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## A better fit at Shoemaker

A lesson learned: W. Phila. charter making the score

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Even as violence flared at West Philadelphia High School, students at another West Philadelphia school calmly took standardized tests last week, their confidence boosted by months of preparation including Saturday classes.

Shannon Moulton, an eighth grader at Mastery Charter School's Shoemaker campus, said the PSSAs seemed easier because of all the extra help she'd received this year.

Back in seventh grade, they didn't teach us a lot," said Shannon, 14. "We weren't really focused on this. But since we have a lot of help and Saturday school and our teachers are better, we get to be more comfortable in how we're learning."

The eighth graders' scores will show more than whether individual students measure up to the state's academic standards. They also will be a barometer of Mastery's success in converting the once-troubled middle school into a charter.

The school's principal, Robert Lewis, while reticent to predict scores, is confident.

"I think it's pretty safe to say there may be pleasant surprises down the road," he said.

Last year, before Mastery arrived, only 30.6 percent of eighth graders had scored at proficient or above in math, 42.8 percent in reading.

"If we come in five percentage points or higher than what they did last year, I would consider that a win," Lewis said. "But I would like to see a little bit more than that."

Results are due this summer.

For years Shoemaker was one of the most troubled schools in the district, plagued by low test scores and violence. Last year, as a traditional district middle school with 186 seventh and eighth graders, it reported 66 serious incidents, including an assault on a school police officer, four assaults on teachers, and 12 assaults on students.

So far this academic year, since Mastery took over, Lewis said, there have been three student fights in a school that now has 208 seventh and eighth graders.



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**Gabrielle Taylor** (left), and Ashley Ensley at Shoemaker. It was a traditional middle school until students and parents pledged change.

**Greta Hough teaches English.** Along with her pupils, she has a visitor: Kiyanna Madden, 8, sitting next to her sister, Shannon Moulton.





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**Keeping up:** Eight-year-old Kiyanna Madden works earnestly as she visits Shoemaker with sister Shannon Moulton (right).

"I am really proud of them," Lewis said. "There is a part of me that finds that hard to believe - and I'm here every day. There are suburban schools that have had more fights."

Based on Mastery's track record at its charter high school in Center City, the school district asked the nonprofit to take on Shoemaker.

Among the first things the students did last fall was to pledge not to engage in violence. And parents, students and school officials signed contracts promising to do "whatever is necessary" to help students succeed.

For half the eighth graders, the "whatever" has included after-school sessions Tuesdays and Thursdays and three-hours of class on Saturday mornings.

The Saturday program began Nov. 4 and concluded March 9. Students capped mornings of math and language arts with a pizza lunch each week.

Some other charter schools, including Laboratory Charter School, which has campuses in Northern Liberties and West Philadelphia, offer after-school and Saturday sessions to help boost test scores. But even though Laboratory consistently has achieved some of the highest PSSA scores in the state, the approach is still uncommon.

Stan Bobowski, the assistant principal who oversees the test-prep program at Shoemaker, said the after-school and Saturday classes give students three extra periods of math and language arts each week.

"It's remediation, but it's also advanced work — if that makes sense — because

some of the things they see on Saturday they will not see in class," he said.

Bobowski looked at results of diagnostic tests he gave students in September, their benchmark scores and grades to identify those who needed help.

Scott Gordon, Mastery's chief executive, said fund raising covers the costs.

Although students were not thrilled about Saturday classes, they complied.

"Basically, we told them they didn't have a choice, really. They had signed contracts," Bobowski said. "In the beginning it was a little rough."

Students who skipped a session without a note from home got three-hour detentions to make up what they missed.

More than 50 of the 60 students who were supposed to attend usually did.

Lewis, the principal, said that week after week, students lined up outside the school on Saturday mornings.

"I have never seen anything like it," he said. "The families have to be supporting us or these kids wouldn't be here."

Bobowski said students' resistance melted when they began to see their grades rise.

Khalil Harris, 14, is a case in point.

"At first I didn't want to go, but when I found that I was learning and everything, I wanted to go," Khalil said. "I liked it because it helped my grades."

He was among 50 eighth graders — a few with younger siblings in tow — who trudged up Shoemaker's steps at 8:30 a.m. one recent Saturday and made their way to class.

Some headed to the room of English teacher Greta Hough for a lesson that



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**At Mastery Charter School's Shoemaker campus,** teacher Greyson Summey, above, helps David Cherry, 14, with a math problem.

included reading and discussing short stories by Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway.

Students compared and contrasted the central characters in the two stories and talked about the authors' points of view. The lesson highlighted skills covered in class the previous week that the students would be expected to know for the PSSAs.

Hough said she had never encountered a Saturday school before arriving at Shoemaker in the fall.

"At first I didn't know if the kids were going to come," said Hough, a Philadelphia native who had taught at several schools in Atlanta. "It's something that is hard for them to do, but we push them. It's good, and we make it fun for them. I think they come, too, because they are doing better and it builds up their skills. They're successful now."

Although the PSSAs for the eighth graders are wrapping up this week, one-on-one after-school tutoring will be available to students who need it.

Saturday school is done for the year at Shoemaker. Now it's the seventh graders' turn to attend the Tuesday and Thursday test-prep sessions. Bobowski has tapped 45 students who need help. He said the program math classes will focus on pre-algebra skills and prepping them for the rigors of eighth grade.

"We'll try to get them ready," Bobowski said, "so they'll have a head start."

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