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It's Cool To Learn

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*This year, several Hartford schools have seen major changes under Superintendent Steven J. Adamowski's district reform plan: Some underperforming schools were shut down, new schools were created and other schools have been restructured. This series takes a look at individual schools that have undergone major changes for the 2008-09 school year.*

Though Achievement First Hartford Academy has strict behavior guidelines, not all students walk the halls of the public charter school in silence.

One group of energetic first-graders this month chants: "uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete..."

Bonnie Gallo, an art teacher at the school who had finished up with a reading lesson with the group, stopped them when they reached 10.

"You're clever," she said to one of the students, then to all: "Now who remembers what clever means?"

The teachers at Achievement First don't waste a minute of instruction: They flip flash cards while students are in line for the bathroom, count in Spanish as they move from one classroom to the next and ask for definitions for their words of encouragement.

After increasing the number of urban students who meet state testing goals at its schools in New Haven and New York City, Achievement First opened its first Hartford academy this year. It is one of the new schools under a districtwide reformation in Hartford.

Achievement First's goals in Hartford are lofty: By the end of the year, school officials want to have 95 percent of the students reading at grade level and mastering 80 percent of the math standards, and have 97 percent attendance rates. Students typically arrive at Achievement First schools reading about two years below grade level.

But with a longer day—almost 10 hours if students stay for intensive tutoring after school—and a small student-teacher ratio, the leaders of the school believe they can succeed.

The elementary and middle school principals, Claire Shin and Jeffrey House, teach classes. Other specialty teachers, like Gallo the art teacher, are cross-certified and teach small groups. In the elementary school, two teachers are assigned to each classroom.

And throughout the school, little details remind the students of their task. They are all referred to as scholars. Teachers use phrases like, "we sweat the small stuff" and make constant references to college.

"It shows all the teachers really want us to enter college so we're not out on the street and we have a good career," said fifth-grader Malik Armour.

But first, the students learn behavior. During the first weeks, students learn to sit still and walk with their arms down by their sides. They sign contracts that they will complete all their homework. It's part of a learning culture the staff tries to create, said first-grade teacher Gretchen Unfried.

"It's cool to learn, cool to be smart," Unfried said. "Your brain grows and you get the knowledge to go to college."

