



Statement before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
On “Proven Results: Highlighting the Benefits of Charter Schools for Students and
Families”

Proven Results: Highlighting the Benefits of Charter Schools for Students and Families

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Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, and members of the Committee, thank you for having me. My name is Robert Pondiscio. I'm a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a former teacher.

In 2002, I became a fifth-grade teacher at the lowest-performing public school in the South Bronx, New York City's lowest-performing school district. A mere 16 percent of PS 277 students could read at grade level. The first charter schools were just opening up in the neighborhood back then; there were virtually no alternatives to the schools that had failed children for decades.

In my role at the American Enterprise Institute, I study and write about education, including charter schools. But my focus has seldom strayed from the question that motivated me to become a teacher in the first place: How can we ensure that disadvantaged children in places like the South Bronx have every opportunity to succeed in school and in life?

A few years ago, this question took me back to the South Bronx, where I spent a year at a Success Academy charter school literally across the street from where I'd been a student teacher, and a few blocks from my old school. But this charter school was delivering astonishing results for children.

In the years since I'd left my classroom, Success Academy had grown from a single school in nearby Harlem to 45 schools across the city educating 17,000 children. The lowest-performing of those schools had 85 percent of its students pass the New York State English Language Arts test. That was the *worst* one. The Success Academy school with the lowest pass rate in math had 92 percent of its students at or above proficiency. The others were even better.

Said differently, if Success Academy were a school district, it would be the highest-scoring district in New York State. It gets better results than the city's gifted and talented programs. And better results than wealthy suburban districts with multi-million-dollar homes.

And more than 90 percent of Success Academy students are children of color, mostly low-income, Black, and Hispanic. By comparison, only one in three black and Hispanic children in New York City test at or above grade level in math and reading.

I spent a year embedded at Success Academy Bronx 1—not as a teacher, but as a reporter and researcher, writing a book about the lessons Success might teach us that could be applied to K–12 education at large. After all, a founding ideal of charter schools was to serve as engines of innovation and experimentation.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss in detail what I observed, but in a sentence: What I saw is what is possible when you allow parents to select a high-functioning school and when every adult in a child’s life, teachers and parents alike, is pulling in the same direction—just as has been demonstrated time and time again in America’s past.

For years I have applied what I call the “Tiffany Test” to my work in education. It’s named after a real-life student I had when I taught fifth grade.

You’ve heard of the expression “the problem child.” Tiffany was a “not-your-problem child.”

She came to school every day in a spotless school uniform. Never missed a day of school. Never missed a homework assignment. She was hard-working and conscientious. Tiffany was solidly at grade level in reading and math in a school where that was rare.

I call her a “not-your-problem child” because one day I pointed out to my assistant principal that I wasn’t doing very much to challenge Tiffany—this incredibly diligent, dutiful, perfectly behaved, and trusting kid who was deeply devoted to school and her education. This assistant principal said something I’ll never forget. She said, “She’s not your problem.”

What she meant was: “Why are you worried about Tiffany? You’ve got kids who are far below grade level in reading and math. You’ve got behavior problems and special needs kids. Who cares about Tiffany? She’ll be fine.”

Reading and doing math at grade level is the starting line for my kid and yours. But it’s the finish line for Tiffany and kids like her? In America?

No one would tell the parent or teacher of a well-off student, “We’ve got bigger problems than your kid. She’s doing well enough.”

Even in the most dysfunctional schools and classrooms in America, you will find some number of diligent and hard-working kids whose parents believe in the promise of education, but whose teachers have bigger problems than the “not-your-problem child.”

So the Tiffany Test is simply this: There are parents and kids who demonstrate faith in education, upward mobility, and the American Dream. Are we doing all in our power to ensure that faith is rewarded?

So 10 years later, what did I see at Success Academy? Tiffany.

In nearly every seat. *Tiffany*.

It’s commonly said in teaching that we should “meet the children where they are.” It’s equally important, I think, to have an education system that meets families where *they* are.

There is no rational or moral reason for government policy at any level to prevent the children of motivated, engaged, and invested Americans of any race, ethnic group, or income level from reaping the full rewards of their talents and ambitions.

There is no reason to interfere with parents’ earnest efforts to do what they deem best for their children.

I titled my book *How the Other Half Learns*. And I chose that title because, frankly, I don’t think I’m wrong or oversimplifying it to suggest if you are wealthy, you have every conceivable education option available to you. You can opt out of the public system or purchase a home in a wealthy community. You have access to excellence. It’s unquestioned and uncontroversial. If you are poor, Black, or brown, you get a lecture. You get hand-wringing over fairness. You’re told to be patient. You’re told your most promising student is “not your problem.”

Public charter schools pass the Tiffany Test.