A School’s “Got to Go” list and the Meaning of Success

One of NYC’s most successful charter networks, Success Academies, is on defense after admitting to a “Got to Go” list of students at one school, where not coincidentally most of those high needs students on the list withdrew. The [NY Times article](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/30/nyregion/at-a-success-academy-charter-school-singling-out-pupils-who-have-got-to-go.html?ref=education&_r=0) describes a seemingly deliberate pattern to push out higher needs students, often documented in emails.

Since our early post, [Getting Honest on Charter School Admissions](http://silentmajorityoakland.com/2015/07/09/getting-honest-on-charter-school-admissions-and-catching-bad-actors/), I have railed against the selective practices of charters (and District schools). Here’s an excerpt, from the Times article that largely confirms what I have been saying.

*From the time Folake Ogundiran’s daughter started kindergarten at a Success Academy charter school in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, the girl struggled to adjust to its strict rules. She racked up demerits for not following directions or not keeping her hands folded in her lap. Sometimes, after being chastised, she threw tantrums. She was repeatedly suspended for screaming, throwing pencils, running away from school staff members or refusing to go to another classroom for a timeout.*

*One day last December, the school’s principal, Candido Brown, called Ms. Ogundiran and said her daughter, then 6, was having a bad day. Mr. Brown warned that if she continued to do things that were defiant and unsafe — including, he said, pushing or kicking, moving chairs or tables, or refusing to go to another classroom — he would have to call 911, Ms. Ogundiran recalled. Already feeling that her daughter was treated unfairly, she went to the school and withdrew her on the spot.*

*Success Academy, the high­ performing charter school network in New York City, has long been dogged by accusations that its remarkable accomplishments are due, in part, to a practice of weeding out weak or difficult students. The network has always denied it. But documents obtained by The New York Times and interviews with 10 current and former Success employees at five schools suggest that some administrators in the network have singled out children they would like to see leave. At Success Academy Fort Greene, the same day that Ms. Ogundiran heard from the principal, her daughter’s name was one of 16 placed on a list drawn up at his direction and shared by school leaders. The heading on the list was “Got to Go.”*

This student was suspended 19 times in the first grade.

The school and Network defended themselves, saying that this was an aberration and that the “Got to Go” list was retracted when network staff found out. They also talked about “fit” and how not all students are a good “fit” for their schools.

Success Academies, have become a national model in the so called charter movement. 3000 miles away in CA, I have had multiple arguments/discussions with school leaders, funders, and even District leadership about Success. Usually it starts with them telling me, how we need more schools like Success, and I say yes and no.

Yes, Success delivers a top flight education to the children it serves—the children that “fit”. And while I am an oft critic—they give those families a robust experience they likely would not get otherwise and have significantly expanded the opportunities for those students.

But, no, not all students do “fit” and unfortunately it’s not an equally distributed set of students. It seems that many higher needs students, those suffering from trauma, and those with special needs are the ones that tend not to fit there, and they are shuffled on to someone else.

As charters, we rightly hold on to the banner of “public” schools, which to me means free and open access. At the same time we want to create unique environments that sometimes do require parental buy in to be effective. The balance between these is the key. And reading the article, we honestly can’t rely on each school to always do the right thing.

There is immense pressure on school leaders to show academic performance. And one perceived short cut is to be selective about your students, pushing out the more challenging. An email from the principal in this case captured this, “I felt I couldn’t turn the school around if these students remained” he wrote. And while he put this in writing, he is not the only one thinking it—both at charters and district schools.

There are no magic bullets, but some quick answers include, real transparency on enrollment and discharges of students with increasing financial and public relations consequences for schools that disproportionally push out high needs students. We also need authorizers to take these issues more seriously and proactively work to maintain the integrity of admissions and discharge processes. Most generally though we need to look hard at the definition of successful schools, moving to from one that looks almost strictly at achievement, and undervalues progress and particularly progress of our most challenged students, for the students that may not “fit”.