

Eva Moskowitz

Arin Lavinia

MISSION POSSIBLE

HOW THE SECRETS OF THE **SUCCESS
ACADEMIES** CAN WORK IN ANY SCHOOL



Praise for Mission Possible

“The authors describe their schools as places defined by ‘joyful rigor.’ Having visited a Success Academy, I can attest to that. If we are going to change the odds for children living in poverty, we need to create more opportunities to replicate what is working at places like Success Academies. This book does just that, taking the best practices from the Success Academies and creating a framework for educators, parents, and policy-makers to learn from their successes.”

—**Sen. Michael F. Bennet**, Colorado

“*Mission Possible* is a testament to what can be achieved in public education when the focus shifts to improving rigor in instruction and continuing education for teachers and principals.”

—**Doug Lemov**, managing director, Uncommon Schools; author, *Teach Like a Champion*

“It is long past time to end the needless conflict between district-run and charter schools, and instead spend our time working together and learning from each other. That is why this book is so important and so timely. We need to learn from the best practices of our successful public schools, whether district-run or charter, and reflect on ways to improve public education for the benefit of all our kids.”

—**Tom Boasberg**, superintendent, Denver Public Schools

“Among the most promising urban charter schools, like the Success Academies, we see sustaining cultures where adults focus on student learning and performance and on supporting each other. As always, we need an intimate glimpse into how those cultures build and grow stronger, and what is the ‘stuff’ that goes on within classrooms. This book gives us that glimpse, in ways that can benefit all schools.”

—**Andres Alonso**, CEO, Baltimore City Public School System

“Success Academy schools are not just great public schools, they are the wave of the future. But great schools can’t be left to chance. The stakes are too high. Just as we expect children of all backgrounds to learn more every day in school, *Mission Possible* shows us how a culture of continuous improvement also allows teachers themselves the gratification of continuing to learn and grow professionally each and every day to better meet student needs.”

—**Eli Broad**, founder, The Broad Foundations

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LIST OF VIDEO CLIPS

Please note: For all the version, the video content can be accessed online at www.wiley.com/go/missionpossiblevideos. When prompted, use access code 67281.

- Clip 1 Introduction to THINK Literacy and Success Academy
- Clip 2 Read Aloud, Kindergarten
- Clip 3 Book Discussion, Kindergarten
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- Clip 8 Guided Reading, Level K (First Grade)
- Clip 9 Coaching During Guided Reading (Levels E, H, and K)
- Clip 10 Book Club, Fourth Grade
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- Clip 17 Read Aloud, First Grade
- Clip 18 Book Discussion, First Grade
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Clip 20 Setting Up Quality Independent Writing in First Grade

Clip 21 The Quality of Model Writing Matters

Clip 22 Writing Direct Instruction, Second Grade

Clip 23 Writing Direct Instruction, Fourth Grade

MISSION POSSIBLE

INTRODUCTION

It sounds like a pipe dream: open a public elementary school in the middle of Harlem, take all comers through a random lottery, and within three years win recognition as the top charter in New York City and one of the very best public schools in all of New York State.

It's fact, not fiction. It's what we did with the first Success Academy Harlem and now are doing with eight more Success Academies in Harlem, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The students in Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn are almost all minorities, the majority of whom live below the poverty line. Their parents seek to escape from failing district schools and to send their kids to college. You might have seen some of their stories in the documentaries *The Lottery* and *Waiting for Superman*.

We're making that hope a reality against long odds. We think we're on to something, and we want to share our story and describe how we created such successful schools where the common wisdom said they couldn't exist.

It may sound odd to hear educators talking so much about "beating the odds." But that's what we do. Great teachers are in the odds-beating business. When we do our jobs well, we alter the lives of the children and families we serve. We give children an opportunity to live the American dream that the odds-makers suggested they couldn't possibly have.

Walk into any one of the Success Academies in New York City and enter a new kind of school, a colorful, enchanting place where the kids we call "scholars" are doing phenomenal things thanks to their hard work, great teaching by exceptionally well-trained teachers, and the support of parents willing to do whatever it takes to get their children a world-class education.

Our talented educators and committed staff fully understand the reality of what we're dealing with: were it not for these dynamic schools, and the ability of our families to exercise choice over what school their child attends, most of our young scholars would have been consigned to zoned district schools that offer little hope for a bright future.

We're talking about schools in which most students are not on track to graduate, in which success itself is an anomaly, whether it is on the third-grade

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reading test or in mastering the skills required to attend a college or university. Beating the odds means shattering that trajectory and starting all over with much higher expectations about what is possible for students. It means offering hope for a better life to students who otherwise would be forced to attend the kinds of failing public schools where dreams usually go to die. It means not giving up on the romantic notion that public education can do better for these students—much better.

This is the world that Eva Moskowitz envisioned in 2005 when she took off her hat as elected city official and became a charter school founder and not-for-profit entrepreneur.

She was motivated by a deep commitment to educational justice and educational excellence. As a former college history professor and city councilwoman, Eva believed passionately that children deserved and needed a much better education than most were getting in the public schools of New York City and indeed in cities, suburbs, and towns across the country. And she knew better than most people how destructive the schools in neighborhoods like Harlem could be, because she attended them herself as a child growing up in New York City in the 1970s. Her parents, both college professors, taught their daughter after school what she should have learned in the classroom. Later she attended the elite Stuyvesant High School, regarded and respected as one of the best public schools in America. But even Stuyvesant, Eva knew, wasn't anywhere near as academically rigorous as it needed to be. It was packed with students whose parents, like her own, were able to academically compensate for the weak education they were getting from the city's public schools.

When Eva had children of her own, she wanted them to have the kind of high-caliber public education that all parents want for their kids. As a public school parent, she was frustrated with what she saw in the schools. Even at well-regarded public schools she saw a lack of rigor and a "pretty good is good enough" attitude. And then there were the absurdities. Despite the \$24 billion city education budget, parents were required by schools to bring in toilet paper, paper towels, and Windex. In less affluent neighborhoods, kids simply went without. Whether looking at high school graduation rates, test scores, or student writing, Eva saw firsthand that we were miseducating and grossly undereducating children.

Eva successfully ran for the New York City Council in 1999 because she wanted to change the broken education system that served 1.1 million schoolchildren. Once in office, she jousting with the city bureaucracy and unions over mismanagement; misplaced priorities; lax standards; and crazy work rules that

left science labs without equipment, art classes without art supplies, buildings without lights working, and restrooms without toilet paper in a system that spends a whopping \$19,000-plus a year per student.

Week after week, Eva held public hearings that probed into every corner of school operations. She demanded answers and often ran into brick walls and powerful forces, like Mayor Michael Bloomberg and teachers union leaders, who continually urged her to lower her expectations for public education. But after six years in office, and a bruising defeat for the position of Manhattan borough president, she left the city council frustrated that the schools were nowhere near where they needed to be.

Eva possessed the confidence to think she could create from scratch elementary schools that were much better than the dysfunctional ones she had visited as chair of the council's Education Committee. She jumped into the public charter school arena at a time when education visionaries and pioneers, such as Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg at KIPP, were showing the world that bigger and better things were possible for students whom many had long ago written off. Eva borrowed what she saw as the best approaches from successful schools of all types—public, charter, parochial, and private—and in August 2006 Success Academy opened the first Success Academy Harlem on 118th Street and Lenox Avenue, located on one floor of a building shared with P.S. 149, the Sojourner Truth School. Eva herself worked as both the founder of the network and the principal for the first two years. She consulted with every successful education expert she could find, and studied every style of instruction under the sun.

Eva searched high and low to find someone who shared her desire to significantly raise the bar by designing a world-class reading and writing curriculum. She stumbled across Arin Lavinia, who was the first educator Eva had ever met who shared her incredibly high standards for reading and writing. When Eva asked Arin how many of the children in her schools could be expected to achieve mastery, Arin replied, "All of them." Arin, who had been a classroom teacher in New York City's District 2, and who had become a staff developer for the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, was working nationally as a literacy consultant when her path crossed with Eva's. In 2009 she came on board as Success Academy's director of literacy. We quickly began the task of customizing our own reading and writing curriculum, which we often jokingly describe as "balanced literacy on steroids." Our approach is built around great books and the power of ideas, with scholars learning from the get-go how to think critically and express ideas elegantly, not just parrot back abstruse skills and strategies.

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We plan eventually to run forty K–8 schools with 25,000 students. Currently 3,500 students attend our nine schools, with five more schools slated to open in summer 2012.

We don't cherry-pick our young scholars. Most are eligible for free- and reduced-price lunches. Fifteen percent are in special education. One in ten is still learning English. And, like other charters, we teach them with about 15 to 20 percent fewer dollars from the city and state than traditional or district public schools receive.

In spring 2009 our first scholars were completing third grade, and they took New York State's standardized tests in math and English language arts for the first time. The scores they posted were astonishing. Every child—100 percent—was proficient or better in math, and most scored at the advanced level. Ninety-five percent passed the English exam. We were the top-scoring charter in New York City. Only 31 of the 3,500 schools in the entire state scored higher.

So what's our secret? How do we do it?

First and foremost we focus on the grown-ups, not the children. We believe the adults in the school—principals and teachers—hold the keys to educational excellence. If they step up their performance, and if they set the bar high enough and truly believe that the children can rise to their expectations, then they can propel these students forward with lightning speed.

This is a radical, startling idea in the slow-to-change world of public education. But it is the touchstone of our beliefs, and we see it affirmed every day by the results in our joyful, rigorous classrooms.

Our scholars and their parents have been ready for everything we threw at them and more. Students attend class almost nine hours a day (7:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) and stay for an hour of after-school tutoring if needed; and some are back again on Saturday mornings. They bring homework assignments home each night and clamor for more.

We give our teachers extraordinary amounts of training, time, and resources to develop their professional skills. We provide coaching and mentoring to a degree unheard of in regular public schools. Teachers get about three preparation periods a day. The children spend three hours daily learning to become voracious readers and great writers because we believe that literacy is the key to learning. We couldn't find a literacy curriculum that fit our vision, so we've fine-tuned a reading curriculum of our own, which we call THINK Literacy.

Introduction to THINK Literacy and Success Academy

Clip 1

This video shows THINK Literacy and our incredible teachers and scholars in action across grades at Success Academies. It offers a window into what's possible when schools put **critical thinking**, rigor, and grown-ups front and center.

In the chapters that follow we're going to take you on an extended trip inside the Success Academies. We'll show you THINK Literacy in action, and take you through some of the coaching and study sessions that our principals and teachers do together. We'll show you what we mean by doing things *fast*, a core value at Success Academies. You'll see how we help adults change and improve their practice fast, as well as the incredible scholar learning that occurs when teachers get better every day. We will visit schools, with a focus on the adults, and expose you to new areas of leverage for increasing the quality of student learning. We'll show you that this work is hard and, no less important, fun.

Pardon us if we shoot from the hip a little bit, but that's our style. We do everything with a sense of urgency. There is no time to waste if our scholars are to get where they need to go.

So take a close look at what we're doing at Success Academies. We encourage you to try it yourself. If you're a teacher or principal, we'll show you how we study and prepare lessons together, and the results we get from lots of coaching and feedback in real time. If you're a parent, we'll show you what to look for in your child's school and classroom. If you're an education reformer, we'll show you what policies need to change to support world-class schooling.

Most of all, we want you to believe as we do that the answer to America's school problems is not smaller class sizes or pay-for-performance or any of the other carrots and sticks that have been tried over the past quarter century with little to show. The answer is getting the adults to step up their game, giving them the training and help they need, and setting the bar far higher for everyone than anyone dreamed possible in public schools.

Welcome inside the Success Academies.

