another. Even when students are prepared academically for higher education, financial challenges and family demands often prevent them from earning their degrees.

Defying the odds, 100 percent of YES seniors are accepted into a four-year college. Within a year of graduating, 99 percent of students enroll in a college, 91 percent of them at four-year institutions. Seventy-two percent of YES alumni are currently enrolled in college or have earned their degrees. Nationally, less than a quarter of low-income students complete college.

When YES began studying its alumni patterns a few years ago, 40 percent of the students in its first graduating classes from 2001 to 2008 had completed a bachelor's degree within six years, reflecting a grim national reality for students from low-income backgrounds who enroll in college and not nearly enough for an organization whose motto is "Whatever It Takes."

In a national study recently reported in The New York Times, among students in the bottom quartile economically, just 6 percent of those with below-average test scores and 26 percent with above-average test scores went on to earn college degrees.¹

"At the beginning we were very focused on getting our students into college," says Jason Bernal, who took over

¹ www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/12/22/education/Affluent-Students-Have-an-Advantage-and-the-Gap-Is-Widening.html?ref=education

as YES Prep's president in May 2011 when Barbic became superintendent of a statewide district of the lowest performing schools in Tennessee. "Our biggest focus now is making sure our kids are graduating from college."

A New Frontier: Continuous Support

YES Prep, winner of the inaugural Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools in 2012, is a pioneer on a new frontier: creating public schools that support low-income, minority students all the way to college graduation.



Nearly all YES students will be the first in their families to go to college.

That support begins from the moment a child enrolls in one of YES Prep's 11 Houston schools as a sixth-grader, and the curriculum has been planned backwards to determine what students need to learn each year to pass college-level Advanced Placement exams by high school. It is not just expected that everyone can gain admission to a four-year school, but that everyone *will*. YES teachers, carefully selected and trained, provide extensive academic remediation and social-emotional interventions to make the goal universally accessible.

The support continues throughout high school, as each year students take a seminar course drilling deep into the college application and financial aid processes and building character

traits such as tenacity that successful college students display. YES organizes tours every spring so that students can visit specific colleges that interest them. Over summer breaks, they have opportunities to travel the globe, build character in the wilderness and experience college campus life—opportunities that prepare them and their families for their eventual departure for college.

And while YES's responsibility to its students technically ends when they earn their high school diplomas, its commitment does not. Alumni can expect calls, visits and care packages from YES staff, as well as calls and meetings with their parents. There are interventions and scholarships to help struggling YES college students. On campuses heavily populated with the network's graduates, YES gives scholarships to its alumni who are doing well at that campus to serve as points of contact for all other YES alumni on campus. Two staff members are devoted exclusively to alumni support. Roberto Treviño, director of college counseling and alumni programs at YES Prep Southeast, has contact information for his 2012 graduates programmed into his cell phone, and every day he calls a few during his drive home.

Only 8 percent of YES alumni need to take remedial courses when they get to college, compared with more than 40 percent of college freshmen nationwide.² YES reports that 72 percent of its alumni are in college or have earned their degrees.

The YES Prep Story

What began as Chris Barbic's vision in one class has evolved into a network of 11 public charter schools serving more than 6,700 students, 95 percent of whom are Hispanic or African-American and 80 percent of whom are from low-income families. Another 7,000 students are on waiting lists, so lotteries are required by law for admittance. But YES still recruits at Houston's highest-poverty, lowest-performing elementary schools to ensure that it is reaching the city's neediest populations. Plans are underway to grow to 13 schools by 2013 and to serve 10,000 students in Houston by 2020. YES strives to become the region's biggest supplier of college graduates from impoverished backgrounds and is looking to open a school outside of Texas to see how its model replicates elsewhere.

YES stands for Youth Engaged in Service, and service was the network's initial theme. While it is still heavily emphasized, the unquestionable focus now is college: entrance and

² Complete College America, www.completecollege.org

completion. Nearly all YES students will be the first in their families to go to college.

Nationally, educators debate whether a four-year college is for everyone. YES's position is that everyone should at least have the opportunity to go. And almost every YES graduate does. A handful start out at two-year schools or choose military service; very few go directly to the workforce. Donald Kamentz, YES's director of college initiatives, points to research showing that students who don't start off at a four-year school have a far smaller likelihood of ever earning a bachelor's degree.

Inside YES schools, the college-going culture is ever-present. At YES Prep Southeast, for example, the cafeteria is called "the union," as in student union, and the walls display college boards listing the names of YES alumni who are graduates. And when students receive a college acceptance letter, they get to ring a huge gong or bell for the whole school to hear. At YES Prep Southwest, a gong is carted out to a schoolwide morning assembly in an outdoor courtyard. At YES Prep Southeast, students ring a giant bell in the hallway, and the sound reverberates into the classrooms.

Every spring, thousands of people gather for the network's "Senior Signing Day," emulating the signing tradition for athletes, when seniors publicly declare where they will go to college. Guest speakers have included U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, former U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and Teach For America Founder Wendy Kopp.

The YES Prep story is one filled with lessons for charter and non-charter schools alike.

Focus On College-Level Work

YES students typically arrive in sixth grade two to four grade levels behind in reading and math. Many interventions are in place to get them up to speed: double periods of instruction in core content areas, after-school tutoring, behavioral counseling for those who need it, the availability of teachers by YES-provided cell phones until 9 p.m. each night.

But the emphasis is on offering challenging, high-quality curriculum more than remediation. Since YES wants students doing college-level work by their later high school years, it maps its curriculum backwards from what's required to pass college-level Advanced Placement exams. In other words, beginning in sixth grade, how much must students learn each

year in a given subject to pass the corresponding AP exam by the time they are seniors?

This "backmapping" strategy has exponentially increased both students' AP enrollment and the number of scores they've earned qualifying them for college credit, even accounting for the increasing number of upperclassmen each year. Each YES campus begins with a sixth grade and adds a grade a year until it is a complete middle/high school. Four of the 11 schools are fully grown out. The number of graduating seniors increased by 56 percent from 2010 to 2012, while the number of qualifying scores in English and calculus increased by 150 percent.

Typically, schools that increase their AP enrollment see their exam pass rate go down. The opposite has been true in YES's case. During the past two years, the number of exams taken has spiked from 468 to 1,283, while the number of exams passed went from 200 to 761. In other words, the AP pass rate increased from 43 to 59 percent while the participation rate nearly tripled.



Three times a year, YES schools administer internally developed common assessments. They are scored like AP exams, on a 1-to-5 scale with a 3 or higher considered passing. So from sixth grade on, students understand the standard to which they will be held. "What it takes to get a 5 in sixth grade is obviously appreciably different, but kids from the beginning

and teachers as well are trained in that mindset,” says Jennifer Hines, YES’s senior vice president for people and programs. In AP classes, the common assessments actually use old AP tests so students have had numerous exposures to the AP format before sitting for the actual exams.

It’s a warm November morning, and James Sheridan is reviewing the results of the fall common assessments with his 11th-grade AP Literature class at YES Prep Southeast, which two years ago moved into a state-of-the-art building after a decade operating out of portable classrooms.

Based on the interim assessment, a quarter of the students would have passed the AP exam in October, had they taken it, and they still have seven months to prepare. “Snaps to that,” Sheridan tells the group, applauding their achievement. He says his goal is for at least two-thirds to pass the exam in May.

The class is a big stretch for some of the students academically, and others who are mastering the material will still have trouble getting through the AP exam in the allotted time. In an interview, Sheridan said the school would have only admitted half of the 42 juniors currently enrolled in one of two sections of AP Literature if its sole interest was passing the AP exam. But YES wants all students exposed to college-level curriculum. Taking one AP class is a graduation requirement, and most students take two to four. “Being in this class is a great opportunity for growth,” says Sheridan, a 12-year teaching veteran who is also the school’s cross-country coach. “They’ll be more prepared for college regardless of whether they get credit for the exam.”

Teacher Talent: A Key Ingredient

In addition to continuously analyzing his students’ performance, Sheridan is also continuously analyzing his own. The organizational mindset at YES is one of great humility, where whatever has been accomplished is never enough.

YES schools dismiss early every Wednesday for professional development. Eight days a year, students stay home so teachers from across YES schools can collaborate by grade and subject; all seventh-grade science teachers, for example, get in the same room to trade ideas. In the back of Sheridan’s room, a student-made bulletin board illustrating SAT words from “The Great Gatsby” (“ephemeral,” “opulent,” “languid”) resembled one he’d heard about from a colleague in one of those sessions.

All YES staff members are carefully selected for their jobs. “We realized awhile ago that we could have the best training

and the best curriculum and if we didn’t take enough time to ensure that we had the right raw material, it wasn’t actually going to get us very far,” Hines says.



Over the past two years... the AP pass rate increased from 43 to 59 percent while the participation rate nearly tripled.

YES relies heavily on bright young talent, with many teachers coming through Teach For America, but there’s an important caveat. YES has analyzed the behavioral traits of its most

successful staff members, and new recruits must demonstrate those same qualities in their interviews. “We used to just do one interview where we asked, ‘Do you like kids, and are you committed to social justice, and are you going to work hard?’” Hines says. “And now we ask questions that get at, ‘How quick is your rebound time, and how much of a perfectionist are you, and how willing are you to engage in conflict if it’s going to get to a better answer?’ ... If folks don’t have that raw material, they could have a 3.9 (G.P.A.) from Stanford and we’re going to pass on them.”

YES has a first-year teacher training program called Teaching Excellence accredited by the state to provide certification. It includes a summer induction program, ongoing coaching

throughout the year, opportunities to take classes and a strong emphasis on analyzing student achievement data.

Because the people YES hires tend to be interested in career advancement, the network developed a performance-based growth trajectory with four levels for teachers, from novice to advanced, with salaries advancing accordingly, starting at \$44,000 for first-year teachers and topping out at a potential \$80,000. The Houston Business Journal has repeatedly named YES one of the city's best places to work.

The network's teachers stand out for their in-depth content knowledge and for their energy and passion. While teachers nationally often report feeling disempowered in their jobs, those at YES approach their work with an almost missionary zeal and can see their dedication rewarded. "People are the source of our strength," says Katherine Legreid, a math content specialist for the network who also teaches at YES Prep Southwest. "I just believe that to my core. We would not be able to achieve the things that we're able to achieve with the students if it weren't for the teachers, the administrators. The people at every level of the organization are invested in student achievement and what matters, and I think that it shows."



The culture heavily promotes homegrown talent; most YES administrators began as YES teachers. More than 30 YES alumni have returned to teach for their alma mater; alumni provide the steadiest supply of quality Hispanic and African-

American teachers. A 2002 graduate has been selected to lead the newest YES school.

Knowledge About College

Beyond the academic preparation students will need to succeed in college, YES puts a heavy emphasis on knowledge about college. All four years of high school, students attend a "college seminar" class to prepare them for everything from the SATs to financial aid applications to navigating resources on campus. Princeton Review has trained YES staff in its SAT prep model, and all students receive the equivalent of a course that normally costs \$1,100 or more. The network pays \$150 per student for Princeton Review's materials, benchmark tests and score reports.

Alexandra Herrera, who was in the class of 2012 at YES Prep Southeast, had most of her tuition covered at the University of Texas at San Antonio, where she's now a freshman. She says the school's help through the financial aid process was—and remains—indispensable. She continues to call her old college counselor with questions. "Other students don't have that same help," the 18-year-old civil engineering major says. "If I ever need anything, I know who to go to for advice."

One day in early November, a few dozen students are in the college counseling suite at YES Prep Southwest, hunched over laptops working furiously on their college applications. (The school of 800 has three full-time college counselors in addition to the two counselors trained as social workers.) YES requires seniors to apply to at least eight four-year colleges by mid-November—they typically end up with three to six offers apiece—and the deadline is days away. Ivan Mireles, the senior class president, is hoping for admission to Rice University.

YES Prep has been named one of the "Best Places to Work" by the Houston Business Journal.

The following week, colleges including the University of Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins and Bucknell that have already admitted students in the class through early

action will be flying them out to visit, with expenses paid by the college. By this point, the students have already visited dozens of campuses on YES tours, so they know what they are looking for.

Nineteen-year-old Luis Ramos, another YES Prep Southeast 2012 graduate, recalls the YES-sponsored college tours he

took each year during spring break. In sixth grade he toured colleges in Georgia and Louisiana. In seventh grade, his class went to Mexico, primarily as a hiking trip, but there were stops at schools along the way. Eighth grade included a long bus ride to Washington, D.C. The only time he stayed in-state was freshman year, touring colleges in Austin and San Antonio, where he visited his older sister, also a YES graduate, at Texas A&M. Sophomore year, the destination was Tennessee, where Vanderbilt University in Nashville stands out in his mind.

“We used to just do one interview where we asked, ‘Do you like kids, and are you committed to social justice, and are you going to work hard?’ And now we ask questions that get at, ‘How quick is your rebound time, and how much of a perfectionist are you, and how willing are you to engage in conflict if it’s going to get to a better answer?’ ... If folks don’t have that raw material, they could have a 3.9 from Stanford and we’re going to pass on them.”

—JENNIFER HINES, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR PEOPLE AND PROGRAMS, YES PREP



Junior year, Ramos was able to select among trips to six different states, with teachers from the various YES schools taking students across the district to the locations of their choice. He opted to go to Philadelphia, touring the University of

Pennsylvania, Princeton, Villanova and Drexel. Ramos ended up enrolling at Connecticut College for its architecture program.

Character Education

To prepare Ramos to succeed in an environment vastly different than where he grew up, YES also puts a heavy emphasis on character education. YES has analyzed the difference between students who succeed in college and those who don’t. Even when students are academically ready, a key factor is whether they possess certain character traits, such as grit, persistence, tenacity, trust and integrity.

On the wall in every classroom, a sign reminds students and staff alike: “100% Every Day!” Parents, students and teachers all sign contracts to commit to doing their best. Community service is mandatory for YES students. In economically struggling areas, students and their families take pride in giving back to their friends and neighbors.

The YES culture has a language all its own, with so-called “Thinks and Acts” statements posted in hallways and conference rooms. These are sayings that students in the first YES graduating class in 2001 came up with to describe the school’s teachings:

*Our education does not end in the classroom.
We always leave a place better than we found it.
When we all pull together, we can move mountains.*

On an autumn morning in a freshman seminar at YES Prep Southwest, a National Blue Ribbon School housed in portable classrooms, teacher Tony Castillo is reviewing SAT vocabulary. When he gets to the word “insular,” he pauses to tell a story about his own freshman year at Rice with three white roommates.

“I came from a school just like this where it was predominantly African-American and Hispanic students,” says Castillo, who graduated from Rice in 2009 and went straight into the YES Teaching Excellence program. “And then I went to Rice University and I move in the first day, and I have no idea who these people are. They have no idea who I am.

“They’re like, ‘What are you, by the way? Are you black? Are you Hispanic? Are you, like, what?’ I’m like, ‘I’m black and Mexican.’ They’re like, ‘You listen to rap and you listen to Mexican Tejano music?’ I was like, ‘Well, yeah, I do.’ So I listened to their music, they started listening to my music, and maybe a couple months later, I had them rapping... I was singing Britney Spears and ‘N Sync, and I was liking it, too...



On students traveling the world: “People think our families can’t afford to pay anything. That is not true. Part of it is believing and helping people get there.”

—LYNDA DANIEL,
SUMMER OPPORTUNITIES
MANAGER, YES PREP

“So one thing you want to be careful of, when you go and start meeting new people, you don’t want to be described as insular.”

Castillo’s story was part of a deliberate YES strategy to teach students to appreciate diversity and be open to other cultures. During her first semester at East Texas Baptist University, 18-year-old Azalea Gonzalez reflected

back on similar lessons from her college counselor at YES Prep Southeast. “He would tell us how we would have to deal with not being able to eat the food that we usually eat or listen to the music we listen to,” says Azalea, who went through culture shock adjusting to life in a predominantly white institution. “He would tell us, ‘It’s going to be hard and you’re going to want to come back. You’re going to miss all the things that you’re used to, but in the end you’re going to be really surprised and glad you were able to open up your eyes to something different.’”

Azalea called on the counselor, Roberto Treviño, for moral support throughout her first semester. After having to sing a song in German for her university choir, a prospect that terrified her, she texted him: “I did it!”

YES Prep Southeast divides students into multi-grade social groups called “families” that perform community service together and check in on one another. The younger students call the older students their parents, and the teachers are the grandparents. Receiving a care package in college with a letter from underclassmen in her YES family meant the world to Azalea, and she’s inspired to persist in college as a role model to them. “It made me a little bit teary-eyed,” she says of the package. “It’s just the little things that make you feel like you’re a part of something.”

Worldly Exposure

In the early days of YES, staff hypothesized that the longer students were in school, the more they would get ahead. Classes were in session from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. 200 days a year, plus three Saturdays a month and an additional month in the summer.

Such long hours produced unintended consequences. For students and staff, it became a game of survival of the fittest. Families were scared off, and teacher burnout—and, as a result, teacher turnover—was high. What’s more, no evidence demonstrated that the long hours were resulting in stronger academic gains.

Today, the YES academic year is the standard American 180 days. However, the length of its day is still longer than most schools: 7:45 or 8 a.m. to about 4:30 p.m. YES leaders say they can’t go shorter than that and still fit in double daily periods of language arts and math, but the reduction in time has improved teacher retention without impacting student achievement data. Saturday school is optional for campuses, and summer programs tend to target specific students who are struggling.

Instead of a comprehensive summer school, YES focuses on giving students the sort of life experiences that affluent parents can afford for their children. YES students attend programs on college campuses. They take trips in the wilderness. And they travel the world.

India, Ghana, El Salvador and Spain are just some of the countries YES students have visited in recent years. Ashley, a senior at YES Prep Southeast, studied Arabic in Morocco for seven weeks last summer. All year long, students and parents do everything they can think of to fundraise: car washes, bake sales, cooking Saturday barbecue dinners for the community, selling drinks at Houston Rockets games. YES students earn

hundreds of thousands of dollars in summer scholarships annually, but families still typically need to pay something toward the experience.

“People think our families can’t afford to pay anything. That is not true. Part of it is believing and helping people get there,” says Lynda Daniel, the network’s summer opportunities manager.

Requiring families to invest something gives them “skin in the game,” Daniel says. If the trips were free, they wouldn’t be so meaningful. “Our kids are not spoiled, so it’s a big deal when their family pulls it all together for them to do a trip,” she says.

Some years ago, when Daniel started coordinating trips for students at YES Prep Southeast, she thought \$300 was the upper limit of what she could ask poor families to contribute. Then an opportunity came along for the Spanish teacher to take students to Puerto Rico. Daniel called a parent meeting to see how many people would be willing to raise \$1,500. Twenty-eight of them did.

The trips give students a taste of living in a different culture, and they have had another unexpected benefit: They lessen parents’ resistance to the idea of their children moving away for college, a huge cultural barrier for some Hispanic and African-American families.

Daniel recalls one student who went on a summer trip to Wyoming after his sophomore year. His mother cried every day. Yet senior year during a college tour when a snowstorm

left the young man stranded at the Philadelphia airport and he called his mother for sympathy, she told him to get over it: He’d slept on the ground when he went camping for a month in Wyoming; he could handle a few days on the floor in a heated airport. He went on to Colorado College and studied abroad in Greece, Thailand and Taiwan. “That first trip changed everybody, and then he was free to roam about the planet,” Daniel says.

Laura Guerrero’s son Jorge is a senior at YES Prep Southeast. “He started having trips in sixth grade and camps for a month, for five weeks and seven weeks, and last year he left out of the country for eight weeks,” she says. “And every time it’s hard.” Last summer Jorge lived on a farm in Costa Rica where he didn’t eat meat and lost 17 pounds, but he says he’d do it again.

Guerrero says the trips started to prepare her for what’s coming next. Speaking at a parent forum in early November, she was overcome with emotion describing what had happened a day earlier: Jorge received his first college acceptance letter, to Iowa State University.

It arrived at 10 o’clock in the morning—schools were closed for Election Day—but she made him wait to open it until his father got home from work. “Just before dinner, we opened it, and you feel like, ‘Oh God,’” she says, choking back tears. “I never went to school here in the United States. You feel like you are going, too, not just him, something so big.” That day Jorge had rung the giant bell in the hallway at school.

TIPS ON CREATING CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND COLLEGE PREP SUMMER OPPORTUNITIES

YES Prep high school students study on college campuses, take wilderness expeditions and travel the world. Lynda Daniel, the network’s summer opportunities manager, offers the following tips on how to make such opportunities possible for youth from low-income families:

- Have a point person on staff who can build relationships over time with those responsible for scholarships at the desired programs. Apply every year regardless of whether scholarships are awarded; persistence pays off.
- Require students and families to have “skin in the game” by contributing something significant toward the cost of the trip.
- Encourage families to get creative in their fundraising, whether preparing and delivering dinners in the community, hosting car washes and bake sales, or starting a website.
- When students have had to work hard for a trip, they are likely to be on good behavior, creating a positive reputation for their school with the program and paving the way for more opportunities.

Alumni Support

Before graduation, every YES student has an exit interview with a college counselor. The counselors rate students red, yellow or green in three categories—financial, academic and personal/emotional—to prioritize follow-up.

Despite their extensive preparation and emphasis on prevention, students invariably still find obstacles once they arrive at college.

Tenesha Villanueva and Chad Spurgeon are the two staff members dedicated exclusively to alumni support. They help students to navigate resources at their colleges, facilitate difficult family conversations and assist with the financial aid process. YES maintains a scholarship fund for alumni.

Villanueva spends considerable time keeping up with alumni on Facebook, where she's often tipped off when something is wrong and a student needs intervention. She administers an alumni Facebook page with features including "What's Up Wednesday?" to facilitate staying in touch.

Spurgeon runs the IMPACT partnership program with 24 colleges and universities nationwide. These schools, from Claremont McKenna College in California to Oberlin and Kenyon in Ohio to Johns Hopkins in Maryland, commit three to five freshman spots per year for qualified YES candidates. Admission isn't guaranteed, but special consideration is. These partner schools commit to meeting 100 percent of admitted YES students' financial need through some combination of grants and loans.

YES also sends a staff member once a year to IMPACT campuses to visit the students.

"We laugh because there are so many great reasons to participate, but what they get really excited about is that somebody is going to come from YES Prep and take them out to dinner," Spurgeon says.

YES has found that students who go to college in cohorts have a higher success rate. One of IMPACT's benefits is that it typically allows YES students to go away together. At Connecticut College, another IMPACT school, Luis Ramos says the presence of his YES classmate Daniel Mendoza was invaluable last fall as he had his first exposure to a predominantly white setting and fell ill with a kidney stone. Mendoza, as well as some new friends, gave up soda and drank only water along with him. "I'm grateful to have somebody else that I know here," Ramos says. He and Mendoza were also grateful for a visit from their YES counselor, Roberto Treviño, shortly before Thanksgiving, when they would not be able to afford to travel home.

"They really care about us," Ramos adds. "All they want for us is the best. Even though we don't go to YES anymore, they're still making sure we're putting 100 percent into our studies and into college graduation. The main thing they focus on is for us to graduate and have a successful life. They're the ones still motivating us to do our best."

Back in Houston, Treviño recently started an alumni parent support group at his school, designating volunteer

A PARTNERSHIP WITH IMPACT

The colleges and universities in YES Prep's IMPACT Partnership Program have agreed to give academically qualified YES seniors special consideration in admissions and meet 100 percent of their documented financial needs if accepted and designated as IMPACT Scholars. YES conducts an annual visit to partner schools to visit with scholars and provide them with ongoing support. Participating schools include:

- Boston University (MA)
- Bucknell University (PA)
- Claremont McKenna College (CA)
- Connecticut College (CT)
- George Washington University (DC)
- Grinnell College (IA)
- Davidson College (NC)
- Hamilton College (NY)
- Iowa State University (IA)
- Johns Hopkins University (MD)
- Kenyon College (OH)
- Lewis & Clark College (OR)
- Macalester College (MN)
- Oberlin College (OH)
- Scripps College (CA)
- Sewanee: The University of the South (TN)
- St. Olaf College (MN)
- Trinity University (TX)
- University of Rochester (NY)
- Vanderbilt University (TN)
- Washington & Jefferson College (PA)
- Whitman College (WA)

parent leaders to make regular calls. At the first meeting in November, about 25 parents added their own personal touches to care packages the school had prepared for all the college freshmen. Ramos's mother and sister added medication, pajamas and flip-flops to the school's microwavable soup, popcorn and hot chocolate.

Maintaining relationships is particularly critical as the alumni get older. When Villanueva studied trends among YES graduates, only a handful of students left college during freshman year. Sophomore year was a bigger drop off.



Rarely is the root of the problem academic. More likely they've missed a financial aid deadline or underestimated how much living away would cost. They're called home because of a family illness or issue. They have to get a job because their family needs the money or they need it themselves to live. Sometimes they're struggling to see the relevance of the college experience to their lives.

At 13 colleges with a large number of YES students enrolled, the network has designated the upperclassmen YES alumni as fellows. They receive a \$1,000 scholarship each year in exchange for supporting their fellow YES alumni. YES provides them with leadership training and pays for one social event per semester.

This peer support will continue to grow in importance as the ranks of YES alumni increase. The number of graduates now exceeds 1,000. Given the extra effort that YES schools have made throughout their journey, the students are all too happy to help fellow classmates cross the finish line. ■

"They really care about us. All they want for us is the best. Even though we don't go to YES anymore, they're still making sure we're putting 100 percent into our studies and into college graduation. The main thing they focus on is for us to graduate and have a successful life. They're the ones still motivating us to do our best."

—LUIS RAMOS, YES PREP ALUMNUS ENROLLED AT CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

ALUMNI SUPPORTING EACH OTHER

Through a grant from Spectra Energy, YES Prep gives \$1,000 annual scholarships to alumni at campuses heavily populated with its graduates to support their peers in college. The fellows are at the following colleges and universities:

- University of Houston, main campus (TX) (three fellows)
- Grinnell College (IA) (one fellow, IMPACT school)
- Texas Southern University (TX) (one fellow)
- Austin College (TX) (one fellow)
- Sam Houston State University (TX) (one fellow)
- University of Tulsa (OK) (one fellow)
- University of Houston, Downtown (TX) (two fellows)
- Stephen F. Austin State University (TX) (two fellows)
- University of Texas, San Antonio (TX) (one fellow)
- Vanderbilt University (TN) (one fellow, IMPACT school)
- Boston University (MA) (one fellow, IMPACT school)
- Lewis & Clark College (OR) (one fellow, IMPACT school)
- Washington & Jefferson College (PA) (one fellow, IMPACT school)

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For more student achievement outcomes produced by YES Prep schools, visit:

www.broadprize.org/publiccharterschools/2012.html

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

www.broadprize.org/publiccharterschools.html

The Broad Foundation

Founded by self-made 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 professional services organization. RMC leads a team of researchers and practitioners on 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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