

# The Columbus Dispatch

## Charter school producing hoped-for results



*"All you have to do is say charter school and you'll get people who close the door."  
-- Andy Boy, CEO of Columbus Collegiate Academy, on perception problems*

By **Bill Bush**

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Amid the politically charged landscape of Ohio's charter-school movement, one operator has racked up a record of success with one of the most challenging student age groups: middle-schoolers.

Last year, the eighth-graders at Columbus Collegiate Academy's campuses in Franklinton and on the Near East Side outperformed the average proficiency rates for all students in Ohio, rich and poor alike. Eighty-five percent of students at the Franklinton campus were proficient in eighth-grade reading, 17 percentage points above the state average for all students, and at CCA's main campus in the struggling Miller-Kelton neighborhood of the Near East Side, 79 percent of eighth-graders were proficient in reading, 11 percentage points above the statewide average.

In math, students both schools are double digits in front of the average Ohio student, despite being part of an overwhelmingly poor student body. At the east campus, every student was considered economically disadvantaged last school year.

At Champion Middle School, the Columbus City Schools building that serves the neighborhood near CCA's east campus, 21 percent of students were proficient in eighth-grade reading, and 16 percent in math.

In other words, amid a sea of mediocrity and failure, CCA is working as state charter law intended by coming up with a new teaching methods that appear to defy the odds.

What gives?

On the Franklinton campus, there's something missing: noise. It's quiet, "the sound of learning," school founder Andy Boy said.

Teachers push carts with their records and materials between classrooms rather than the students moving from room to room. Boy says quicker class changes add up to almost half an hour a day of extra instruction. Student time in the hallways "is never anything productive," Boy said. "We get back hours every week, days every year, because our teachers rotate."

Teachers get 30 days a year of training, and up to two hours a day of classroom planning. The training involves controlling "the game" that's being played in class to keep students on task. Instead of lecturing,



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Teacher Keiko Sano gets her students' attention during a seventh-grade world-history class last week at the Columbus Collegiate Academy on the West Side. The school has produced impressive results in statewide testing.

Students earn “paychecks” that they can use to bid on end-of-term auction items, such as tickets to Ohio State sporting events. The \$100 (in funny money, not real cash) they get each Friday can decrease or grow based on behavior. Late? \$15 fine. Forgot your homework? \$5. No one is fined based on test results.

Students take field trips to nine colleges each year, to envision what it’ll be like when they enroll in a few years. Pennants from the schools line the hallways and stairwells.

### **A sea of mediocrity**

Despite CCA's impressive results, Boy, 37, is no dyed-in-the-wool backer of Ohio’s charter-school movement. In fact, he tries to disassociate his schools from it. Ohio’s system is turning the public against charters, Boy said, and CCA is getting lumped in with “well-intentioned people with no training, starting schools, who have no business doing so.”

“All you have to do is say *charter school* and you’ll get people who close the door,” said Boy, standing in the basement of his Franklinton middle school, Columbus City Schools’ former Dana Elementary building, as a group of about a dozen middle-schoolers took a violin lesson in the background.

The Walton Foundation, which has provided CCA with \$1.3 million in support over the past eight years, held back hundreds of thousands of additional dollars that would have come to CCA had it been in a more progressive state, Boy said.

Boy almost moved his operation to Indiana a few years ago, before city leaders, including then-Mayor Michael B. Coleman, begged him to stay, promising him that support was coming.

But then voters shot down the tax levy that Coleman supported that would have shared property taxes with charters for the first time. And last year, the feds put a \$71 million grant for charter expansion in Ohio on hold, questioning the claims state education officials made in their application.

Boy is confident his program can be replicated elsewhere. He just needs the money, he said.

Columbus City Schools Superintendent Dan Good views Boy's schools as "examples of quality programs that he does respect," said Scott Varner, his spokesman.

"They are a strong program, there's no doubt," said Rhonda Johnson, education director for the city of Columbus and a former head of the teachers union for Columbus schools. But she cautioned about comparing the results of Boy's middle schools, which draw students from across the city who want to attend, with a neighborhood school such as Champion.

Still, CCA "takes sixth-graders from all over the city who are behind, and in three short years they best state averages," said Chad Aldis, vice president for Ohio policy and advocacy with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which sponsors CCA. "It is unusual for anybody. It would be nice to capture and bottle what they're doing."

### **Starting in the basement**

Boy, a Bellefontaine native, graduated in 2001 with a degree in education from the University of Cincinnati. Unable to land a teaching job, he sold knives door-to-door. Then he answered an ad to teach science at a charter school and was hired on the spot. But the school, the W.E.B DuBois Academy, was cheating. Boy said he got fired for complaining about enrollment irregularities. DuBois’ founder, Wilson H. Willard, would later go to prison for billing the state for fictitious students and using hundreds of thousands of tax dollars to remodel his home.

“I almost thought at the time, 'If this is the best that education has to offer, I want nothing to do with it,'” Boy said.

But then, in 2006, Boy landed a sought-after fellowship with the Boston-based Building Excellent Schools, a nonprofit group that trains educators to design and lead new charter schools. He learned fundraising, hiring, school governance and team-building, all while touring dozens of the best schools in the nation.

“All of our schools have started in the basement of something,” Boy said.

### **The future**

In 2014, Boy expanded into the elementary grades with two United Preparatory Academies. Boy hopes the feds will release grant money in time to continue his expansion in 2017-18. And he’s looking at Columbus City Schools' facilities plan, hoping to land another building.

He thinks that by the time these elementary students are ready for middle school, they not only won't be behind but will be ready for critical thinking and in-depth writing. That might force him to revise the middle-school curriculum, which is now based on helping below-grade-level students catch up.

“The only way to go is to start with the early ages,” Boy said.

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