



Horizon Science Academy – Cleveland Middle School

Cleveland, OH

Principal: **Aydin Kara**
 Superintendent: **Murat Efe**
 School type: **Charter**
 Grades served: **6-8**

121	Student enrollment
97.7	Percent economically disadvantaged
>91.0	Percent non-white
4	Teachers' average years of experience
\$31,246	Average teacher salary
\$11,382	Total expenditure per pupil

No Frills Zone

Horizon Science Academy – Cleveland Middle School sits between its elementary and high school facilities on a small, nondescript “campus” setting. It is a single modular building that consists of one long and relatively narrow hallway, a small cafeteria space that doubles as a physical education facility, and just enough classrooms and offices to serve the 150 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. No space goes unused.

But even the stark simplicity of Horizon’s facility can’t mask the powerful learning taking place inside the school’s classrooms. The school’s atmosphere is both serious and nurturing. Students smile and seem relaxed as they move between classes, yet this ease is undergirded by a sense of purpose and efficiency. In this no-frills environ-

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.



ment, it becomes clear very quickly that the people and the mission matter most.

The school's mission is as simple as its space: to engage kids in a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum. (The Horizon High School, into which most of the middle-school students matriculate, boasts 100 percent graduation and 90 percent college-acceptance rates.)

—● *“Students work really hard here, but the teachers really help us.” – Selena, seventh grader*

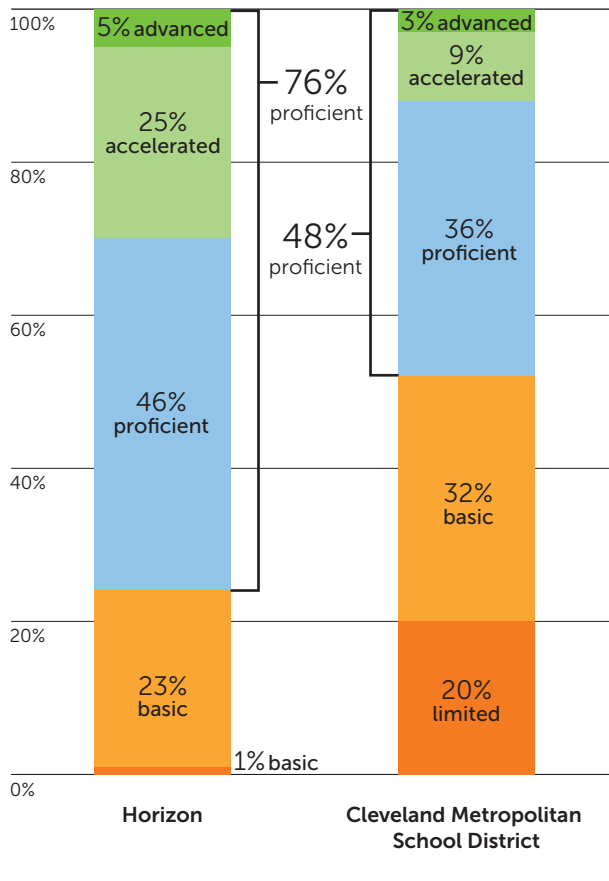
Seventh grader Selena shared that more than in her previous school, “students work really hard here, but the teachers really help us.” Essie Nash, a parent of an eighth grader, said, “I don't want my daughter coddled,” and appreciates that teachers have created

an excellent balance of being strict and demanding while also making it clear to students that the teachers really care about their success.

Proactive Approach

The relationship between home and school at Horizon begins with a home visit by teachers and administrators, to get to know the families and procure formal commitments to Horizon's program from both the parents and students. For parents, the commitment letter expresses their willingness to co-educate their children through a shared partnership. For instance, according to Executive Director Aydin Kara, if any student needs remediation to move the student to grade-level competency, parents must agree to after-school tutoring and Saturday school by signing an academic contract. Tonya Castleberry, parent of three Horizon students, shared, “the children are

Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (Horizon vs. district)

really challenged here,” and especially appreciates the mandatory after-school tutoring.

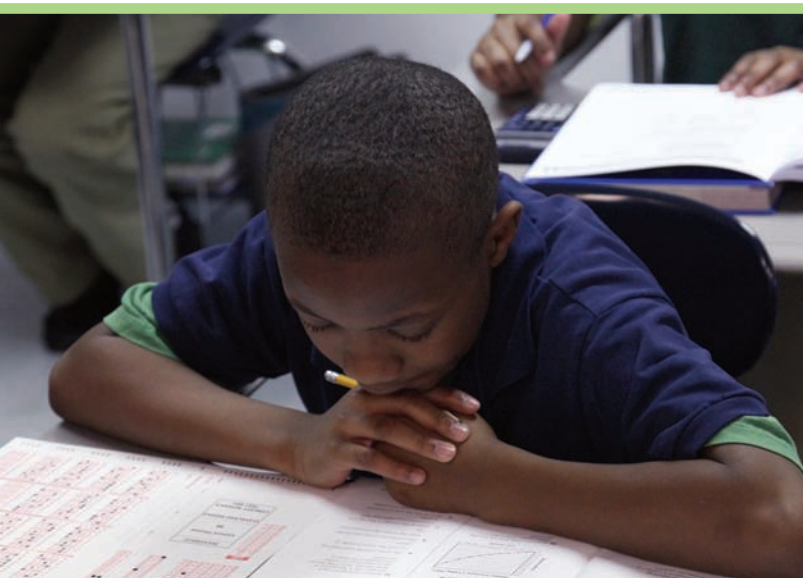
The school staff orients the Horizon parents with the school’s data network so they can monitor the daily progress of their children. Mr. Kara said that Concept Schools,¹³ the nonprofit charter management organization that runs all Horizon schools (they have 16 schools in operation statewide that collectively serve about 4,000 students), provides an online tool to make it easier for parents to follow their children’s academic progress. The data are used by teachers during their regular grade-level

meetings. As a result, there is much transparency at Horizon—both in terms of expectations and student achievement.

— “The kids here have a mission: to prepare for college.” – Aydin Kara, executive director

There is good reason for such transparency. Expectations for student achievement are high at Horizon. The school will not promote a student to the next grade if he or she fails one core subject for the year or fails to perform at grade level on the Ohio Achievement Test. Rather, they must repeat the grade entirely. While some parents protest, noted Mr. Kara, most understand that these expectations ultimately represent what is best for students, not adults.





Another unique feature of the Horizon experience is that all students study either Turkish or Spanish every year. Horizon’s founders are Turkish and numerous staff members are bilingual, so they support the language instruction provided to all students. During the summer, students studying Turkish are even offered the opportunity to travel to Turkey.

Secrets to Horizon’s Success

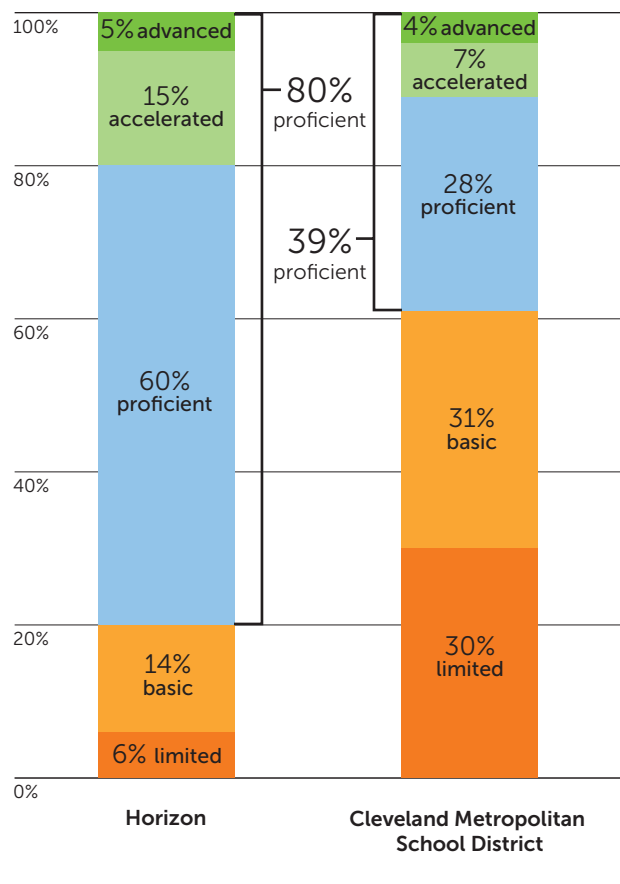
Horizon’s academic achievement shows on state achievement tests. Seventy-five percent of students scored proficient or better on the state’s reading tests, compared to the 48 percent of students in the Cleve-

Proactive policies centering on orientation, commitment letters, aggressive intervention requirements, and high expectations are recognized as the most effective combination to ensure that every student has the fullest opportunity to achieve academic success. As Mr. Kara said, “The kids here have a mission: to prepare for college.”

Reinforcing the Daily Curriculum

Horizon offers an extensive array of extracurricular activities that include a regional robotics competition. Students are offered an eclectic package of teacher-led field trips that include visits to the Rock & Roll and Pro Football Halls of Fame, as well as science and art museums, bowling outings, and an annual trip to Chicago. Eighth graders Brandon and Lamont described these field trips as a great way to bond and learn at the same time. Most impressive to the students are the participation and enthusiasm of their teachers in helping them to explore their city and region. “These opportunities are offered as rewards for good grades and behavior, so most of us try really hard to be included,” seventh grader Jahari said.

Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (Horizon vs. district)

land Metropolitan School District. More strikingly, 80 percent of Horizon students were proficient in math, compared to only 39 percent of district students.

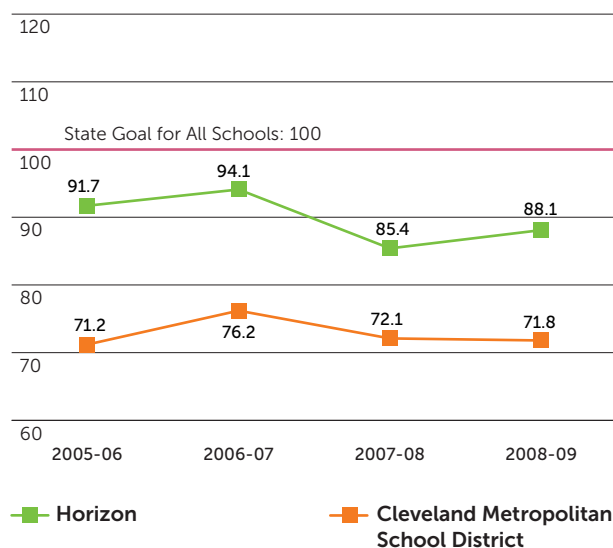
So just how does this middle school accomplish so much with relatively little in the way of resources and facility? Central to its success are the teachers and administrators. Much credit for the school's annual growth goes to a core of five teachers that have been at the school since its founding in 2005. Despite little to no salary increases over the past three years, teachers say that what really motivates them is seeing the difference they are making in their students' lives. Eighth-grade English teacher Ms. Kline explained, "We're able to give these students a chance [at success]."

Teacher dedication combined with the no-frills, no-excuses approach helps students realize that their teachers really care about them—even if it does mean extra work and strict behavioral expectations. Tonya Castleberry said, "my two sons were bored at their previous school, yet got straight As," but thanks to the demanding and dynamic teachers at Horizon, these young men have been challenged beyond what they had ever experienced.

—● *"We're able to give these students a chance [at success]." – Ms. Kline, eighth-grade English teacher*

Preparation is a key to the school's success. During the summer months all teachers report two to three weeks before students arrive for the new school year. They spend this time in professional development and departmental planning sessions. In order to stanch learning loss, the school offers math and science camps during holiday breaks and over the summer.

Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (Horizon vs. district)

Throughout the regular school year, each grade-level chair hosts weekly teacher meetings that are deemed so important that teachers seldom miss them. As teacher April Maimone says, "the continuity of the original core staff and the commitment of everyone to collaboratively maintain a culture of high expectations" is what sets Horizon apart from so many other schools. As classroom teachers, she and her colleagues appreciate the data that are constantly shared with them by the school's director. The data provide insights into how she and others can adapt lessons to ensure students are grasping the appropriate concepts while also developing critical thinking skills.

Other practices that have contributed to the school's success include: mandatory Ohio Achievement Test preparation sessions that are held from 8:00 a.m. until noon for eight Saturdays before the April tests, a "Hands to Themselves" disciplinary emphasis, and a high quality arts program.