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A rectangular button with a gold gradient background and the text "WATCH THE TRAILER" in a serif font.

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The Fragile Success of School Reform in the Bronx

By **JONATHAN MAHLER**

On a recent morning, Ramón González, the principal of M.S. 223, a public middle school in the South Bronx, arrived at work as usual at 7:30, stripped off his coat and suit jacket, deposited his tea and toast from a nearby diner on the cluttered conference table in his office and hustled down the hallway to the school's back door to greet arriving students. González had a busy agenda for the day. Among other things, he needed to get to work on a proposal for the city's Department of Education to expand 223 into a high school.

At 10, González was finally about to sit down at his computer, when he was interrupted. A young teacher came into his office in tears, unable to figure out what was going on with an eighth grader who had just transferred to 223 from a public school in Florida, was way behind in class and had been wandering around the school's hallways between periods, looking lost. González knew almost nothing about the girl. Like many of his students, she turned up at 223 with no more than a utility bill to prove she lived in the neighborhood. He calmed the teacher and started trying to figure out what was happening. (When he finally reached an administrator at the girl's old school days later, he discovered that she had been classified with a severe learning disability.)

Next, González was informed that the three free books that each of his school's students was entitled to — under a nonprofit program to promote literacy in poor communities — had never arrived. He needed to chase them down. (As it turned out, they wound up at the wrong school.) As he was doing so, he learned that a former teacher who had physically threatened him, members of his faculty and even some students, and whom González had spent years trying to remove from the classroom, was challenging his termination.

There was also the matter of the eye tests. For five straight days, González had been trying to get through to someone at an organization that does free vision tests at public schools and fits children with glasses on the spot. "I can guarantee you right now that at least 20 percent of our kids need glasses," he told me, after leaving yet another message on someone's voice mail

to “please, please, *please* call me back.” González, a light-skinned, baby-faced Latino, was sitting at a table in his office, his untouched tea and toast in front of him. Hanging on the bulletin board above him were the school’s last three report cards from the city, straight A’s, and an elaborately color-coded chart tracking all of his 486 students’ test scores. “They’re in their classrooms right now, staring at blackboards with no idea what they’re looking at,” he said. “You can have the best teachers, the best curriculum and the greatest after-school programs in the world, but if your kids can’t see, what does it matter?”

González has been principal of M.S. 223, on 145th Street near Willis Avenue, since the school’s creation in September 2003. One of the first schools opened by [Joel Klein](#), the New York City schools chancellor at the time, 223 was intended to help replace a notoriously bad junior high school that the city had decided to shut down. Thirteen percent of its first incoming class of sixth graders were at grade level in math and just 10 percent were at grade level in English. Last year, after seven years under González, 60 percent of its students tested at or above grade level in math and 30 percent in English. Not something to brag about in most school districts, but those numbers make 223 one of the top middle schools in the South Bronx. According to its latest progress report from the Department of Education, which judges a school’s growth against a peer group with similar demographics, 223 is the 10th-best middle school in the entire city.

Success stories like this in high-poverty neighborhoods are becoming more common in the era of [charter schools](#), but 223 is no charter. There is no clamoring of parents trying to game a spot for their kids in a lottery, no screening of applicants, no visits from educators hoping to learn the secret of the school’s success, no shadow philanthropist supplying Kindles to all of its students. M.S. 223 is just a regular public school. González isn’t even allowed to see the files of incoming students before they arrive. “You know what you have to do to come to school here?” González told me. “Walk through that door.”

Late last year, as I was first getting to know González and M.S. 223, I spent some time with Klein during his final days on the job, joining him on a couple of his last school visits and talking to him about his tenure as chancellor.

Now that education reform has become an established national movement, backed by countless multimillionaires and endorsed by [President Obama](#) himself, it’s easy to forget that Klein was once a lonely pioneer, if not the first chancellor to try to overhaul his schools, then surely the first to undertake such an ambitious effort to do so, and in the city with the largest — 1.1 million students — and most complicated school system in the country.

During our conversations, Klein, a former lawyer, cloaked his revolutionary ideology in a technocrat's rhetoric, describing how he implemented "disruptive strategies" designed to transform the city's schools "from a provider-driven system to a consumer-driven one." What he meant was that he turned the city's school system upside down, opening hundreds of new schools and shutting down dozens of others. Individual schools were given control over their own budgets, hiring and curriculums. In exchange, they were expected to earn good grades on their report cards from the city — another Klein innovation — or risk closure.

Klein's successor, [Cathleen Black](#), made it clear that she planned to continue the bold policies that he started implementing after his appointment by [Mayor Bloomberg](#) in 2002. (Black has since resigned.) While it may still be too early to evaluate Klein's legacy, some statistics certainly suggest meaningful progress. When Klein started, for instance, less than 50 percent of New York's incoming high-school freshmen were graduating in four years. That number is now 63 percent. Since 2006, according to an analysis of state testing data by the city's Department of Education (which used 2010's recalibrated proficiency levels to compare 2006's testing data to 2010's), the city's elementary and middle schools have seen a 22-point increase in the percentage of students at or above grade level in math (to 54 percent) and a 6-point increase in English (to 42 percent).

At the center of Klein's vision was the notion that New York should not aspire to have a great school system but a system of great schools run by talented and empowered educators. To help reach this goal, Klein created an academy to train principals in the new skills the job would require and dispatched its graduates to the city's most difficult neighborhoods with a mandate for change and the authority and autonomy to try to effect it. "I think one of our core accomplishments is that we transformed the principal from an agent of the bureaucracy to the C.E.O. of his or her school," Klein told me.

I thought about this notion a lot over the course of the months I spent with González at 223. It's an incongruous metaphor to apply to someone whose office overlooks one of the largest, most dangerous housing projects in New York. Still, González has shown the kind of entrepreneurial thinking that, were he a C.E.O., would attract attention: he joined the board of the Randall's Island Sports Foundation in part to gain access to its playing fields, hired a part-time grant writer to raise money for the school, brought in a number of nonprofits to support the school's extracurricular activities and even rented out space in his building to underwrite 223's two-week summer-school program.

In certain respects, 223 is a monument to Klein's success: empower the right principals to run their own schools and watch them bloom. Thanks to Klein, González has been able to avoid

having teachers foisted on him on the basis of seniority. He has been able to create his own curriculums, micromanage his students' days (within the narrow confines of the teachers' union contract, anyway) and spend his annual budget of \$4 million on the personnel, programs and materials he deems most likely to help his kids.

And yet even as school reform made it possible for González to succeed, as the movement rolls inexorably forward, it also seems in many ways set up to make him fail. The grading system imposed by Klein that has bestowed three consecutive A's on González is based in part on how well 223 does on state tests. But the school's relative success on these tests and other measures also disqualifies him from additional state resources earmarked for failing schools. The ever-growing number of charter schools, often privately subsidized and rarely bound by union rules, that Klein unleashed on the city skims off the neighborhood's more ambitious, motivated families. And every year, as failing schools are shut down around González, a steady stream of children with poor intellectual habits and little family support continues to arrive at 223. González wouldn't want it any other way — he takes pride in his school's duty to educate all comers — but the endless flow of underperforming students drags down test scores, demoralizes teachers and makes the already daunting challenge of transforming 223 into a successful school, not just a relatively successful one, that much more difficult.

The school day at 223 begins at 7:50 a.m. This is 10 minutes before the [United Federation of Teachers](#) officially permits New York City public schools to start, which means that every year a majority of 223's teachers has to vote to approve the earlier opening bell. The early start is a way to create more time for after-school programs, especially academic tutoring, before it gets dark and the streets surrounding the school become more threatening. "The research says it's better to start your school day later," González says, referring to studies showing that adolescents often need to get more sleep in order to be at their best. "But those researchers don't live in my neighborhood."

M.S. 223 is in the heart of School District 7, which is part of the poorest Congressional district in the nation. More than 90 percent of its students live in one of five housing projects, most prominently the Patterson Houses, a sprawling complex of 15 towers across the street from the school. About 70 percent of its students are Hispanic, predominantly Puerto Rican and Dominican. The remainder are black, either African-American or recent immigrants from West African countries like Senegal. Roughly 11 percent of the school's students are ELLs, or English-language learners. (Another 60 to 70 percent of its students are former ELLs.) About 17 percent have learning disabilities.

Upon arrival at 223, students pass through a gantlet of smiling teachers. González requires

that faculty members stand outside their doors at the start of the school day, part of his effort to set the school off from the grim streets surrounding it. “In our location, kids have to want to come to school,” he says. “This is a very sick district. Tuberculosis, AIDS, asthma rates, homeless shelters, mental-health needs — you name the physical or social ill, and we’re near the top for the city. Which means that when our kids come to school in the morning, when they come through that door, we have to welcome them.”

There’s another, no less compelling reason for this policy: posting teachers outside their classrooms helps maintain order in the hallways. It’s one of a number of things, like moving students’ lockers into their homerooms, that González has done to ensure that kids spend as little time as possible in the halls, where so much middle-school trouble invariably begins. (Chaotic hallways also tend to make for chaotic classrooms.)

Watching students pour into the school, some barely five feet tall, others over six feet, it can be hard to believe that all of 223’s kids are within just a few years of one another. This is the nature of middle school, which straddles childhood and adolescence, an awkward period for most children and one of the many reasons that educators will tell you that middle-schoolers are unusually challenging, even in the best of circumstances.

It’s hard to say definitively how successful González has been at controlling 223’s halls. During the weeks I spent at the school, I never saw anything much more serious than one kid yanking another’s backpack, but the wave of students crashing noisily toward their homerooms bore little resemblance to the silent, single-file lines you see in many charter schools.

Those schools have a distinct advantage over 223, though. Their families have already chosen to be at a charter and have often jumped through numerous hoops to get there. This makes it easier for charters to create their own cultures. They can define the length of their days, dictate exactly how children dress and enforce strict codes of conduct. Those students — scholars, in charter parlance — who fall out of line don’t last.

Much of what González does involves creating a culture for 223 too, one that he essentially tricks children into embracing. Look closely at just about any aspect of 223, and you will invariably discover a hidden agenda. Students at 223 are required to wear white shirts and blue pants or skirts. González would like all of his boys to dress more formally, but rather than insisting that they wear ties, the custom at many charters, he has encouraged the school’s athletes to do so in the hope that the trend would spread. Most charters extend the school day until 5 p.m., an easy way to maximize their influence over students. Traditional public schools, however, are permitted to require that children be in school for only about six hours each day,

so González has had to find creative ways to keep kids in the building, for example, mandating that students attend math or English tutoring before participating in after-school sports, clubs and music programs.

Career Day was held at 223 on a Monday morning in late January. Participants, a professionally diverse crowd of about 25, mostly minorities, that included a fashion designer, a corporate lawyer and a parole officer, started assembling at around 9 o'clock in an overheated classroom. A few picked at an unappetizing buffet of cold eggs, dinner rolls and limp, greasy bacon. Most scrolled through their BlackBerrys and waited, with growing impatience, to be told where to go and what to do.

If they expected to deliver a perfunctory description of their jobs, answer a few questions and be done, González had other plans. At about 9:15 he strode into the room and got right to the point. "Some of these kids have never left the Bronx or even the area," he said, casting a stern eye around the group. "For a lot of our kids, this is going to be a life-changing experience, and I want to make sure you see it that way. I'll be out in the hallway cheering you on, keeping that fire going, but I have to stress that this is an opportunity for them, and you don't want to lose it." Then he walked out.

González, who is Cuban and Puerto Rican, has a term for encounters between his students and adults with the potential to affect them: touches. As he describes it, it was a touch that changed the course of his own life when he was in middle school. González was raised in East Harlem by his mother, who supported seven children on welfare. A Puerto Rican stockbroker who volunteered at the Boys' Club where González spent most of his free time took an interest in him and encouraged him to take a test to qualify for a high-school scholarship. González aced the test and was accepted to Middlesex, a prep school outside Boston. "I always had this weird feeling of having one foot in one world and one foot in another," he says. "My financial-aid package paid for me to fly up to Boston, then I'd fly home for vacation and kids in the neighborhood would be getting shot." From Middlesex, he went on to [Cornell](#).

González's background is similar to that of many of his students, and he can personally relate to some of the obstacles that stand in the way of their academic achievement: as a boy, he would take a pillow into the bathtub and close the bathroom door, because it was the only quiet place to read in the apartment. But González had at least one thing going for him. While his father, a veteran who returned from the Vietnam War addicted to heroin, was in and out of jail for much of González's life and ultimately died of AIDS during his senior year at Cornell, he was self-educated and politically aware, a member of the Young Lords, the Puerto Rican equivalent of the Black Panthers. He recognized that his son was bright, and even if he wasn't a

provider or a role model, he did have aspirations for his son. He wanted him to go to law school and become a neighborhood defense lawyer.

Instead, after graduating from college and moving back to his old neighborhood, González started working as a math teacher, biding his time and building his résumé until he would be considered qualified to run his own school.

The opportunity to start 223, which began with 150 students, all sixth graders, arose when he was 31. Things got off to an inauspicious start. González initially opened the school in another building with two other South Bronx middle schools, one of which was reserved exclusively for children with special needs. Special-needs students tend to be older and bigger than others at their grade level and often have behavioral issues, a mix that proved problematic for González's students. "My kids were getting their butts kicked," he says. After one such episode led to a broken nose, he decided that he had seen enough. In a freezing rainstorm on Christmas Eve, he found himself personally ferrying 30 computers out of one building and into the empty floor of another, where 223 now resides.

González still lives in East Harlem, a few blocks from where he grew up. Though his son, Laurencio, the oldest of three children, is in kindergarten at a private school on Manhattan's Upper East Side, González told me that he hoped to send him and his two other children to middle school at 223. "That's the goal, to have this school be a place where I'd want to send my own kids."

One frigid night in December, I went with González to watch him give a presentation at a community-education council meeting at an elementary school in the South Bronx. González had recently introduced a literacy initiative at 223, asking all of his parents and children to drop whatever they are doing at 6 o'clock every Thursday night and spend the next two hours reading. As part of the campaign, 223 placed free-book bins in local bodegas, health clinics and Laundromats. Now González was hoping to expand Community Reading Night into a broader, districtwide event.

González was preceded by the school's holiday concert. The moment the performance ended, parents started heading for the door. By the time González rose to speak, the auditorium, nearly full when we arrived, was mostly empty. He had prepared a PowerPoint presentation, but had to abandon it because there was a cord missing. "This community is in crisis," he said. "The literacy test scores that we have in our community are 23 percent. That is a scary number. What that means is that 23 percent of our kids are on pace to graduate from high school and go to college. Go to college. That doesn't mean they're going to finish college.

Twenty-three percent. We cannot sustain our community on 23 percent. We have to be reading with our children. That's the only way we're going to change this scary statistic."

Klein may see González as a chief executive, but González prefers to think of himself as a community activist. His vision for 223 is in some respects anachronistic in the era of school reform. Klein's animating belief, and surely what he will best be remembered for, is the notion that while low-income families may not be able to choose what neighborhood they live in, they should nonetheless be able to choose what school their children attend. It was toward that end that he brought more than 100 charter schools to New York — with at least 100 more still on the way — deliberately concentrating them in high-poverty areas like Harlem and the South Bronx to create competition for existing public schools. Without ever quite saying so, Klein was agitating against the very idea of the neighborhood school with deep roots in a community, which is precisely what González is now trying to revive and reinvent.

Broadly speaking, the modus operandi of most charter schools, or at least those in impoverished neighborhoods, is to separate children from their presumably malignant environments. González objects to this in principle. "I don't want to be part of the history of taking talented kids out of the neighborhoods and telling them to move on," he says. More practically, he doesn't think it's a realistic objective, considering 223's population. "Most of our kids are never going to leave this area just for financial reasons; they can't afford to live anywhere else, they don't have the guidance, whatever. So how do we make those places better so that their kids aren't going through the same cycle?"

Given his and Klein's conflicting agendas, it's no surprise that González is critical of many of the policies of education reform. He has no problem with schools being held accountable for their performance, but he worries that the reform movement's infatuation with competition will undermine the broader goal of improving public education — that by grading schools against their peers you are encouraging them to hoard their successful innovations rather than to share them. He is concerned as well about the fact that the new principals being sent, disproportionately, into disadvantaged neighborhoods have little experience with or connection to the communities they're supposed to serve. And he is made uncomfortable by all of the educational experimentation, the endless stream of pilot programs, being implemented in neighborhoods like his. "I'm just afraid that our kids are being sacrificed while everyone is learning on the job," he says. "This is not some sort of urban experiment. These are kids' lives we're talking about."

González tries to visit classrooms at least three days a week to provide informal feedback to his less experienced instructors. On a recent morning, I joined him on his rounds, sitting in on

a sixth-grade science class taught by a second-year teacher named Garrett Adler.

A common assumption inside the school-reform movement, one often repeated in the wake of America's sobering performance in the recent Program for International Student Assessment exam — the U.S. ranked 17th in reading and 23rd in science — is that our nation's public-school teachers tend not to be high achievers themselves. (By contrast, in Finland teachers are drawn from the top 10 percent of their college classes.) You can't get much more high-achieving than Adler, who grew up on the Upper West Side and attended Hunter College High School, one of New York's most selective public high schools, before graduating magna cum laude from [Brown University](#).

And yet when Adler came to 223 last year through the New York City Teaching Fellows program, which helps train and place aspiring teachers in the city's public-school system, he was at best a struggling teacher. He was incapable of controlling his classroom. Students shot rubber bands at one another, fooled around with dangerous lab equipment and ignored his repeated requests to quiet down. "I used to go into his classroom first thing in the morning scared of what I might see," González told me. "To be honest, at one point I was about ready to give him the hook." Instead, he devoted precious resources to teaching Adler how to teach, hiring a personal coach to attend his classes regularly and meet with him for 45 minutes a week.

There were 30 students in Adler's class, their desks divided into several clusters. The subject of the day was matter. Adler, a slight, anxious-looking 24-year-old with glasses and a beard, wore chinos and a button-down shirt and tie, per the unofficial dress code for male faculty members. (The U.F.T. contract prevents González from formally requiring that teachers wear ties.)

After a brief introductory movie starring an animated robot, Adler taught his students the "matter march," warning them in advance that it was "incredibly dorky" but that once they learned it, they would never forget the definition of "matter." Standing in front of his class, Adler proceeded to demonstrate the march — really more of a dance, with a spin and a clap and the words, chanted like a cheer: "Matter is anything that takes up space and has mass!"

Adler moved swiftly through the rest of the lesson, working hard not to lose his momentum. "Not right now," he said brusquely, his eyes fixed on his clipboard, to a student whose hand was raised. Over the years, González and his staff have developed a simple, rigid plan meant to help new teachers manage their classrooms and progress through lessons without getting derailed. Each 45-minute period is divided into five sections, or waves, as they're known. Adler

facilitated his transitions with chants: “Work hard. Get smart. Woot! Woot!” The suggestion to do that came last year from his coach. “At first, I thought they were really cheesy; I felt like they weren’t me,” he told me later of the undignified sideshows he has come to deploy. “Now I feel like: You know what? They can be me.”

After class, González had some criticisms. Among other things, Adler never made it to the final wave of the lesson, known as the share, when the class gathers in a circle to review and reinforce what it learned that day. (“Circle up to talk it out, to get it, get it, get it.”) But González was pleased. The danger now is that like many young teachers, Adler will soon move on, and all that money González spent on his development will have been wasted. “Every time one of my teachers leaves, that’s \$200,000 walking out the door,” he told me.

During his tenure, Klein often referred to the mission of improving our nation’s public schools as “the civil rights battle of our time.” Rhetoric like this helped the education-reform campaign blossom into a full-fledged movement. Young college graduates now go into blighted schools to teach in much the same way that an earlier generation went south to march. This has been a boon for González. Eight of his nine original faculty members were fresh from college via [Teach for America](#), and today 60 percent of his teachers are in their 20s. “You really need idealists, people who are willing to do the extra work,” he says.

But this dependence on young teachers brings its own challenges. “First-year teachers are pretty much useless,” González says. “To me, the ideal teacher is a third-year Teach for America teacher.” The problem, at least from where González sits, is that Teach for America requires only a two-year commitment. It entices the best applicants not only with the promise of changing lives in impoverished schools but also by presenting itself as a résumé-builder for elite institutions like Harvard Business School and McKinsey & Company. “I’m trying to build people who are going to stay, who want to work with our kids,” González says. “This isn’t where they’re starting their careers; this is their life. We’ve had plenty of brilliant people here from organizations like Teach for America, and they lasted two years, because their hearts weren’t in it. I can’t afford that. That’s hurtful to our kids.”

Much as he has done with his student body, González has tried to create a particular culture among his faculty, relying equally on inspiration and incentive. Last year, to discourage teachers from taking advantage of a clause in the U.F.T. contract allowing them to miss 10 days of every school year, he gave everyone with a perfect attendance record a Flip video camera. (As usual, there was an ulterior motive: González wanted them to use the cameras to record themselves in the classroom.)

A few weeks after visiting Adler's class, I stopped by his classroom at the end of the day. The place was a mess. He had just finished a lab that involved making ice cream in baggies with ice, salt, sugar, vanilla and milk. He made us a batch, spooning some into Dixie cups as we sat down to talk.

Adler said he was enjoying his job — “I like being the science teacher, being that figure in these kids' lives” — especially when he considers his friends from Brown, many of whom are still stuck in a postcollege malaise. And González, he said, is certainly an inspiring boss. “When he gets up and gives his little spiels about how we're here to change people's lives and how we do that every day, that's a powerful thing to hear as a teacher.”

Still, he isn't convinced that he's well suited to teaching, particularly at this level. He's not organized enough to keep students on task and, indirectly anyway, he echoed González's concern about fundamentally not being part of the 223 community. “I have a vocabulary that comes from always having gone to really high-level schools,” he said. “I feel like I'm probably talking over half the class half the time.” This, he feels, diminishes his already tenuous authority in the classroom: “Who am I, this 24-year-old white kid from the Upper West Side, to tell a bunch of kids from a very different background how they're supposed to behave and act?”

M.S. 223 holds its parent-association meetings on the first Saturday morning of every month. During the preceding week, parents receive a robocall reminder from the school, either in English or Spanish. Not that such calls ever make much of a difference. Parent engagement, a given at most charter schools and middle-class public schools, is an ongoing struggle at 223. Like a door-to-door salesman, González is not ashamed to use every method at his disposal to prod participation. Each parent meeting is bookended by free raffles to encourage people to show up and to stay. Just to be safe, no one leaves empty-handed: goodie bags at the door are filled with soap, shampoo and other beauty products.

On a clear, cold Saturday in January, about a dozen parents gathered inside 223's library, an oversize classroom lined with empty metal shelves, for the first parent-association meeting of the new year. Wanda Hill, the school's parent liaison, started by raffling off a \$30 gift certificate to Payless shoes. Later came a World Wrestling Entertainment clock and a set of queen-size flannel sheets from J. C. Penney. All three had been procured by Hill, who volunteers at World Vision, a Christian charity, in large part so that she can get first dibs on the corporate castoffs that the organization collects.

Sandwiched in between the raffles, in English with Spanish translation, was a presentation on

gangs, as well as an update on the campaign to renovate the school's library. In closing, Hill reminded parents that anyone who made it to one of the district's monthly education meetings would be entitled to free clothes from Dress Barn, also arranged through her volunteer work at World Vision.

After the meeting, I introduced myself to the only English-speaking parent in attendance, Cheryl Thomas, the mother of a sixth grader named Terrell. Thomas told me that she moved her family to the Patterson Houses several years ago, when they had to go on public assistance after she quit her job to care for a daughter with spina bifida. Thomas said that she had decided not to enter Terrell in the lottery at a charter about 12 blocks away from 223. Because of the school's long days, he wouldn't have been heading home until close to 6, which made her nervous. She and Terrell went to an open house at 223 and liked what they saw. After he registered, Terrell returned to the school for a technology seminar run by a nonprofit; all attendees were given free computers.

On my way out of 223, I saw Hill, a cheerful, plain-spoken woman, putting away unclaimed gift bags in a supply closet. She was clearly frustrated by the school's indifferent parents. "Even knowing that they're going to get two free bags of clothing from Dress Barn, we can't get one person — not *one* person — to come to a C.E.C." — Community Education Council — "meeting," she said, shaking her head. "At least we can say we're trying."

In a sense, the education-reform movement is out to demonstrate that the backgrounds of students' families don't need to be changed in order to improve schools. As reformers see it, those who cite economic circumstances as an explanation for failing schools are playing into the very "excuse-based culture" that Klein was trying to dismantle.

González has proved the reformers right, at least to an extent: his school is thriving without the benefit of consistently engaged, supportive parents. But as its English and math scores reveal, 223's success remains relative. It's also hard won. This should not come as a surprise. Studies dating to the 1960s have suggested that children's experiences inside the classroom are responsible for as little as 20 percent of their overall educational development. No less important is how they spend their evenings, their weekends, their vacations.

González sees this firsthand every September, when tests show that many of his returning students have dropped a full grade level in reading over the summer. He is trying to reverse this trend by bringing parents into their children's lives at 223 in any way he can, whether it's through sporting events (one byproduct of the school's large Dominican population is a great baseball team), plays, recitals or classroom celebrations. "We're trying to change a culture

here,” González says. “That’s going to take time. That’s going to take generations.”

Eric Lincoln, M.S. 223’s assistant principal, spends the first three weeks of every school year registering about 40 unplanned-for students who have just been assigned to the school by the Department of Education. This is typically a high-needs group. It includes children from failing schools who are entitled to transfer to 223 (or any other middle school in good standing) under the [No Child Left Behind](#) statute as well as children whose families recently moved to the city or the neighborhood, often under duress.

Two weeks into the 2009-10 school year, Lincoln registered a seventh grader named Saquan Townsend. Saquan’s family had been living in a project in East New York, Brooklyn, when their apartment was broken into by someone who thought that one of Saquan’s half-brothers had been involved in a shooting. For safety reasons, Saquan’s mother felt she needed to move her family as soon as possible, but she couldn’t afford another apartment. The city placed them in a one-bedroom apartment in a homeless shelter in the South Bronx. Saquan has two older half-brothers, ages 20 and 18, and a 12-year-old brother with a learning disability caused by lead poisoning that he contracted at their old apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. For about a year, all four boys and their mother slept in the same room. Saquan’s new zoned school was 223.

It didn’t take Saquan long to develop a reputation as a kid who never did his homework, spoke disrespectfully to teachers and seemed unwilling to follow even the most basic instructions. He spoke in a deliberately provocative, high-pitched voice in the classroom — some of his teachers called it “the alien voice” — and raised his arms high up over his head in mock stretches to elicit laughter from classmates. Most of all, Saquan had a problem with absenteeism, missing more than 50 days over the course of the school year. “Honestly, I thought there was some sort of mental disability or something weird going on,” says Emily Dodd, who had Saquan for seventh-grade science last year.

One Friday, Dodd, a 25-year-old graduate of Oberlin College, asked Saquan to stay late to catch up on some assignments he missed. Working with him one on one, she quickly discovered how wrong she had been. “I realized this kid is brilliant,” she told me. “He’s an intellectual. His ability to think critically, to reason critically is on a very high level.”

Dodd started sending Saquan [text messages](#) every morning urging him to come to school. (“Get on the bus!!!” she would write him when she first arrived at 223 at 7.) It took him three weeks to meet her initial challenge of making it on time a total of three days in a week. They celebrated the accomplishment with cheesecake, which Saquan had never eaten. “Honestly,

more than anything, I think he felt rewarded by being able to spend a half-hour with me on a Friday afternoon,” Dodd says.

Having gotten the “touch” he needed from Dodd, Saquan’s attendance and behavior gradually improved. He also began participating in some of 223’s after-school programs. He was one of three students to join a new running club and was cast in a lead role in the school’s production of “West Side Story.” Directed by Dodd, it was the first play performed in 223’s building in years. (The stage curtain, having sat unused for so long, collapsed at the opening of the show.) Saquan missed a lot of the rehearsals, so many, in fact, that Dodd panicked and divided his part in two. When he was there, he was often disruptive, cracking jokes and distracting other cast members. “But he was amazing in the performance,” says Dodd, who recalls looking around the audience and seeing Saquan’s mother in tears.

As recently as a few years ago, M.S. 223’s bilingual-education program was the last place students or teachers wanted to be. Geared toward moving Spanish speakers into English-only classrooms as quickly as possible, it was known as a repository for slow learners. The perception became self-fulfilling, reinforced by the low expectations placed on students.

In an earlier era, González would have been hard pressed to change this situation, as the school would have been required to use the city’s bilingual-education curriculum. But Klein’s reforms gave González the freedom to try a different approach. In 2007, he asked a new teacher, Silvestre Arcos, to overhaul the program. Arcos mapped out a strategy to change virtually everything about bilingual education at 223, beginning with its primary aim. Rather than weaning children from their native tongues, the goal would be to develop and refine their Spanish skills as well as their English ones. Classes would be taught in both languages; the curriculum would include a course in which students hone their Spanish grammar and read Spanish literature.

The school’s dual-language program, as it is known, is now the pride of 223, a magnet for strivers rather than a dumping ground for underperformers. This year, it was a finalist in a national bilingual-education competition run by the Spanish Embassy. Three hundred children applied for the 30 spots in next year’s incoming sixth-grade class.

Evaluating teachers is an imperfect science, but by almost any measure Arcos is one of 223’s finest. González basically has to rig the school’s Classroom of the Month award, based on academic performance, behavior and class preparedness, to prevent Arcos from winning it every time.

A stout, goateed 33-year-old, Arcos grew up in South Texas. His father, a Mexican immigrant who worked as a gas-station mechanic, was a middle-school dropout, but Arcos excelled in school, winning a full scholarship to Cornell. He spent four years at a Kipp charter school in Los Angeles before moving to New York to get his master's at Columbia. He considered teaching at a charter in New York while pursuing his degree but decided that the schedule would be too demanding to leave him time to study, so he came to 223 instead, bringing Kipp's philosophy with him. The walls of his classroom are adorned with Kipp slogans like "All of us WILL learn" and "No shortcuts. No excuses." (Whatever ideological issues González has with charter schools, their fingerprints are everywhere at 223, beginning with its décor: the school's hallways are lined with college pennants, a design innovation popularized by the charter movement.)

Arcos's classroom has a deceptively relaxed air. He stands casually at the front of the room, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his khakis, allowing students to banter as they figure out answers to his questions. But he works relentlessly, particularly during the early part of the school year, to create and reinforce academic expectations, discipline and accountability. At the start of classes, Arcos praises students who seat themselves quietly and take out their work without being asked. When he hands back quizzes or other assignments, he singles out students who "met or exceeded expectations." Loud applause follows each name. All of his students, even the highest performers, are required to stay after school for tutoring.

I visited Arcos in his classroom one winter afternoon, the day after a huge snowstorm in New York. Even though the city's schools weren't closed, more than 50 percent of 223's students were absent. Arcos called all 12 of his 30 homeroom students who weren't there at the start of the day. Six of them came to school immediately. Arcos told me that he just received an e-mail from the United Federation of Teachers thanking its members for showing up at their jobs despite the storm. "I was like, You've got to be kidding; you're praising people for coming to work on a day when they're supposed to?" Arcos said. "I thought that was ridiculous."

As a public-school teacher, Arcos is required to be a member of the U.F.T., but he doesn't see eye to eye with the union on most issues. Among other things, he favors the public release of teacher-performance ratings, which the U.F.T. has been fighting aggressively to prevent. "What kind of message are you sending to families and communities if you're like, We don't want those evaluations to be made public?" he said. "Are you basically saying your teachers are doing a terrible job?"

Arcos told me that he has been impressed by the dedication of many of his colleagues at 223. Still, he misses the uniform standards of his Kipp school. "At Kipp, I wasn't worried that once

my students left my math class and I sent them off to science or social studies or E.L.A. [English Language Arts] that they were going to fall apart, that the expectations weren't going to be there, academically, behaviorally, in terms of their intellectual habits," he said. "Two years ago, when my sixth-grade math students left for seventh-grade math, they totally fell apart. After all of the hard work we did, they went from the top of the school in their math-test scores to the bottom. I took it pretty hard." Earlier this year, Arcos was thinking about returning to a charter school, but he recently decided to stay, swayed by his commitment to the dual-language program and his faith in González's broader vision for the school.

Last summer, Saquan's family moved out of the shelter and into a small apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Saquan wanted to remain at 223 for eighth grade, even though that would mean getting up at 5:45 and making it to the subway by 6:15 for the one-and-a-half-hour commute to the South Bronx. If he stayed for after-school activities, he would not return home until after 6. Because his mother works nights, they would barely see each other. She would not yet be home when he had to leave for school and would be asleep when he returned.

I first met Saquan at a gathering of the Principal's Book Club. It was a Monday afternoon in December, and he was one of a dozen students arrayed around the conference table that dominates González's office. Manuel Santos, González's hulking executive assistant, doled out half-slices of pizza, as González and the kids discussed "Fallen," a young-adult novel about a group of fallen angels at a reform school. "Probably the biggest critique you might have of our reading program is that we don't spend much time on the classics," González says. "I can live with that. I just want our kids to read."

Toward that end, González spends close to \$200,000, or 5 percent, of his annual budget at Barnes and Noble on popular new books that are more likely to interest 223's students. The strategy worked with Saquan, who joined the Principal's Book Club last April, when the book of the month was "The Hunger Games," which he had been wanting to read but couldn't find in his local library. He hadn't missed a meeting since then.

At 5-foot-3, Saquan is small for his grade, and his voice has not yet dropped, but his size 9 sneakers suggest a growth spurt in his near future. He is handsome, with smooth skin, a "faded" Afro that shoots straight up like a pencil eraser from his head, big, bright eyes and a sly smile. He poured himself a cup of orange soda and, slouching down low in his chair, said that he was annoyed by the book's main character, who obsesses endlessly over a boy without ever directly approaching him.

Several weeks later, I picked Saquan up at school and rode the subway home with him. He

fiddled around with my iPhone as we talked, playing down his various activities and relationships at 223. (The play was “kind of fun.” Dodd was “O.K.”) When we arrived at his building, his mom didn’t invite me in — she had left behind their furniture when they moved out of their place in East New York and still hadn’t replaced it — but suggested we get together after school the following day at an IHOP in Brooklyn.

When we met, Saquan’s mom, Tonya Henry, was operating on just a few hours of sleep. A tiny woman with dreadlocks and dark circles under her eyes, she had returned home that morning from her shift answering phones at a car-service company in Queens and gone directly to a dental clinic with Saquan to get one of his teeth pulled.

Saquan gingerly chewed his pancakes, cutting off pieces of turkey sausage to share with his mother. At one point, he told his mom with obvious pride that he’d been invited to join an after-school math program at 223 that could be applied toward his high-school credits. “You gonna do it?” his mom asked, disinterestedly. “Then do it.” She went on to explain her less-than-enthusiastic response: “I try to let him make his own decisions. Sometimes he gets upset with me. He wants me to have more input than I want to. He’ll ask my opinion, and he’ll say, ‘Mom, why can’t you just give me an answer?’ I’ll say: ‘Listen, I don’t want to say this, and I don’t want to say that. You’ve got to make up your own mind.’ ”

Saquan was one of 25 eighth graders at 223 who qualified for a prep course last summer for New York’s specialized high-school test, used to determine admission to eight prestigious public high schools. (Run by Kaplan, the six-week course cost González \$8,000.) But even after the prep course, he was at a severe disadvantage. Some of 223’s students who take the test have been preparing since sixth grade, attending another twice-weekly class on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons that the city offers free to poor students.

The test was given in late October, and the results were released in mid-February. For the first time in 223’s history, one of its students was accepted at Bronx Science. Another got in to Brooklyn Tech. Saquan didn’t score high enough to be admitted anywhere, leaving him in the regular, citywide high-school application process.

Saquan is at grade level in reading and above grade level in math, which is nothing short of remarkable given everything he has been through. Still, his transcript is hardly impressive, and the city’s high schools place a great deal of weight on attendance records. What’s more, without Dodd’s full-time attention, Saquan’s academic performance has faltered this year. At the end of February, he was failing social studies, having not completed any of his class projects, and was barely passing English. All of this might be mitigated by a proactive parent,

the kind of mother or father who diligently researches the city's high schools until they find the right fit and a sympathetic principal. This is the sort of sophisticated shopper that Klein's consumer-driven system, with its emphasis on choice, would seem to depend on. But parents like this are in short supply at 223.

It's hard to disagree with the reform movement's insistence that poverty, like ignorant or apathetic parents, should not be accepted as an excuse for failing schools. But watching Saquan, it's just as hard to ignore the reality that poverty is an immutable obstacle in the path of improving public education, one that can't simply be swept aside by the rhetoric of raised expectations. Is it really a surprise that a child whose family had been forced to move into a homeless shelter where he was sharing a bedroom with his mother and three brothers was having trouble getting himself to school and was acting out in class? Is it realistic to think that demanding more of him and his teachers is all that is required?

In late February, after hearing about Saquan's poor grades, Dodd sought him out to encourage him to end the year strong. Even though he was no longer in any of her classes, she volunteered to personally tutor him to make sure he finished with only B's or better. "Because he has never actually known what it feels like to get A's and B's, and because I know that he is capable of A's and B's, I want him to experience this before he gets to high school," Dodd wrote me in an e-mail in early March. "He's totally into it and believes he can pull it off." By way of incentive, she was going to offer to give him and his mom tickets to a Broadway show.

Days after the meeting, though, Saquan stopped coming to school. A couple of 223's administrators called his house, as did Dodd, but they were unable to reach him or his mother. When Dodd finally managed to speak with Saquan in mid-March, he told her that he decided to transfer to his neighborhood middle school in Brooklyn.

In February, 223 received an unexpected visit from a space planner for the city. To González, it seemed to be the equivalent of getting measured for his coffin. He figured that it could mean only one thing: a charter school was coming to his building.

González was furious. "You're impacting my community, and you're not even going to have a discussion with me?" he said. It also made no sense to him. "There are three, maybe four middle schools in our district with their heads above water," he told me. "How are you not closing one of the failing schools and putting the charter there? Or better yet, you have a couple hundred more kids who need to be educated? Fine. Send them to me. I'll take them. Now I have to fight with the D.O.E., and those are the guys who are supposed to be helping me."

Battles between incoming charter schools and reluctant public-school hosts have become a recurring motif on New York's education-reform landscape. The tension often carries over into the school year in the form of bickering over access to shared facilities like cafeterias and auditoriums.

To González, though, the arrival of a charter would represent more than just an inconvenience. Not only would he lose the extra space that he deliberately carved out for teacher training and student guidance, but he also feared that a charter school could jeopardize his plans to expand 223 into a high school, perhaps even a boarding school. The idea, which he enlisted a class of students at [New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service](#) to help develop, is to create a nonprofit attached to the school and to purchase an abandoned building in the neighborhood that would be converted into a dormitory. It's a radical notion — a public inner-city boarding school — but it's also very much in keeping with González's expansive vision for 223.

When González first told me about the charter, I couldn't help sharing his outrage. It seemed a cruel joke, the most extreme example yet of him being punished for his success. From the city's perspective, however, González's building doesn't belong to him or even, really, to the city. It belongs to the students. An opportunity to use it to create another potentially successful school is not one that the city can afford to miss.

González did everything he could to have the charter placed elsewhere, arguing that, among other things, 223 had less unused space than several other middle schools in the district. (He also made it known to the D.O.E. that this article was in the works.) In late March, he received a reprieve. For at least another year, there would be no charter moving into 223's building.

The D.O.E. says that it was only considering a charter at 223 and that González's lobbying was largely irrelevant to its final decision. González says that his impression, from his interactions with the D.O.E., was that the charter had basically been a done deal. Either way, it was just another obstacle for González to overcome, along with developing and retaining young teachers, engaging parents and getting free eye tests for his students.

During one of our last conversations, González told me about a new eighth grader with a learning disability who recently turned up at 223. Already almost 16, the boy had earned the lowest possible score on both the reading and math portions of the state's standardized test. His mother had just moved to the neighborhood, and even though he was qualified to receive a host of free services connected to his disability that were not available at 223, she had heard good things about the school and waived her son's privileges so that he could attend it.

Hearing about the student and the challenges he would present, yet another hurdle in the endless row of them that make up the days at 223, made me exhausted. González, who would have a matter of weeks to somehow get the boy ready for high school, had a completely different reaction. “It’s days like this that remind me why I get up in the morning,” he said.

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 10, 2011

An article on Page 34 about Middle School 223 in the South Bronx and the reforms established by its principal, Ramón González, misidentifies the New York University graduate school from which Mr. Gonzalez enlisted a class to help M.S. 223 develop a plan for a local boarding school. It is the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, not the business school. The article also contains an outdated reference to Cathleen P. Black. On Thursday, after the article went to press, she resigned as schools chancellor of New York City.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 24, 2011

An article on April 10 about Middle School 223 in the Bronx misstated the reasons the school does not qualify for some state financing earmarked for poorly performing schools. It does not meet some of New York State’s criteria for failing schools and it is relatively successful on state tests and other measures. It is not because of the school’s report card from New York City. The article also omitted an attribution for the increases in percentages of students at or above grade levels in math and English from 2006 to 2010. Those figures came from the New York City Department of Education, which did its own analysis of state testing data using 2010 proficiency levels for 2006 test scores. (Without that adjustment, the percentage of proficient learners in both math and English actually dropped from 2006 to 2010.)

