



# Sedgwick Middle School

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A National School  
of Excellence 1999-2000

Dr. Benjamin J. Skaught, Principal  
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## To Whom It May Concern:

Charter schools and Amistad Academy in particular, play an important role in educating children in the state of Connecticut. The work being done by the Amistad Academy in closing the achievement gap for urban students is worthy of celebration and emulation. In West Hartford, we have struggled for many years to make a significant impact on that gap. We have been generally successful in raising the scores of all students and all subgroups, but find the gap to be persistent. Year after year, though our scores went up, the gap remained. In 2004 I met with the faculty and challenged them to look at programs that were finding success at closing the gap, even if they were serving a distinctly different population, so that we could adopt, adapt, or even create something unique to our building that had the promise of reducing the achievement gap for our students. Shortly after that, one of my teachers asked if I would purchase the PBS special on the success of Amistad for our teachers to view. After viewing the documentary, they asked if they could visit the Achievement First schools in New Haven. We sent our first team of teachers for a visit in April of 2005. Since then, over 70 of our staff members have visited the Amistad Academy.

Our school is comprised of grades 6, 7 and 8 with three teams of approximately 100 students at each grade level. (These numbers vary from year to year based on enrollment figures.). One of our grade six team leaders was among the first group to visit Amistad, and came away so impressed that he decided to ask his team to immediately implement the REACH principles. Other faculty members suggested he wait and start fresh in the fall. They felt that having only two months to test out the impact of the REACH principles was insufficient. He could not be dissuaded and felt compelled to start right away. He was committed to the concept of teaching children the behaviors critical to academic success.

Students in our school are instructed in the academic areas from a team of teachers in Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, Science, and World Language. They rotate through their Unified Arts classes two periods a day. Teachers of Music, Art, Technology, Physical Education, and Health instruct all three teams at their given grade level. Therefore, a grade six Unified Arts teacher would see all grade six students from the three grade six teams, and could see for themselves any differences that might occur as a result of one team implementing the REACH principles. Within two weeks they reported a significant difference in the way students from the REACH team entered their classroom, behaved in the hallways, came prepared for instruction and performed academically. The visible differences were compelling evidence that all students could benefit from being part of a REACH program.

The next fall, all three grade six teams adopted the REACH principles as the foundation for their instruction. They were quickly able to change the culture of sixth grade students from one where doing well in school was not "cool" to where doing well in school was "cool". A focus on homework completion resulted in an increase of from 50% to 60% on daily assignments to 90% to 95% completion of daily assignments. Evidence of improved school climate and higher student achievement were noticed. In 2005-2006 we failed for the first time, to make AYP. In 2006-2007, after having just one grade level implementing REACH, we made Safe Harbor. The following year, 2007-2008, we had two grade levels implementing the REACH program. Our task was even more daunting though, as the standards for AYP were raised an additional 10%. A goal that many outside the school felt might be impossible. Our faculty was up to the task, however, and we made Safe Harbor once again.

The attached charts show, that while we still have quite a challenge ahead of us to close the gap, we are seeing some progress as the gap narrows. This year all three grade levels and all teams use the REACH principles as part of our instructional model. As with any change some teachers and some teams have



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progressed further in its implementation than others. We have, however, all gained by learning from the work being done at the Amistad Academy.

I would be happy to share with you more details about how the ideas inspired by the Amistad Academy have influenced our work with children in West Hartford and would encourage you to come and visit Sedgwick Middle School to see for yourself the difference it has made.

As you struggle with making decisions about how to utilize dwindling resources in education there are two things of critical importance you must consider. First and foremost is the need to provide an appropriate education for our most underserved students, particularly the underperforming students in our urban school districts. For far too long, many of these students have not received an education that prepares them adequately to be productive and contributing citizens in our society. With the creation of charter schools like Amistad Academy, these students finally have the hope of a better future. It would be irresponsible to take away that hope when economic times become more difficult and ask that segment of our population to suffer an inequitable burden. Failure to fund Amistad Academy and other educational programs that have demonstrated success in raising the achievement levels of our low performing students will continue to foster the hopelessness that now exists for many of our urban children. Please continue to fund the few bright spots that flicker in a world filled with barriers to their success.

Secondly, assuring that successful programs like Achievement First continue to exist in difficult times provides a model and an inspiration to other public school programs looking for ways to improve their own performance. I doubt there is a single school in Connecticut that is sitting idly by unaffected by the embarrassment of an achievement gap. There may be some who choose to explain it away. But there are many who could benefit by learning from those who have real students in real educational settings with real results. Our job as educators is to look for answers wherever they can be found. At Sedgwick we have found some answers by looking at the work being done by the Amistad Academy.

You have difficult choices to make. You may not be able to fund all of the programs in the state that you have in the past. I simply ask that you not shortchange those children who have been traditionally underserved. To quote President Obama, "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works." Please make sure that when you decide how to reduce the spending, that you fund what works. That is the only way education in Connecticut will get better.

Sincerely,

Benjamin J. Skaught, Ph.D.  
Principal