

# NYOS Charter School

## AUSTIN

When asked why they started NYOS Charter School, school founders state simply, “We knew there was a better way.” Determined to live up to its name, Not Your Ordinary School (NYOS) opened its doors in 1998 to students in grades kindergarten through grade 7 and has expanded to add one grade level each year since. The school was founded by a group of educators who had worked together for many years in traditional public schools and were somewhat frustrated by their experience with increasingly larger enrollments, test-driven instructional methods, and curricular modification accompanying each administration change. As the NYOS principal explains, the group was motivated by commitment to a curricular and instructional approach they felt was very effective and wanted the freedom to implement the approach consistently over time. NYOS strives to incorporate an innovative curriculum with the vision that “every child realizes their maximum potential.”

### Student Characteristics

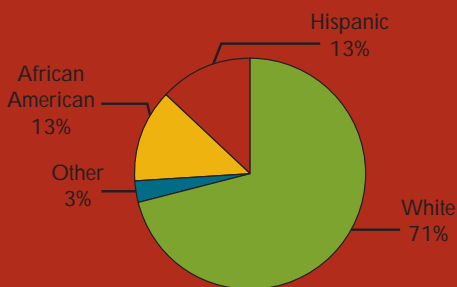
NYOS currently has two campuses in Austin serving somewhat different student populations. The school began at its Gessner campus and has since expanded to a new building on Lamar Boulevard.

Currently, the Gessner campus serves students in grades pre-kindergarten through 2 and the Lamar campus serves grades kindergarten through 11. In 2001–02, NYOS enrolled a total of 262 students at its two campuses. Overall, NYOS students are predominately White (72 percent), with small percentages Hispanic (13 percent) and African American (13 percent). Approximately 14 percent of students are classified as economically disadvantaged, and 6 percent qualify for special education services. These overall averages, however, do not reflect the differing demographic characteristics of the two campuses. The Gessner campus serves a more ethnically and economically diverse population; almost half (44 percent) its students are African American and 58 percent are economically disadvantaged.

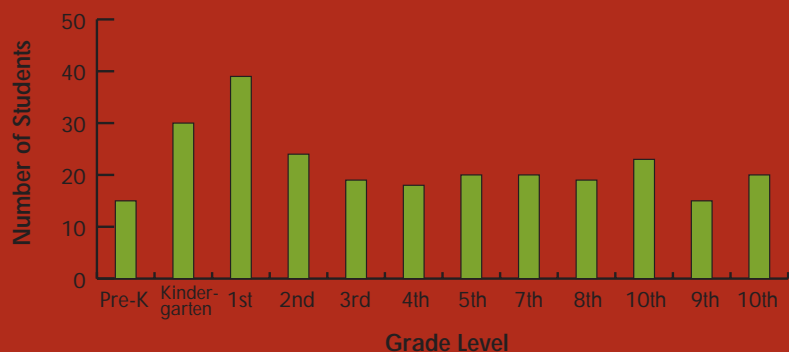
### School Characteristics

Aside from serving different grade levels, the educational program and schedule at NYOS’ two campuses are the same. Students attend classes the typical 180 days per year; however, the school uses a year-round calendar with two- to three-week intercessions scheduled each quarter. Additionally, the attendance rate is quite high (96 percent), and there are no student dropouts.

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in NYOS Charter School: AEIS 2001–02



The administrative structure of NYOS is minimal, including a principal (who also serves as counselor), an assistant principal, and a business administrator. NYOS has 24 teachers, with the majority (54 percent) having between one and five years teaching experience, and some (17 percent) having advanced degrees.

Though administrators report that recruiting teachers initially was somewhat difficult due to the uncertainty of charter schools and lower pay compared to traditional public schools, this is no longer a problem and the school receives dozens of applications for any open position. Due to funding limitations and small school size, administrators seek to hire teachers who have multiple skills or areas of expertise. NYOS also strives to keep pay scales comparable to neighboring school districts to attract qualified teachers. Teachers also are included in the hiring process to a large extent. "I've never hired a teacher," states the NYOS principal, "the staff hires the teachers...the people they're going to be working with...that is definitely a group process."

NYOS founders believe strongly that every child is gifted, so they require that all teachers receive gifted and talented endorsements and special education certification within two years of being hired. They believe this requirement ensures that a teacher can adequately teach every child in a classroom, including those with special needs. To facilitate further teacher professional development and collaboration, NYOS dismisses students early each Friday to allow for faculty meetings. These meetings include a variety of topics and formats. Some weeks are devoted to whole-group faculty meetings about policy issues, other days are set aside for vertical team or grade-level meetings.



This time also is used for formal professional development sessions on issues such as discipline. In addition, administrators report that many teachers use their time during intercessions to attend professional development sessions out of town or out of state.

Friday afternoon meetings also allow teachers an opportunity to voice concerns or suggest programs. "We can talk about issues and initiate things," commented one teacher. "Curriculum, management, policies, anything...of course, it has to be okayed by the principal, but other than that we have a lot of room to initiate." Teachers believe their input is valued, and the fact that there are several teacher representatives on the governing board further substantiates teacher importance. One teacher explained the effect of this feature on school success: "Teacher input is always important as far as if you're thinking about school and what makes the school successful. Teachers are respected and our opinions are valued."

## Educational Program

The educational program at NYOS has many unique characteristics that set it apart from most traditional public schools. One of the most noticeable differ-

### School Characteristics

Founded	1997
Grades	PK to 2; K to 11
Enrollment	262
Daily schedule	8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Days of instruction	180 (year-round)
Student attendance rate	96%
Student dropout rate	0%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

### School Staffing

Number of teachers	24
Student-teacher ratio	12 to 1
Beginning teachers	8%
Teacher average years experience	5.1
Teacher turnover rate	35%
Teachers with no degree	7%
Teachers with advanced degrees	17%
Average teacher salary	\$34,497
Average campus administrator salary	\$50,450
Average central administrator salary	\$40,001

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

ences is multi-age grouping. Two or three grade levels are typically grouped into each section (i.e., 2-3, 4-5, 9-11). NYOS founders and administrators believe strongly in this approach and its effect on children’s learning. “Life is multi-age,” comments the NYOS principal, “Families are multi-age...children learn from each other, not always the younger learning from the older.” Using multi-age grouping allows students to stay with the same teacher for multiple years (i.e., looping). Teachers say this approach, along with small class sizes (maximum 15:1 student-teacher ratio), allows them to be more effective in the classroom. “I would say one of the biggest and most significant differences is that you have a chance to develop a relationship with a kid and learn their learning style,” explained one teacher. “Usually the classes are 15 or less, and I’ll have them for years...even if I just had them two years, that would be much better than having them one year and then passing them on.” Additionally, students are assigned to classes by academic ability rather than age. When questioned about this approach, students say they benefit. One student commented, “You’re placed on ability, not so much grade level. If you’re a kindergartner and can do fourth-grade work, they’re not going to hold you back for that.” To accommodate multiple grade levels in the same classroom, an individual learning plan is prepared for each student. This plan guides teachers in creating assignments and experiences that best meet the needs of each student.

This individualized approach also is characteristic of the instructional methods at NYOS. Whole-group instruction is very limited and instead teachers primarily work with students individually. This

approach is supported by the school’s lack of reliance on textbooks. No textbooks are used at the elementary level; at the high school level, they are considered just one of many resources available. One teacher explains this approach: “We use textbooks as resources...we have to use different types of resources to kind of pull in the best of what we think will work.”

Another key component of NYOS’ educational philosophy is the concept of building personal power in students. The NYOS principal explains this idea: “We never do for someone what they can do for themselves. We are very much on building personal power in the students, and the only way to do that is to not enable them to depend on us.” Based on this approach, teachers say they use more student-centered, discovery-type methods in which students have to figure things out for themselves. In math, for instance, most teachers write the majority of their problems. Instead of students working a set of problems, teachers require students to find multiple strategies for solving the same problem. Even students say that this approach, while frustrating at times, helps them learn. “It’s more exploratory, you’re given the information about a concept, and you have to explore to find the solution. It’s frustrating sometimes, but you learn something.”

Content-area learning is supported by the use of specific approaches such as Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI) in math and the Literacy Learning Network (LLN) in reading and language arts. CGI uses students’ natural problem solving abilities to help them understand math and solve problems using a method of their choice instead

**School Finance**

Per-pupil expenditure	\$7,104
Per-pupil for instruction	\$3,714
Local revenue	14%
State revenue	83%
Federal revenue	3%

*Source:* Actual financial data for all funds, PEIMS 2001-02.

of one imposed by the teacher. For reading instruction, NYOS teachers use the LLN approach, a writing-to-read model that focuses on students' writing in the process of learning to read. More recently, NYOS has received a grant to focus more attention and professional development on Integrated Thematic Instruction. Although only in its beginning stages, this model will eventually influence classroom atmosphere, organization of topical units, and assessment, as thematic units are incorporated across all subject areas and grade levels. Like many of the strategies used at NYOS, administrators believe this approach most closely resembles what happens in daily life. The NYOS principal explains: "We just believe very strongly that what you're learning is integrated...your day doesn't have a math section and a reading section and a science section, it's all integrated." To further support this thematic approach, teachers are encouraged to take students on any fieldtrips they feel would support their learning. Students mentioned trips to farms, museums, amusement parks, and local businesses that corresponded to units they were studying.

The notion of building a sense of empowerment in students is also evident in NYOS disciplinary approach. Administrators, faculty, and students are trained in a program called Redirecting Children's Behavior (RCB). RCB focuses on offering students choices and helps teachers (or others) understand a child's needs. The assistant principal describes the program this way:

Kids are given a responsibility to take care of themselves...it [RCB] just helps you to implement your program in a way where you are listening and looking and trying to understand what it is that is underlying the outward emotion.

Instead of punishments, natural and logical consequences help students understand the effect of their behavior. "If you don't bring your stuff to class," explains one teacher, "the natural, logical consequence is you're not prepared for class, you can't do what we're doing, it affects your participation grade for today."

Another feature that sets NYOS apart from most traditional public schools is its use of authentic assessment. At the elementary level, classes are nongraded, and teachers rely on portfolios and rubrics to assess students' progress. In the upper grade levels, a variety of assessment techniques are used. Although middle-school and high-school teachers describe using rubrics for areas such as writing, some numeric grades are assigned as well. High school teachers and administrators struggle with the need to assign grades for students applying to colleges while still holding to their desire for authentic assessment. Currently, NYOS uses a nontraditional grading scale for high school students in which 100-94 is an "A", 93-87 is a "B," and so forth. Teachers and administrators, however, are exploring other grading scales or models of assessment that can best meet the needs of high school students.

NYOS administrators also use authentic methods in their approach to teacher appraisal, including observations by teacher leaders and administrators, self-evaluations, and discussions with administrators. According to the NYOS principal, teacher appraisal focuses on finding teachers' strengths and challenges rather than giving a teacher a "grade." "I want to look at their strengths," she explains, "I want to use the people for the right thing and use their knowledge that they have, which might be totally unrelated to their teaching area, to help build the school."

*"You've got to hold to your goals, and primarily, it is to give kids the opportunity to really learn at their maximum potential."*

## Parental Involvement

By all accounts, parents play a huge role in the operation of NYOS. Although parents are required to spend 20 hours annually volunteering for the school, administrators and teachers say many parents devote hours beyond the minimum requirement. Each campus has a parent volunteer committee to offer parents an organized means of volunteering. In addition to the typical fundraising activities, parents are involved with the school on a daily basis by chaperoning trips, working at book fairs, and providing teachers with additional resources for their classrooms. Some parents also offer valuable services to the school. One NYOS parent, who also is a registered nurse, provides the students with periodic hearing and vision tests required by state regulations. Administrators also report parents began managing the cafeteria after the school had problems with the former provider. In several instances, parents also have made substantial financial contributions to the school. The principal reports that during the first two years of operation, a group of parents provided funds to give every teacher a small Christmas bonus. Similarly, one parent offered \$1,000 toward the purchase of a new air conditioner. Administrators say parents also influence elements of the school's educational program, such as minimal homework. "You don't just have homework for the sake of having homework," comments the principal. "We want your evenings to be family time, and I think that's another thing that's helped our parents be able to enjoy being up here—they're not having to do homework with their kids every night, so they get to have normal family time at night."

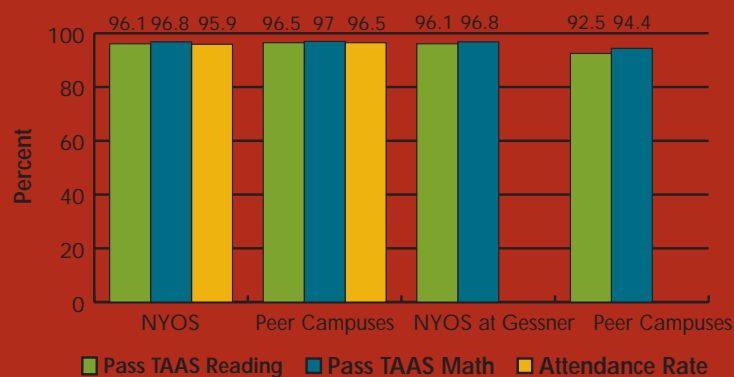
## Governance

NYOS' governing board is composed of 11 members representing parents, teachers, administration, and local business people. The board's primary responsibilities center on budgeting, policy, long-range planning, student recruitment and retention, and safety issues in addition to administrative personnel decisions. Board members comment that the relationship between the board and administration is productive, with the common goal being the school's success. "There's a common goal," says one board member. "That's what we have here...a real common interest, and that's a real uniting force." The governing board also tries to be responsive to parents. Besides having four parent representatives, the board uses an annual survey to gauge parent concerns. The governing board formally addresses any issue raised by more than 10 percent of parents. Although addressing parents' concerns is a high priority, board members also say outside community members have a voice. "We have outside people, people from the community who have no other involvement with the school...that gives a whole different perspective," explains a parent representative on the board.

## Accomplishments

Efforts to be *extraordinary*—through the use of an innovative curriculum and teaching strategy at Not Your Ordinary School—seem to be working. They have garnered high accountability rating and their students continue to perform well above state averages on TAAS. Additionally, high percentages of NYOS students pass subject-specific

Comparison of Performance for NYOS Charter School and Peer Campuses: AEIS 2001–02



end-of-course exams, with more than 90 percent of students passing Algebra I and English II in 2002.

Although they are proud to be rated an Exemplary school, NYOS administrators stress that their goals for students extend well beyond TAAS. They explain that the way the state classifies schools as Exemplary is “not necessarily the way that we would classify ourselves as an exemplary school because the goals that we have for our kids are not encompassed in the criteria.” From the beginning, NYOS has made a concerted effort not to engage in the drill-and-practice methods commonly associated with standardized test preparation. Instead, administrators say they focus on their primary goal—to “give kids the opportunity to really learn at their maximal potential.”

#### Campus Accountability Rating

2000	Recognized
2001	Acceptable
2002	Exemplary

*Source:* 2001–02 AEIS report.

#### TAAS Percent Passing

	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 3	100.0	100.0	83.3	70.0	100.0	94.1
Grade 4	94.4	100.0	100.0	83.3	100.0	92.9
Grade 5	92.3	100.0	94.7	83.3	94.4	94.7
Grade 6	100.0	100.0	100.0	91.7	91.7	100.0

*Source:* AEIS reports.