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July 10, 2011

# Message From a Charter School: Thrive or Transfer

By MICHAEL WINERIP

In 2008, when Katherine Sprowal's son, Matthew, was selected in a lottery to attend the [Harlem Success Academy 3 charter school](#), she was thrilled. "I felt like we were getting the best private school, and we didn't have to pay for it," she recalled.

And so, when [Eva S. Moskowitz](#), the former city councilwoman who operates seven Success charter schools in Harlem and the Bronx, asked Ms. Sprowal to be in a promotional video, she was happy to be included.

Matthew is bright but can be disruptive and easily distracted. It was not a natural fit for the Success charters, which are known for discipline and long school days. From Day 1 of kindergarten, Ms. Sprowal said, he was punished for acting out.

"They kept him after school to practice walking in the hallway," she said.

Several times, she was called to pick him up early, she said, and in his third week he was suspended three days for bothering other children.

In Matthew's three years of preschool, Ms. Sprowal said, he had never missed time for behavior problems. "After only 12 days in your school," she wrote the principal, "you have assessed and concluded that our son is defective and will not meet your school criteria."

Five days later, Ms. Sprowal got an e-mail from Ms. Moskowitz that she took as a veiled message to leave. "Am not familiar with the issue," Ms. Moskowitz wrote, "but it is extremely important that children feel successful and a nine-hour day with more than 23 children (and that's our small class size!) where they are constantly being asked to focus and concentrate can overwhelm children and be a bad environment."

The next week, the school psychologist evaluated Matthew and concluded he would be better suited elsewhere: "He may need a smaller classroom than his current school has available."

By then, Matthew was throwing up most mornings and asking his mother if he was going to be fired from school. Worn down, Ms. Sprowal requested help finding her son another school, and Success officials were delighted to refer him to Public School 75 on the Upper West Side.

At that point, Ms. Sprowal had come to believe her son was so difficult that she was lucky anyone would take him. She wrote several e-mails thanking Ms. Moskowitz, saying she hoped that Matthew would someday be well-behaved enough to return to her “phenomenal” school.

Three years later, looking back, Ms. Sprowal said she felt her son had been done an injustice. Matthew, who has had a diagnosis of an attention disorder, has thrived at P.S. 75. His second-grade teachers, Johanny Lopez and Chanté Martindale, have taught him many ways to calm himself, including stepping into the hallway for an exercise break. His report card last month was all 3s and 4s, the top marks; the teachers commented, “Matthew is a sweet boy who is a joy to have in the classroom.”

Matthew’s story raises perhaps the most critical question in the debate about charter schools: do they cherry-pick students, if not by gaming the admissions process, then by counseling out children who might be more expensive or difficult to educate — and who could bring down their test scores, graduation rates and safety records?

Kim Sweet, director of [Advocates for Children](#) of New York, said she had heard many such stories. “When we look at our cases where children are sent away from schools because of disabilities,” she said, “there are a disproportionate number of calls about charter schools.”

There is no more tenacious champion of charters than Ms. Moskowitz, whose students earn top test scores and who has plans to build a chain of 40 schools. She saw Matthew’s experience in a far different light, as her spokeswoman, Jenny Sedlis, explained in two voluminous e-mails totaling 5,701 words.

“We helped place him in a school that would better suit his needs,” Ms. Sedlis wrote. “His success today confirms the correctness of his placement. I believe that 100 percent of the time we were acting in Matthew’s best interest and that the end result benefited him and benefited P.S. 75, which now has a child excelling.”

Ms. Sedlis denied that Matthew had been suspended, and said he was not disciplined when he was kept after school.

“Practicing walking through the halls is the opposite of a punishment,” she wrote. “Just as in math, when a child does not get a concept, we re-teach. We don’t let the child fail. We ensure he gets it. We take the same approach with behavior. If a child is struggling, we re-teach. This is an example of when the school went out of its way to help Matthew be successful.”

Ms. Sedlis noted that two Success board members were leaders of well-respected special-education schools, Donna Kennedy of [Gillen Brewer](#) and Scott Gaynor of the [Stephen Gaynor School](#).

She also offered counterexamples, like Iris Ayala, whose 6-year-old son, Alexander, has an attention disorder and speech problem but has thrived at a Success school.

Ms. Ayala said Alexander often acted up, running out of the classroom. But the school gave him special-education help, she said, and now he is reading above grade level. “I love the school,” Ms. Ayala said.

Alex or Matthew — whose experience is more emblematic? You would think data could help shed light here.

Indeed, Ms. Sedlis cited figures from the city [Education Department's Web site](#) showing that the attrition rate is lower at the Harlem Success schools than at traditional public schools in the same district.

On the other hand, every traditional public school that is housed with a Success charter has more special-education children as well as students for whom English is the second language, according to numbers posted on city and [state Web sites](#). At Success 3, the school Matthew attended, 10 percent are in special education and 2 percent are English language learners, according to the [publicly available data](#); Mosaic Prep Academy, a district school that shares its building, has 23 percent in special education and 13 percent learning English as a second language.

But Ms. Sedlis said that the Web sites were wrong, and that 7.6 percent of students at Success 3 had limited English. "It is imperative that you not use incorrect data," she wrote. "It is a complex system and I will walk you through it and produce voluminous documentation."

Even if not a single number on the Education Department's Web sites can be trusted, there is one indisputable fact: The traditional public schools handle the most severely disabled children, which Success charters do not serve. At Mosaic Prep, 58 percent of the special-education students — 46 children — are those requiring the "most restrictive environment" and are in classrooms of their own. At Success charters, the special-education children are classified as needing the "least restrictive environment" and are mainstreamed, though two of the charters will add classes strictly for special-education students in September.

Ms. Moskowitz has enormous political clout, and without my asking, Laura Rodriguez, a deputy chancellor, sent an e-mail saying the Success charters were getting better about special education. "Harlem Success has made a real commitment to improving services for students with disabilities," she wrote, "and we'll continue working with them to enroll and serve even more of these students moving forward."

Serving children with special needs lowers test scores. At P.S. 75, Matthew's new school, 17 percent are in special education, and for 17 percent, English is a second language. In 2009, 76 percent of the school's general education students were proficient in language arts. But when special-education scores were factored in, proficiency dropped to 69 percent.

Still, Robert O'Brien, who has been principal there for 14 years, says the most gratifying part of his work is with the children who lower his test scores.

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