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Phila. charter schools honored

By Martha Woodall

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Two Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia are among 21 charters across the country that have won national honors for dramatic academic gains among low-income students.

A study by New Leaders for New Schools highlighted student performance in the 2007-08 academic year at Mastery's Shoemaker campus in West Philadelphia and its Lenfest campus in Center City.

The New York nonprofit praised Mastery yesterday for "tackling the issue of educational equity head-on. By placing an emphasis on effective management and proven practices, Mastery is growing into a leader in urban education."

The staffs at both campuses will share \$175,000 in awards for boosting student achievement.

"We are obviously thrilled," Scott Gordon, chief executive officer of Mastery Charter Schools, said yesterday. "The study conclusively showed that . . . we were able to get kids who were below grade level above grade level."

New Leaders New Schools' Effective Practice Incentive Community (EPIC) initiative conducted a detailed analysis of test scores at 150 charters serving low-income students.

The group uses state tests to track individual students to determine charter schools that are most effective. Information about the successful programs is shared.

EPIC is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Incentive Fund, school districts, charter schools, and philanthropies.

Shoemaker students posted an increase of 12 percentile points in one year, while the Lenfest students gained 14 percentile points, said Chris Mathews, national director of research and evaluation for EPIC.

Shoemaker was one of three "gold gain" winners among the 37 middle schools. Lenfest was the top "silver gain" winner among 25 high schools.

EPIC's analysis showed that, based on their economic backgrounds and past performance, the students were expected to score lower, said Jeff Pestrak, Mastery's chief academic officer.

"But something happened," he said, "and the thing that happened was Mastery."

Lenfest, a traditional charter high school that opened in 2001, draws its 420 students from across the city to its campus at 35 S. Fourth St.

Shoemaker, 5301 Media St., was converted from one of the Philadelphia School District's most troubled middle schools into a Mastery charter in 2006-07.

Unlike traditional charter schools, Shoemaker enrolls the same students who would have attended when the district operated it, and draws from Bluford Elementary School and its West Philadelphia neighborhood.

Shoemaker has 470 students in seventh through 10th grades. It grows each year and will ultimately enroll

550 students through 12th grade.

The EPIC money will be awarded to teachers, administrators, and other instructional staff who worked at the two campuses in 2007-08, Gordon said.

Mastery, he said, will provide bonuses for the charters' clerical, maintenance, and other staff.

"We have fantastic teachers and an amazing staff," Gordon said, adding that Mastery also had "great kids and great parents."

Mastery, which operates four charters in Philadelphia, aims to prepare students for college and beyond by enforcing a strict behavioral code, offering a rigorous curriculum, and developing personal responsibility and interpersonal skills. Its approach includes a longer school day and a longer school year. Struggling students must attend tutoring and Saturday sessions. All students must show "mastery" by earning a grade of at least 76 percent before advancing to the next level.

A total of 144 charter schools in 17 states and Washington participate in EPIC's National Charter School Consortium. On average, 70 percent of their students are low-income and eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

Other Pennsylvania schools among the 21 winners are Propel McKeesport and City Charter High School in Pittsburgh. No New Jersey charters were recognized.

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