

PROGRESSIVE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS SERIES | 2

Uncommon Schools Excellence Girls Charter School

By Dana Laurens and Charles Barone

Uncommon Schools Excellence Girls Charter School (Excellence Girls) is a public charter school located in the Bedford–Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, and one of 52 schools in the Uncommon Schools network. Excellence Girls, as the name implies, is an all-girls school with the mission of teaching girls the skills necessary to succeed in college and beyond by providing a rigorous education, self-discipline, and character empowerment. Excellence Girls is dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of female representation in positions of leadership and the school's key focus is to expose students to opportunities where they can celebrate current female leaders, including elected officials.

The Excellence Girls Elementary Academy, founded in August 2009, serves 440 students in grades K-4. The Middle Academy, founded in August 2013, serves 251 students in grades 5-8. Through persistent advocacy efforts by parents in the community, Excellence Girls was founded five years after the founding of Uncommon Schools Excellence Boys Charter School, also located in Brooklyn.



“Through talking about fierce women who had struggles in this life and who had people doubt what they could do, seeing them triumph really reaches our girls. It helps them know there is a path for them and there is a way that they’re going to make their mark on the world.”

— Principal Nikki Bowen, featured in a 2017 *People Magazine* human interest story

Each month the school features a “Fierce Female.”

Some former “Fierce Female” features include Illinois Senator Tammy Duckworth, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Academy Award-winning actress Lupita Nyong’o. This is just one of the many ways Excellence Girls models the school’s “Creed Values” of Optimism, Respect, Honesty, Curiosity, Justice, Love, Hope, Courage, and Sisterhood.

Character education is an important piece of the school’s progressive education curriculum. Character education classes are intended to assist in developing young girls into responsible citizens and community leaders. This unique component of Excellence Girls’ school culture is noticed and welcomed by parents.



“My stepdaughter has become more outspoken and my daughter is very eager to come home and show us what she learned in school. They have become very confident in what they do and if they get something wrong they don’t give up they want to try again. The girls look at [their principal] Ms. Bowen and see a young African American female who is making a difference. They see her and say, ‘Well if this is what Ms. Bowen is doing I know if I want to be a teacher or a principal or the president I can do it too!’”

— Precious Overton-Adkins, parent of two first graders at Excellence Girls

Excellence Girls’ rigorous curriculum challenges students to think critically and excel academically on daily assignments and annually on New York state assessments. On Monday through Thursday, the school day begins at 7am and ends at 4pm, giving students ample time for academic instruction, character education, and extracurricular activities. On Friday, dismissal is at 1:20pm to allow teacher-collaboration, goal-setting, and weekly evaluations between teachers and school officials. Saturday tutoring is offered for students who need additional academic support.



During her time as a U.S. Senator, Hillary Clinton (D-NY) was an early leader in the bipartisan push for single-sex schools at the federal level: *“I thank [my colleagues] for working with me to...further the ability of our school districts around the country to develop and implement quality single-sex educational opportunities as a part of providing a diversity of public school choices to students and parents but in doing it in a way that in no way undermines Title IX or the equal protection clause of the Constitution. We know, as [Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R-TX)] has said, that ‘single-sex schools and classes can help young people, boys and girls, improve their achievement.’”*

At the Elementary Academy, students receive three hours of literacy instruction and one hour of math instruction every day. The rest of the school day includes science, social studies, character education classes, fitness, art, and music. Students at the Middle Academy spend an hour-and-a-half on reading and comprehension, an hour-and-a-half on math, one hour on writing, one hour on history, one hour on science, and thirty minutes in an elective such as dance, basketball, theatre, track, or art. The allotted thirty-minute elective allows students to participate in activities that will enrich their skills outside the classroom. The Middle Academy also offers one hour of tutoring for students who need additional support.

Excellence Girls is dedicated to maximizing learning opportunities for all students as reflected by the 15:1 student-teacher ratio. Nearly 60% of Excellence Girls’ teachers are teachers of color in contrast to New York City as whole where 60% of teachers are white. At Excellence Girls, each student is required to complete homework called “Life’s Work” each night that reinforces the skills learned that day and deepens students’ understanding of classroom material. Life’s Work includes a requisite 20-30 minutes of reading every night on which parents have to sign-off. The benefit of this required reading is two-fold: students’ enhancement of reading and comprehension extends beyond the classroom, and parents are included in their child’s learning process.

Strong parental involvement is key to the success of students at Excellence Girls. Parents and families are encouraged to participate in Families for Achievement, similar to a Parent Teacher Association. Other opportunities for parents to get engaged in their child's education include Parent-Teacher Conferences, family nights, re-orientations for returning students and families, and volunteer opportunities. Establishing good and solid relationships between teachers, school officials, and parents is imperative to students' academic success.

At the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year, New York City Schools Chancellor, Carmen Farina, met with school leadership and teachers at Excellence Girls to discuss math instruction, teacher coaching, and sharing of best-practices with other New York City public schools.

“It was such a pleasure to visit Excellence Girls and spend time in classrooms, where I saw passionate teachers and eager students.”

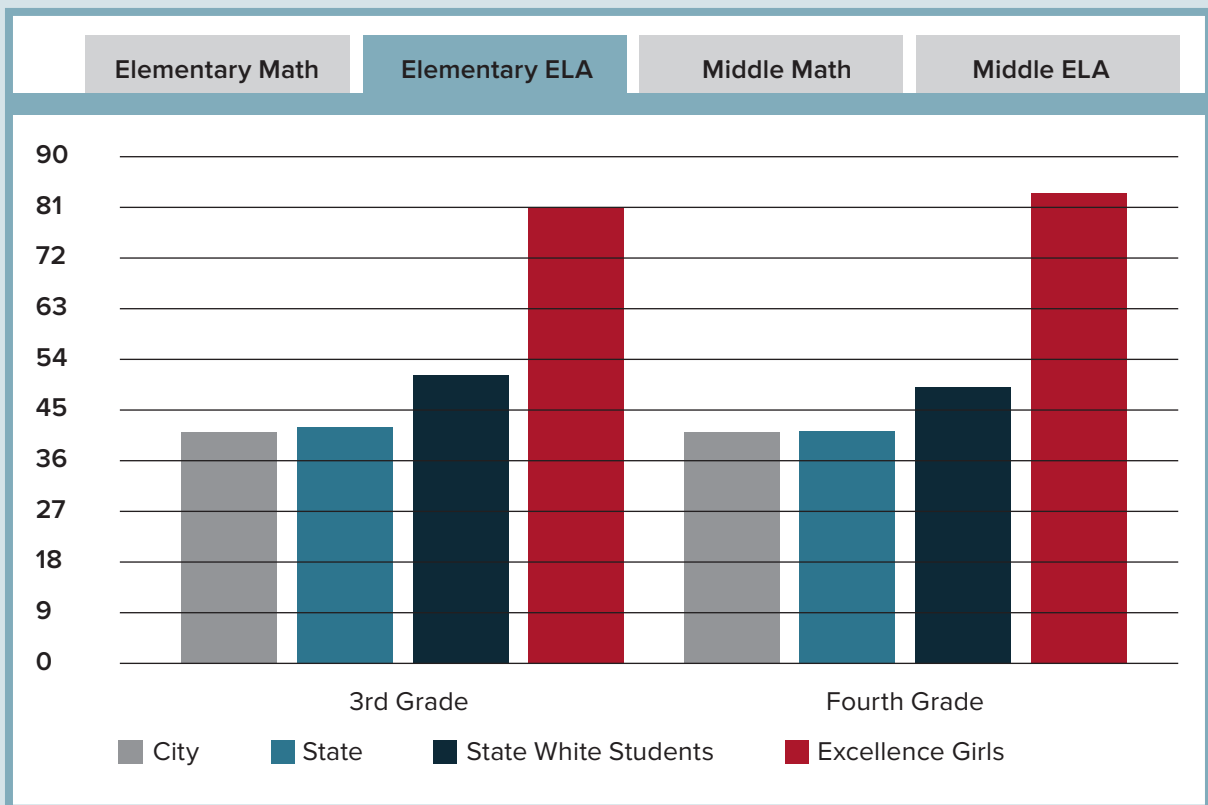
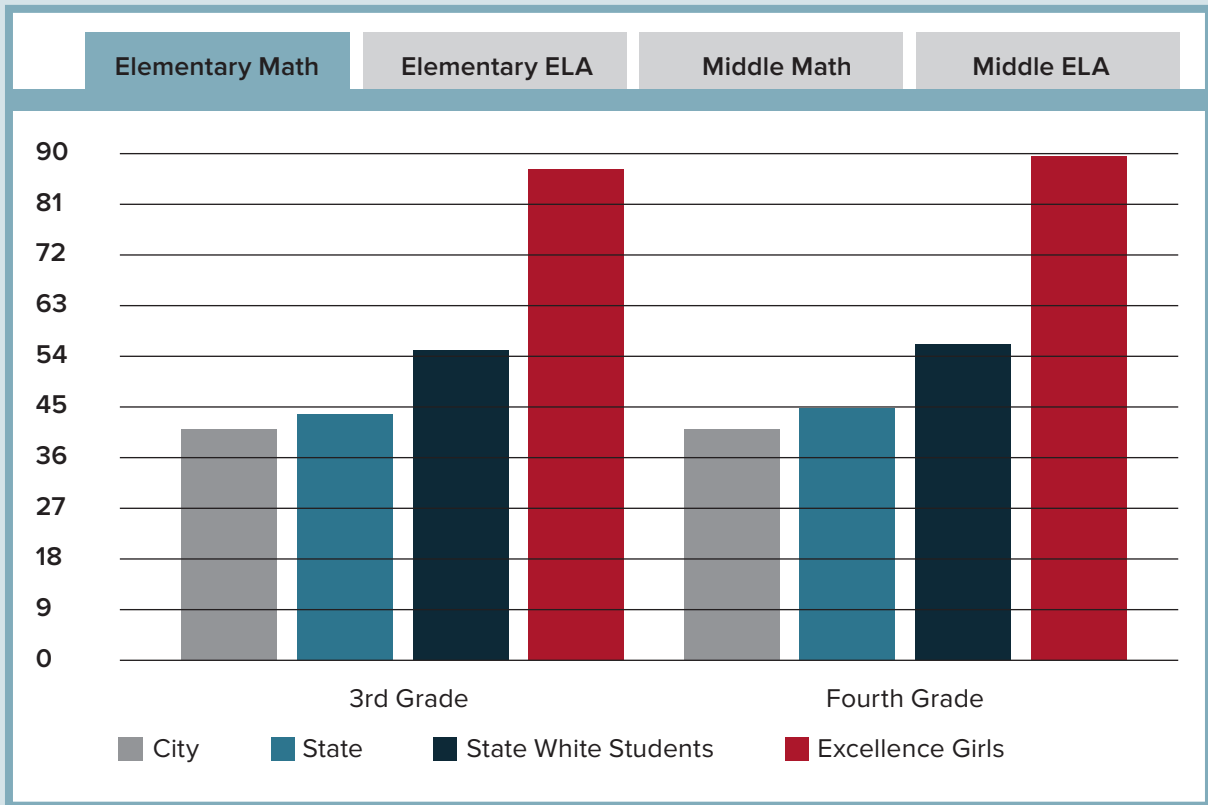
— Carmen Farina, New York City Schools Chancellor



A strong partnership continues between Uncommon Schools and the New York City Department of Education.

Excellence Girls has a population of 93% African American students at the Elementary Academy and 92% African American students at the Middle Academy. Students at both schools, on average, outperform their peers in New York City and New York state in academic outcomes across the board (see charts on next page).

Achievement at the elementary level in both math and ELA at Excellence Girls is double the achievement at the city and state level. At the Middle Academy, while the margins are closer with regard to math, Excellence Girls also outperforms both the city and state in math and ELA.





In 2016, Excellence Girls was recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education for high student achievement, its commitment to female empowerment, and building students' character and confidence. Excellence Girls is the first charter school in Brooklyn to receive this notable award. City Councilwoman, Darlene Mealy (D-41st District), pictured at right, presented the National Blue Ribbon Award proclamation to school leaders, teachers, and students. Mealy said she "saw 'phenomenal learning' and was especially excited about the school's mission to give girls confidence as they grow into strong young women, or 'fierce females,' as the school calls them."

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