

Students, school making the grade

by [Kasi Addison](#)/The Star-Ledger
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Curriculum coordinator Sabrina Meah, left, listens 7th graders Denajah Hoffman, center, and Imani Greenlee explain their paper-recycling project during the Greater Newark Charter School's recent science fair.

The rhymes of rapper Lil Wayne no longer serenade Jahzhanee Sutton as she rides to Greater Newark Charter School each day. The seventh-grader ditched the morning music after she worked with classmates on a science project that concluded music has a negative effect on concentration.

"We learned our parents were right," 13-year-old Jahzhanee said with a half-smile. "Listening to music while studying is like hitting yourself in the head."

After years of struggling, the 8-year-old school has seen across-the-board gains in test scores. In 2004, only 8 percent of students at Greater Newark passed the state's Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment math exam. Last year that number jumped to 77 percent.

School director Peter Turnamian credited teachers and data-based instruction -- the school's "single greatest assets" ---- for the gains, which also were seen in the science and language arts scores. Students were periodically given informal tests, the results were analyzed, and adjustments were made to ensure the school's curriculum was in line with state requirements, Turnamian said.

The result was better-informed educators who were able to tailor their teaching so students were capable not only of performing well on the tests but of engaging in critical thinking, he said.



7th grader Kyree McMillan, above right, explains his project, "The American Rocket," to Peter Turnamian, school director.

Anne Ndiaye, the assistant director of the school, said teachers were able to look at test scores and adapt as they saw best. "We used data to make teaching decisions," she said. "We got staff input so that everyone has a sense of ownership in what happens in this school."

The school accepted its first batch of fifth-graders in September 2000. For a time it operated out of a space at Bethany Baptist Church along West Market Street, and as it grew it moved temporarily into trailers behind the Boys and Girls Club along Avon Avenue.

Students are expected to know and live up to Greater Newark's "Five Pillars" -- think deeply, be kind, be organized, be skillful and "What is your dream?"

"We have a strong school culture that is focused on achievement," Turnamian said.

The school's constant moving didn't do anything to stabilize test scores, he said, but once it settled in its current location along Central Avenue, students' performance improved.

An example of the school's progress and student engagement was a science fair held last month, he said. In both the school's basement and auditorium, students shared the results of their various experiments with classmates, parents and teachers. One group demonstrated how to make paper out of recycled newspapers and showed the positive effects of recycling as part of a project on the environment. Another batch of students analyzed whether plants grew best in water, juice, soda or seltzer.

It was one of the reasons, Jahzhanee said, she was glad to be a student at the school. "When I leave next year, I'm going to miss it a lot," she said. "But it's really helped me build my character. I've changed."

Students complained about uniform requirements, the length of the school day -- 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. -- and classes that run through July, but for the most part they were proud of their school.

"In my four years here, it has been a pretty good experience," said eighth-grader Joseph Sykes. "My favorite thing about it has been all of the new things I've learned."