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## Case Study: Icahn 2 Charter School

New Orleans, LA | Grades 4-8 | 100% African-American | 95% Free and reduced lunch | Founded in 2007

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### Class Rules

Teachers at Icahn invest their students in the school rules as well as the consequences by having students write them. Each year, the classes sit together and develop their own list of class rules, while also incorporating the school-wide rules, such as mandatory uniforms. In 3rd grade, teacher Nancy Santiago's room, students pledge to respect the property of others and complete all missed work. The consequences they devise are no joke either: A call to parents, meeting with parents, a silent lunch ("That's a biggie, they work," she says.) "*When caught doing something wrong, they'll say, 'I think you should call my mom...Or, I'm going to take a book downstairs and do reading at lunch time,'*" Santiago says.

Third-graders also critique each other's projects, helping push their peers to do a little better. One of Santiago's students shows off a project she recently completed on the Iroquois, complete with diorama and a lengthy written report, explaining that the students don't just read their papers to the rest of the class. "*We discuss,*" she clarifies. Other students give feedback with "Stars" (saying what they liked about the report) and "Wishes" (laying out what they wished the student would have included in the report.)

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### Expect More, Get More

“ Every day I notice with my kids when I do writing prompts with them, if they think they can get away with writing a three-sentence paragraph and nobody's going to demand more from them, that's what they're going to do.

But if you expect more from the kids, and they know they can't get away with anything less than their strongest vocabulary, sentence structure, capitalization, punctuation—you have to be on top of it all the time...I go around and if they're not writing up to par, 'Do it again.'

It's that constant push. They might not like you for it, but they'll benefit from it in the long run. ”

—Alison Fliegel, 4th grade teacher

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### Core Knowledge

Every afternoon in Nancy Santiago's 3rd-grade classroom, she leads her students through a block of Core Knowledge that incorporates social studies lessons with art and music. Sometimes the lessons involve science topics. For example, students are studying the planets and the 13 colonies, and for their project, will pretend to colonize a planet in the same fashion as the colonies. In the hallway, dioramas with students' projects line the hallway. Some are on different cultures, some on different continents, with accompanying reports the students have written. The projects are all part of the Core Knowledge curriculum that guides Icahn teachers to meet the Common Core standards, and illustrates how the implementation of standards can make use of different curriculums.

Icahn 2's model revolves around the Core Knowledge curriculum, which is rooted in the idea that students need a rich base of background knowledge. Without such knowledge, it's harder to read with comprehension, solve problems, and think critically; so the curriculum is infused with social studies, science, art and music to give students that background. The original Icahn charter school embraced Core Knowledge, and the superintendent of Icahn schools is considered an expert in the curriculum. Icahn teachers start their year with a two-week summer institute where the staff comes together as a whole, and also with other Icahn charter schools, to immerse themselves in the materials provided by the Core Knowledge sequence.

*"One of the things that makes it so successful is that it's very content-area driven," says Icahn 2 Charter School principal Brenda Carrasquillo. "Yes, it has a lot of social studies aspects to it, but it also meets the New York state Common Core curriculum mandates."*

She believes Core Knowledge gives students that little edge they're going to need to become strong thinkers, readers, and writers. Her staff was given the syllabus and the core curriculum from the original Icahn school, but *"the delivery was up to us in how we wanted to do this,"* Carrasquillo says. *"I had been exposed to environments where we were told at 9:01 you need to do this, at 9:07 you have to do this, at 9:14 this is where you should be and I never really subscribed to this kind of mentality."*

Fill the Strategy Toolbox: Shared Inquiry Teacher Krystal Colon has the second-graders' desks arranged in a circle. They are finishing up answering a few key questions about the story they read. In front of her, Colon has a chart where she keeps track of who says what during the class discussion so she can

seek input from those who haven't answered, or refer back to what another student says to push the conversation forward. Repeating back what the student says *"gives validity to the student because you know the teacher heard it,"* Carrasquillo says.

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***"It is really hard to do, that's why you get push back..."***

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Projected on a screen in front of them, Colon has outlined the expectations for the discussion: Listen to other participants and respond to them directly. Support your opinion with evidence, and so on. Here, the teacher is supposed to be invisible, letting the kids follow the rules of behavior to have a civilized discussion about the story and build on their classmates' statements. Carrasquillo pushes her teachers to become black belts in Junior Great Books and the shared inquiry approach. The teacher takes on a quieter role as he/she gently facilitates a conversation among the students, encouraging each to share their own opinions with the group. *"It's a strategy and an approach, not a script from the book,"* she says. *"For the teacher, it's basically the*

*art of questioning. It helps teachers become better listeners.*" Carrasquillo says that teachers often push back when introduced to this method. *"It is really hard to do, that's why you get push back. I keep going in and I sit by them,"* she says. *"You have to keep pushing them. When a teacher gets that one feeling of success; they want to do it again."* Colon reads the introductory question aloud, and students jump in to read their statements off their paper. As the first student wraps up, small voices pipe up with the words *"I agree"* or *"I disagree."* The teacher doesn't select the speakers, the children wait for an opening to address the rest of their peers. As they start repeating the same point, Colon jumps in with a *"why?"* The students go round and round without getting to the why, until one quieter boy finally speaks up and provides the answer. There is excitement in the room at the shift the conversation has taken, at this new idea introduced. The session doesn't end until the teacher has marked off everyone on her chart.

In the staff's August professional development held before school started, teachers had one full week with a Junior Great Books trainer. Carrasquillo says she sat in on the sessions with the trainer so she could be sure to speak the same language to the teachers when she offered them feedback or pep talks in their classrooms later. Teacher Eleni Petropoulos says that a Great Books trainer

videotaped her doing lessons and provided feedback, and that she gets continued feedback from Carrasquillo as well. Teachers do two shared inquiry stories a month, providing students vocabulary words that are 1-2 years above level, reading the story aloud, doing a shared read, an independent read, and then the final discussion to sync it all together.

Teacher Nancy Santiago says the shared inquiry approach really develops critical thinking, while also involving every child. *"We kind of learn also to work with each other in a social setting where we don't have to raise our hands to be acknowledged,"* she says. The story is read twice, and questions are raised by the teacher. *"They have to answer without having given it much thought, and then after the shared inquiry, they answer it again and they discuss why they change the answer, and 99.9% of the time they have changed their answer because now they're listening to the perspectives of other children,"* she says. *"It really increases their ability to be critical and to comprehend what they read."*

As a teacher, the strength comes in being quiet and asking the right questions, *"because you don't want to give the answer in the question,"* Santiago says. *"Like a good cross examination, you want to drive them there. It takes a little bit of practice, but you can get there."*

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### Targeted Assistance

When Eleni Petropoulos' 16 students don't understand a lesson, she starts trying to decipher what's holding them back. The other grade-level teacher will weigh in, but she can also go to the specially dedicated Targeted Assistance teacher to ask for help. That teacher can be pushed into the classroom, or work one-on-one with a student, depending on what's needed.

Targeted Assistance is a key part of the Icahn school model. Classes are already kept small—18 students or less. But the Targeted Assistance teacher offers another level of intervention. Icahn 2 has two grade-level teachers for each year, then three Targeted Assistance teachers that are shared among the grade levels. Teachers can push in or out. Targeted Assistance teacher Regina Alleyne, who works with the 1st and 2nd grade, says she moves from one class to the next, taking small groups of students for 45-minute periods. In addition to that help, most teachers hold after-school tutoring. A Saturday Academy runs from 9 a.m. to noon and is taught by staff teachers, to catch up students and offer help in test-taking skills.

Teacher Nancy Santiago has seen a child who can barely read—forget about reading, he or she can barely sound out words—make substantial gains after a couple of months in Targeted Assistance. The Targeted Assistance teachers *"will take the task we are doing and break it down to its minimal level and then bring it up, and you see the results,"* Santiago says. "In September, the first test that child took, he barely got 3 right out of the 29 or whatever, and then you see the improvement, improvement, improvement." The one-to-one ratio definitely helps the children who need something explained a few different ways. *"We try doing it when we're working with groups," she says. "But there's nothing like that one-to-one."* Santiago can also make specific requests to the Targeted Assistance teacher to say,

*'instead of taking the three students today, could she take one and really focus in on a particular skill?'* Classroom teachers alert the Targeted Assistance teachers to what is being covered in class, so they can also go over that lesson with the child. Generally, no more than three students are receiving Targeted Assistance help in Santiago's classroom at any one time. "It all depends, for reading it may be the same three kids in Targeted Assistance for the bulk of the time. In math, it may change," she says.

With 17 kids in her class, teacher Alison Fliegel says it's already easier for her to check for understanding among her students as they go through lessons, but if she needs the help, she can ask the Targeted Assistance teacher to help her with a student struggling with one particular skill. *"A lot of the times if I do have (Targeted Assistance), it's a push in, where somebody comes in and works with two or three kids who are really struggling with a skill, and then I can proceed with the rest of the class, and then we'll all come together as a class."*

After school is another opportunity that most every teacher has seized. Santiago has 3rd and 4th-graders in her program. All students have a different packet of materials ready to go for them after school, all targeted to their different abilities and weaknesses. "After school is like another form of Targeted Assistance," says Santiago who has four kids in her after-school program for two hours, three days a week. For the Saturday Academy, there are nine students. *"It's a different level, mostly working with test taking strategies," she says. "It's very intense, only reading and math."*

Teacher Lori Pascuzzi also offers morning tutoring four days a week for an hour. *"We do a lot of attacking the small things they're having trouble with—math skills, we do a lot of reading comprehension," she says. "At times, it's just one*

other student and myself or a couple other students and myself." She also does after-school tutoring three days a week with her students from the previous year. "We do part of it homework; the other part of it is extra support with reading and math," she says.

For Fliegel's Saturday Academy group, it's all test prep material—90 minutes of math, 90 minutes of English/Language Arts. "For the most part, teachers

teach their own students, so we already know what the children are struggling with," she says. Saturday Academy is more laid back. The children arrive in their everyday clothes and it's more of a relaxed environment, with students working over books on the rug, or in smaller groupings. "I find a lot of the children who aren't speaking up as much during the regular school day are so much more productive on Saturdays," she says.

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### School Leader

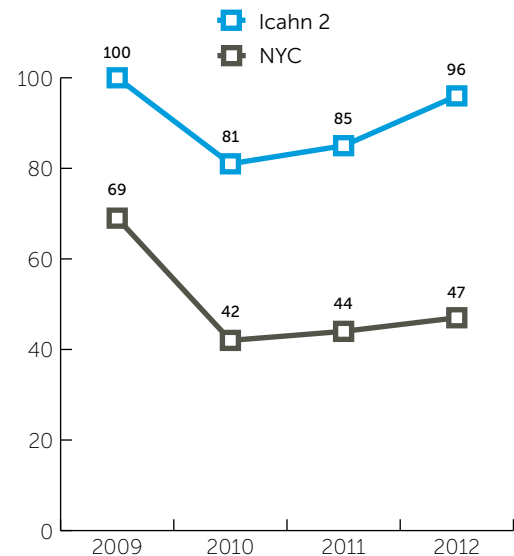
Brenda Carrasquillo, founding principal

Brenda Carrasquillo, a veteran principal who previously led traditional district public schools in New York City, was tasked with replicating the success of the original Icahn charter school. The school's model centers on the Core Knowledge curriculum, which is rooted in the idea that students need a rich base of background knowledge. Without such knowledge, the thinking goes, it's harder to read with comprehension, solve problems and think critically. The curriculum is infused with social studies, science, art, and music to give students that background. Icahn schools also strive for small class sizes, 18 students or less, based on the Tennessee Class Size study.

A Targeted Assistance program focuses teachers on providing small group instruction and individualized learning plans for struggling students. In addition, teachers lead intensive before and after-school tutoring sessions. Students also can attend Saturday Academy, a half-day program dedicated to improving students test-taking skills and reinforcing what they are learning in class.

Carrasquillo makes daily observations of her teachers while two staff developer positions allow for coaches to work intensely one-on-one with teachers.

### % Students Proficient or above on NY State exams—ELA



### % Students Proficient or above on NY State exams—Math

