Case Study: Sci Academy

New Orleans, LA ❙ Grades 9-12 ❙ 94% African-American ❙ 90.5% Free and reduced lunch ❙ Founded 2008

Being True to the Data

Data can sometimes throw one for a loop, when results deliver surprises that may deviate from the plan. Sci Academy founder Ben Marcovitz learned to course correct after receiving data showing how far behind the kids were when they entered school. *"We had bought all these different curricula for 9th grade, and everyone (coming in) averaged at the 4th grade level,"* Marcovitz says. The staff boxed up the 9th grade curriculum and broke out phonics for high schoolers. *"We had to change everything,"* he says. *"It's never stopped feeling like an emergency when kids come in. We wait to see the diagnostics when the 9th and 10th graders come in, and every year, it's devastating. We felt a little more over the years like we have an emergency management system, but we are still emotionally disturbed by it every year. It's a leader's job in this organization to frame the obstacle as inspiring and not demoralizing. The etter we get at confronting that, the better we'll be."*

Data as a Change Agent

On a wall in the Sci Academy office hangs a framed picture of the word "Data" with a heart around it. For every decision, staff members say they seek data to support their next steps. One example of the approach: The administration noticed that the school was losing kids, and decided to gather the data on why students were leaving. They found that the lack of extracurricular activities was causing students to drop out. The school didn't originally have cheerleading, and almost lost female students. *"Not having a roster of extracurricular activities hurt us, so we did it. Now we don't lose kids,"* Marcovitz says.

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Marcovitz used data to shift the focus of the school from culture to instruction. A respected educator visited the school and confirmed that the culture was great, but if Marcovitz wanted to boost student achievement to the next level, he had to change instruction. Marcovitz says the shift to focus on instruction was not easy. *"I felt like I was banging my head on the wall.....People were using all their time and breath talking about behavior."*

He kept coming back to the idea of what gets measured, gets done. In the foundational years, the staff had created a complicated discipline database that went deep into each student's behavior. Any positive behavior a student exhibited during the day was tracked, any misbehavior was tracked and advisors reviewed the document with advisees daily. This resulted in a great school culture. *"No wonder people were caring as much. Because at the end of the day, that's what I was making them do, was focus on this,"* Marcovitz says. *"I remember sitting down at the computer and copying a full sheet of that database into a new document and saying 'How can I make this about instruction?'"* He started with a simple spreadsheet, having teachers enter how many students had mastered each day's lesson. He included a spot for the teacher to comment on why the lesson worked or didn't, then a spot for him to comment so the teacher knew he was looking at it. *"It did make that shift,"* Marcovitz says. *"The way we planned was much more centered around daily mastery."* The staff built from that foundation, then started working to make sure teachers were actually measuring mastery well and not just giving non-rigorous assignments.

Hiring: Talking Candidates out of the Job

When forming his team, Sci Academy founder Ben Marcovitz just had to find nine like-minded people—a challenge unless leaders know their school very well, he says. "*I took what I envisioned to be the school before it existed and described it to people, and told them about what I thought would be the elements that were appealing, or the elements that were challenging, and tried to show them what would be happening to them as a teacher*," Marcovitz says. But "*what tends to happen when you hire without a ton of knowledge about what you're hiring for is people feel like you've promised them things that you are not delivering.*" A few teachers felt like the job didn't turn out as it had been described to them. "*The best way I learned to deal with that was to just really listen and look at what was really challenging for teachers*," he says. The approach helped him refine the hiring process for his second round. During the interview process, he was direct about the fact that some people were leaving, and detailed the reasons why. Then he asked candidates to consider everything overnight and get back to him if interested. About 70 percent of applicants did not. "*The 30 percent who did had already bought into some of those most challenging elements of our school and we were able to work it a lot better from there*," he says.

Since that time, the hiring process has further solidified. As Sci Academy has expanded, the school has added a director of human capital, Soraya Verjee, to seek out candidates aligned with the school's core values. In her first conversations with candidates, it may almost seem like she's trying to talk them out of the job. "*I explain who we are—not in a marketing way—but in a 'here are the things you need to know about working here that might not make you want to work here' way*," Verjee says. Those things include an intense weekly professional development cycle, increased accountability, and a demand for flexibility. That flexibility may mean having to teach a different class midyear because that's what the data shows kids need. Those candidates who advance past the

initial conversation then speak with a principal who delves deeper into their teaching style and practice. Next, candidates would be invited to do a sample teach, either at their school or at Sci Academy. The staff provides feedback, which the candidate will have to incorporate into another sample teach to see how well he or she can implement it.

Next steps include a team interview with five members of the Sci Academy staff who will rate the candidate on the school's core values, then a reference check. A reference check should involve five references, and all should be kept on the phone for half an hour. "*It's a huge investment, but when we're able to do it well and when we build a relationship with someone over the phone, you're able to get a ton of corroborative information and maybe something you never even saw*," Verjee says. "*Even though we try to have a performance-based piece, it's easy for people to game the system. You have to make sure you have that check in place.*"

When she first started at Sci Academy, teacher Katie Bubalo worried about keeping up with her peers. But she instead found that everyone was continually working to improve. "*The idea of constant feedback is what makes this place tick*," Bubalo says.

Adult Culture

"*Most important to setting the culture of the kids is setting the culture of the adults*," Marcovitz says as he walks into the school's media center just before 8 a.m. one morning. The staff is gathered for their spirited morning meeting. The large room that serves as the media center is basic but bright, the Sci Academy messages continued here in the décor, with signs like "SWTSS" (Sweat the small stuff) mixing with other reminders of the school's values. These values can be found everywhere—even posted around the bathroom mirrors. "*It's kind of 'kumbaya,'*" Marcovitz says of the daily gathering. "*It's a ritual meant to turn on their brains.*"

Teachers mill about as Director of Curriculum and Instruction Aidan Kelly starts yelling "5...4...3...2...1..." then they gather into their grade-level team circles. The clapping begins. They take turns shouting out a value like "Teamwork" or "Enthusiasm," then launch into a fast-talking cheer to describe how another teacher helped them out. One staff member thanks a colleague for pitching in when someone was absent on Friday. Another thanks a teammate for a positive email sent out. They all punctuate the end of their shout-outs by repeating the value they are trying to highlight: "Enthusiasm!" "Teamwork!" Another teacher is singled out by the circle for the relationship he's building with students who aren't even in his class. "*Give him a smack*!" says the nominating teacher of his friend, who nods in appreciation.

A young teacher with glasses has her fists balled at her sides. They are clenched in determination, not anger as she starts talking about her student. "*Alexis (name changed) is really struggling right now*," she says, asking the other teachers to remind Alexis of a letter she wrote to herself awhile back. The teacher wants them to remind the girl "*not what she promised you all, but what she promised herself*." A voice interrupts, warning that there is just 45 seconds left. Another teacher reminds that them Bethany (name changed) is new and thinks "*this is not a normal high school. Make sure you hold her accountable, but be positive. She was very negative yesterday*," the teacher says. Then all hands join in the center of the circle for a chant that ends "*One for all!*"

The circle time stops, and Kelly calls everyone into a larger circle for announcements. Kelly reminds the staff to hold students accountable for their uniforms, and teachers snap their fingers to show approval. All hands meet again in the center of an even larger circle for a closing cheer. "*Chase Perfection! Catch Excellence!*" As Marcovitz explains, "*there's no way to catch excellence without seeking perfection*." Teachers put on sunglasses for the short walks through the outdoor halls between classes. Time for school to start.

Mission-Driven Decision-Making

Shifting gears midstream, whether that means throwing out entire curriculums based on test results or moving teachers to new classes, is something Sci Academy staff members have to grow accustomed to. It goes along with the culture of continual improvement at all levels. The changes can be hard on a day-to-day basis, but Marcovitz tries to focus teachers on the idea that they don't want to continue to do something that's not the best way to do it. For instance, teachers sometimes struggle with curriculums that don't work, but must rally on with them because the district bought the program for all classrooms. "*Our view is always going to be 'if there is a better way we could be doing it and we can start doing it that way tomorrow, that's probably when we'll start doing it that way.'*" Often the shift in gears is made easier when the suggested changes come from teachers and the data they gathered themselves. Getting buy-in for a decision that was not generated by the staff requires being really clear about the reasons why the change is being made, Marcovitz says. If there is not a good way to message why the change is being made, then it's probably not warranted.

Marcovitz recalls when the leadership diversified the freshman math curriculum. The decision created more classes that required teachers to learn a lot of new things to teach. "*In messaging that, we had to say to ourselves, 'why are we asking them to do that?' Well, it's because math performance levels of our lowest quartile were just extraordinarily poor, and we needed to do something about that*," Marcovitz says. They shared the data with the teachers and had them draw their own conclusions and talk about what was needed. "*When they saw that data, they were moved in the same way we were and actually hungry for us to provide a solution*," he says.

Honesty is the Best Policy

Of course, not every interaction is conflict free. To prepare the staff for having those tough conversations, Marcovitz believes there needs to

be an established history of saying things that may seem hard to say. *"Our training in the beginning of the year has a lot of focus on difficult conversations, on how to be transparent with each other,"* he says. *"So if you have a record as a team of being honest with each other about the hard things, there tends to be very few assumptions that personal agendas or politics are involved,"* he says. Having these honest conversations is the only way that accountability can truly exist among the staff. *"When somebody is telling you everything that's wrong, or going to you for help with the things that they need, that's owning up to personal accountability—that's them saying to you 'I understand what's expected of me and I'm always going to let you know if I'm not hitting the mark.'"*

Teacher Katie Bubalo's previous school had been a place where there was a lot of talk, only it was taking place behind a person's back. *"Here, people are comfortable giving you feedback to your face,"* she says. While in some school environments staff flee from conflict, teachers speak up during moments of discomfort to keep it from turning negative, she says. Delving into the hard conversations has made the staff feel more open. *"I feel extremely comfortable crying in front of my boss. I have said 'I'm drowning here, and I need a day,'"* Bubalo says, adding that she asks for help when she needs it. Marcovitz tells her and the rest of the staff *"If you're not asking for help, I get worried."*

Balancing a close relationship with the need to hold staff members accountable can be tricky, but chief operating officer Riley Kennedy says that the leadership at Sci Academy does so by using evidence. Staff members set goals together with their supervisors and talk about them when they meet. *"We just go back to those goals…This is your job, this is whether you are successful or you aren't… What are you doing to make sure these things happen? I understand there are circumstances that might prevent you from reaching these goals immediately, but what's your plan to reach them long term,"* she says. *"It's very transparent."* Kennedy says that it avoids the culture becoming caught up in politics.

Use Data

In a meeting with the Sci Academy charter management staff early into the year, Marcovitz announces to the small group that two teachers at the network's brand new schools are leaving because they weren't working out performance wise. The school leadership spelled out what the teachers would need to do, but all decided it was not a good fit and best if the teachers moved on. Marcovitz asks the CMO staff to support the new school leaders because it might be hard for their staff, which is also new, to absorb the loss.

When someone isn't working out at Sci Academy, Marcovitz schedules a meeting and lays all the data in front of the person. *"I'll say here are the specific data points that are telling me this is not a good match,"* he says. Just like the staff does with the students throughout the building, Marcovitz will describe exactly what an acceptable performance would look like. Then he and the teacher in question usually set some goals to hit over the next couple of weeks to make it look that way. The goals have specific deliverables: Student achievement scores need to be here. Or, no more than two kids can be sent out of your classroom everyday instead of 10. He then tells the person: *"If in the course of your trying to do these things, you find yourself not too motivated to do them and not excited about preserving your work here that you're willing to do these things, then that's fine. Let me know and we can part ways."* But the person is put on notice that if he or she doesn't hit the mark, they'll both agree the situation is not working out. *"What's typically happened is someone makes their own choice, after my making clear to them what it would take to succeed here,"* Marcovitz says. *"As a result of someone making their own choice, it tends to be a much more gracious parting."*

Early into the first year of Sci Academy, Marcovitz had to part ways with his director of curriculum and instruction. He hired someone for the position who had done a residency at a school he respected but *"when I looked up a couple weeks in, there wasn't the level of urgency, and honestly, the skill in putting*

together a curriculum in meeting our kids' needs that there needed to be," he says. After realizing students were entering the school at a much lower level than expected, the majority of the staff wanted to blow up the curriculum to meet students where they were academically.

Marcovitz met with the director of curriculum and instruction to ensure their game plan would be to do that. He left the meetings feeling great, but very little changed. In subsequent meetings, he made it clear that specific goals must be met, such as making sure scope and sequences were sequential and connected to each other.

Kids were coming in at a 4th grade level, and "*so far, all we planned was a 9th grade curriculum*," Marcovitz says. Experts were brought in to help. Teachers started saying they had no idea what to do. He made the call to part ways with the director of curriculum and instruction. While the move, made midyear, was difficult, staff members refer to that decision as signaling that "*it wasn't about the team, but about how the team could help the kids*," he says.

Marcovitz believes it's rarely a mystery when someone is not a good fit. To help stamp out self-conscious fears in other staff members that they may also be a bad fit, Marcovitz has made a promise to be honest with teachers if he ever thinks that's the case. "*I've actually found it really useful to tell teachers over*

the past couple years 'if I'm ever worried you're not working out, I will tell you within 24 hours,'" he says. "*So if you're ever worried you're not working out, and you don't hear from me for 24 hours, odds are you're doing just great*."

When someone is leaving, especially midyear, he says it's important for the leader to have control over the messaging. He typically discusses with the person leaving what he wants to say to the team, and what the teacher will say. Marcovitz then moves forward by talking to each team member individually, making clear that the departure is not happening because the staff no longer cares about the person. "*People tend to go back through their mind to all these moments they had with this person and wonder if they're meaningless or (if) they were contributing to something negative*," he says. He closes out by reminding them that their own performance is pretty good, just in case their mind is flying in different directions.

"*I do think, however, a lot of people walk away making the inference that poor performance isn't tolerated here, and I recognize things about this person's performance, and I now have learned that is not acceptable here—and the leadership team really does mean that*," Marcovitz says. "*I actually typically see a boost in performance when somebody leaves because you put a stake in the ground about what you expect*."

Create an Aspirational and Constructive Environment

Beyond the chain-link fence that surrounds Sci Academy, overgrown lots are littered and devoid of activity. The school itself is a collection of plain trailers, obtained from a Catholic school that no longer needed them after the Hurricane Katrina recovery effort. Wooden boardwalks connect the trailers into a school. Sci Academy's surroundings suggest everyone is still in emergency mode here, like they haven't had time to reconstruct buildings or clean up debris. But within the fence, the staff has developed an effective emergency management system for accelerating the students who arrive at their doors several grade levels behind.

While trailers may not add a permanent feeling to the school, the structures put in place for creating an aspirational and constructive learning environment for students are solid. Having emerged as one of New Orleans' top-performing high schools, Sci Academy students not only beat out district scores, but they exceed state scores. Their sights are set on the top prep schools.

Red lines of tape that run down the walkways provide students direction. They are to stick close to the red lines to preserve order in the halls. After starting the school, founder Ben Marcovitz says he didn't expect to keep the red lines on the boardwalks for so long. He admits to being terrified in the beginning of removing any structure, as it helped the kids feel safe.

Within the school, they could relax, be more silly and fun, more kid like—and most importantly, they could learn. "*We have a lot of structure, but we want to annihilate the fear,*" Marcovitz says.

The strict systems can be an adjustment for students and parents, says parent Tynia Bellanger. "*Maybe they felt they were being treated like little children. As a parent I could see the bigger picture,*" Bellanger says. "*If you think you're going to get away from Sci*

Academy and think there are not going to be rules, you must live in a fantasy land."

Students say they welcome the rules that replace the violence that dominated elsewhere. "*When you first come in the gate, they have a teacher standing there at the end. When you first get off the bus, they have the principal who greets you in the morning. Then when you get to the boardwalk, they have another teacher who greets you in the morning. Then when you get to your class, you have another teacher who greets you,*" says student Alexis Goldsmith, 17. "*That's comfort…If you have problems, there's always a teacher right there.*"

In students' freshman and sophomore years, the structure is a lot more purposeful toward building that feeling of comfort in students. "*We start as freshmen, then remove a rule while explaining why you have it and that it may come back if you don't follow it,*" Marcovitz says. He's thought a lot about the learning opportunities lost during the day because of seemingly routine issues. His graduate school research project focused on middle school and high school hallways. He learned that once transitions are figured in, the average time between learning, stopping in one class, and actual work starting again in the next class is 13 minutes. Thus, the red lines stay right where they are.

Above the red lines, stark black and white signs hang from the thin awning above the boardwalks, broadcasting reminders of where the students are going. "*Check your 20,*" says one, which means "*Where will you be at age 20?*" For every student, the answer should be college.

What Marcovitz set out to create here was a gap-closing high school, with no feeder middle school, that prepares kids for college. "*The building blocks were a vision of taking the best practices*

of no excuses schools in the 9th and 10th grade, specifically around structure and joy. For the final two years, taking the best practices of effective prep schools nationwide and saying 'You are in this arena now and you need to compete here,'" Marcovitz says.

The advisory system is another key element to creating a space where students can learn. *"Whenever you hear a story about a kid who makes it, they have a story about an adult who cared,"* Marcovitz says. For all four years, Sci Academy students have the same advisor, who serves in a role that is part cheerleader, part confidant. Advisories adopt the university alma mater of their advisor, and with it, mascots, bragging rights, and values. In the Wisconsin advisory, you see the advisor ascribing certain qualities to "Badgers" when addressing advisees. *"All Badgers have integrity,"* he says, and the kids incorporate that thinking, too. If a scholar doesn't get along with his or her advisor, which does happen, the approach is that it's like a family member: *"You gotta make it work, you're stuck,"* Marcovitz says. *"Because home situations are bad, often (students) can't express themselves at home, so they find an adult they can be safe with, and send all their animosity there—which is what advisors sometimes experience because the kids feel safe with them."*

Hitting the Ignition

Once Marcovitz had assembled his team, preparations started for the first day of school. *"I had it in mind that the only way you're going to get a 16-year-old kid to buy into walking in lanes between their classes, and for instance, sitting up straight in class all day when they hadn't ever before, was to make them feel successful, which had also rarely happened before,"* he says. So the staff brainstormed, then rehearsed ways to make the kids feel successful. You'd see adults walking through a day of school, having conversations with invisible students in the hallway. *"We wanted as much to be already in our body and our mind as possible so we could be really ready to go that day,"* he says.

Marcovitz also did 90-minute home visits to prepare kids and their parents for success on that first day. *"Day one just became this incredible force in our lives. I'd say to a kid 'Alright before I go, I want to tell you what we're going to learn the first day so you have a leg up on everyone else,'"* he says. Those first day "hints" would include telling kids to raise their hands without bending at the elbow so they look really enthusiastic and sitting up straight so they're able to pay attention for all of class. *"I would make them feel really good about their ability to do it and on the first day they all felt like they were coming in already having aced the game, so they did,"* Marcovitz says.

The staff tried to keep that positive feedback cycle going for the students. During orientation, teachers would write down one positive thing about each advisee, then trade that information with another adviser, who would approach the student and say *"Oh, you're Georgia! I hear you're really good at raising your hand and asking good questions. That's what we were saying about you,"* Marcovitz recalls. The idea being that *"for the first time ever, presumably, this kid has the notion that adults are talking about me in this really positive way,"* he says. *"The idea of an identity shift, here's how I can be in my new school. I can be someone who's really successful."*

For parents, the unknown school raised doubts when it first opened. Post-Katrina, when her family could finally return home, Tynia Bellanger remembers her son coming home and declaring one day that he was going to Sci Academy. As he listed off what he had learned about Sci Academy, *"The first thing I said was 'that sounds to good to be true, you probably have to pay to go,'"* Bellanger recalls. *"Being a new school, I can honestly say I didn't know what was going to be happening."* But she became less dubious when she heard more from the school leaders, starting with the language they used in reference to the kids. *"'Scholars'—the very name you call a child can be the very way they turn out to be,"* she says.

Why Are You Here?

On a recent morning, one grim-faced boy lurks in front of the buses, a teacher standing nearby. He is missing a belt. He paces as he seems to be trying to make up his mind about what to do. If he doesn't have the correct uniform, he will have to spend all day with his advisor. Marcovitz says the uniform check *"reminds kids we are in charge."*

As the kids walk down the boardwalk, following the red tape lines down the middle, another teacher stands at the end of the walk to greet them. Each student picks up an apple, carton of milk and a muffin from a box, before walking to another teacher who is holding open the door. *"Why are you here?"* the teacher asks. *"To learn,"* the student says. *"What will it take?"* the teacher asks. Students will respond with the six core values—Achievement, Respect, Responsibility, Teamwork, Perseverance and Enthusiasm. Each student will go through this conversation with the teacher before he or she can enter the building. Some will speed through it, some mumble, some say with a smile, but everyone says it. Students then enter the building, a larger trailer that holds several classrooms, ready to start their advisory.

Inside the trailer, students in the freshman hall are lined up against the wall, teachers silently gesturing them into their place in line. *"Snap if you like no detention today,"* the teacher says, to which many students snap their fingers in rhythm. Students start with chants *"Change my future! Change the world!"* The teacher reminds them of a recent visit to LSU, as other freshman teachers quietly correct students who are slouching or not standing in line, while singling out those students who are doing well. A section of the line, about eight students long, has to redo their entrance into the classroom because they were out of line and not doing it correctly. They do so twice until they get it right, walking around the hallway, and re-entering the class. The student without a belt is hovering near a doorway, having decided to stay with his advisor all day in freshman hall.

Senior Simone Smith, 18, was slipping in the school

she attended for 9th and 10th grade, skipping class and not doing her work. *"Either you came or you didn't. If you didn't, nobody cared. If you came, nobody cared,"* she says. She decided that she wanted to repeat the 10th grade because she felt she hadn't learned much. When she and her mother visited Sci Academy, the staff told Simone she could start fresh and be ready for college, but Simone was dubious. *"I was just thinking to myself 'you can't help me. I'm way too far behind for all that. I don't think I can come up. High school was already hard for me. I came here I thought, this is a good school, this is not going to work out,'"* Simone says. She admits to being frustrated by the first few weeks. Other students and teachers reached out to help her. *"Nobody was sitting there forcing me. It was just 'Are you taking your time? Do you feel lost? Do you need help?' Whenever I needed that help, they gave it to me,"* she says. She adjusted to the structure and is now applying to Princeton, Bard, Oberlin, and Columbia.

Luther Hughes, 16, a junior, also struggled to adjust after spending class time at his old school with music in his ear or on his phone. *"Honestly, I slept almost all my 8th grade year, but I still managed to pass,"* he says. *"When I came here, it was silent in the halls. We walk in lines. Raise your hand straight up. No head down. I was like 'I can't function like this.'"* Over time, it became automatic for him to behave in that same way.

Alexis Goldsmith, 17, pushed back against helpful teachers. *"At first I was like why do they care so much? Why are they always pushing up on you? Why they always breathing down on your back?"* she remembers. *"In the long run, you see that it's good for you. They're only here to help you."*

The school wide college readiness focus helps push even those students who may have never thought about college before, the students say.

"Teenagers, even though they don't mean to, and some people try to avoid this, they do tend to get involved with their social surroundings. Whatever is going on around them, they want to be part of that.

If everybody at your school is saying, 'I'm about to do my work, and you need help with your homework? We're going to this college, we're applying here.' It makes you feel like you don't belong there (if you're not doing that too)," she says. *"When you come to Sci Academy you can feel that part of the community, that everybody is just trying to make something better of themselves."*

Visit the Competition

The shift from a high structure environment to a more typical prep school or college itself requires exposure to those environments so that kids can see what's going to be expected of them, Marcovitz says.

The staff plans many college visits, as well as visits to traditional prep schools. Afterward, the teachers push students to reflect on what they saw. *"How are kids behaving in this classroom? What is the teacher asking them to do, and what is the teacher assuming they can do on their own? If you were to be in this class right now, what would you immediately have to change about the way you approach your work? If you were to go to this college, what sorts of things would you have to do between now and then?"* Marcovitz says. *"For a lot of them, it's that individual reflection on where they are now and where they need to be that helps really guide their focus and makes them more motivated."*

Testing

For diagnostic testing, Sci Academy uses the GMADE for math; for reading, the staff uses the Ray silent reading test, the GSRT. Both are administered at the beginning of the year and a couple times throughout. Teachers administer benchmark assessments every six weeks. Staff developed their own internal assessments using state resources, ACT prep, and other materials, founder Ben Marcovitz says. He realized the staff needed additional points of data, so they added biweekly assessments. Additionally, every class ends with exit tickets. When the administration has tried to remove some of the testing, teachers ask for it back, so they have data at the interim, biweekly, and daily level.

Teachers are provided a scope and sequence and the five or six assessments they need to administer throughout the year. Marcovitz agrees with the school of thought that schools need to set up teachers to teach the right things. "Let's not pretend that you as a brand new teacher here are going to know what it takes right off the bat to get these kids prepared for college,'" he says. As teachers get acclimated, they do generate a lot of those assessments. "It's never 'make one out of thin air,' a lot of it is reordering it, or saying 'this is not rigorous enough'...but we always start with that."

Case Study: Sci Academy

New Orleans, LA ❚ Grades 9-12 ❚ 94% African-American ❚ 90.5% Free and reduced lunch ❚ Founded 2008

Sci Academy is located on the far east side of New Orleans, and serves 380 students. The school pulls many students from the Lower Ninth Ward, which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina and still has not rebounded completely. The school is divided by two groupings of trailers—one holds 9th and 10th grades, the other 11th and 12th.

Founder Ben Marcovitz and his team say schools need to be realistic about where kids are academically. Before starting the school, they purchased curricula they believed were age appropriate, but once faced with their students' actual performance levels, had to throw it all out. "*The picture of it is us taking all the books we'd ordered, all the novels, all the textbooks, all the computer programs and literally stuffing them back in the boxes, and putting them on shelves in a closet,*" Marcovitz says. "*We've since been able to unearth it, which is great. But that was a very important day in our history, and if you ask people who have been with us from the beginning what*

Photos courtesy of Sci Academy

were the biggest moments that first year, that one will always be said—as the day we decided the kids needed more than we were giving them, the day we really stared in the face the reality that they were that behind, and we had to do something about it."

Once the staff understood just how low the reading and math levels were, they built new plans using programs that had been designed for elementary and middle schools. They brought in guided reading, and "*a lot of hands-on math manipulatives for algebra that would have gone by the wayside typically in 6th grade at the latest,*" Marcovitz says. "*We were just doing a lot of things that had worked for elementary and middle school kids to get the kids up to level.*"

Still, Sci Academy takes that lesson to heart. "*We'll still make a change like, 'Oh, wow, these kids don't need a class where they do English. They need a class where they're going to do phonics.*" he says. The hope is that by 11th grade, students are taking that grade-level curriculum.
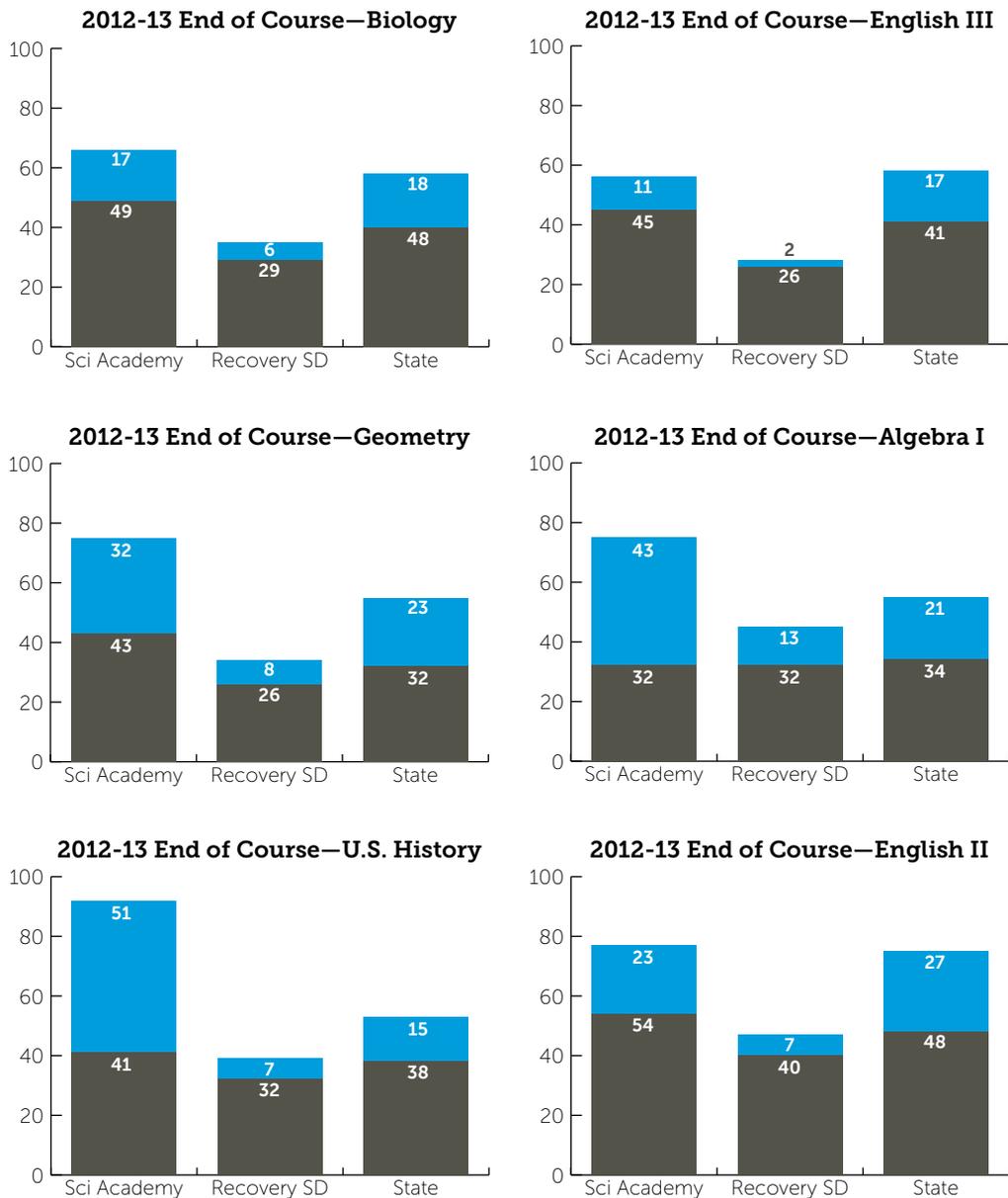

Prior to founding Sci Academy, Marcovitz was a teacher and assistant director at New Orleans Charter Science and Math High School, known as SciHigh. He also taught for Boston Public Schools. He has a bachelor's degree from Yale University and a master's from Harvard University.

Sci Academy End of Course Results

In Louisiana, high school students take End of Course tests in six subjects: Algebra I, Geometry, English II and III, Biology and U.S. History.

■ % Students Scored "Excellent"

■ % Students Scored "Good"

2012-13 End of Course—Biology

	Good	Excellent
Sci Academy	49	17
Recovery SD	29	6
State	48	18

2012-13 End of Course—English III

	Good	Excellent
Sci Academy	45	11
Recovery SD	26	2
State	41	17

2012-13 End of Course—Geometry

	Good	Excellent
Sci Academy	43	32
Recovery SD	26	8
State	32	23

2012-13 End of Course—Algebra I

	Good	Excellent
Sci Academy	32	43
Recovery SD	32	13
State	34	21

2012-13 End of Course—U.S. History

	Good	Excellent
Sci Academy	41	51
Recovery SD	32	7
State	38	15

2012-13 End of Course—English II

	Good	Excellent
Sci Academy	54	23
Recovery SD	40	7
State	48	27

Source: Louisiana Dept. of Education