

Students thriving at Amistad

City charter school sets high standard and the kids shine

By **Natalie Missakian**
Register Staff

NEW HAVEN ----- Kendall Petri's former students called their time in her classroom "The Great Depression."

"We worked like dogs. We worked through snack time. We *never* got to eat our snacks," said Kevin Walker, an Amistad Academy eighth-grader who has attended the start-up charter school since it opened in 1999.

Long hours and hard work are the way of life at Amistad, where 193 children in grades 5 through 8 attend classes from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., where the school day is highly structured and where chewing gum or cheering too loudly in recess will land you in detention.

"You have to be prepared to be suspended," said eighth-grader Kiara Fuller. "Because we get suspended for every little thing."

The payoff come in March, however, when results of the Connecticut Mastery Tests showed Amistad eighth-graders -- all of whom are black and Latino and most of whom are poor -- are beating the statewide average in writing on the exams and out performing the city a their suburban peers in math.

The news came as state Education Commissioner Theodore Sergi was lamenting the slow progress of urban schools in closing a ragging achievement gap. Those students are more likely to have social problems that make it more difficult to learn, than their counterparts in mostly white and wealthier suburban schools.

"The story across the state (when the results were released) was that black and Latino students were under performing," said Dacia Toll, Amistad's executive director. "It's nice to offer some proof that



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Amistad Academy reading and writing teacher Drema Brown instructs Kevin Walker, 13, left, while Leroy Steed, 13, and Jennifer Wells, 14, work on their assignments. Students at the charter school have scored high on state standardized tests.

they can achieve at the same high level as wealthy, white students -- and in large numbers, not just a single kid here or a single kid there."

A colored-coded bar graph documenting the mastery test accomplishment hangs on a bulletin board in Petri's second-floor classroom. Petri, one of the 19 teachers at the school, said she simply tired of the flood of questions from her students on the day state officials released the scores.

"These are kids who have seen and heard their whole lives that New Haven kids are on the bottom," said Petri, a former Boston trial lawyer who gave up practicing to teach. "Many of the kids in here have asked if New Haven did better than Bridgeport or Hartford because they're very, very aware."

Amistad, a publicly funded alternative to the city's

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Inner-city students prove dedication works

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traditional public schools, opened on James Street in Fair Haven in 1999 with a promise of high expectations and rigorous academic course work for inner-city middle schoolers. It was founded by a group of Yale law students, city parents, school-teachers and business people. The school was named after the schooner Amistad, where 53 blacks abducted from West Africa in 1839 staged a rebellion. A replica of the ship is based in New Haven Harbor.

In addition to the longer school day, parents must sign a contract promising to get their children to school on time, in uniform and to return teachers' telephone calls within 24 hours.

Students also sign a pledge to live up to the school's values, known as REACH -- respect, enthusiasm, achievement, citizenship and hard work. Students are required to read at least 20 minutes each night and reading, writing and math are taught first thing each morning, when minds are fresh.

When students arrived at Amistad, most were scoring at the same low levels as their urban peers in New Haven and other Connecticut cities, and many came to school with the same kinds of challenges. Eighty-seven percent of Amistad's students qualify for free and reduced price lunches, a statistic often used as an indicator of poverty.

As sixth-graders in 1999, only 16 percent could meet the state goal in math, and most -- 66 percent -- were scoring at the lowest two levels. Two years later, 47 percent of those same students met the state goal as eighth-graders -- the state average was 55 percent and the city average was 28 percent -- and almost 9 out of 10 in the two top scoring bands.

The success in even more pronounced in writing, where 64 percent of eighth-graders met the state goal, a figure that rivals scores in Branford and Milford. The state average was 59 percent.

"We had several students who hadn't passed anything the first time around pass in math, reading and writing," said Petri.

"It's nice to offer some proof that they can achieve at the same high level as wealthy, white students."

Amistad Academy
Executive Director Dacia Toll

One of them was Nastashia Archie, an eighth-grader who says she came to Amistad as a sixth-grader "because my mother made me." Two years later, though, she doesn't mind the long hours, and admits the school and its teachers have helped.

"They push us," she said. "They pushed us a lot."

In Petri's class, there's also heavy emphasis on test-preparation, for which Petri makes no apologies.

"All of us as human beings do the best on any task when we know what's expected of us," she said. "One of my aims is to alleviate anxiety, build self esteem and develop familiarity with the test so that when they do sit down and take it in September they do it with much more confidence."

Students in her class, for example, know exactly how many points they need to earn from graders to write a passing CMT essay. They follow a structured format to keep their papers organized and memorize any acronym to help remind them of them of the different ways to elaborate on a point -- whether it be through statistics, facts, opinions or anecdotes.

As Petri worked with students on arguments essays during a recent class, she urged them to put their best arguments first and grab the reader's attention -- a basic tip for any piece of good writing, Petri said.

"These CMT graders, they grade thousands upon thousands of these essays and everyone's got to write about the same issue. How boring do you think it gets?" she told them.

To be sure, Amistad has plenty of advantages that can sometimes be difficult to replicate in traditional

Amistad Academy: A case study

Improvement from sixth- to eighth-grade

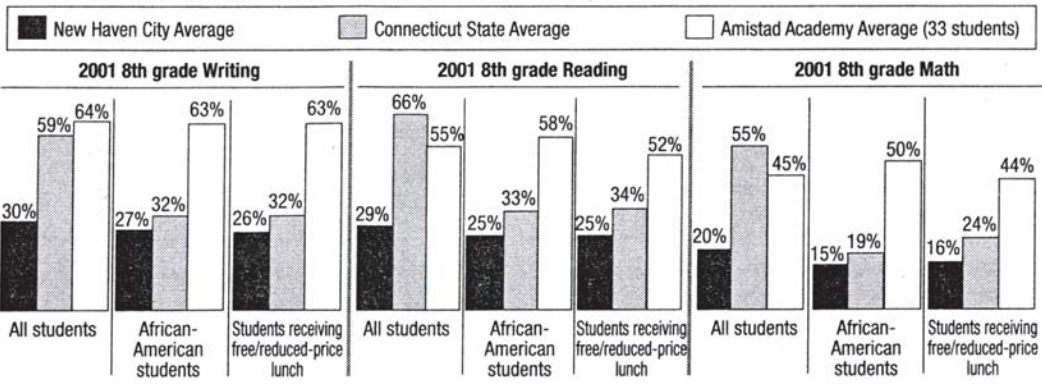
The Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) results for the same 32 students show a consistent pattern of improvement from 1999, when they started at the school as sixth graders, and as eighth graders in 2001, after two years at Amistad.

Math CMT	1999 6th grade	2001 8th grade	Reading CMT	1999 6th grade	2001 8th grade	Writing CMT	1999 6th grade	2001 8th grade
Level 4	16%	47%	Level 4	34%	56%	Level 4	38%	66%
Level 3	19%	41%	Level 3	25%	19%	Level 3	31%	22%
Level 2	25%	3%	Levels 1 & 2	41%	25%	Levels 1 & 2	31%	13%
Level 1	41%	9%						

Level 4 is at or above goal, Level 1 is remedial. Levels 1 and 2 scores for reading and writing were only available grouped.

Amistad compared to New Haven and Connecticut averages

Comparing the percentage of Amistad students at or above goal on the CMT with the state average results and with New Haven's city average shows that the Amistad children generally scored higher. These numbers differ slightly from those above because these are for 33 Amistad students, one of whom did not attend in 1999.



Source: Amistad Academy

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public schools. There's no union contract to limit the number of hours in the school day, for one, and the longer hours make for more time to teach and practice the basics. The school's small size allows Amistad to give kids more individual attention.

Plus, charter schools benefit from a parent and student body who have chosen the school, and are therefore committed to its mission, said Tom Murphy, spokesman for the state Department of Education.

But he said Amistad's improvements "confirm what we know -- that all children can achieve at high levels."

"It's a matter of resources, focus and expectations," he said.

At \$11,000 per pupil, Amistad Academy spends about as much to educate a student as the New Haven public school system, but more than most other charter schools. The school receives private donations to supplement the \$7,500 per pupil the state gives charters to operate. Other charter schools in Connecticut so far

have had little success in substantially raising test scores above those in their home school district.

Toll rejects the idea that charter schools such as Amistad get the better students -- and most committed parents -- from city schools. Students are selected through the same lottery used by city magnet schools and the school has had only limited success in enforcing its parent contract, she said.

To the school's advantage, Toll said Amistad had enjoyed a friendly relationship with leaders of the city's public school system, something not all charter schools enjoy. Designed to foster innovation, charter schools began as a way to reform public schools by fostering competition.

"It's not a competition and they have never treated it like a competition," Toll said. "It's all about the kids."

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