

Testimony of Eva Moskowitz,
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Before the Joint Economic Committee for the United States Congress
July 29, 2014

**Increasing Economic Opportunity for African Americans:
Schools Can Be Lifelines Out Poverty**

Chairman Brady, Vice Chair Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon, I am Eva Moskowitz, founder and CEO of Success Academy Charter Schools. Thank you for this opportunity to speak about how Success Academy is making a difference in increasing economic opportunities for low-income and minority students in New York City.

Education is an issue of utmost importance to increasing economic opportunity for disadvantaged children, the future members of our workforce. There is clear evidence that American students are losing academic ground globally. On the most recent international PISA exams, more than 30 countries outperformed the United States in math. We ranked 17th in reading and 20th in science. Only 9% of American students were top scorers in math, compared to 55% in Shanghai and 31% in Korea.¹

The United States has the fourth highest income disparity in the world, and that inequality is rising faster than in most countries.² Our most disadvantaged citizens are being left behind because they are not receiving adequate educations, and this only weakens our nation's economic strength. Each month, 3 million U.S. jobs go unfilled due to lack of skilled labor.³ We have the jobs, but we don't have qualified workers with the skills to perform them.

African American males are twice as likely to be unemployed,⁴ compared to white males, and half as likely to earn a college degree.⁵ Only 15% of African American students attend well-resourced, high performing schools⁶ — and the effects are clear: White students are three times more likely to be proficient in math.⁷ In New York City, less than 13% of African American students graduate from high school prepared to do college-level work.⁸

For the majority of African American public school children in this country the odds for success are daunting. Without the skills and training to become employable, they remain stuck in poverty, unable to support themselves and their families, unable to expect a different future for their children.

Children in disadvantaged neighborhoods often suffer from educational negligence, and the consequences follow them into adulthood. In too many inner city neighborhoods, schools are dead-ends. Instead of equipping poor children with the skills they need to escape poverty, bad schools lower their expectations and sink their hopes. Schools *can* be lifelines out of poverty, but they can also be lifeless houses of detention.

There is a myth in this country that poverty and race are overwhelming barriers to a child's ability to learn. This is simply not the case. At Success Academy, our scholars have proven that they can overcome these disadvantages. They not only can catch up, but in many instances they overtake their more affluent peers.

Success Academies are free, K-12 public schools, open to all children. In a few weeks we will open 10 new schools – making 32 in all – and welcome 9,000 scholars from all across New York City. Anyone in New York can apply and because we have so many applications, students are admitted by lottery. Three out of four of our scholars live at or below the poverty level; 94 percent are minorities, 14 percent have disabilities, and 8 percent are English language learners. The demographics of our scholars reflect the neighborhoods where we open schools, yet the disadvantages our children face do not hold them back.

Success Academy is the highest performing charter school network in New York City, but more importantly, its schools are at the top of all public schools in the state. For the past five years – since the first scholars were old enough to be tested by the state for math and English Language Arts proficiencies – SA scholars have consistently ranked in the top 10 percent of all New York State schools. On last year's test, which for the first time was aligned to the more rigorous Common Core standards, our scholars outscored New York City students by 52 percentage points in math and 32 points in English Language Arts.⁹

Nearly all the SA scholars tested are children of color, and they dramatically outperformed their peers across the state: 82% passed math and 58% passed ELA exams – compared to 15% of African American students and 18% of Hispanic students for math, and 16% of African American students and 17% of Hispanic students for ELA.¹⁰ On the state science exam, 100% of our 4th and 8th grade scholars passed, with 99% of 4th graders and 91% of 8th graders attaining the highest score. Significantly, our most economically and educationally challenged children – English language learners, children with disabilities, and those receiving free or reduced price lunch – also outperformed their counterparts across the city and state by wide margins.

Achieving proficiency in math and English is essential, but it is not enough to fully prepare children for college. When we opened Success Academy in 2006, we knew our kids needed to be ready for careers in science and technology, so we designed our curriculum to include science five days a week, beginning in kindergarten. In the first year, our kids perform more than 100 experiments. In middle school, they take two years of computer science; about 30% of them are on the math team and compete internationally in the Math Olympiad. By high school, they can choose a STEM-track program, with courses in applied science, engineering, and advanced math, culminating in a related internship and senior thesis.

We know our scholars must be critical thinkers to succeed in today's economy, so we teach chess as part of our curriculum, also starting in kindergarten. We believe deeply in the importance of chess and hold dozens of our own tournaments as well as send scholars to compete in state and national playoffs. This spring, seven Success Academy chess teams qualified to compete in the United States Chess Federation National

Championship in Dallas. Four of our teams placed in the top ten within their divisions, and individually, five scholars placed in the top 10 in their sections.

To prepare children to become accomplished adults, schools must offer a wide range of experiences. We teach art, dance, theater, and yoga, and next year we will unveil our first string orchestra. Our scholars compete at soccer, track and field, basketball, debate, even ballroom dancing. In one middle school elective, Young Entrepreneurs research and write business plans for start up ventures, which they then present to a panel of experts. We have field studies and assemblies, which connect classroom curriculum to the real world and expose our scholars to cultural experiences and institutions that they may not otherwise access. Not all field studies are off campus; last year, novelist Salman Rushdie, journalist Carl Bernstein, civil rights legend Claudette Colvin, and Olympic athletes visited our schools, as did musicians, jugglers, and artists.

We also believe that great schools must make parents their partners in the success of their children. We never ask our parents to hold bake sales or school fundraisers, but we do ask them to read to their scholars every night and to participate in family events that celebrate their child's accomplishments. Our schools have an open-door policy allowing parents to visit the classroom at any time, and parents are given the cell phone number and email address of every adult in the building.

The Success Academy school design has many aspects, which together support world-class teaching and learning. Key to our ability to help all children achieve at high levels is the emphasis we place on the professional development of our staff, especially our principals and teachers, who receive the equivalent of 13 weeks of training each year. We provide exceptional support from a central instructional management team, which oversees curriculum, student assessment, and teacher development. Over the last eight years, we have expanded and refined the immersive summer training we give teachers before they even walk into their classrooms. Throughout the year, we continue to support teachers' professional development through daily coaching and weekly workshops.

Strong management expertise and operational best practices, while less often recognized, are also essential to creating and sustaining excellent schools. To be effective, schools must operate efficiently. Our staffing model differs dramatically from that of traditional public schools. Freed from administrative duties, our principals concentrate entirely on motivating and inspiring teachers, scholars, and parents to meet and exceed the high standards we set. They are the academic leaders in their buildings, coaching and preparing every teacher, in the classroom and in professional development sessions. Each school has a business operations manager who works closely with the principal to ensure that parent communications, facilities, budget and other non-instructional concerns are handled efficiently and cost-effectively.

Strong Impact on Local Community and Beyond

As Success Academy has grown to serve more families, our impact has spread throughout the city. In 2002, there was not one school in Harlem, the Bronx, or Central Brooklyn where kids scored in the top 10% of New York City schools. Today, there are 11 schools in these areas that rank in the top 10% – 10 of those are charter schools, and of those, 9 are Success Academies. In the south Bronx, the nation's poorest

Congressional district, Success Academy has four elementary schools and two middle schools. Last year, SA Bronx 2 was the second highest scoring elementary school in math in the state of New York – 97% of scholars met or exceeded math proficiency standards, compared to 13% at the local school district.

Parent demand for high-quality schools is overwhelming. Last year, Success Academy received more than 16,200 unique applications for fewer than 2,900 open places – about five applications for every open seat. There were more than 7,600 applications for kindergarten alone – half of all Central Harlem’s kindergarteners applied. Across the city there are almost 50,000 families on wait lists, hoping to escape the failing schools in their neighborhoods. More than 1 million children are on charter school wait lists across the country.

The Success Academy school model has attracted the interest of educators from across the country (as well as from around the world). Last year, we hosted 275 educators from 70 different organizations for tours and workshops. Attendees represented 19 states as well as Barcelona, Indonesia, and South Africa.

Success Academy is eager to share its best practices, but each year we have more requests than we can handle. In response to these requests, Arin Lavinia, Senior Managing Director of Academic Excellence, and I wrote *Mission Possible: How the Secrets of Success Academies Can Work in Any School*, which details the curriculum, philosophy, and key aspects of our results-driven school model.

Personal Impact: Futures of our Children

Success Academy’s most profound impact, of course, is on our scholars – scholars who have not only reversed the achievement gap, but also overturned it: 80% of our African American scholars passed math last year, compared to 50% of the city’s White students. With me today, representing Success Academy are:

Nigel Webb Nigel is in the 7th grade and loves science, math and English. He’s also a great soccer player and passionate about dance. Nigel will tell you that he hasn’t always been a top student, but he’s worked hard to master and exceed grade-level standards. “I like my school because they treat us like adults,” say Nigel, whose grandmother, **Merlene Jarrett**, is also with us today.

Ananda Shannon Ananda is in the 8th grade and science is her favorite subject. She loves robotics and the performing arts, and says that what she likes best about Success Academy is “that we learn something new every day, and we learn some things that even my parents don’t know.” Ananda plans to attend a performing arts college. Her mother **Natasha Shannon** says, “I’m especially proud that all students are expected to do well.”

Aida Bathily Aida is in 9th grade and will be attending our first high school. Aida is a passionate debater and went to California this spring with her team to the national debate tournament. Aida wants to attend either Princeton or Yale, and when she says, “I know I would be able to make it there,” her mother, **Michelle Thiam**, and I also know that her excellent work and study habits back up that confidence.

Success Academy is now spread out all over New York City, from the Bronx and Manhattan to Brooklyn and Queens. Many of our families face incredible challenges. Some work two jobs, others don't have a job. About 6 percent of our families are homeless. We have single parents, parents who struggle with difficult economic realities, parents who commute from Staten Island to Harlem – they had to move from Manhattan, but they refused to give up on their child's education. These parents will tell you they did not have anything close to the education their children are getting, and they are united in their commitment to our schools and to their children's futures.

Return on Investment

Success Academy scholars have benefitted from federal support. In particular, the Charter School Program has helped us to start up new schools and to develop the innovative teacher-training program we call "T School." I encourage Members of the Committee to support more well-run, high-quality public schools like Success Academies – schools where teachers and students are held accountable, where all children are expected to achieve and are prepared and equipped with the skills they need for the 21st century. It's possibly the best return on investment our country can make.

With 1 million students on wait lists for U.S. charter schools, we have an obligation to rapidly develop more high-quality school options for families. Congress can help meet that constituent demand by passing S. 2304, the Expanding Opportunity through Quality Charter Schools Act, which would authorize an increase of funds to the Charter School Program and codify into law a grant competition that enables high-performing charter schools to grow. While this bill is a good start, more must be done to support schools helping children achieve at extraordinary levels. With key supports like S. 2304 and others, public charter schools like ours can continue to make a positive and critically needed difference in the lives of disadvantaged children.

We as a nation can't fix poverty unless we fix education, and we can't fix education if we keep telling ourselves our schools are "good enough." If we sell low-income, minority children short, because we believe their poverty prevents them from learning, then indeed, they won't learn. If we want to help our children of color to rise out of poverty, we must give them schools on par with what their more affluent peers have.

We don't have an achievement gap in America — we have an **opportunity** gap. With access to great schools, African American students – indeed, all students – can and do achieve tremendous academic success. If we give all children a fair start, then the race is theirs to win. We do not need so much to "lift" children from poverty as to equip them with the skills and self-confidence to achieve their dreams. We must choose to make schools incubators of opportunity, not poverty traps.

I am optimistic that our nation can do this, that opportunities can be extended to all children and that they will gain the skills and training to fill our jobs and fuel our economy, to become our greatest resource and to realize their own dreams. But we must act with urgency. Lives are in the balance and global competition is becoming stronger and moving with greater velocity than ever before. To bring about meaningful change, we need new thinking and a new approach. Education needs to move as rapidly and dramatically as the rest of our economy.

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- ¹ OECD, PISA 2012 Results, “Snapshot of performance in mathematics, reading, and science,” *available at*
- ² <http://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/Tackling-high-inequalities.pdf>
- ³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey,” *available at*:
<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.toc.htm> (last visited July 27, 2014)
- ⁴ W.K. Kellogg Foundation, “The Business Case for Racial Equality,” *available at*:
<http://www.wkkf.org/resource-directory/resource/2013/10/the-business-case-for-racial-equity> (last visited July 22, 2014)
- ⁵ Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Center for Policy Analysis and Research, “Challenge the Status Quo,” *available at*: <http://www.cbcfinc.org/oUploadedFiles/CTSQ.pdf> (last visited July 27, 2014)
- ⁶ *Id.*
- ⁷ Results from National Assessment of Educational Progress Math Assessment (2013) in both fourth and eighth grade. *Available at*: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/mathematics> (last visited July 28, 2014)
- ⁸ http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/ela-math/2013/2013-08-06FINALELAandMathPRESENTATIONDECK_v2.pdf
- ⁹ New York State Education Department – Information and Reporting Services, *Release of Data – August 7, 2013*, *available at* <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pressRelease/20130807/home.html> (last visited Nov. 3, 2013).
- ¹⁰ *Id.*