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School celebrates hard-won success

Mastery's Shoemaker campus marks a turnaround.

By Martha Woodall
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Annette Hayes squeezed into a seat near the stage for the eighth-grade promotion at Mastery Charter School's Shoemaker campus in West Philadelphia because she just knew she was going to holler and cheer for her son, Leroy.

Hayes had plenty to shout about. Leroy, 14, won academic awards in math and social studies and took first honors for scoring 80 percent or higher on every benchmark test this academic year.

"I'm looking forward to next year already," Hayes said. "I feel grateful that I can send my son to a school where he can learn and is a really good experience."

Thursday's ceremony was more than a rite of passage for students and families marking the transition to ninth grade at the former Shoemaker Middle School. The event was a rousing finale to a year that saw the successful makeover of one of the Philadelphia School District's most troubled schools into a model charter school.

"I present to you the first freshman class of Mastery Charter School at Shoemaker," principal Robert Lewis announced, with a sweeping gesture toward the eighth graders. "Some people don't want to admit it," he said, "but these students here and the seventh graders in the back are one of the biggest success stories this city has had this year."

The school's testing showed students had gained one and a half to two years in reading and math. Discipline has improved dramatically at a school that had one of the highest assault rates in the district a year earlier. Students say their attitudes toward school have been transformed, and administrators say the change is visible in students' faces.

"When I first got here, they were so angry," recalled Jerel Brooks, dean of students. "They were really hard. Some kids just didn't smile at all."

He recalled the student who told him he had "survived" earlier grades.

"I said, 'You don't survive school. You learn from school,'" Brooks said.

Now, he said, he is surrounded by beaming faces.

"Just looking at them smile is great,"



CHARLES FOX / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Eighth graders at Mastery Charter School's Shoemaker campus in West Philadelphia celebrate their promotion. The school and its pupils experienced a year of positive change.

Brooks said.

Mastery's approach aims to prepare students for college and beyond by enforcing a strict behavior code, offering a rigorous curriculum, and developing personal responsibility and interpersonal skills.

And while Mastery enforces rules firmly, it rewards good behavior and improved academics with pizza parties, no-uniform days and trips.

It all began in 2001 when Scott Gordon, a former businessman with an M.B.A. from Yale University, founded a charter high school to bring business acumen to education.

He recruited prominent business and academic leaders to the board of trustees, including Brook J. Lenfest, president of Brooks Capital Group, and Jeremy Nowak, founder of the Reinvestment Fund.

As a charter school, Mastery receives funding from the Philadelphia district: \$7,248 per student and \$15,346 per special-education student. Extra money comes from fundraising.

A \$2.65 million grant from the NewSchools Venture Fund in 2005 is helping Mastery expand. Based on Mastery's success with its Center City high school, the district asked it

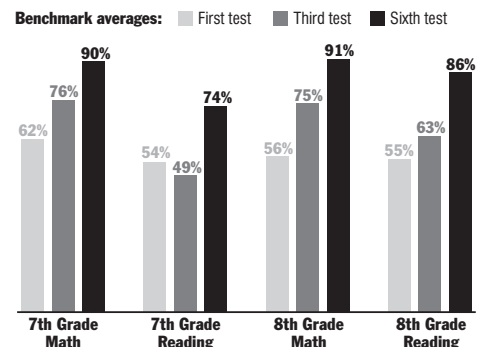
to convert Thomas Middle School in South Philadelphia to a charter school in the fall of 2005. In September, Mastery will open Pickett Middle School in Germantown as a charter school.

Shoemaker, which welcomed 208 seventh and eighth graders from the school's West Philadelphia neighborhood in the fall, is Mastery's biggest challenge yet.

In 2005-06, only 30.6 percent of Shoemaker's eighth graders scored proficient or above in math and 42.8 percent in

Looking Up

Mastery students were given internal benchmark tests during the 2006-07 school year designed to assess their ability to master material covered during the preceding six weeks.



SOURCE: Mastery Charter Schools

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Highlights of Mastery Program

All students must:

- Sign contracts promising to do "whatever is necessary to succeed."
- Pledge not to engage in violence.
- Know the school's mission is to prepare students for higher education and to compete in the global economy.
- Memorize the student code of conduct, including the statement "I am here to learn and achieve."
- Attend school in uniform.
- Wear ID lanyards with cards on which staff can record good deeds and demerits.
- Participate in group sessions and community meetings.
- Achieve 76 percent proficiency in academic subjects to demonstrate "mastery" for promotion.
- Attend twice weekly after-school and Saturday morning sessions if struggling academically.

reading on state tests.

That year, when Shoemaker had only 186 seventh and eighth graders, the school reported 66 serious incidents, including 12 assaults on students, four on teachers, and one on a school police officer.

This academic year, Lewis said, there were four minor fights, mostly involving shoving and pushing. He said that no one was injured but that all eight students were forced out for violating the nonviolence pledge they signed when they were admitted.

In at least one case, Lewis said, he had not wanted to make the student leave but believed he needed to show that the school was serious about enforcing its rules.

If he had made an exception, Lewis said, "I believe it's over, and everything that I've said was a lie."

He said that there were no student assaults on staff at Shoemaker this year and that he could not imagine any of his students hitting an adult.

"We were supposed to be one of the most violent schools in Philadelphia," he said. "All I know is we have the same children, and these children are not violent. They're very intelligent. They are talented. And their families have been unbelievably supportive."

Most parents appreciate the strictness.

"You have to abide by their rules," said Marvin Robinson, whose daughter Cinquetta, 16, was promoted to ninth grade. "They don't play. They don't take no nonsense. They are about teaching the kids."

That firmness was evident even at the eighth-grade promotion. More than 80 students will move to ninth grade, but only 56 participated in the ceremony. The others, Lewis said, had missed mandatory rehearsals.

Although results of this year's state tests will not be available until later this summer, Lewis said teachers were encouraged by the

students' performance on the school's own benchmark tests.

And the Shoemaker building is halfway through its own physical renovation, which includes huge new windows, bright hallways, colorful linoleum, and splashes of vibrant paint on the walls.

"We have known in [educational psychology] for many years that the color of rooms really does stimulate learning," said Lewis, who joined Mastery last year after seven years as a principal.

The students love the colorful surroundings, but they talk more about the safer atmosphere at Shoemaker, the help and attention they received from teachers, and the personal changes they experienced this academic year.

Eighth grader Aja Waters, 14, said she began the year "out of control," as she had been in seventh grade at Shoemaker. She was suspended in December after being disrespectful to teachers.

During the suspension, Waters did some thinking and decided she wanted to make a better life for herself.

"When I came back, I just changed my whole way of thinking," she said. "I have been getting my grades up. The teachers are giving me good phone calls at home, saying how much I improved."

Khalif Younger, 14, changed, too.

He had gotten into trouble regularly in seventh grade at Sulzberger Middle School in West Philadelphia and had a rough time at first at Shoemaker.

He was suspended twice for cutting up on a corner near Shoemaker with friends and darting into traffic after school.

"It's called 'disrupting the community,'" Younger explained. "But I changed my behavior and my attitude, and it's much better."

He credits the school with helping him.

"The teachers, the principals, the staff — they know we are here to learn, and they're here to teach us," Younger said. "They care about us."

He and other students said they felt secure at Mastery's Shoemaker campus.

"You don't have to worry about anybody beating anybody up," Leroy Hayes said. "There were no firecrackers in the hallway this year."

Students said they also had to get used to strict discipline and tough academic standards that require students to achieve at least 76 percent to demonstrate "mastery" of academics.

"Just the way they grade — 75 equals an F," said Chauncey Johnson, 14, who transferred in the fall from another charter school.



A TRANSFORMATION: The makeover of a troubled school Mastery Charter School at Shoemaker, its principal says, offers "one of the biggest success stories" in the city.



CHARLES FOX / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Students Christina Brown (center) and Erica Hall (right) embrace teacher Ajaka Roth after the promotion ceremony.

He said his grades improved after he got to work.

"The work has been harder, and the year has been great," said seventh grader Gilbert Waters Jr., 12.

"The teachers before didn't push us like these teachers," said William Wingate, 14.

Mastery's Shoemaker campus will eventually expand to 714 students from seventh through 12th grades. Students said they planned to be there when Lewis hands out the first diplomas in 2011.

"I would really like to be a doctor," Younger said. "This place will help get me where I want to go."

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