

Testimony of Dr. John B. King, Jr.
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor
June 4, 2009

Thank you Chairman Miller and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify today. My name is John King and I am a Managing Director with Uncommon Schools, a non-profit charter management organization. I am here today to talk about my experiences as an educator and to ask the Committee to support initiatives to increase the number of high performing charter schools serving low-income students. I am convinced that the autonomy of charter schools with respect to budget, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and school culture in combination with greater accountability for performance can create the context for both innovation and excellence.

I grew up in Brooklyn, New York – the son of two career New York City public school educators. My father, who grew up in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn in a family just a couple of generations removed from slavery, served as a teacher, principal, and eventually Deputy Chancellor over the course of a nearly forty year career with the New York City schools. My mother came to the Bronx from Puerto Rico as a small child with her single mother and was a teacher and guidance counselor in some of the most challenging schools in New York City. My parents provided an extraordinary example for me of dedication to public service. However, I did not get to know them well because they passed away when I was in elementary and middle school. During that difficult period, fantastic teachers in New York City public schools made a huge difference my life. My experiences at P.S. 276 and Mark Twain J.H.S. led me to believe deeply in the power of public education to transform lives.

As a result of the difference schools made in my life, I became a teacher and then a principal. In 1999, I co-founded **Roxbury Preparatory Charter School in Boston, the highest performing urban middle school in Massachusetts for five years running and a school that has closed the racial achievement gap on state exams.** Roxbury Prep's student body – selected by random lottery – is 100% African-American and Latino; over 70% of the students qualify for free and reduced price lunch, and the school is dramatically outperforming not only the Boston Public Schools, but many of the most affluent suburban districts around the state. Value-added data shows that the key to success at Roxbury Prep is not creaming: students generally come in significantly behind grade level, but make huge gains. One hundred percent of Roxbury Prep's 8th grade graduates go on to attend college prep high schools, including Boston's prestigious public exam schools and elite New England independent schools. We keep careful track of our alumni and know that about 80% of Roxbury Prep's college-age alums are on track to graduate from college compared with fewer than 10% of adults in Roxbury who hold Bachelor's degrees.

How is Roxbury Prep achieving these exceptional results? The autonomy we have as a charter school in making decisions about budget, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and school culture has allowed us to:

- Establish a compelling **mission** to prepare our students to enter, succeed in, and graduate from college

- Create a **small school community** in which every adult knows every student
- Attract and retain **outstanding teachers** selected from among more than 80-100 candidates for every opening
- Set **high standards for academics and character**
- **Extend our school day** to incorporate double periods of literacy and math, science and social studies every day, and enrichment for all students
- Make substantial investments in **professional development** for teachers including more than three weeks of curriculum development each summer and dedicated time each week for teachers to analyze student performance data and plan collaboratively

However, autonomy alone does not guarantee success. Every trustee, administrator, and teacher at Roxbury Prep understands that the school's bottom line is student achievement and that the school's charter will only continue to be renewed if the school fulfills its academic mission. Ensuring that schools use their autonomy effectively requires a strong system of accountability that ties schools' continued existence to results.

Given the success of Roxbury Prep, I wanted to figure out how such results could be replicated on a larger scale. I moved back to New York City – both because of the opportunity to create better educational opportunities for students in the community where I grew up and because the New York State charter law, New York's rigorous authorizing process, Mayor Bloomberg, and Chancellor Klein had created an educational environment that fosters innovation. Uncommon Schools, where I now serve as a superintendent of a small network of charter schools, has as its mission starting and managing urban charter public schools that aim specifically to close the achievement gap and prepare low-income students to graduate from college. Each of the Uncommon Schools is modeled on the best practices of three of the highest performing urban schools in the country: Boston Collegiate Charter School, North Star Academy Charter School, and Roxbury Prep. Uncommon Schools' student demographics reflect the student populations of the communities where they are located. Our schools have similar percentages of students who require Special Education services, and even higher percentages of African American and Latino students than other schools in their districts. The average percentage of students in our schools qualifying for Free and Reduced Price Lunch mirrors the average for their school districts.

Uncommon Schools is proving that success is replicable. Across our 11 schools in New York City, Newark, New Jersey and upstate New York, our students – all selected by random lottery and most entering our schools well below grade level – are thriving. In 2007, one of our middle schools, Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School, was the #1 ranked public middle school on the Chancellor's progress reports. In 2008, Excellence Boys Charter School, was the #1 ranked public elementary school on the Chancellor's progress reports. We just recently received the 2009 state exam scores and I am pleased to report that our students again closed the racial achievement gap (see Exhibit A attached). Across all of Uncommon's New York schools, 98% of students scored Advanced or Proficient on the 2009 state Math exams, compared with 92% of White students statewide, 80% of Hispanic students statewide, and 75% of Black students

statewide. On the English Language Arts exams, 89% of Uncommon's students scored Advanced or Proficient, compared with 86% of White students statewide, 65% of Latino students statewide, and 64% of Black students statewide.

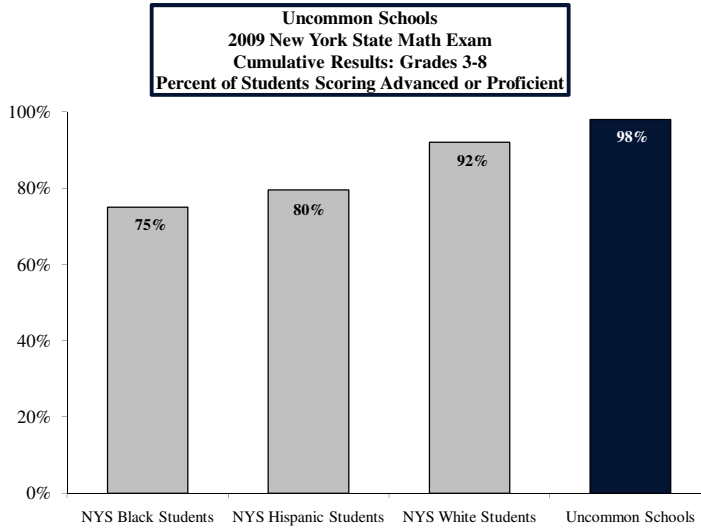
Uncommon Schools is proving that success is scalable. As we grow Uncommon Schools, we are trying to build systems that will allow us to achieve in 33 schools, serving over 8,000 students by 2014, what we are now achieving in 11 schools. We are in essence trying to build a model of what a highly effective urban school system should look like by leveraging the freedom we have as charter schools. We are particularly focused on building excellent systems for training and supporting outstanding school leaders and teachers. Recently, we launched a teacher education program at Hunter College in partnership with two other high performing charter networks, KIPP and Achievement First. Over time, that teacher education program, called Teacher U at UKA (Uncommon Knowledge and Achievement) , will train over 1,000 teachers each year, most of whom will be working in traditional New York City district schools as Teach for America corps members or New York City Teaching Fellows.

In a nation where only about 50% of the students in large urban districts graduate from high school and where only 9% of our country's lowest income students are graduating from college compared to 75% of the highest income students, there can be little question that education is the civil rights issue of our time. I recognize that the work we are doing at Uncommon Schools is only one part of what must be a multi-pronged national strategy to dramatically reform public education, particularly schools that serve low-income students. However, the evidence is clear that the success of Roxbury Prep, Williamsburg Collegiate, and Excellence Boys is both replicable and scalable when school leaders are given autonomy with respect to budget, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and school culture and held strictly accountable for their results.

Again, thank you for your time today.

Exhibit A

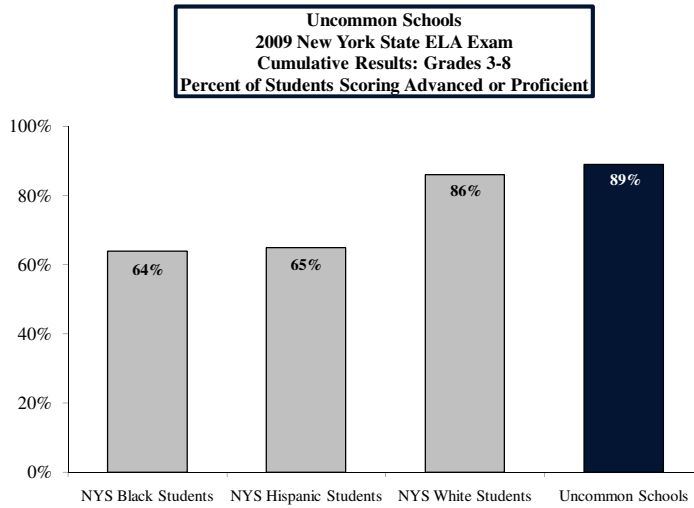
Closing the Achievement Gap in Math



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Closing the Achievement Gap in ELA



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