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## A charter school models how the city can educate autistic children

By **ELIZA SHAPIRO** | 10/30/2017 05:03 AM EDT

The New York City Autism Charter School is, by its very existence, challenging the way both the city's charter and district schools educate students with profound special needs.

The school — which opened its second location in the South Bronx this fall for 12 children with moderate to severe autism — belies a common critique, true or not, that charters don't use their flexibility to serve kids who need the most help; an argument often parroted by Mayor Bill de Blasio and United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew, among many others.

The Autism Charter also offers a broad challenge to the way autism education is funded at the local, state and federal level. The school, which has won praise from experts on all sides of the charter debate, demonstrates how children with the most severe needs can be educated in a public setting, rather than in the private schools where many affluent parents manage to send their children with disabilities. And as the rates of autism diagnoses rise dramatically, the school could have influence far beyond the 44 students it serves at its East Harlem and Bronx outposts.

Though the school's mission puts pressure on the rest of the charter sector, the Autism Charter is as apolitical as any charter in New York City.

Unlike many of its peers among the city's charter sector, the school doesn't participate in pro-charter rallies, marches or press conferences. School leaders' interaction with the press has been mostly limited to Paperless Post invitations the school's annual piano recital and "baseball extravaganza."

On a recent morning at the Bronx school, the Autism Charter's director, Julie Fisher, said she's content to stay out of the volatile world of education politics.

"I came at this as an autism educator and that's very much how I have always identified myself," Fisher, who refers to her students as "kiddos," said. "Incorporating 'charter leader' into my identity has been a gradual process, but an amazing one. I've learned so much from my brilliant charter colleagues, but I can't really turn to the charter sector to learn what's cutting edge for kids with autism."

The school stands apart from the city's district and charter programs for autistic children for the staff's level of specific expertise in autism, and for the school's practice of matching every student with their own teacher or paraprofessional. Even the most specialized public settings typically have two teachers for every six students.

### **A unique model**

At the Autism Charter's Bronx outpost, a set of locked double doors on the second floor of a hulking brown school building opens to a pristine, bright hallway where children zip up and down on colorful scooters. On their scooters, kids learn to respond to "stop" and "go," practice their balance and blow off some steam.

In Fox Street, a classroom named for the school's block, one boy who had spent the first few weeks of school swatting at his teacher was being cuddled and tickled by his teacher. A girl who has not demonstrated a grasp of language was at the other end of the room, playing a

game called Seek-A-Boo to help her match symbols to activities, in order to develop a daily schedule.

A sign outside the classroom reads, “Fox Street students are working on making requests to gain access to people and things in their environment and completing a number of self-care skills that are critical for their increased independence.”

In the Simpson Boulevard classroom, where students with the more moderate needs were working on math problems, one boy explained that he was going on a field trip to the Bronx Botanical Garden later that week. He said he was looking forward to seeing the Venus flytrap, his favorite plant, using his fingers to imitate the motion the carnivorous plant makes when it traps a bug. Officials said that student may make enough social and academic progress this year to be integrated into some general education classes at South Bronx Classical Charter School, which shares a building with the Autism Charter.

Throughout the day, students filter out of their classrooms for a lesson at the school’s weathered piano. Children match piano keys to letters or colors to build songs. Every student has customized piano instruction, but three-note songs like “Hot Cross Buns” are popular.

“If they recognize a tune, they’re happy,” said Eileen Buck, the school’s piano teacher. Framed photos of the Center’s students crowd the piano’s mantle.

Fisher’s school could likely only exist as a charter, outside the bureaucratic strictures of traditional public schools where teachers are free to adapt to a child’s specific needs in real time.

Dr. Catherine Lord, the director of the Center for Autism and the Developing Brain at Weill Cornell Medicine/NewYork-Presbyterian, offered an example. She’s worked with staff who were under strict instructions to never touch a child — so when they once saw a young child with autism walk out a front door, they were initially hesitant physically stop the child from wandering.

“It was ridiculous,” Lord said. “You just have to have some flexibility.”

“This is an art, it’s not just a science,” said Ilene Lainer, the president of the advocacy group NEXT for Autism which creates services and programs for people with autism.

“This work really requires professionals who understand the differences between one child with autism from another,” said Lainer, also a member of the Autism Charter’s board.

## **A charter evolution**

While the autism charter expands what the charter model can do for high-needs students, its growth also sheds light on what the rest of the local charter sector is — and isn't — doing for the city's most vulnerable children.

The charter sector's political foes have long accused the schools of not serving students with disabilities, an accusation often contradicted by statistics. Still, there is growing concern within charter movement that charters aren't taking advantage of their inherent freedom by serving more high-risk students.

"Charter management organizations in New York City have led the charge in improving outcomes for low-income students, but they have not yet done the same for students with [disabilities]. They should," Noah Mackert, the literacy director at the charter network, Democracy Prep, wrote last week in an op-ed for *The 74*, an education news outlet.

Some of the city's biggest networks have recently introduced pilot programs aimed at addressing the issue.

This fall, Achievement First, which has 20 schools in Brooklyn, opened the Bushwick Empower Program specifically to serve students with disabilities, including children on the autism spectrum. Democracy Prep recently opened Pathways, its program for low-income students with disabilities, which currently serves 32 students. KIPP NYC has added new supports for special education students, including hiring more special education certified teachers and more training for teachers to work with students with special needs.

Success Academy, the city's largest charter network, includes its students with autism both in integrated general education classes and in small class settings with 12 students and two certified special education teachers and has increased the number of small classes for students with disabilities. The New York City Charter School Center has also developed the Special Education Collaborative to help more charters educate students with special needs.

But much of this work is still preliminary, and the Autism Charter remains the city's sole charter option for students who are the most profoundly affected by autism.

## **A growing need**

The sheer scale of need for high-quality public options for autistic children has left the Department of Education scrambling to open new programs.

Last year, there were 20,450 students in New York City on the autism spectrum; 17,015 were educated in a district or charter school. The majority of those students — about 11,000 — are educated in District 75 schools, the city's district for students with the most advanced special needs. Autism experts say there are high-quality District 75 options, but that some programs serve students with a variety of disabilities, rather than autism specifically, and that programs' structures can be restrictive for some teachers.

City schools chancellor Carmen Fariña has embraced and expanded a popular program known as ASD Nest, which embeds about 1,000 high-functioning students with autism into general education classrooms. ASD Horizon, which serves students further along on the autism spectrum, serves about 450 students. Horizon programs typically have eight students and two teachers, and some Horizon students are eventually able to move into general education classrooms.

But the size of the Autism Charter's waitlist makes it clear that some parents of children most impacted by autism are looking for programs outside the district. The Charter's East Harlem school, which serves 32 students, has a waitlist of 108 families for three open spots.

The school's popularity and model has proved popular among a wide variety of the city's education leaders and politicians, some of whom are otherwise critical of charters. City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito has visited the Autism Charter's East Harlem school, which is in the Council district she represents.

"All students — especially the most vulnerable — deserve access to quality education, and the New York City Autism Charter has been a welcome addition to the El Barrio/East Harlem neighborhood," Mark-Viverito said.

The de Blasio administration, which has sought to repair its relationship with some charter leaders after a damaging fight over charter space in 2014, has identified the Autism Charter as a prime example of the type of charter school it supports.

"The New York City Autism Charter School has done incredible work on behalf of their students and families and we look forward to finding new ways for us to collaborate and share best practices with their schools and staff," Melissa Harris, the senior executive director for the Department of Education's charter school office, said.

Dorothy Siegel, the creator of the Nest program and a well-regarded voice in the city's special education community, said she "loves the school."

“I’m a big fan of their expansion, and it says something that they went to the South Bronx and not Riverdale or Park Slope,” she said. “We need to put services where the children are most in need and least likely to get them.”

Other autism experts say they’ve been impressed with the Autism Charter’s ability to educate children with profound needs so well in a public school.

“The more of these schools that could exist in a public school setting, the more money the taxpayer would save,” said Lord, of the Center for Autism and the Developing Brain, rather than paying for students with the most serious needs to attend private schools, she said. The schools’ students will likely need fewer public services, including hospital visits, later in life.

Lainer, of NEXT for Autism, said, “we believe we can do better as a society to support people with autism, and public education is no different — we can be doing better.” The school, she said, “has helped raise the bar.”

Students on either side of the autism spectrum are better represented than they were even a few years ago, experts say, with the expansion of Nest and the Autism Charter. But students in the middle still need more high-quality seats, Lord said.

“Autism is such a heterogeneous condition,” she said. “We need something for everybody.”

*CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story incorrectly cited the name of the Special Education Collaborative.*