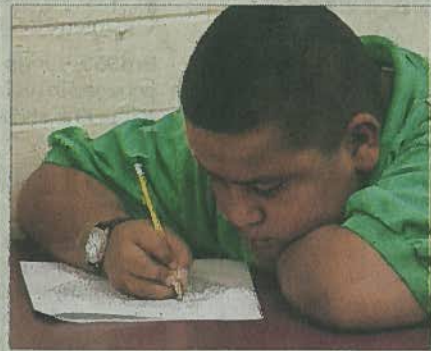
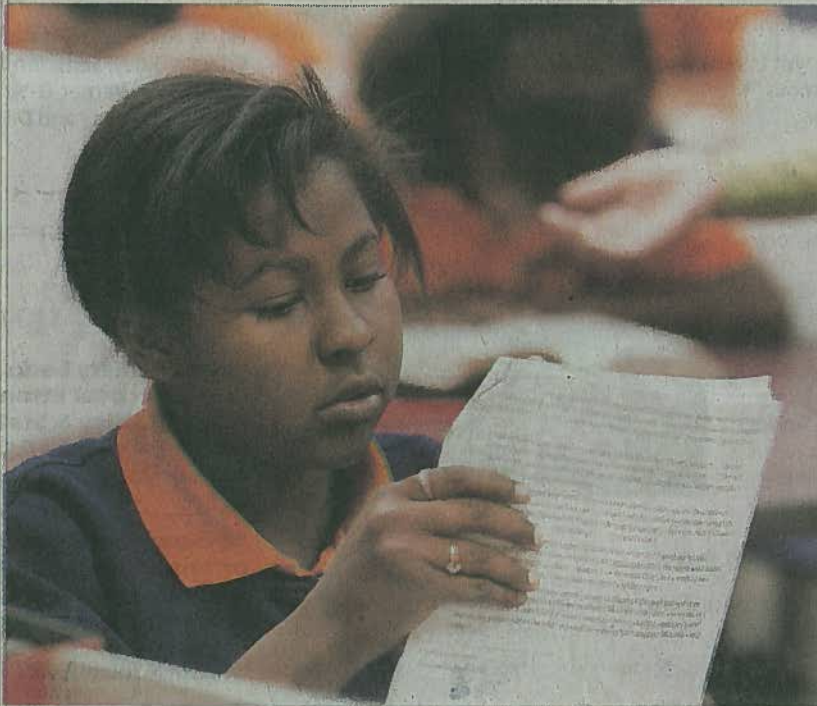


K-12: YOUR MONEY'S WORTH

A continuing series on how, and how effectively, Arizona spends its money on K-12 education



"Every kid deserves a great school. These kids need this school."

—RACHEL BENNETT YANOF, executive director at Phoenix Collegiate Academy

TOUGH SCHOOL, TOP RESULTS

What Phoenix Collegiate Academy may lack in facilities and funding, it makes up for in determined teachers and high-testing students

By Karina Bland
The Arizona Republic

Rachel Bennett Yanof accepts no excuses.

At Phoenix Collegiate Academy, where she is executive director, students must turn in all their homework, complete all their assignments, tuck in their uniform shirts and sit up straight, or risk a demerit. An adolescent eye roll is an automatic 40-minute detention.

Even a student who showed up out of uniform recently because her family had been evicted the night before, with no time to even grab extra clothes, received a hug, a new uniform — *and* a demerit. Rules are rules.

Yanof is this tough because she believes students in low-income parts of Phoenix can be held to the same academic standards as kids in more

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Clockwise from top left: Elessia Williams, George Gonzales and Melissa Arriaga are students at Phoenix Collegiate Academy, a charter school that opened in south Phoenix in 2009.

PHOTOS BY ROB SCHUMACHER/THE REPUBLIC

School aims to prepare students for college

ACADEMY

Continued from A1

affluent areas, like Scottsdale — and fare just as well. They deserve the same opportunities, no matter that they are poor, or Hispanic, or African-American, from a broken home or a whole one, or no home at all.

With the right approach, and a lot of work, they will go to college. She's sure of it.

Yanof opened the charter school two years ago in south Phoenix.

That first year, the school received a Performing Plus rating from the state, and Yanof is hoping for Highly Performing, the next rating up and the second-highest, when new labels are announced this week.

Scores on Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards, or AIMS, released earlier this month show Yanof's students consistently doing better than other children from the same neighborhood and with similar backgrounds. Her students are low-income (95 percent) and minority (95 percent), and 17 percent have special needs, like autism and learning disabilities. Some students started a year or two behind in reading and math.

With results like these, educators from across the country are watching Yanof with interest. If it works in south Phoenix, could it work elsewhere?

Andrew Lefevre, spokesman for the state Department of Education, says schools like Phoenix Collegiate Academy can serve as models for others, though as a charter school, it has some advantages.

Phoenix Collegiate Academy is not part of a district, so Yanof has total control when it comes to hiring — and firing — staff. She controls her own budget and curriculum.

Yanof also has the complete backing of the parents who choose to bring their children to her school. They sign a contract promising to make time for homework, sign the homework when it is finished, and limit distractions like TV, among other supportive measures.

Traditional public schools can't mandate that kind of parental involvement.

But there are also disadvantages to being a charter school. Yanof must teach the same state standards, and her students must take AIMS, yet she gets less money from the state than traditional public schools. She doesn't have the same buying power for books or supplies as district schools, nor the same sources. So Yanof applies for grants and presses for donations to make up the difference.

And the school's scores continue to rise.

At Phoenix Collegiate Academy, children go to school from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., arrive on time every day, stand up when a teacher enters the room, spend double the usual time in math and language arts, debate the merit of nuclear arms, and read two literary novels at once, one for class and one for pleasure.

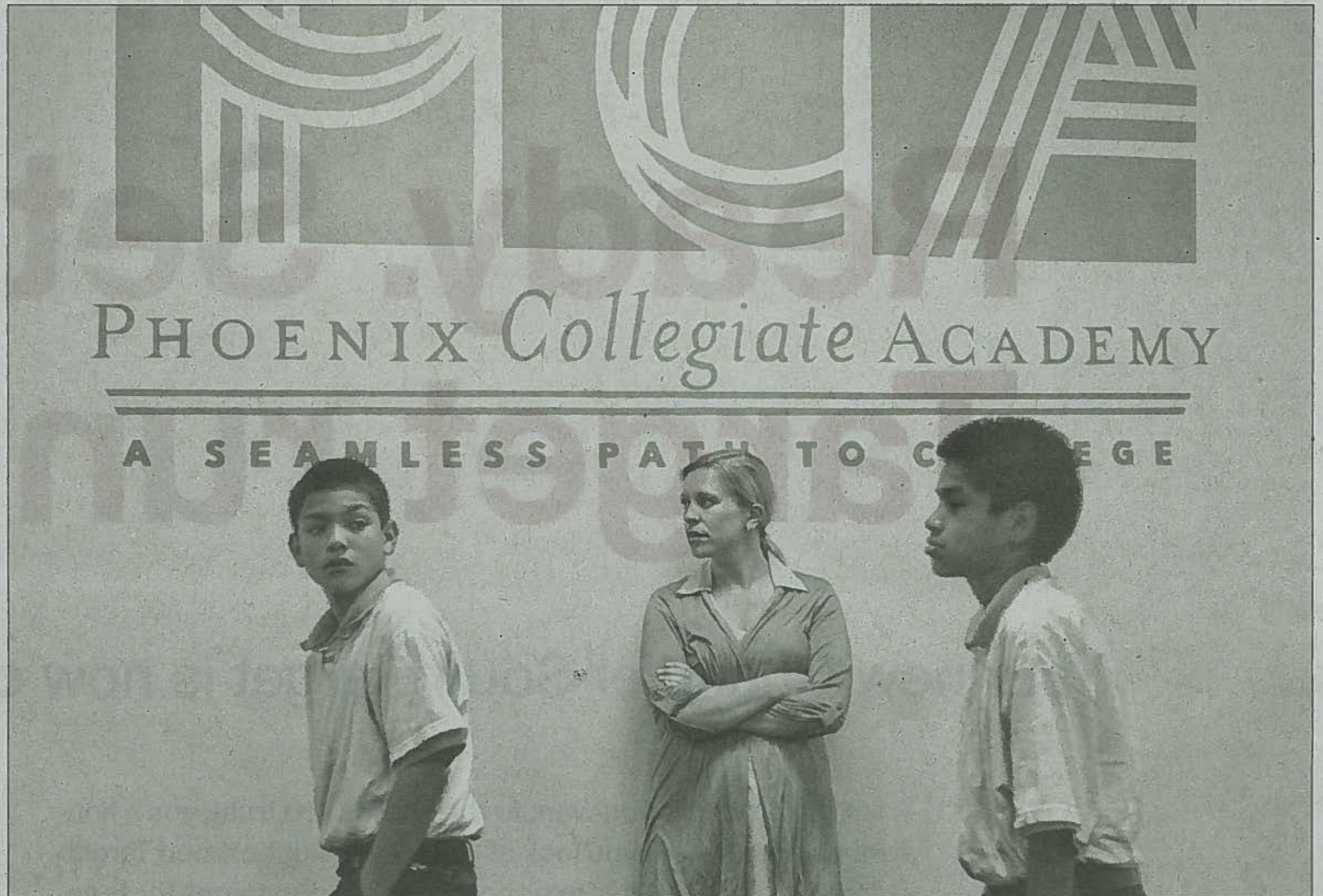
It is an intense curriculum, but Yanof believes her students are capable. "To say otherwise is to say, 'I don't believe in that child.'"

At 29, Yanof is young for an administrator, idealistic and part of an education-reform movement that believes all children can learn at high levels and that demographics do not determine destiny.

It's not easy. It takes hard work, high expectations, strong basic skills, excellent teaching, committed parents, and no excuses — not for Yanof's students and not for herself.

Hopes and hurdles

After graduating from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., in 2003 with a bachelor's degree in economics, Yanof joined Teach for America, a national



Rachel Bennett Yanof (center) is executive director of Phoenix Collegiate Academy, a charter school. She believes her students are more than capable of handling a tough curriculum: "To say otherwise is to say, 'I don't believe in that child.'" PHOTOS BY ROB SCHUMACHER/THE REPUBLIC

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"We aren't just students who sit around and can't say anything. They respect what is in our minds."

ELESSIA WILLIAMS (ABOVE)

times more, to teach in low-income public schools. Yanof says she joined in hopes of giving kids the same opportunities she had.

She taught eighth-grade social studies in south Phoenix for four years while earning a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Arizona State University.

"I fell in love with the kids in the community," says Yanof, who grew up in Alaska. And she happened to fall in love too with an engineer named Joe Yanof. (They got married a year ago and are expecting their first baby in October.)

But Yanof was dismayed by what she saw at the school. Sometimes students did their homework; sometimes they didn't. Kids chewed gum even though it was against the rules. They left the school with no plans, sometimes not even for high school, let alone college.

Yanof was sure she could do it better with the help of like-minded Teach for America alumni.

In spring 2009, she found a 50-year-old building that had been a bowling alley in one life and a thrift store in another at Central and Sunland avenues, right in the heart of the Roosevelt district where she had worked.

With a two-year lease with an option to buy, and the owners' permission, Yanof hired a crew to gut the low-slung building. She thought all she needed to make the building into a school were some new classroom walls and paint. She planned to open the doors in July.

the power for three months, leaving the crew and staff working in near darkness. They used generators to power their tools and dipped into big plastic buckets of ice to stave off heatstroke.

Work on the sewer lines meant no water, either. Half of the air-conditioning was shot and needed to be replaced. And when the lights finally came back on in July, a freak storm flooded the building.

Time was running out.

But the crew worked practically around the clock to get the work done. The general contractor, Mark Leinweber of Stevens-Leinweber Construction, is a Teach for America board member, and Yanof says she only imagines how much money he lost on the job. Another Teach for America board member, Ernie Hostetler, a retired project manager, oversaw the work for free.

City building officials signed off on the school's certificate of occupation just three days before the first day of classes in late July.

Yanof thought students would flock to the new school, but she had to go looking for them. In triple-digit temperatures, Yanof, her staff and some of her former students went door to door in the neighborhood, skirting broken bottles and barking dogs, knocking on doors and talking to whomever answered. They staked out the front of the nearby Ranch Market and Walmart too, working to persuade parents to send their kids to their school, saying that if they came, they would be prepared for college.

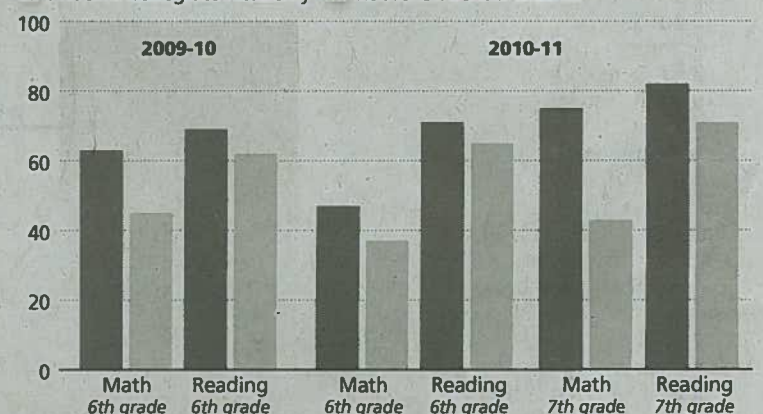
HIGH MARKS FOR CHARTER SCHOOL

Phoenix Collegiate Academy, a charter school, has posted test scores that outpace those of the surrounding school district, even though the two entities have comparable student bodies. Scores for sixth-graders in 2009-10 improved when they moved to seventh grade.

AIMS results, 2009-10* and 2010-11

Percent passing

■ Phoenix Collegiate Academy ■ Roosevelt School District



* No seventh-grade students at Phoenix Collegiate Academy for 2009-10.

Source: Arizona Department of Education

THE REPUBLIC

parents thought of the earnest blond woman who wasn't much taller than the students she was trying to recruit, making promises that she had no proof she could keep. She went back to the same houses four or five times, leaving her cellphone number. She wanted kids from this neighborhood.

"What I absolutely loved was that they were giving extra time where it was needed," says Katherine Haynes, who was at Walmart two years ago with her daughter, Elessia Williams, and expressed interest in the school. Yanof went to Haynes' house to tell her more.

At her old school, Elessia was struggling in math and reading, and her teacher had recommended special-education classes. Haynes felt that her daughter had nothing to lose by switching schools. At Phoenix Collegiate Academy, Elessia is near the top of her seventh-grade class.

"Every kid deserves a great school. These kids need this school," Yanof says.

The parents she talked to wanted more for their children — more homework, more reading, more excitement about projects they were working on or what they were studying.

"We think we can be better," Yanof told them. "Give us a chance." They did. In 2009, the school opened with 60 sixth graders. By

were 70. Last school year, the school expanded to sixth and seventh grades.

Yanof accepted all children who wanted to come as long as they were willing to do the work and wear the uniform and had someone to help them get to class on time and every day. No excuses.

'We have a voice here'

At the beginning of every class, students stand when a teacher enters pushing a cart on wheels loaded with books, papers and other supplies. On this day, they say in unison, "Good morning, Ms. Ellis," to language-arts teacher Raquel Ellis.

The children don't change classrooms; their teachers do. Even five minutes for passing between classes six times a day is 30 minutes of instructional time wasted, Yanof says.

Ellis is leading a discussion about Gary Paulsen's "A Soldier's Heart," and the students are sitting up straight, their eyes following her progress across the front of the room, where one wall is brightly painted to focus students' attention there.

The students nod as Ellis talks, and when she asks a question, almost every hand shoots up. This is what we teach them, Yanof says: Listen carefully. Stay engaged.

Academy

Continued from A6

When someone asks a question, offer an answer. This is what will help you stand out among hundreds of college students in your classes and, later, wow an interviewer to land an internship, a job.

In discussions like Ellis', students also learn how to make a point, cite their sources and disagree but do it respectfully.

"We have a voice here," says Elessia, now 14, wearing the telltale orange uniform marking her as a seventh-grader. "We aren't just students who sit around and can't say anything. They respect what is in our minds."

There's no library yet, but every classroom has bookcases full of novels and reference books. There's a computer lab but no cafeteria. (Lunch is catered for free as part of the federal reduced-price and free meal program, and kids eat in their classrooms.)

Yanof bought the school building this April, with a \$2 million loan from the Raza Development Foundation, which lends money to entities that help low-income minorities.

All three administrators and 16 current teachers have master's degrees or are working on them, and have impressive resumes with teaching experience around the globe. None is much older than 30.

While teachers at charter schools have to be highly qualified, they do not have to be certified, unlike at traditional public schools. Yet all of Yanof's teachers last year were certified. Because she does the hiring, she hand-picks teachers whose philosophy matches hers.

In coming to the academy, the staff gave up being part of the state retirement system. Teachers work from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and for an average salary of \$35,000, compared with the state average of almost \$42,000 in 2009. They give their students their cellphone numbers in case they need help with homework.

To keep the teachers from burning out, Yanof schedules each to teach six periods a day and gives them three periods to plan, prepare and



Phoenix Collegiate Academy offers a rigorous curriculum. ROB SCHUMACHER/THE REPUBLIC

grade student work. The hope is that when they leave at 5 p.m., they won't need to take work home.

Math teacher Carrie Wypiszynski used to teach in a south Phoenix school where she said it was common to hear teachers offer excuses for the students. She counts them off on her fingers: "Well, you know what their family is like." Or, "Considering the neighborhood where they come from..."

It was frustrating and seemed hopeless. Here, Wypiszynski says, the two-hour block of math means more time to cover material more thoroughly.

"There's not an excuse not to do your best," Wypiszynski says.

Akshai Patel, the school's managing director, liked the idea of being able to have a say in what the school was like, as well as manage its facility and finances. He can swiftly move money or make staffing changes. At public schools, those affairs are controlled at the district office.

"We can see the difference we are making every day," he says.

Dreams and dollars

The school's hallways are plastered with college pennants, and students take field trips to universities, including ASU, Northern Arizona University and the University of Arizona.

For 12-year-olds Melissa Arriaga and George Gonzales, it was their first time on a college campus.

"I could see myself there,

studying and going to classes," George says.

Melissa remembers her old school as not being as strict, and being more fun. "We had parties," she said. She misses that, but she admits she didn't do much actual schoolwork — unlike here.

"It's hard work, but you get used to it," Melissa says. And to her surprise, she has discovered that she enjoys research projects like one she did on natural disasters.

Twice a year, she and her classmates do field work at the nearby Nina Mason Puliham Rio Salado Audubon Center, getting there and back on the city bus with their teachers. Melissa had thought she would be a teacher but now thinks she might be a scientist. "I like to discover things."

George says he may join the U.S. Air Force and apply to West Point.

If Yanof has her way, Melissa and George, and the rest of her students, will do the things they dream about.

She's the type of person who thinks "no" means try again or find another way to do it.

"I get told I'm crazy every day," she says, laughing, and then adds, "At least four times a day."

Her enthusiasm is the kind that has donors opening their wallets even during difficult economic times: \$5,000 from Ernst & Young, a Phoenix accounting firm, for the trees that dot the school's courtyard; secondhand furniture from the University of Phoenix; and volunteers

painting murals and redoing the basketball court behind the school. Her stepfather built picnic benches for the courtyard.

Last year, she raised more than \$100,000 in private donations and state tax credits.

Charter schools receive hundreds of dollars less per student in state funding than regular public schools do, and they do not get any local property-tax revenue. With 140 students last year, the school received about \$826,000 from the state and about \$70,000 in federal funding based on the number of low-income students.

So Yanof also applies for grants, like one she received for \$230,000 from the state

Department of Education for charter schools preparing low-income students for college. Another grant means the kids will get free uniforms next year. A partnership with ASU brings in music, art and mentoring programs.

The school is growing slowly, starting with just sixth-graders the first year, expanding to include seventh-graders last year, and adding fifth- and eighth-graders this fall, which will double enrollment to 280.

It is a growth plan modeled after other successful charter schools, like those run by the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, a string of 109 charter schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia started by two Teach for America alumni in 1995.

KIPP's methods — the high expectations, longer school day, double sessions of math and language arts — were among those Yanof studied in 2007 during a yearlong fellowship at Building Excellent Schools, a nonprofit leadership-training program in Boston.

"We know what works," Yanof says, so it is only a matter of picking the best practices and duplicating them: "I'm not a very great inventor, but I'm a great implementer."

The same strategies already are in use at other schools, including tradi-

tional public schools, like Creighton Elementary School in Phoenix, which is rated as Performing Plus by the state.

Phoenix Collegiate Academy is a small school, though the class sizes are typical, an average of 30 students. And while Yanof is not hand-selecting the smartest kids from the neighborhood — her percentage of special-education students is comparable to the surrounding district — her parental involvement is high, and that makes a big difference in student performance, she says.

While Yanof is not accountable to a district administration, she answers to a state charter board, her own board, and parents.

So far, her scores are proving her worth, as is her retention rate. Of the 70 sixth-graders that first year, 62 returned for seventh-grade last year.

Steve Mancini, public-affairs director for KIPP, says his organization is watching what is happening at the academy because of its success so far. Linda Brown, director of Building Excellent Schools, also is following her former fellow's effort.

With so many people watching, Yanof knows she is asking a lot of her students, but she doesn't think she is asking too much.

"Kids always rise to the expectations," Yanof says. No excuses.