

Robert Treat Academy

Newark, New Jersey



From the moment a visitor enters the lobby at Robert Treat Academy (RTA), it's obvious something different is taking place at this charter school. From the soothing neutral colors on the walls to the wood floors and the classical music piped into the hallways, a visitor quickly gets the sense that this school does things its own way. And does it ever. RTA was founded by Stephen N. Aubato, an educator and the founder of Newark's North Ward Center, a non-profit community organization dedicated to improving the lives of Newark's residents. The school was built on his vision of providing a world-class education to children in Newark. The students at the school affectionately refer to him as "Big Steve."



RTA was built from the ground up.

RTA was built from the ground up, explains Principal Michael Pallante. In order to form the school culture, RTA began with only kindergarten and grade one, then proceeded to add one new grade each year. Now, in its twelfth year, RTA serves 450 students, 50 in each grade from kindergarten through eighth. Any student who lives in Newark is eligible to attend, but with only about fifty slots a year, the annual lottery is an emotional event. Siblings of current students get priority, further narrowing down the number of available slots. The waiting list has more than 1,000 students. An independent contractor hosts the lottery to remove even the impression of unfairness.

It's not surprising that families are eager to join the school community. RTA's students consistently score in the top ten percent of New Jersey's state assessments. Many participate in the summer program offered by Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. On graduation, about one third of them leave Newark to attend, on scholarship, some of the most prestigious boarding schools in the country. Flags from those schools hang in RTA's multi-purpose room as reminders of all the opportunities RTA provides them. And yet, "these are just average kids," says one administrator. On the surface, the student body is fairly reflective of Newark's North Ward

Student Demographics

Robert Treat Academy, Newark, NJ

roberttreatacademy.org

449 students, K – 8

African American	17%
Hispanic	78%
Asian or Pacific Islander	2%
White	3%
Students eligible for free/reduced price meals	65%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	1%
Special Education Students	6%
Average Teacher Turnover rate, past 5 years	4%
Student/Teacher Ratio	28:1

neighborhood. Approximately 65% of RTA students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Most are Hispanic. Their success underscores the school's belief that any student can succeed.

Students work for that success. Thanks to RTA's extended day, week, and year, students are potentially in school until five-thirty Monday through Friday. They attend classes on Saturday, too, and the school year exceeds 200 days. But RTA students are far from feeling like they are missing out on fun. "Being a student here is very exciting," says an upper-grade student. "There's lots of learning, and the longer year and day is good because we get more education for our benefit." Another eighth grader stated: "I feel bad for my friends—they have nothing to do on Saturdays but play, and we get to go to school."

A STATE-SPONSORED CHARTER SCHOOL

Students, teachers, and administrators know how important a streamlined organization is to better serving students and families. A "charter school gives you the ability to create what you need," says Pallante. He came to RTA eleven years ago, the fifth principal in a school that has only been around for twelve years. It goes without saying that staff are held to as high a standard as the students.

Because RTA is small, "we can eliminate the problems found in larger districts," Pallante says. He and the vice principal repeatedly point out that there is no bureaucracy at RTA. Everything they do is about keeping things simple and back to basics. Staff members are not union by choice.

But being a charter school does not mean ignoring the larger district surrounding them. RTA is keen to interact with Newark Public Schools, hosting meetings for them, opening their doors for observation, and trying to show the world how it can replicate what they do.

What they like to do is keep things simple.



Principal Michael Pallante: A "charter school gives you the ability to create what you need."

BACK TO BASICS

"Everything we do," says Pallante, "is very basic." The school's curriculum is aligned to state standards, and the administration is always looking for trends in student data. He boasts that the school is still using the same curriculum that it used on Day One. The school tries new procedures, but Pallante makes clear that they don't follow trends. When something works, they stick to it. "Old school math and reading aren't popular these days," says an administrator. "But they work well with our population."

To that end, RTA places a heavy emphasis on phonics in kindergarten through second grade. Students leave first grade knowing how to read, an administrator says. Struggling students get help in RTA's extended day program where they can load up on services. Through this program, RTA offers Reading Recovery, guided reading, and speech teachers. All students with special needs are mainstreamed with resource room assistance during the regular day. "We had a few we thought might not read," one teacher admits, "but they did learn."

In the middle grades, administrators work with teachers to choose texts based on content standards. Teachers must correlate the curriculum with the standards in lesson plans that are submitted for bi-monthly review. The administration uses that review to provide feedback and confirm that teachers are meeting their objectives.

Curriculum is simple, Pallante insists: "You have to teach to the standards, and not any one program covers them all, so you find what does and you teach it." When teachers need supplemental texts, they get them. It's common to knock teaching to the test, says another administrator, but the test assesses what you're supposed to be teaching. So if a teacher isn't teaching to it, that teacher isn't doing his or her job.

In addition to emphasizing the core curriculum, RTA believes in a strong role for the arts. The school has a fine arts pavilion, and a full time music/choral director. A piano lab in the extended day program allows students to create their own compositions that can be played for the entire school, and students can join band, orchestra, or choir. All students get music once a week.

A computer lab with 30 networked computers is used during technology classes, and is available before or after school for use on assignments. Students may also join a technology club.

Two teachers, either both certified or one certified and one highly qualified assistant, are assigned to each classroom. This paired teaching enables small-group instruction in a whole-group setting or teaching the whole group while keeping a close watch on students who need the most help.

Teachers are expected to understand and use Bloom's taxonomy and to teach across the disciplines. In a technology lesson, for example, a teacher integrates a lesson on adjectives into a computer assignment. Says the music teacher, "You can't just teach your subject. You have to teach everything." Teachers must be willing to hold multiple roles, in and out of the classroom.

The administration is happy to admit that nothing they do is new. It's all about just doing the hard work. "We sweat the small stuff," says the vice principal. For example, in classrooms where students have a hard time focusing, teachers wear microphones to help them project their voices.



A student composes her own music in the piano lab.

CULTURE: TAKE NOTHING FOR GRANTED

Each day at RTA begins with morning announcements in the multi-purpose room. While hundreds of students in green uniforms pile into their seats, the music teacher plays piano. Groups of students take turns giving timely presentations, such as reports on Barack Obama and Joe Biden around the inauguration. Students sing the school song, wish a happy birthday to those celebrating one, and recite the student pledge: to work hard, be the best we can be, and be kind to one another. Principal Pallante gives the morning reminders, among them asking students why they are here. “You can’t take anything for granted,” he says. Before coming to RTA, he says, he never gave much thought to how many kids don’t understand why they are in school.

Culture is the driving force at RTA. The school took a financial hit by building itself up from kindergarten and first grade only, but the administration believed it was essential to instill the school culture at a young age. As the students grew with the school, the older ones set the example for the younger, new students coming in.

When one class wasn’t getting along, the staff worked on team-building. “We treat everyone as if we are part of a family,” says a teacher. The teachers know the kids, and the administration tackles whatever problems arise. Any teacher can remind us of the rules, one upper-grade student explains, “so it’s like we’re brothers and sisters and they’re all the parents.”

We provide opportunity, says a Board member. We are not about changing everything. It’s a holistic approach that encompasses the kids, teachers, and parents.

Culture: Community Service

Part of that holistic approach integrates a community service component into the curriculum. “Test scores are important,” says the vice principal, “but schools develop the whole child.” One of RTA’s goals is to make their students decent people, so they focus on service and teaching students how to make the right decisions. The idea is that a good citizen of the school makes a good citizen of the community.

Community service starts in sixth grade, and students need a certain number of service hours to graduate. Options may range from helping at the school, through peer tutoring or cleaning the library, to sending care packages to soldiers, or volunteering at a soup kitchen or a senior citizens center. Students reported enjoying the community service, and staff members said they love to see them return to the community after graduation, still eager to do good things for the people in it.



Students deliver the morning news.

Culture: Communication

We're aware that everything we do sends a message, says an administrator. The building must be clean and orderly. We show them good manners, and how to be respectful to people and property.

Part of school culture is about establishing relationships with parents, says a staff member. RTA works hard to build those relationships, and the school depends on two-way accountability. They expect parents to hold them to high standards, and the school expects the same hard work from parents. "They let you know what it's all about early on," says one parent. "You can decide if it's not right for you."

Parent council meetings are held monthly (11 times a year) and are "required." Since expectations are made clear to parents before they can enroll their students in RTA's lottery, most parents understand. Still, students are expected to remind their parents and encourage them to attend, and the class with the highest percentage of attendees earns a reward. In return, the school provides parents with an annual report every year.

Parents are also expected to attend parent teacher conferences twice a year, in October and February. One hundred percent participation is the norm.

Besides the twice a year conferences, RTA provides parents with frequent progress reports. The school has ten reporting cycles, sending home five progress reports and five interim reports. The school has a myriad of ways to keep parents informed. "If my son misses a homework, they let me know," says one parent. "I know they hold him accountable, and I hold them accountable."

Pick up and drop off times are another way the school reaches parents. All students are required to be picked up and dropped off by a parent or designated guardian. The street is closed down during these times, and the staff members use the time to connect with parents.

Communication within the school is treated just as critically. "It's one of the reasons we hold morning meetings every day," says an administrator, "It's about building communication and community." Teachers are expected to notify administrators and each other about issues immediately so they can be addressed quickly.

"I feel blessed for my son to have this school," says one parent. "The teachers come to his football games. The school brings parents together, and makes you part of the family." The result of this family togetherness? "We can't get the students to leave," says the vice principal with a laugh. "They graduate and keep coming back."

SUPPORTS: EXTENDED DAY

The extended day program at RTA takes two paths. For students who don't need remediation, non-academic activities are available, such as sports, music, or technology. For students who are identified by their teachers as requiring remediation, however, the extended day is mandatory for as long as help is needed. Additionally, extended day is mandatory for any student who comes to RTA after kindergarten, at least initially. Even good students who come to RTA after kindergarten find themselves behind the accelerated curriculum.

To support the remediation classes, every grade-level teacher stays at least once a week, and usually more. Ninety percent of all extended day instruction is provided by regular classroom teachers, some of whom do morning remediation as well. Additionally, a part-time counselor and social worker is available during extended day, and two speech teachers are brought in. Parents are told the program is necessary if their child is identified as needing the additional help, but the school tries to make sure parents and students see the extended day positively. "We're here to help you," says a teacher.



Students prepare to conduct an experiment.

Peer tutoring is also part of the extended day, and staff members praise it for really working. The kids can just teach each other better sometimes, says a teacher. And the small groups in the extended day enable more of the all-important relationship-building. Kids open up, another teacher explains. It gives them a chance to find an adult to talk to.

SUPPORTS: SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS AND ENGLISH LEARNERS

All supports for special education and English language learners happen during the extended day. The learning consultant stresses that all students receive their regular instruction together and students aren't to be in the resource room more than one hour per day during regular school hours. Special education students are expected to do what the other students do, with accommodations as necessary. Not having students pulled out a lot is wonderful, says a classroom teacher: They don't miss anything.

The learning consultant provides support from the resource room, planning and aligning instruction with classroom teachers. RTA has approximately 20 students with IEPs and a few with 504s. Intervention takes place early, says the learning consultant, so a lot of kids don't end up as special education students. "Most problems are language related, and we talk to parents about building background," the learning consultant explains. A speech and language teacher sees students who need services during the extended day.

All incoming students are assessed for English learner/ limited English proficient status. Those who do not test in can still opt to attend extended day classes if they would benefit from the exposure. Because English language learners often have parents who cannot easily help them with schoolwork, they can also get homework help during the extended day.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

At RTA, the administration stresses that reaching the standards is more than just scoring a certain number on a test. "Standards are about reaching the full potential," says the vice principal. "You have to tell the students what the

standards are so they know what's expected. Then you work with them to meet those standards." And staff members are quick to remind a visitor that RTA takes any student whose name comes up in the lottery. They're average kids, says an administrator, but you can push them. "Never assume any kid can't do the work."

Says one teacher, "When a kid doesn't do well, it's the teacher's fault." The staff takes full responsibility for helping students, and expects students to take full responsibility for their learning. Staff members follow the students beyond graduation to see what they might have done better to prepare them.

All this "pounding" of expectations into the students' heads gets the message across. "Expectations are high," says an upper-grade student, "and it makes us feel good. We'll get into different schools and get degrees and good jobs." Students like, too, that their parents know the expectations so they can help out.

"It was hard to adapt because I came in third grade," an upper-grade student explains. "The teachers had to help me until I caught up. They pushed me harder than at my old school." But the constant return of successful alumni helps demonstrate the benefits of working hard. "They explain how essential this is to our future," says a student, "We don't want to disappoint anyone."

Although students admit to occasionally being upset about their lack of vacation compared with their peers, they learn to take advantage of the opportunities RTA makes possible. With high expectations come rewards. Last year 37 students from 6th through 8th grade qualified for the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth Summer Program.

This success also brought its own dilemma: what happens to these kids after they graduate? They weren't prepared for public high school, explains an administrator; they were too sheltered, too different. RTA's response was to create a high school placement program that helps students and families apply to high school. These days, approximately equal numbers of students go on to boarding schools, local magnet or parochial high schools, and vocational schools.

At an interview day held by the high school placement program, representatives from 40 to 50 private schools present on their schools and talk to students and their families. Then RTA walks parents through applying for financial aid and helps students with their applications. Staff members take students and parents on trips to visit the schools, too.

At first, parents resisted the idea of sending their children to boarding schools, says an administrator, but since parents have heard the alumni talk about it, they've gotten on board. The boarding schools show them the world is diverse, says a parent. You can teach other people about who you are and learn who they are. It's about learning and teaching respect.



Hands-on science makes the abstract concrete.

Naturally, RTA doesn't stop paying attention to students just because they graduated. Staff members travel to boarding schools to check in on RTA students. The Alumni Coordinator tracks the progress of all alumni but pays close attention to those at boarding schools. For example, after staff learned some former students had problems with study skills, they enhanced their Study Skills curriculum. "We are very protective of our kids here," says an administrator. "We want them to be successful. Their success is important to us so we do whatever we can to influence that."

LEADERSHIP

Having dealt with their share of heavy top-down leadership elsewhere, administrators at RTA takes a light hand in supervising. Says Pallante, "I put a lot of confidence in the staff. I don't micromanage. We communicate our expectations, and if a teacher doesn't fit in, it becomes obvious." No one, he says, is trying to get out of work; everyone is trying to get into it.

Teachers appreciate the freedom and the quick responses administrators give their needs. The great thing about RTA, says the learning consultant, is there is no bureaucracy: "If I need something, I get it."

Newly hired teachers start out as the second teacher in the classroom, paired with a master teacher. It works as a type of mentoring system, and those second teachers progress to lead jobs when openings arise. It makes for a wonderful combination of experience and new ideas, says a teacher. Another teacher points out that it provides flexibility; impromptu meetings are possible because someone else is there to take over if needed.

All teachers are observed three times per year, and new teachers are observed more often during their initial time. Feedback is constructive and welcomed. Additionally, teachers write a list of accomplishments and concerns monthly for administrators, who offer feedback.

Parents appreciate the administration's responsiveness to their needs as well. "They listen," a parent says. Adds the vice principal, "It's a matter of trust. We have to demonstrate to them that we're committed."

SHARING AND SUSTAINING

Lots of people have a negative impression of charter schools, says a teacher, because there are bad ones and because they siphon off the best kids. "We don't do that." Indeed, staff members at RTA are eager to share what they've learned with public schools. For example, a board member notes, the school is looking to work with one or two public schools as a model.

We have a lot we can teach, says a teacher. Schools have to change as needed—that's one thing we've learned. A lot of success depends on parent participation, another teacher adds. RTA can show other schools how to increase that.

As for sustaining its success, RTA staff members are confident. “It’s not going to be a problem,” says a board member. “Everyone’s on board and others want to be.” Says one teacher, the principal would never leave without knowing there was someone here to carry out his vision that “leadership needs to be inspirational.”

Far from it, Robert Treat Academy will be opening another RTA in Newark’s Central Ward in August 2009.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- If offering advice to other schools similarly situated demographically but low achieving, what would be the priority of recommendations to implement: strong leadership, parent involvement, school culture, two teachers to a classroom, adequate funding, other?
- Does the second teacher in the classroom receive the same pay as the first teacher? Are the teachers matched for complementary skills or is it a random placement?
- The amount of parent involvement and communication to parents sounds fabulous. Are there classes for parents of Special Education and ELL students to help them to work with their children?

Robert Treat Academy New Jersey Proficiency Assessment % proficient and above: English Language Arts					
	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08
Grade 3					
All	92	96	100	98	100
Low Income	90	97	100	97	100
Grade 8					
All	na	96	89	88	100
Low Income	na	95	90	na	100
% proficient and above: Mathematics					
	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08
Grade 3					
All	94	96	100	100	100
Low Income	97	95	100	100	100
Grade 8					
All	na	78	79	93	98
Low Income	na	76	76	na	100