

## “Reform” Principals Check In BY MELISSA BAILEY | MAR 15, 2011 11:08 AM

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More kids are showing up to school at New Haven’s new charter experiment, though not all the adults are sticking around.

That was one result gleaned Monday as principals of four pilot schools at the center of New Haven’s school reform drive offered updates for their bosses.

Principals at Domus Academy, Edgewood Magnet School, John C. Daniels School and Barnard Environmental Studies Magnet School issued five-minute progress reports at Monday’s school board meeting at 54 Meadow St.

The schools are among the [first batch of seven schools](#) that were graded last March as part of a nascent effort to close the city’s achievement gap and tackle its 27 percent dropout rate. Based largely on test scores, the seven schools were placed into three tiers. They were given more autonomy, allowed to extend staff time or were totally revamped at the start of this school year. The rest of the city’s 47 schools will follow suit in the next five years, with [the next batch of 11](#) starting in the fall.

The pilot schools are [now facing their first big test](#) in the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMTs), statewide standardized exams that students started taking this month.

Before those high-stakes results come back, the principals Monday gave a more general overview of some programmatic changes they’re making this year at their pilot school. Each got special leeway to test out new rules and ideas to spark dramatic improvement.



Craig Baker (pictured), the chief education officer at Domus, shared some early signs of progress as well as some challenges at the first-of-its-kind school.

Domus Academy is the city’s first charter experiment in the school reform drive. It was formed from the ashes of Urban Youth, a middle school that earned a failing grade and was dubbed a Tier III turnaround school. The district hired a private not-for-profit outfit called Domus, which runs two charter schools in Stamford, to take over management of the school with a new crew of unionized public school teachers who agreed to work extra hours.

The revamped school on Leeder Hill Road in Hamden serves about 45 kids in grades six to eight who failed in traditional school settings because of behavioral or social problems.

In its debut year, Domus Academy is [relying heavily on energetic, rookie teachers](#) to staff its high-need classrooms, where two-thirds of students fall into the special education category. The new school retained about 15-20 of the same students from Urban Youth. The rest were referred to Domus by the city school district. The school is

based on a model Domus developed over 11 years at Trailblazer Academy, a Stamford middle school serving a similar population.

Baker announced a dramatic increase in attendance this year, as staff sought to instill a new culture at the school, with uniforms, nine-hour school days and extra social supports.

Average daily attendance year-to-date is 83 percent, compared to 50 percent last year, according to Baker.

Meanwhile, two classroom teachers, or 22 percent of the nine-person teaching staff, quit teaching mid-year. One administrator left the school as well.

Baker expanded on these developments in an interview after his presentation. He attributed the growth in attendance to two factors: First, the school is “building investment in the purpose of schooling.” Second, if a student doesn’t show up to school, “we will go get them.” When students miss the bus, the school dispatches a van to pick them up at home, he said.

For example, the school had one student who “never went to school” last year at Urban Youth, said Mike McGuire, Domus Academy’s principal. She was combative and got arrested last year, he said. This year, she came back to a school with a new set of rules, including a much longer school day. At first, she showed the same behavior, acting out and skipping school. But staff stayed on her case, picking her up at home, driving her to school, and dropping her off at the end of the day, according to McGuire.

“That doesn’t mean she’s the most pleasant person in the morning” after being dragged to school, McGuire said, but she has been attending class and learning. He said she has improved nearly two grade levels in literacy and math. She is now showing up four and a half days per week, and getting Bs and Cs in class, he said.

Overall, students came to Domus Academy in the fall lagging four grade levels behind in reading and three levels behind in math, according to Baker. He said in five months, the students have grown 1.1 grade levels in reading and 1.2 in math. Those stats are based on the [STAR Enterprise tests](#), Baker said.

## ***The Turnover***

Students made the progress despite several changes in staff at the small school, which works hard to retain a strong sense of school culture, routine and structure for its kids.

Arnold Amore, a social studies teacher, resigned from the school on Nov. 22, just three months into the school year. Amore, a former lawyer, was a first-year teacher from Teach For America (TFA).

At the start of the school year, six of the nine classroom teachers at Domus were in their first year in the profession, including [five from TFA](#). A seventh had one year’s teaching experience. The eighth and ninth were veterans.

One of the two veteran teachers, Rachel Sexton, a literacy instructor, resigned from the school on Dec. 31.

Baker said the two teachers left because the work is “very difficult.”

“The kids are challenging,” Baker said. “The kids are not used to success.”

Amore couldn’t be reached for comment. Sexton offered a very different version; see it in the comments section below.

Scott Emmerson-Pace, a longtime Domus employee who took on an administrative role at Domus Academy, also left the school mid-year. Domus Academy administrators are paid through a [\\$807,200 annual contract](#) Domus has with the district to run the school; their titles and salaries are not listed in the district’s new budget.

Emmerson-Pace took a job with the [Child Guidance Center](#) of Stamford.

Domus found a replacement for him, and found another first-year teacher to take Amore's place as the school's social studies teacher. The school has interviewed about a dozen candidates for Sexton's literacy instruction job but has not yet found a match, Baker said.

McGuire said the change in staff brought "certain challenges" to the school's inaugural year, but "the kids haven't suffered."

Other staff, including [Richard Cheng](#), stepped in to fill the gaps. A 2008 college grad, Cheng became Domus Academy's director of curriculum after completing two years of teaching through TFA.

Click on the play arrow at the top of this story to watch Cheng step in to help out a rookie teacher struggling with a class at the beginning of the school year.

Domus staff said the school has had eight out-of-school suspensions this year. It has seen a significant drop in the number of kids who have to be pulled out of the classroom to cool down in the "problem-solving" room.

Baker said despite signs of progress, the school needs to "improve school culture by keeping expectations high and helping students consistently meet those behavioral and academic expectations on a daily basis."

"We're not satisfied," he said. "We're further ahead than we thought we could be" this year, but "we're not going to rest" until kids meet those expectations.

## ***Art, Lunch & Study Skills***

Over at the Barnard magnet school, students are reporting stronger bonds with adults, according to Principal Mike Crocco. On a student survey last year, 17 percent of students at the school said they did not have an adult in the school whom they trust.

After identifying that weakness, Crocco made a push this year to get teachers to establish better relationships with kids. One tactic was to have teachers eat lunch with their students. (Click on the play arrow to watch a art teacher Reginald Augustine in action in the cafeteria.)

That change has made a difference, according to Crocco: On a recent internal survey, 95 percent of students were able to name an adult in the building whom they trust, he said.

Barnard was dubbed a Tier III improvement school, meaning it scored in the bottom rung of student performance, but was not totally overhauled. The school kept its principal and most of its staff. It made more modest changes than the two turnaround schools: For example, staff now have a longer workday, but students don't.

Barnard has 35 classroom teachers serving 580 students in grades pre-K to 8. Because of a new teacher evaluation system, those teachers are now getting a lot more support and oversight, Crocco reported. Monthly classroom visits by school leadership staff has tripled from 30 to 90 visits per month, he said.



*Mike Crocco, Gina Wells and Bonnie Pachesa  
On an internal survey, 95 percent of teachers said they find valuable [a new setup where they collaborate with teachers](#) in other grade levels in so-called "vertical teams," said Crocco (at left in photo).*

At John C. Daniels, a bilingual school in the Hill, 100 kids attended a new summer school, which got high marks from parents, reported Principal Gina Wells. After Daniels was dubbed a middle-ground Tier II school, [Wells added learning time](#) for some students and made some curricular

changes . She said the school is providing more small-group instruction in math and reading with new co-teachers and math interventionists. The school also added a mandatory after-school study skills program for seventh and eighth graders to prepare them for high school. All of the eighth graders applied to magnet schools, she reported. Now, she said, the school is counseling those whose names weren't [drawn in the magnet lottery](#).

Over at Edgewood, [a nearly 100-year-old school in Westville](#), Principal Bonnie Pachesa reported some benefits of having greater autonomy this year, after her top-performing school was placed in Tier I. When her school won that distinction, Pachesa said she'd use make use of her new freedom to do less teaching to a test.

Pachesa [used the opportunity](#) to expand an arts enrichment program for grades K to 2. The Visual Literacy program, run in conjunction with Yale's Center For British Art Center, uses art get kids writing and reading. The program aims to activate kids' senses, teach them to think critically, and make learning more fun. Pachesa said she doesn't have a way to measure the program's effectiveness yet; Yale is working with the school to develop a measurement tool.

## ***Sounds Good, Now Hit The Targets***

After hearing from the principals, schools Superintendent Reggie Mayo said he hopes the changes will be reflected in better scores on the reform effort's most important measurement—the Connecticut Mastery Test. The state will release those scores this summer.

"I don't think you'll see the outcomes until CMTs come out," he said.

Board member Alex Johnston, who's also the CEO of the education watchdog group ConnCAN, echoed that emphasis. He asked the principals if they think they're on track with the objectives the board has laid out.

The district aims to close the achievement gap between New Haven kids and their statewide peers on standardized tests by 2015. That's a daunting task: New Haven now lags between 25 and 35 points behind the state average on the CMTs, depending on the grade level and subject. To close the gap, the district has set goals for each school, each grade level and each subject.

"If you all don't hit those targets, then the district doesn't hit the targets," and students are left behind, Johnston warned.

"Your success is central to the school district," added Mayor John DeStefano, who appoints the school board and has made school reform the main emphasis of his final years as mayor.

He said he wanted to "thank and acknowledge" the principals for their hard work—"and for the success you're going to deliver to the district."

"We know where you live," he added in a tongue-in-cheek, ominous tone, eliciting laughter from the four principals standing before him.