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Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff

CHARTER VOICE

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Charter school activists attend chapter leader training



MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY

Working on a task together are (from left) Affoussata Boundy of New York French American Charter School in Harlem, Mary Frances Hopkins of the Opportunity Charter School in Harlem, UFT staffer Richard O'Brien and Anna Lambert of the New York City HS for Architecture, Engineering and Construction Industries in the Bronx.

For the first time, unionized charter school leaders participated in the UFT's annual two-day long intensive training on how to become effective school-based union leaders. The event, which took place Jan. 19-20 in Rye, N.Y., brought together leaders from the union's 14 functional chapters, including charter educators from Amber Charter School, Bronx Academy of Promise Charter School, New York French American Charter School in Harlem, Green Dot New York, Merrick Academy Queens Public Charter School, New York City Charter High School for Architecture, Engineering & Construction Industries (AECI), Opportunity Charter School and the UFT Charter School.

After UFT Director of Legislation and Political Action Paul Egan and UFT President Michael Mulgrew addressed the assembled crowd providing some overall context for the training for chapter leaders, charter school teachers broke out into smaller groups for a series of workshops focused on the specific issues facing unionized charter school leaders.

The first session, lead by UFT Vice President Leo Casey, focused on leadership development. Dr. Casey discussed the historical background of public sector unions and public education to help provide some context for the current climate of the progressive charter school movement. He reminded unionized charter school leaders of their important role in ensuring that charter schools are truly public schools.

James Thindwa of the Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (Chicago ACTS) led a session on engaging the local community in their schools. Charter school educators used role-plays and other activities to

"The weekend reminded us that we are not alone as unionized charter school teachers."

—Jacqueline Veracochea
of Merrick Academy
Queens Public
Charter School

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HARLEM'S SUCCESS: Opportunity's parents, teachers and students rally for their school

Earlier this school year, Opportunity Charter School (OCS) of Harlem was targeted by the city Department of Education (DOE) for closure. The school's charter was up for renewal and the DOE has placed the school on its "early engagement" list. The news came as a shock to parents, teachers and the school's administration given the school's success with students with special needs. Some parents and teachers expressed concern that OCS has been put on this list to create more space for Eva Moskowitz's Harlem Success Academy 4, which shares space in the same building. Opportunity is one of three schools, along with Wadleigh Secondary School for the Performing Arts and Frederick Douglass Academy II, that are co-located with Harlem Success schools and were put on the "closure list."

Throughout the winter, the entire Opportunity Charter School community rallied in support of the schools' renewal. Parents, teachers and students held a series of rallies at the school where they expressed their unwavering support for the school's mission and questioned the motives for shuttering the school.

At a rally held at the school, United Federation of Teachers Vice President Leo Casey reaffirmed the UFT's commitment to the teachers, parents and students of OCS. He noted the school's achievements with special needs students and questioned the motivation for closing the school, "If a

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Fahari Academy recognizes teachers' union

Management at the Fahari Academy Charter School in Brooklyn has agreed to voluntarily recognize the United Federation of Teachers as the educators' exclusive collective bargaining representative. The agreement comes just weeks after teachers at the school organized a union.

Fahari educators at the school announced they had organized a union on Oct. 4. A majority of the educators signed union authorization cards, and the UFT filed a formal petition on their behalf for recognition with the school's board. On Nov. 2, the board agreed to voluntarily recognize the union.

The school's educators say they look forward to working with the administration to create a contract that will solidify their mutual commitment to providing the highest quality education for the students and a professional environment for the staff. Freddy Viera, an alternative



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Fahari Academy teachers are all smiles as they anticipate what a union can do for their school.

education teacher, says he is eager to work with the administration to build the best learning environment for children. "Now that we have been recognized, we can focus our full attention on student achievement," he says. "I look forward to working in partnership with administration for the betterment of our students."

While organizing their new union, the teachers and staff sent a letter to

the school's board outlining their vision of a strong learning community and their commitment to Fahari's mission of instilling in its students the "core values that are critical for academic, social and professional success—perseverance, respect, independence, discipline and excellence."

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

Harlem bilingual charter educators choose UFT

The New York State Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) on March 12 officially certified the UFT as the bargaining agent for educators at the New York French American Charter School in Harlem. Most of the school's staff indicated their support for the union by signing union authorization cards last fall.

In the letter that they delivered to both the principal and the school's board announcing their decision to form a union, the teachers outlined their desire to work collaboratively with the administration to create a school-based contract that fulfills the school's mission and best supports teachers and students.

The board had the opportunity to voluntarily recognize the union. After the deadline passed, the teachers and the UFT filed a petition with PERB asking it to certify the union on the basis of the union authorization cards signed by the teachers. After

reviewing the cards, PERB officially acknowledged the union at the school.

Since then a new principal and board chair have expressed a willingness to work with the union to negotiate a contract at the school.

"Being a member of a union will make me feel safe and secure to fulfill my mission as a teacher," said Awa Diop, a founding teacher at the two-year-old school. "The union allows me to express myself in a productive way to help the success of our school."

Maya Wojcik, a teacher's assistant at the school, noted the important role that the union has played in her brief career as an educator. "The union has provided me guidance, showed me respect as a professional and empowered me as an educator," she said.

The New York French American Charter School offers bilingual and bicultural instruction in French and English. It serves about 150 students in kindergarten through 2nd grade with plans to expand to eventually serve students in kindergarten through grade 12.

"Charter school teachers want representation and a voice to help do what is best for their students," said UFT President Michael Mulgrew. "We are happy to welcome the New York French American Charter School teachers and staff into the UFT family."



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Essence Jaime, Beatrice Yode, Soukeyna Diop and Affoussata Boyndy (left to right)

MEET YOUR COLLEAGUES:

Christine Hernandez

Christine Hernandez is a 10th year teacher at Merrick Academy — Queens Public Charter School. She was one of three charter school leaders across the state who received a special recognition at this year's NYSUT Representative Assembly.



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

A: I didn't seek out a job at a charter school per se, but I've just always known I wanted to be a teacher; I used to teach my dolls. When I was younger and I was struggling in school, my 4th- grade teacher, Ms. Ford, helped me to believe in myself. She showed me that even though it was a struggle I could do well, and she taught me to really enjoy school. She really inspired me to become a teacher myself so I could give students that sense of pride and excitement about learning.

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

A: Being part of a union has given us a voice; we can now speak up for our teachers and students without fear of repercussions. For me, forming a union has been a very personal experience. When we organized the teachers at our school, I had a young child at home and was scared about the unionization effort. Once we went public, I was fired. The UFT and their fantastic lawyers fought for me and helped me get my job back. Going through that experience made me realize how crucial the union is and how important it is for charter school teachers to stand up for their rights. Now we have a contract that gives us "due process," which means the school (administration) can no longer fire us without cause. This also gives us the power to advocate for what's best for our school.

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

A: Prior to organizing a union at Merrick we didn't realize how truly important it is to be union members and we didn't know the true power of our own voice. When you're allowed to participate in the discussion, you realize how truly significant it is. You shouldn't be scared of fighting for your rights—your union will have your back. The louder you raise your voice the more protection you have!

Each charter school is different, but teacher voice is vital at any school. It's important that teachers take part in the negotiations process because they are in the best position to know what works best for that particular school. I had the opportunity to take part in negotiations, which showed me that it's vitally important to have teachers at the bargaining table.

Opportunity's parents, teachers and students rally for their school

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decision about Opportunity Charter School is made based solely on education and not political reasons, it cannot be closed," said Dr. Casey. He left the stage to thunderous applause from the assembled crowd.

Despite losing her voice, parent teacher association president Shire Tribble addressed the crowd with the help of math teacher and basketball coach Natasha Seabrook who read a statement on Ms Tribble's behalf.

When asked about her daughter's school, Ms. Tribble questioned the logic of closing down a school like OCS, "Opportunity is the only school that serves this many students with IEPs," she said, "OCS has been very successful serving these students, so why would they be put on this list?"

About half of Opportunity's students have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and many of the students entered the school having fallen behind. The school has been very successful serving these high needs students and helping them successfully graduate high school; the school's special education graduation rate was almost double the city's average for special needs students.

In January 2012, the New York State Department of Education finally granted a two-year renewal to Opportunity Charter School, allowing it to continue to fulfill its mission to serve students with special education needs. These events serve as a reminder of the important place Opportunity has in the Harlem community. Students, parents, teachers and alumni are committed to making sure the school remains open to fulfill its unique vision. Third-year assistant teacher Crystal Chandler noted the crucial role Opportunity serves, "It's essential to keep OCS open. We serve every student that walks through those doors – no matter what. There is no reason we should've been on this list. We are Harlem's success!"

OCS parent speaks out during Dec. 8 rally.



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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"Each charter school is different, but teacher voice is vital at any 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

Charter school activists attend chapter leader training, continued from page 1

help better understand the perspectives of parents and other members of the community.

Sunday's session provided attendees with an overview of the roles and responsibilities of being a school leader. The presenters showed charter leaders important ways to engage fellow teachers in their union at their schools.

Green Dot New York chapter leader Do-

nial Rodriguez expressed how important the weekend was to connect with other unionized charters. "The training was an important opportunity to share ideas with other New York charter school colleagues and listen to their struggles," he said.

Jacqueline Veracochea of Merrick Academy Queens Public Charter School agreed that the training was a unique opportunity to make connections with other

unionized charter leaders.

"The weekend reminded us that we are not alone as unionized charter school teachers," she said. "We can support each other and provide advice for each other. All in all, I had a wonderful time."

This was the first chapter leader training developed specifically for charter school leaders, and more are expected.



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