

NY explores more alternative schools

School

School Without Walls' low-testing approach could be statewide model

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It only took about an hour for teacher Mariana Barry and her School Without Walls students to break just about every taboo in education. The students ate snacks, wore hats and got up and walked around when they needed to. Barry, meanwhile, divided her attention between them and the pot of coffee she was brewing. She only spoke when a student called on her — by her first name.

They weren't working on math or English, but rather planning an *Amazing Race*-style competition in the school. They had learned from experience that some ground rules were needed for the extreme eating portion of the contest.

"If anyone throws up, you have to keep it a secret," Barry warned. "I don't want to get in trouble."

It didn't look much like a traditional classroom. But of course, traditional classrooms in the Rochester City School District haven't always worked very well.

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Students at School Without Walls work on a class project. The school on Broadway Street is the highest-performing high school in the Rochester City School District, graduating 94 percent of its students in 2015.

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LARRY WILLIAMS

12TH-GRADE STUDENT

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School Without Walls, a high school on Broadway Street, is the highest-performing high school in the district, graduating 94 percent of its students in 2015. It is also part of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a group of 27 schools across the state that have used a testing waiver over the last 20 years to demonstrate an alternate model of teaching and learning.

With parents and educators across the state up in arms over student and teacher evaluations, New York State Education Commissioner Mary-Ellen Elia has pointed to the consortium model as worth further investigating and said she hopes to expand it through a pilot program in the new federal education legislation.

The consortium schools, most of which are downstate, vary in particulars but all follow a few core principles.

First, their students do not take most Regents exams, but rather Performance- Based Assessment Tasks (PBATs). They can be research projects, science experiments or practical applications of academic concepts in math or history. The students spend most of the school year working on them, then present them to a panel that includes teachers as well as their peers.

“When you take a test, you can kind of blow it off, but you can’t do that when you have to present in front of people,” said Haley Vega, a School Without Walls 12th-grader. “This is more like the real world. We get to talk to people and interact.”

The PBATs follow from a dedication to inquiry- based learning, where students learn through questioning and experimentation rather than having a teacher deliver a lesson. The consortium schools are nearly all small — School Without Walls has fewer than 250 students in grades 9-12 — and their teachers get extensive, and expensive, professional development.

Part of the trade-off in not having annual state testing is that there is less data to analyze regarding students’ performance. Graduation rates in consortium schools, though, are consistently higher than those in their home

school districts. A recent report showed those graduates are more likely to enroll in college and more likely to complete a two- or four-year degree.

The new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, allows more local control of a variety of education measures. One little-noticed provision will give five-year testing waivers to seven states that propose an alternate model of assessing students.

The provision seems tailor-made for an expansion of New York's consortium model, and Elia, the new state education commissioner, has expressed interest in applying for one of the waivers.

"Any way we can still keep the rigor in our graduation requirements but open up opportunities for different people to do things in different ways ... can only strengthen our approach to supporting students who, I would venture to say, don't all walk to the same drummer," she said at a Jan. 11 Board of Regents meeting. "I think it's important for us to look at small ways we could start to introduce (PBATs) ... so we get kind of a working knowledge of how much it will require from the districts and the state in terms of resources."

The state is still waiting to learn how the federal approval process will work, and Elia didn't have full details of what an expansion would look like. She mentioned the PBATs could be an option only for students who have already failed traditional Regents exams; she also said she'd like to find a district willing to experiment with them on a wider scale.

Martha Foote, who served as the consortium's director of research until 2014 and now works with them as a consultant, said any sort of expansion would require careful planning.

"You can't just throw schools into the consortium — it's hard work, and it's not for everybody," she said. "But it's incumbent on our education system to have these programs available for teachers and students who really want and need something like this."

Even beyond the PBATs, School Without Walls bucks a number of educational trends. Its students are required to perform 75 hours of community service each year and are expected to do much of their research independently, outside the classroom.

For that reason, they have the shortest school day in the city: from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. most days, including an hour of "personal needs time" that allows for lunch as well as short research trips to the downtown library or other community destinations. On Thursdays, they're out by noon.

"It's a very powerful model to get students to take ownership of their learning," principal Idonia Owens said. "The students are taught to be critical thinkers. The work they're doing is real ... and it tells a lot more about (them) than a test score does."

Most days also include 90 minutes for "extended class," a kind of thematic home room where students in all four grades come up with a broad subject — race and culture, or gastronomy, or teen issues — then spend the entire school year immersed in it.

That's what Mariana Barry's students were doing, in their own way. Their discussion wasn't exactly linear. There were digressions, distractions and jokes, but the hour was seeded with serious debate.

They signed up to attend a musical at the Auditorium Theatre and debated which charities should benefit from an upcoming fundraiser. A boy recommended a mental health organization; a girl said she wanted one for premature babies.

“I don’t want to say why,” she said. They decided to give to several.

Several students and faculty agreed the model wouldn’t work for every student, or for every teacher. But they agreed an approach that focuses less on testing is worth expanding in some way.

“When you’re taking a test, you just learn what they want you to learn,” 12th-grader Larry Williams said. “(Here), you learn how to learn by yourself.”

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Kaysceia Anderson laughs with classmates as they make decisions about a class project.

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