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Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff

CHARTER VOICE

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Educators at two Bronx charters elect to join UFT



PHOTO: ROB CALLAGHAN

New Visions Charter School educators celebrate their decision to join the UFT.

At the end of the 2011-12 school year, educators at two New Visions schools in the Bronx became the latest two charter schools to join the UFT.

Educators at New Visions Charter HS for Advanced Math and Science and New Visions Charter HS for the Humanities have unanimously signed union authorization cards to indicate their support for a union at their schools.

"Going into the process we felt like teachers already had a voice at this school, but we felt it was important to formalize that collective voice," said Eric Benzel, a math teacher at New Visions Charter HS for Advanced Math and Science.

Prior to the organizing effort, the leadership of New Visions for Public Schools and the boards of the New Visions' charter high schools were in discussions with the UFT about the formation of a union at the school. The result of these deliberations was a neutrality agreement.

School management informed the teachers and staff at the schools that the decision to form a union at the school was up to the educators and that no one would be subject to discrimination for his or her views on union representation.

"We share a philosophy of the importance of collaboration and community in education, and a vision of the centrality of teacher voice to educational change," said the letter signed by the school board secretary and chair.

Danielle Rivellese, a reading specialist at New Visions Charter HS for the Humanities, underscored the importance of collaboration between the two schools and among leadership and teachers. "The process of forming a union really felt collaborative, like everything at New Visions; it was just another project to collaborate on," she said. "The union contract will help solidify our spirit of collaboration."

Rivellese's colleague Marie Southwell, a 23-year veteran

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Unique Brooklyn school to produce new charter

First-grade teacher Pepe Gutierrez, the chapter leader at New American Academy, is glad to see his school's model of education extended to the new charter.

The innovative New American Academy in Crown Heights is on the cutting edge once again, soon to become the first district school to spin off a charter school.

At the proposed school, as with the academy, the traditional classroom is out. The union is in.

From the start, the UFT has been a partner with the Brooklyn school, which features large, open learning areas with four teachers and 60 children, creating a teacher-student ratio of 15 to one. There is a daily 90-minute professional development meeting, a master teacher program and a career ladder program.

"The academy's basic philosophy is about empowering teachers to deliver the highest quality education, and to see that replicated at another institution is good news for the union and the teaching profession," said UFT Vice President Leo Casey. "Of all the experiments in New York City with master teachers, the academy is the only place where it is being done right."

"We believe in this model of education, so of course we believe it should be extended," said Chapter Leader Pepe Gutierrez. "Whether that's through a district school or a charter school, it's good for kids."

Because a charter school cannot open with a unionized staff, Headmaster Shimon Waronker will gather teachers as soon as New

"The process of forming a union really felt collaborative, like everything at New Visions."

—Danielle Rivellese, reading specialist

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Queens charter school teachers have begun contract negotiations

Educators at Academy of the City Charter School in Queens announced on May 21 that they have organized a union at the school and intend to join the UFT. Just weeks later, the board and administration of Academy of the City Charter School announced that they have formally recognized the union at the school.

In letters given to the school's principal and board of directors teachers outlined their reasons for organizing a union. The letters, signed by the entire teaching staff, called for a formal collective voice at the school and the recognition of educators as vital partners "to the success of our school and to the realization of its mission to empower students."

Teachers and pedagogical staff at the Long Island City school have all signed union authorization cards indicating their support for a teachers' union. The UFT filed a formal petition with the school's board of trustees and notified the New York State Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) that Academy of the City teachers and staff are seeking union recognition.

"As teachers, we are the best advocates for the children we work with every day. In order to support our students, the staff at Academy of the City Charter School has to work as a unit. We are building the foundation of our school, and we need to put the students and their needs first. Forming a union will help us to work together to make informed decisions and support one another and our students," said Samantha Feigelson, a kindergarten ELL teacher at the school.

First grade teacher Alice McNeil agreed, stating that "having a union at Academy of the City Charter School will give the teachers a strong voice in making decisions to best support the students."

This summer the board and administration of Academy

PHOTO: ROB CALLAGHAN



Educators look forward to working with the administration to create a contract that will establish an atmosphere of collaboration and reflection.

of the City Charter School announced that they have formally recognized the union at the school. The recognition agreement, signed by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the school's principal and its board president, identifies the UFT as the exclusive collective bargaining agent for the educators at Academy of the City.

Teachers at the school said they are eager to work with the school's administration to create a contract which will solidify their mutual commitment to the success of the school and the realization of its mission to empower students.

Special education teacher Jessica Donatelli stated that she and her colleagues are excited about crafting a school-based contract that meets the unique needs of Academy of the City teachers and students. "In order to carry out Academy of the City's mission of creating independent thinkers who are committed to an educational philosophy rooted in social justice, we must lead by example. By negotiating on a mutually agreeable contract we are demonstrating that our school is, at its very core, dedicated to establishing an atmosphere of collaboration and reflection," said Donatelli.

The union and school's board have begun negotiations and are working toward a first contract at the school. ●

Brooklyn charter school teachers ratify innovative first contract

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the board at the Fahari Academy Charter School have agreed to a first ever contract at the school. The new school-based agreement was unanimously ratified on June 29, 2012, by the staff.

The three-year contract will go into effect during the 2012-2013 school year and cover the teachers and teachers' assistants at the middle school, which is located in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn.

In the first year, the contract provides teachers with a premium of 20% above the Department of Education pay scale in order to fairly compensate teachers for an extended day. Educators at the

school will receive a 28% raise over the life of the contract.

The agreement also includes salary steps based on education and years of experience, along with tuition reimbursement and two 45-minute prep periods throughout the school day. But most important to educators was the creation of a due process system, which includes arbitration as the final step for grievances and terminations. Along with the significant raise and due process system, the contract includes teacher-led committees that will help ensure that teacher voice is included in all programming and policy planning.

In the fall of 2011, educators at the school organized a union in order to

have greater voice for educators at the school to help provide Fahari's students with the best possible education.

Two months later, on Nov. 2, management at the charter school in Brooklyn agreed to voluntarily recognize the United Federation of Teachers as the educators' exclusive collective bargaining representative.

After a series of negotiations sessions, educators and the board came together on an agreement that achieved the same kind of job protections and salary steps that teachers in district schools have.

Sonia Browning, a founding teacher at the school, said that with the

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Brooklyn charter school teachers ratify innovative first contract, *continued from previous page*

contract in place, said she looks forward to working with administration to create a thriving school community.

"With the establishment of a teacher's union, I see a unique opportunity for our staff and administrators to collaborate more effectively," Browning said, adding, "I am confident that this will lead to an enriched learning environment for our students."

The board's director, Dirk Tillotson, spoke of the positive working relation between the school, the educators and the UFT. "From the beginning we have seen this as a partnership to serve the students and families at Fahari and this contract makes the school more stable and stronger. The bargaining process itself was a back and forth about what we need to run a good school and what conditions need to exist to staff and develop it and how to structure that conversation. As someone who has worked with charters going on two decades, I see this as a new way for unions and charters to work together."

Fahari currently serves grades 5 through 7 and plans to expand through grade 12. ●

Unique Brooklyn school to produce new charter, *continued from page 2*

American Academy Charter is up and running as planned by the next school year, discuss what they would like to do and encourage them to join the UFT.

Under charter school law, the decision to form a union and bargain collectively is up to the teachers. Waronker values his school's partnership with the UFT and sees a union presence as a positive force.

"A lot of people think the only way to innovate is without a union, but I don't think that's true," Waronker said. "When you do innovation with the union, it will outlast any leader and maintain all parties on the same sheet of music."

Certainly there is professional harmony at the school. Teams consisting of a master teacher, two partner teachers and an apprentice teacher work closely with each other and with the students through six-year learning loops.

"Students can see [teachers] working together and learning from each other. The students are controlled less by uniform rules than by the constant informal nudges from the teachers all around," wrote New York Times writer David Brooks in a March 22 column praising the school.

Children thrive in the atmosphere of student-centered values, which stress individual creativity, discovery and scientific inquiry. Parents give the school high grades and are involved.

Casey, who is leaving his post of vice president to direct the AFT's Shanker Institute, will serve on the board of the charter school.

The application for the charter was earmarked for District 19, but Waronker says they will open the school wherever there's space in Brooklyn, "as long as it's a high-needs area." ●

MEET YOUR COLLEAGUES:

Eric Benzel

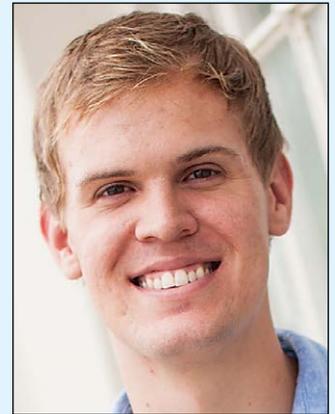


PHOTO: GRACE COMBS

Eric Benzel is a second year math teacher at New Visions Charter High School for Advanced Math and Science.

Q: Why did you decide to become a charter school teacher?

When looking for schools, I wasn't specifically looking for a charter or district school. More importantly, I wanted to find a school where teachers felt supported by their principals, staff worked together closely and students were held to high expectations. Now that I'm working at a charter, I've had the opportunity to appreciate how much flexibility and support teachers are given at our school. We have instructional coaches and assistant principals who know what we are doing daily and support us in our classrooms. We have the chance to read essays that students write in other classes so we can get to know our students better. We also get the opportunity to design and teach week long projects with teachers in other content areas. This culture of collaboration is a hallmark of New Visions Charter School, and I believe is a reason that we are able to support students so well.

Q: How has the union made a difference for your school?

We are still in the process of negotiating a contract at our school. Yet already, the UFT has helped our staff to have important conversations with the leaders of our school about what we as teachers need to make our school a competitive and sustainable place to work. We are hopeful that the collaboration between the UFT, our staff and the leaders at New Visions will result in a school that teachers want to teach and stay in.

Q: What would you say to your colleagues in non-union charter schools about the union?

I think that it is important to realize that charter school educators don't organize into the Department of Education's contract. We all get to be a part of the process in putting together a school-based contract that makes sense for the teachers and students at our school. I think that this process is very much in line with the spirit of innovation and independence that teachers at charter schools often appreciate. ●

UFT ACTS online! Check out the Alliance for Charter Teachers and Staff at www.uftacts.org. Interviews with charter educators, tons of classroom resources, information about your rights, and more...

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“When you do innovation with the union, it will outlast any leader and maintain all parties on the same sheet of music,” said Headmaster Shimon Waronker.



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The union and the school's board are working toward a first contract at the school.



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“We all get to be a part of the process in putting together a school-based contract that makes sense for the teachers and students at our school.”



The Charter Voice

A newsletter by, for and about New York City charter school educators, produced by the United Federation of Teachers Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (UFT ACTS).

We believe that schools work best when educators are respected and when they are included in program and policy planning. We believe collaboration and communication are most successfully achieved when educators are organized and have the collective power of a union. We believe our union can help you do your job and help your school reach its goals. If you are interested in learning more, call our confidential hotline.

www.uftacts.org
212-510-6464
confidential hotline

Educators at two Bronx charters elect to join UFT, continued from page 1

teacher, said that the faculty wanted to ensure that the school's collaborative nature extended to the decision-making process. “The union is us, and we have to make sure it reflects our culture and our values,” she said. “The union gives us a place at the table to make sure the school is sustainable and teachers have input.”

Over the course of the school year, the teachers and school leadership will begin the process of negotiating school-based

contracts.

“All of the staff is excited to take part in the contract negotiation process,” said Benzel.

UFT Vice President Leo Casey went to the school on May 30 to welcome teachers to the union and field questions. Teachers and staff have selected staff representatives from each school to serve on the negotiations committee.

New Visions Charter HS for the

Humanities and New Visions Charter HS for Advanced Math and Science both opened this past September, and each serves approximately 125 students in grade 9. A 10th grade will be added in September. New Visions will open two new schools in the South Bronx in the fall.

Including the two New Visions schools, the union now represents educators at 19 charter schools across the city. ●



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