June 3, 2011 – Ten-year-old Asiko Aderin is wearing headphones and staring into a computer screen, looking very much like an underage call-center employee. It’s a school day – and this is what school looks like for Asiko and her two brothers, Ayomiro, 11, and Ayodeji, 8.

Holed up in the basement of their family’s Poconos, Pennsylvania, home, they watch lessons on a screen, typing answers to questions as their mother, Sharon Aderin, a former U.S. Army Reserve sergeant, hovers nearby. The children attend Agora Cyber Charter School, managed by K12 Inc., the largest U.S. operator of taxpayer-funded online schools and part-owned by billionaire Michael Milken.

In a development that would have been unheard of a decade ago, about 200,000 U.S. school children are enrolled in full-time online programs, Bloomberg Businessweek reports in its June 6 edition. Eleven years after its founding, K12 has 81,000 students in 27 states and the District of Columbia. If it were a school district, it would be one of the nation’s largest. K12 posted profit of $21.5 million last year and expects to generate $500 million in revenue this year. Its stock has doubled since the company went public in December 2007.

The financial success of K12 has shown that Milken, the health-care philanthropist and 1980s junk-bond king who pleaded guilty to securities fraud, has figured out how to profit from public schools. While online education may have paid off for him and other investors, it’s less clear that K12 is benefiting its students.

‘Dangerous Direction’

The company said its kids are making impressive gains in academic achievement, though a growing group of critics, including school superintendents and academic researchers, disagrees. They’re concerned that online schools fail children and overcharge taxpayers – and that the money-making model that Milken has championed could be embraced more broadly as a way to overhaul public schools at the expense of actual education.

“This isn’t going to turn out to be good for education or good for kids,” said Diane Ravitch, an education historian and former assistant U.S. Education Secretary under President George H.W. Bush. “When you think about people in isolation, sitting in their basements at home, not having to learn how to deal with people, how to cope with cliques, how to work out problems with other children, how to function in a group, it strikes me this is a hugely dangerous direction for our society.”

Some of the nastier elements of socialization, such as drugs, bullying, and early sexual behavior, are why Aderin, a devout Christian, chose an online school for her kids.

Channeling Teddy Roosevelt

As part of a fourth-grade history lesson, her daughter Asiko volunteered to read off the screen after watching a video about Theodore Roosevelt and the Spanish-American War: “The whole country seemed to crackle with energy,” she said, in a quiet monotone. “No one had more energy than Theodore Roosevelt.”

K12 manages charter schools, independent entities that operate public schools without bureaucratic constraints such as contracts with teachers’ unions. They’ve become the darlings of would-be education reformers across the political spectrum: Microsoft Corp.’s Bill Gates, Wall Street hedge fund philanthropists, the Obama Administration, and many Republicans including Jeb Bush and Mitt Romney.

Over the past two decades charters have been promoted as a way to provide less affluent families with an alternative to conventional schools. K12’s
version is offered entirely online, with students taking classes and earning degrees at home in front of a computer, giving kids along every rural byway access to a charter education, as long as they don’t mind getting it through the Web.

**Tied to Marketplace**

“Bill Gates has invested (in education) without a real expectation of a return on investment,” said Michael Moe, an investment banker who helped take K12 public, comparing Gates’s and Milken’s contributions to the field. “Michael Milken believes that the greatest success in education will be tied to the marketplace.”

Or, as Ron Packard, the former Goldman Sachs Group Inc. banker and McKinsey & Co. consultant who co-founded K12, put it: “Mike believes that education is a phenomenal investment opportunity.”

Geoffrey Moore, a spokesman for Milken said, “Mike is an investor but is not involved in the company’s management.”

The seeds for K12 were planted in the fall of 1999, near the peak of the Internet bubble, when Packard visited the Los Angeles offices of Knowledge Universe, Milken’s for-profit education company. Packard wanted to start a business that would offer elementary through high school entirely online. Classes would be beamed directly into students’ homes over the Internet. The schools would be operated for a profit and be funded by taxpayer money that usually goes to traditional public schools.

**19 Percent Stake**

Milken, now 64, his brother, Lowell, who is chairman of the family’s philanthropic foundation, and Larry Ellison, chief executive officer of Oracle Corp., invested $10 million in Packard’s startup, named K12. The Milkens have invested a total of about $90 million in the venture, Packard said.

Knowledge Universe and other companies controlled by Milken and his brother own 19 percent of K12, according to Securities and Exchange Commission filings this year. At the end of May, the stake was worth about $260 million. K12 is just beginning its growth trajectory as it pushes to enroll more of America’s 50 million schoolchildren, Packard said.

K12’s headquarters are in a nondescript office park in Herndon, Virginia, along the high-technology corridor near Washington Dulles International Airport. The company has 2,400 employees, including 110 curriculum developers, among them former executives at PBS and the Smithsonian Institution who design and update the company’s online courses.

**Sales Goals**

Along with running online public schools, K12 markets directly to homeschooling parents as well as to districts that want to start their own online classes. One floor of the headquarters houses a call center, where 80 employees court students across the country – and the local, state and federal money that comes with them.

A job posting for a K12 “enrollment sales consultant” said applicants should “be able to close the sale with a customer” and “meet or exceed team and individual sales goals.” Salespeople are paid mostly in salary, though compensation is based partly on success in enrolling students, Packard said.

The U.S. Education Department has moved to ban the tying of recruiter pay to enrollment at for-profit colleges, saying the practice encourages employees to sign up students who might not benefit from the degrees. The ban doesn’t apply to charter schools.

Packard dismisses any comparison. Whereas for-profit colleges are paid up front, K12 is generally paid monthly. Because of initial outlays for computers and materials, it loses money if students drop out after several months, Packard said.

**Missed Benchmark**

“We don’t want to be recruiting kids who it’s not right for,” he said. “That would be a disaster academically. It would be a disaster for the company economically.”

The Education Department said there is little valid research comparing online versus face-to-face instruction for elementary and high school children.

K12 did lag behind in a key measure – the
percentage of students meeting the federal benchmark for yearly progress toward proficiency on state tests, according to a December 2010 study of for-profit companies running charter schools by researchers at the University of Colorado at Boulder and Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo.

Three-quarters of K12 schools failed to show sufficient progress, compared with 45 percent of the physical charter schools in the study. K12’s results are “just shocking,” said Gary Miron, a professor at Western Michigan and one of the study’s authors.

**Seven Years**

In part, this is a reflection of the backgrounds of K12’s students, who tend to be poor and struggling academically, Packard said. The company is growing so fast that more than half its students are new each year, meaning they may take state tests five months after first enrolling, before they’ve had a chance to benefit from K12 teaching, he said.

More than 90 percent achieved proficiency on state tests after seven years with K12, according to company literature. Packard said that K12 has invested more than $200 million in technology and curriculum and that the company’s schools, which collect money on a per-pupil basis, receive on average only 60 percent of a traditional district’s allotment, which saves taxpayers’ money.

Still, it’s a difficult sell to some education scholars.

**‘Young Kids’**

“The enthusiasts for cyber learning have overstated the potential,” said Tom Loveless, an education researcher at the Brookings Institution who did paid consulting for K12 in its early years. “What they keep forgetting is we’re not talking about college students here. We’re talking about high schoolers and young kids. The idea that parents go to work and leave their kids in front of a computer – it’s absurd.”

Michael Milken is a product of the traditional public school system. He graduated from Birmingham High in Los Angeles in 1964. After college at the University of California, Berkeley, he joined Drexel Burnham Lambert, where, during the 1980s leveraged-buyout boom, he pioneered the use of high-yield bonds to finance takeovers of companies such as Safeway Inc. In 1990, Milken pleaded guilty to six felony counts of securities fraud and served a 22-month sentence.

Since his release, Milken has become known for high-profile philanthropy, funding prostate cancer and epilepsy research and providing college scholarships through the Milken Family Foundation. He laid out his education philosophy at the annual Milken Institute Global Conference of movers and shakers held May 1-4 at the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles.

**Entrepreneurial Energy**

There, amid hundreds of CEOs and government officials, Milken released an essay that bemoaned declining U.S. educational performance relative to Asia, and, in an implicit criticism of teachers’ unions, complained that instructors are paid based on seniority rather than performance.

To address education and other major problems, Milken wrote, “In each case, the solution is the same: Unleash the energies of entrepreneurial people, and
they will change the world.”

After Milken agreed to back K12, Packard looked for a partner with education credentials to run K12 with him. He sought former U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett, who had served in the Reagan Administration and had the conservative bona fides to appeal to the initial target market: homeschoolers, many of whom are conservative Christians.

‘Billion Kids’

In an April interview, Bennett said that he liked the company’s “world-class” curriculum, which features a firm grounding in American history and math instruction. In 2005, Bennett, who hosts a syndicated radio show, resigned from K12 after making controversial remarks about blacks and abortion that he said were taken out of context.

Packard said he speaks with Milken by phone as often as once a month. Milken will often call while on trips to China, India, and Indonesia, suggesting that K12 could broaden its international ambitions.

“There’s no reason why eventually you can’t be educating a billion kids online,” Packard said.

In Pennsylvania, the first state where K12 won approval to open a cyberschool, online education is both popular and controversial.

Under state law, charter schools, including virtual ones, are entitled to the same amount of local, state, and federal tax money that each student’s home district spends, minus funding that traditional schools receive for transportation, capital outlays, and debt service. Online schools don’t have to operate cafeterias or gyms, either.

Pennsylvania Model

K12 said that under Pennsylvania’s formula, which is among the nation’s most generous for charters, it gets 80 percent of the funding of traditional schools. That came to about $8,000 per student, on average, according to a February state filing.

Charter schools must also be nonprofit under Pennsylvania state law, although the schools’ boards can choose a for-profit management company to run them. Agora Cyber Charter School’s volunteer board is made up mostly of parents of children at K12 schools.

K12 also charges Agora separately for instructional materials and online courses. In the year ended June 30, 2010, K12 received $31.6 million from all those sources, Agora reported on its tax form, or 8 percent of K12’s revenue. With peak enrollment of 5,500 last year, Agora, the only K12-operated academy in Pennsylvania, can enroll students anywhere in the state.

Tax Money

Pennsylvania Auditor General Jack Wagner issued a report in October saying that Pennsylvania’s 11 cyber charter schools may be receiving too much tax money, given their lower costs. Don Bell, superintendent of Pennsylvania’s Northern Lebanon School District, said he was able to open an online school for his students for a third of what K12 charges.

“I support school choice,” Bell said. “I just don’t think you need to be ripping off everyone to provide it.”

In response, K12 said the state sets funding levels for all charter schools. School districts that say they are spending far less for online instruction “don’t care about quality,” Packard said. K12 also offers field trips and other face-to-face get-togethers and is introducing physical learning centers that serve about 5 percent of its students nationally.

In a state filing last June, Pennsylvania’s Acting Education Secretary Thomas Gluck demanded that Agora improve performance on state tests or risk losing its charter. On the latest round of assessments, for 2009-2010, 55 percent of Agora students were considered proficient or above in reading, compared with 72 percent statewide. In math, 47 percent achieved that benchmark, below the 75 percent state average.

Poor Students

K12 said Agora has lower test scores partly because 63 percent of its students are eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch programs, a measure of poverty, compared with the 39 percent state average. By another state yardstick – students’ improvement over each year – the company said Agora ranks
among the top schools in the state.

One of Agora’s most successful recent graduates points out that K12 attracts students who aren’t necessarily suited for independent online work, resulting in heavy turnover – almost a third of the 7,700 students Agora signed up withdrew last year.

“Cyberschool was the right choice for me,” said Darian Kiger, Agora’s 2010 valedictorian, who delivered a live speech to the graduating class at an evangelical church and conference center. “I don’t think it’s the right choice for everybody,” said Kiger, 19, a freshman at York College in Pennsylvania.

**Virtual Truants**

That was the case for one student, Cortnie Ettinger, who left the ninth grade at her high school in the Central Susquehanna Valley in 2007 and enrolled in Agora. She eventually stopped logging in to her virtual classes and spent her days watching TV or hanging out in the park. Now 19, Ettinger has since returned to a traditional high school, where she made honor roll last year.

“I wouldn’t recommend it for my kid,” Ettinger said of online education.

Cyberschool truancy is a common problem, according to many school districts. At least 15 percent of the students enrolled in cyberschools in Pennsylvania’s Bangor district end up as virtual truants, Superintendent Patricia Mulroy estimated.

“We pay for them, even though they haven’t logged in,” Mulroy said.

Most of the time, K12 students study on their own, clicking on lessons, doing exercises, taking tests, with teachers available by e-mail and phone for support. For younger kids, this largely independent enterprise means that parents act as classroom monitors. In the company’s parlance, they’re “learning coaches.”

**Speech Therapy Online**

This free labor is a boon to K12’s business model because it conscripts a corps of committed parents as instructors, cutting out some of the cost of hiring trained teachers, with their union wages and benefits.

Sharon Aderin’s two boys also receive up to an hour a week each of speech therapy online, via headset, microphone and Web conferencing. That means that Agora gets almost $22,000 for each Aderin boy annually from their Stroudsburg school district under state funding rules. While her daughter used to receive such help, she is now getting only general-education services, for which Agora gets just under $10,000 a year.

An hour a week of speech services would cost the Stroudsburg district about $1,500 a year, according to Business Administrator Don Jennings. Agora is receiving “a windfall,” Jennings said, when it bills $22,000 a year for students receiving what he described as “very minimal services.”

**Parent as Teacher**

K12 said that children with disabilities can cost two or three times the amount it receives, and the company also delivers special-education services in therapists’ offices and at home.

Aderin said she’s delighted with the education her children are getting from Agora, noting they are scoring high on state proficiency tests. Still, she said she had no idea of the cost to taxpayers.

“Wow,” Aderin said. “For that, I could have them in private school. It seems high to me, especially since I’m doing most of the teaching.”

—Editors: Sheelah Kolhatkar, Lisa Wolfson
September 21, 2011 – When talk-show host Oprah Winfrey handed a $1 million check last September to the principal of New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy, 200 students watched the broadcast from a church and celebrated with a brass band.

Lawrence Melrose, a ninth-grader with learning and emotional disabilities, sat next door in a school office. The staff was concerned his fighting and cursing could be an embarrassment, said Shelton Joseph, his great uncle. Because he has trouble communicating, Lawrence needed intensive counseling and speech therapy, which the school didn’t provide, Joseph said. He was repeatedly suspended and told he couldn’t take the school bus with other kids, according to his lawyer.

The education of 16-year-old Lawrence represents a common complaint about privately run, taxpayer-financed charter schools: They often exclude children with serious disabilities or deny them the help they need, violating federal laws.

“They left me,” Joseph recalled the boy telling him on the day of the Winfrey celebration. “They left me out.”

Along with the academy supported by Oprah’s Angel Network - - which the entertainer used to raise money from the public – New Orleans charter schools accused of discrimination include those that are favored charities of Microsoft Corp. Chairman Bill Gates, Wal-Mart Stores Inc.’s Walton family and New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees.

Shunning special-education students helps school budgets since the average disabled child costs twice as much to serve as a nondisabled one, said Thomas Hehir, who oversaw federal special-education programs under President Bill Clinton. The practice also improves the reported academic results of schools because children with disabilities often have lower scores on standardized tests, he said.

“There’s no incentive to take these kids,” Hehir, now a Harvard University professor, said in an interview. “If you can avoid educating them, there are other things you can do with the money. You can pay people more or reduce class size.”

One New Orleans charter school recommended the expulsion of a girl with depression for cutting herself in class, records show. An administrator and an aide at another carried a distraught third-grade boy into an empty room, restraining him until he urinated on himself, according to their written accounts. A former special-education coordinator at a third school said administrators told her to stop talking to parents after she counseled them that their children were entitled to more services.
Closing Doors

Under federal law, all public schools – including charters – must educate students with disabilities. The requirement strains even the best-financed school systems, which are under pressure to accommodate special-needs students due to court decisions even as they face budget cuts.

Charters and other public schools must come up with an individual plan for every child with a disability. They are expected, when appropriate, to place special-needs students in regular classrooms with extra support, such as an aide.

If a child needs more help, the school can set up a separate class or send the child elsewhere, including a private school. The school pays the bill, and parents have a legal right to challenge each decision. Students with disabilities also have special protection when they are disciplined if the behaviors are related to their condition.

Many charter schools aren’t following these rules and procedures and are instead closing their doors to students with disabilities or declining to provide appropriate services to students like Lawrence, according to families and officials monitoring school districts.

‘Not Practical’

Charter schools, which tend to be small and receive less tax money than traditional districts, can’t afford to take on children who may cost tens of thousands of dollars to educate, said Andrew Coulson, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based nonprofit research group. The children need to stay in better-funded districts, he said.

“It’s just not practical and feasible” for charter schools to educate severely disabled children, said Coulson, whose organization favors free markets and limited government. Parents “know that every school can’t serve every child.”

Charters on average receive $9,460 per student in local, state and federal money, 19 percent less than traditional districts, in part because many don’t get money for buildings under state laws, according to a 2010 Ball State University study. Some schools get more for special-education students, though generally not enough to cover the cost of services for those with the most serious disabilities.

Government Money

About 1.8 million children – or 4 percent of public school students – attend charters, five times the number in 1999-2000, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, a nonprofit advocacy group based in Washington.

Charters last year received $14.8 billion in local, state and federal money, up from $4.5 billion in 2003, estimated Larry Maloney, president of Washington-based Aspire Consulting LLC, which analyzes public-education finances.

While charters are free from many of the bureaucratic constraints of traditional districts, such as union contracts and limits on the length of school days, they must follow U.S. antidiscrimination laws, just like other public schools.

The 1975 federal legislation now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires a “free appropriate public education” for disabled children, who make up about 12 percent of enrollment. The law mandates that schools provide services – Braille materials for the blind, tutoring sessions for dyslexia, occupational and physical therapy for autism.

Court Cases

New Orleans, Los Angeles and Washington, three districts that rely on charter schools, face claims of systemic discrimination in special-education court cases, including allegations that charters aren’t open to children with serious disabilities.

While federal data show that charters and traditional districts have similar percentages of kids in special education, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that charters in Louisiana, California, New York and Texas had fewer with more severe disabilities.

Only 1 percent of the students in Los Angeles charter schools have serious disabilities, such as autism, compared with 3.5 percent at district-operated schools, according to the system’s court-
appointed monitor. Twenty-nine out of 186 charters didn’t have a single child with serious disabilities.

Charter enrollment practices may screen out children who are hard to educate, according to reports by monitors in Los Angeles and Washington. The Gates foundation disagrees. Parents are often leery of leaving established district programs, where they are well served, said Don Shalvey, who oversees the group’s charter-school philanthropy of $475 million in the past decade.

After Katrina

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans turned to charters as a way to rebuild schools and overhaul public education. Its charter schools now enroll more than 70 percent of students, a larger share than in any other U.S. district, making it a flash point for concerns about special education.

Last October, 10 families, including Lawrence’s, filed a federal special-education discrimination suit against the state of Louisiana. The Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil-rights group in Montgomery, Alabama, represents the families. Charter schools aren’t named as defendants, and the allegations include complaints about services at conventional schools, as well.

Lawrence’s great uncle, Joseph, 57, lives in New Orleans’ hurricane-ravaged Lower Ninth Ward. Unemployed and recovering from a heart attack and stroke, he became guardian four years ago after the child’s grandmother died.

Army Dream

New Orleans Charter Science and Math, with its polo shirt and khaki uniforms and mission to send kids to college, promised special-education services and hope for Lawrence, Joseph said in an interview.

A lanky teenager who dreams of joining the Army, Lawrence reads and does math at roughly the third-grade level. Along with attention deficit disorder, he has language-related disabilities that make his speech difficult to understand.

In a 2009 evaluation at Children’s Hospital in New Orleans, doctors said Lawrence could become “a productive member of society.” They said his fighting resulted from frustration at his difficulty in communicating, and recommended special-education services “at the highest level possible,” including speech therapy, tailored assignments and extended time on tests.
Rather than provide all the services he needed, the charter school excluded him by suspending him repeatedly and keeping him from going to the Oprah celebration, according to the lawsuit.

“He needed a place that would work with him as an individual,” Joseph said. “What they gave him was the opportunity to get out.”

‘Beloved Member’

Lawrence and some other students didn’t attend the ceremony to protect children’s safety, Benjamin Marcovitz, the school’s founder and principal, said in a phone interview. Angela De Paul, an Oprah Winfrey spokeswoman, declined to comment.

Lawrence struggles because of failings of his previous schools, and the academy did everything it could to help him, including paying for a mentor, Marcovitz said. Educating the 15 percent of the school’s students with disabilities is “something we’re very passionate about,” he said.

“Lawrence is a pretty beloved member of our school community” and returned to school this year, Marcovitz said. After the lawsuit was filed and repeated meetings with the family, the school shifted its approach last December, providing the mentor, speech therapy and instituting a plan that rewarded him for good behavior, according to Eden Heilman, a Southern Poverty Law Center senior staff attorney.

Noah’s Story

Kelly Fischer, another plaintiff, toured New Orleans charter schools in March 2010 to find a spot in fourth grade for her son Noah, who is blind, autistic and eats from a tube.

Administrators from three charter schools told her they couldn’t handle Noah, according to her notes. At a fourth school, the staff said she would have to meet with its special-education coordinator to see if her son’s needs could be met. The school didn’t return messages, she said.

“You do not want your son to come here,” Laura Todaro, a counselor at Samuel J. Green Charter School, told Fischer, according to her notes.

Lafayette Academy Charter School accepted Noah, educating him primarily in a special-education class of a dozen students where he has a full-time aide, along with a teacher. Noah attends music, lunch and recess with the entire school.

“Noah came here, we provided the services he needed, period, end of story,” Mickey Landry, Lafayette’s head of school, said in a telephone interview.

Brees Donation

To entertain a visitor to his New Orleans home, Noah, a skinny 10-year-old with close-cropped brown hair, played “Mary Had a Little Lamb” on a keyboard, while Fischer sat on the floor, smiling, laughing and offering encouragement.

“I know that my son requires a lot,” Fischer said. “I also know he has some potential. But when people within the educational field, professionals, tell me that he’s too much for them, it’s kind of like telling me there’s no hope for him.”

The Samuel Green school, run by FirstLine Schools, received a $279,000 donation from the foundation of NFL quarterback Brees. Chris Stuart, Brees’s agent, declined to comment on special-education services at the schools that the football player supports.

About 15 percent of students at FirstLine schools have disabilities, according to Chief Executive Officer Jay Altman. Todaro, FirstLine’s director of counseling services, said she remembers her conversation with Fischer differently. She told Fischer and another parent with her that the schools educated children with disabilities in regular classrooms – a philosophy of “complete and total inclusion” – and didn’t have anything already in place to serve Noah, Todaro said.

‘We Always Try’

“I’m sorry if she took away that he couldn’t come here,” Todaro said in a telephone interview. “We always try to accommodate the needs of the kids.”

Once in a charter school, students with special needs can find themselves under pressure to leave, said Robyn Flanery, a parent at New Orleans’ Lusher Charter School.

In elementary school, Flanery’s daughter, Sayge Brantmeier, who plays piano, violin,
saxophone and guitar, flourished at the arts-focused Lusher where she showed promise as a songwriter. The NFL’s Brees raised more than $600,000 for Lusher through his foundation.

In middle school, doctors diagnosed Sayge with depression. She began showing mood swings and impulsive behavior. The school chastised her for having cigarettes and violating its dress code by wearing makeup, records show.

Cut With Scissors

In February 2010, the school recommended expulsion after the seventh grader cut herself with scissors in science class, “a disruption of the learning environment,” according to a letter sent to her family. Sayge was never expelled, Kathy Riedlinger, Lusher’s chief executive officer, said in a telephone interview, during which she declined to answer further questions about the case.

Under pressure from Lusher, Sayge withdrew from the school and was then repeatedly hospitalized after attempting suicide, Flanery said.

“They didn’t want to get her help,” Flanery said, her voice breaking, during in an interview in her home, decorated with her two daughters’ artwork. “So they got rid of her.”

After her family contacted the Southern Poverty Law Center, the 14-year-old returned to Lusher in January, though she was placed in a separate class, rather than in the general population, according to Heilman. The family isn’t a plaintiff in the suit.

Consequences

In another complaint about discipline in New Orleans, Leskisher Luckett said Langston Hughes Academy Charter School punished her son, Darren Butler, because he misbehaved after he didn’t get the services he needed.

To handle Darren’s attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in third grade, Langston Hughes relied on a system of “consequences,” the most severe of which was isolating him in a room, according to school records. Langston Hughes offered only half an hour of counseling, according to the New Orleans lawsuit.

When asked about discipline at his school during an interview in his New Orleans home, Darren, a 10-year-old who likes to crack jokes and fidget when he isn’t drawing or dancing, turned quiet.

“They put me in a closet,” he said.

‘Screaming and Yelling’

On May 12, 2010, after Darren harassed other students and his teacher, an administrator and aide carried him into a band practice room, according to their written accounts. Luckett described the room as soundproof and the size of a large closet.

While the administrator stood outside, the aide restrained Darren, who was “screaming and yelling the entire time” until he urinated on himself, according to their reports. Darren couldn’t breathe because the aide sat on his chest, his mother said.

Luckett, a 35-year-old cable-television dispatcher and single mother, said she pleaded for more help.

“He was too much for them to deal with,” said
Luckett, wiping away tears. “They didn’t want to provide the services. They didn’t want to do the work.”

In a telephone interview, Mark Martin, Langston Hughes school director, called the incident “unsubstantiated” and declined to comment further.

‘Superman’ Schools

The family of another child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder said he was shortchanged at KIPP schools – a charter network that operates across the U.S. San Francisco-based KIPP is featured in “Waiting for Superman,” the documentary directed by Academy Award winner Davis Guggenheim that lauds charter schools. The Gates and Walton foundations support KIPP, which stands for Knowledge is Power Program.

In the New Orleans lawsuit, the mother of a 16-year-old said he didn’t get the help he needed from KIPP Believe College Prep. Because of his ADHD, the boy, identified in the suit only as L.W., reads at the second-grade level and had failing grades and scores on state standardized tests.

The school’s special-education plan included no social work, counseling or psychological services, according to the complaint. At KIPP Renaissance High School last year, the boy received only 30 minutes of counseling a week, the suit said.

‘Serving All Students’

“We are deeply committed to serving all students,” including the 9 percent last year who had disabilities, Rhonda Kalifey-Aluise, executive director of KIPP New Orleans Schools, said in a statement.

Substandard special education goes unnoticed because schools discourage teachers from informing parents of their rights, Sarah Clifford, a former special-education coordinator at New Orleans charter school Success Preparatory Academy, said in an interview.

Four students, including one with Down syndrome and two with autism, were placed in a separate classroom last year with an aide who lacked training, she said.

One of the kids was Monica Butler’s son, 7-year-old C.J., who has a mild form of autism. Then a first-grader who did math at a third-grade level, C.J. received little more than “baby-sitting,” Butler, a 35-year-old hair stylist, said in a telephone interview.

Clifford said she told parents to complain because their children weren’t getting services. School co-founders St. Claire Adriaan and Niloy Gangopadhyay warned her to stop talking with families outside of their presence, she said.

Money Tree

“I was told they don’t have the money to provide the services,” Clifford said. “They basically told me, ‘Where was the money tree?’” She quit in December 2010 because she objected to the charter’s approach, she said.

In a joint telephone interview, the co-founders said they never let financial concerns interfere with providing services.

“I am shocked that our model is being questioned,” Gangopadhyay said.

Adriaan said Clifford resigned after the school criticized her job performance. The state determined the aide in the class Clifford cited was qualified to provide services, he said. C.J. returned in second grade, where he has a full-time aide and is educated in regular and separate classes, according to the founders and Monica Butler.

To avoid conflicts over special education, charter schools need to form cooperatives so they can afford to handle the most serious cases, said Todd Ziebarth, a vice president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, which receives funding from the Gates and Walton foundations. That would give charters the scale to offer special programs comparable to larger school districts.

Central Lottery

New Orleans is pushing to establish cooperatives, said John White, superintendent of the Louisiana Recovery School District, which oversees most of the city’s schools. He said he favors a centralized lottery to encourage kids with disabilities to apply more broadly and make it easier to monitor whether
they’re given a fair shot.

Students unwelcome at charters end up at traditional schools, leaving districts with disproportionate workloads and higher costs, said Frederick Weintraub, the court-appointed monitor of the Los Angeles school system.

“If you’re going to be a school in the community,” Weintraub said in a phone interview, “you ought to serve all the kids in the community.”

–Editors: Jonathan Kaufman, Lisa Wolfson
November 15, 2011 – In Silicon Valley, Bullis elementary school accepts one in six kindergarten applicants, offers Chinese and asks families to donate $5,000 per child each year. Parents include Ken Moore, son of Intel Corp.’s co-founder, and Steven Kirsch, inventor of the optical mouse.

Bullis isn’t a high-end private school. It’s a taxpayer-funded, privately run public school, part of the charter-school movement that educates 1.8 million U.S. children. While charters are heralded for offering underprivileged kids an alternative to failing U.S. districts, Bullis gives an admissions edge to residents of parts of Los Altos Hills, where the median home is worth $1 million and household income is $219,000, four times the state average.

“Bullis is a boutique charter school,” said Nancy Gill, a Los Altos education consultant who helps parents choose schools. “It could bring a whole new level of inequality to public education.”

The growing ranks of U.S. charter schools in affluent suburbs are pitting neighbor against neighbor and, critics say, undercutting the original goals of the charter movement. Families who benefit cherish extensive academic offerings and small classes. Those who don’t say their children are being shortchanged because the schools are siphoning off money and the strongest students, leaving school districts with higher expenses and fewer resources for poor, immigrant and special-needs kids.

Bullis Charter School offers its 465 students a rich, interdisciplinary education unavailable in regular schools, said Principal Wanny Hersey. She compared Bullis to Silicon Valley companies such as Apple Inc. – whose leader, the late Steve Jobs, grew up in Los Altos.

Valley’s Spirit

“It really speaks to the spirit of the valley, trying to be a model for innovation and unleashing human potential,” Hersey said in an interview.

Bullis’s popularity shows that even parents in wealthy, top-performing school districts such as Los Altos have become disenchanted and are seeking alternatives. Bullis has higher state standardized test scores and offers more art and extracurricular activities than the Los Altos district, which is cutting music and increasing class size. Bullis has achieved this success while receiving about 60 percent of the conventional system’s public funding.

Every child deserves a good education, Buffy Poon, a Bullis mother of three and former EBay Inc. executive and Merrill Lynch & Co. banker, said in an interview.

“It takes all of us, the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ (I cringe to use such blunt distinctions), to help improve the world.” Poon wrote in an e-mail to the Santa Clara County Board of Education, which oversees the school.

Netflix Founder

Parents in Los Altos Hills created Bullis in 2003 because they were angry after the district closed their neighborhood school, said Mark Breier, a founder of
schools is in a suburb, including affluent communities like Los Altos, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. In Minnesota, where the charter school movement began in 1992, charters in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region initially focused on black, urban neighborhoods and have since spread into wealthy suburbs, where schools are often predominantly white, according to research from the University of Minnesota Law School’s Institute on Race and Poverty.

A quarter of U.S. charter schools don’t participate in the federal free and reduced-price lunch program, compared with 2 percent at conventional public schools, according to a 2010 study by the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles.

**Racial Balance**

That means they aren’t serving a significant low-income population, Erica Frankenberg, co-author of the report and an assistant professor at Pennsylvania State University, said in an interview.

California’s 1992 charter law – the second in the U.S., after Minnesota’s – says schools should place “special emphasis” on “academically low-achieving” students and make an effort to reflect the “racial and ethnic balance” of the population in its district.

Last year, about 2 percent of Bullis students spoke English as a second language, compared with 11 percent in the district, county data show. Bullis had about half the percentage of Hispanic students or those with disabilities.

The charter school makes it tough for non English-speaking students to attend because it doesn’t have materials in Spanish, Doug Smith, a trustee on the Los Altos school board, said in an interview. Lower-income families aren’t even aware that the school is an alternative, he said.

**First Charter**

Last year, U.S. charter schools received $14.8 billion in local, state and federal money, up from $4.5 billion in 2003, according to an estimate by Washington-based Aspire Consulting LLC, which analyzes public-education finances.

One out of five of the country’s 5,200 charter schools is in a suburb, including affluent communities like Los Altos, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. In Minnesota, where the charter school movement began in 1992, charters in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region initially focused on black, urban neighborhoods and have since spread into wealthy suburbs, where schools are often predominantly white, according to research from the University of Minnesota Law School’s Institute on Race and Poverty.

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Bullis, “Is it a private school?”

“Bullis doesn’t fit with the spirit of the law,” said Gary Rummelhoff, a former president of the Santa Clara County Board of Education who sits on the board of a charter school in nearby San Jose. “It only existed to serve a very wealthy area.”

Bullis doesn’t discriminate because it accepts children through a random lottery and broadly reflects the demographics of the community, said Moore, son of Intel co-founder Gordon Moore.

“Bullis is a public school, free and open to all,” said Moore, who chairs the Bullis board.

The school plans to translate materials into Spanish and advertise in Spanish-language papers, he said. Bullis offers free lunches to low-income students and doesn’t participate in the federal program because of administrative costs, Hersey said. Less than 1 percent of students would qualify for the program, she said.

Broadway and Stocks

On a recent school day at Bullis, a kindergarten class studied Mandarin. Second-graders, sitting cross-legged under pictures of Bach, Mozart, Liszt and Stravinsky, learned to read music. A seventh-grade math class worked on algebra – a year or two before most U.S. schools – while an advanced student did linear equations at a high-school level. The school offers electives in Broadway dance and the stock market.

“We’re lucky to have so many different things we can study here,” said third-grader Ishani Sood, 8, taking a break from her Mandarin class.

A foundation set up to help fund the school asks Bullis parents to donate at least $5,000 for each child they enroll. Those who can’t afford to pay should discuss the reason with a foundation member, “recognizing that other school families will need to make up the difference,” the foundation said on its website.

‘Aggressive’ Requests

In an interview, Anna Song, a member of the Santa Clara County Board of Education, said she received about 20 phone calls from parents who felt pressured to give because of repeated solicitation in school parking lots, e-mails and phone calls.

“They are very aggressive in asking parents for money,” said Laurie Uhler, a former Bullis parent. “If you don’t pay it, word gets out that you aren’t doing your part.” Parents often refer to the payments as “tuition,” she said in an interview.

Donations are “purely voluntary,” Moore said. They are necessary because Bullis receives less public money than the district, which has a foundation that asks for $1,000 per child, Moore said. The Los Altos School District last year spent about $10,000 per student, according to state data. Bullis receives about $6,000 in public funding, primarily because it doesn’t qualify for money from a local tax that the school district receives. On average U.S. charter schools get 19 percent less local, state and federal money than traditional districts, according to a 2010 Ball State University study.

District Cuts

The Los Altos school system is cutting back. Since 2009, the district’s budget has fallen 9 percent to about $40 million. Los Altos cut 20 teaching and...
other positions and eliminated many of its music programs. Maximum class sizes in kindergarten through third grade rose to 25 from 20. Bullis averages fewer than 20.

Along with leaving the district with the hardest-to-serve students, Bullis-related expenses have hurt the Los Altos school system in other ways, said Randy Kenyon, an assistant superintendent.

For each district student who attends Bullis, the system loses about $5,000 in per-pupil funding, Kenyon said. Los Altos pays about $300,000 a year for the school’s facilities, he said.

Hersey said Bullis can provide its enriched education with the same amount of funding as the district, including donations, because it has less bureaucracy and overhead.

Bullis last month won an appeal of a lawsuit against the school district saying Los Altos must provide more space and buildings under the state’s charter-school law. Bullis currently operates out of portable classrooms. The case cost Bullis $900,000 in legal fees, according to its tax filings. The district spent about $700,000.

‘Sense of Entitlement’

Song, who originally supported the school, changed her mind when Bullis’s charter came up for renewal last month.

In an open letter, Song cited the school’s “sense of entitlement and lack of understanding of what it means to be part of public education.”

Bullis “performed abysmally in serving socioeconomically disadvantaged students,” she wrote. After a more than four-hour session, attended by 200 people, many of them Bullis parents wearing school T-shirts, the Santa Clara County school board voted to renew the charter, 5 to 2.

During a break, Arash Baratloo, a Google Inc. software engineer and Bullis parent, said he considered the $5,000 donation requested every year by Bullis to be “money well spent.” He previously sent his child to a private school where tuition was about $25,000 a year.

“It could be considered a bargain, but that’s not why we came,” Baratloo said. “We were looking for the best education out there, and that’s what we found.”

—Editors: Jonathan Kaufman, Lisa Wolfson
December 22, 2011 – At Dugsi Academy, a public school in St. Paul, Minnesota, girls wearing traditional Muslim headscarves and flowing ankle-length skirts study Arabic and Somali. The charter school educates “East African children in the Twin Cities,” its website says. Every student is black.

At Twin Cities German Immersion School, another St. Paul charter, children gather under a map of “Deutschland,” study with interns from Germany, Austria and Switzerland and learn to dance the waltz. Ninety percent of its students are white.

Six decades after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down “separate but equal” schools for blacks and whites, segregation is growing because of charter schools, privately run public schools that educate 1.8 million U.S. children. While charter-school leaders say programs targeting ethnic groups enrich education, they are isolating low-achievers and damaging diversity, said Myron Orfield, a lawyer and demographer.

“It feels like the Deep South in the days of Jim Crow segregation,” said Orfield, who directs the University of Minnesota Law School’s Institute on Race & Poverty. “When you see an all-white school and an all-black school in the same neighborhood in this day and age, it’s shocking.”

Charter schools are more segregated than traditional public schools, according to a 2010 report by the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles. Researchers studied 40 states, the District of Columbia, and 39 metropolitan areas. In particular, higher percentages of charter-school students attend what the report called “racially isolated” schools, where 90 percent or more students are from disadvantaged minority groups.

Charter-School Birthplace

In Minnesota, the birthplace of the U.S. charter-school movement, the divide is more than black and white.

St. Paul’s Hmong College Prep Academy, 99 percent Asian-American in the past school year, immerses students “in the rich heritage that defines Hmong culture.” Its Academia Cesar Chavez School – 93 percent Hispanic – promises bilingual education “by advocating Latino cultural values in an environment of familia and community.” Minneapolis’s Four Directions Charter School, 94 percent Native American, black and Hispanic, promotes “lifelong learning for American Indian students.”

Charter schools, which select children through lotteries, are open to all who apply, said Abdulkadir Osman, Dugsi’s executive director.

“Some people call it segregation,” Osman said. “This is the parent’s choice. They can go anywhere they want. We are offering families something unique.”

Nobody ‘Forced’

That’s a “significant difference” between Minnesota charters and segregated schools in the 1950s South, said Joe Nathan, director of the Center
for School Change at Macalester College in St. Paul. “Nobody is being forced to go to these schools,” said Nathan, who helped write Minnesota’s 1991 charter-school law.

Ever since Horace Mann crusaded for free universal education in the 19th century, public schools have been hailed as the U.S. institutions that bring together people of disparate backgrounds.

The atomization of charter schools coincides with growing U.S. diversity. Americans of other races will outnumber whites by 2042, the Census Bureau projects.

Even after a divided Supreme Court in 2007 ruled that schools couldn’t consider race in making pupil assignments to integrate schools, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy urged districts to find other ways to fight “de facto resegregation” and “racial isolation.”

“The nation’s schools strive to teach that our strength comes from people of different races, creeds, and cultures uniting in commitment to the freedom of all,” Kennedy wrote.

**Diverse Workplaces**

Citing Kennedy’s words, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Attorney General Eric Holder this month called for schools – including charters – to combat growing segregation.

Along with breeding “educational inequity,” racially-divided schools deny children the experiences they need to succeed in an increasingly diverse workplace, Duncan said in announcing voluntary guidelines for schools.

Charter schools may specialize in serving a single culture as long as they have open admissions, and there’s no evidence of discrimination, said Russlynn Ali, assistant education secretary for civil rights.

The education department is encouraging charter schools to promote diversity. Charters could expand recruiting and consider lotteries that give extra weight to disadvantaged groups, such as families living in low-income neighborhoods or children who speak English as a second language, Ali said in a phone interview.

**Immigrant Magnet**

Minnesota, 85 percent white, is a case study of the nation’s growing diversity. Since the 1970s, Minneapolis and St. Paul have become a magnet for Hmong refugees, who fought alongside Americans in the Vietnam War. In the 1990s, Somalis sought refuge from civil war.

St. Paul, where the nation’s first charter school opened in 1992, is 16 percent black, 10 percent Hispanic and 15 percent Asian-American, according to the U.S Census Bureau.

Charter schools should be similarly diverse, recommended a 1988 report that provided the groundwork for Minnesota’s charter-school law.

“We envision the creation of schools which, by design, would invite a dynamic mix of students by race and ability levels,” the Citizens League, a St. Paul-based nonprofit public-policy group, wrote in the report.

**‘Great Failure’**

Instead, in the 2009-2010 school year, three quarters of the Minneapolis and St. Paul region’s 127 charter schools were “highly segregated,” according to the University of Minnesota Law School’s race institute. Forty-four percent of schools were 80 percent or more non-white, and 32 percent, mostly white.

“It’s been a great failure that the most segregated schools in Minnesota are charter schools,” said
Mindy Greiling, a state representative who lobbied for the charter-school law when she was a member of a suburban school board in the 1980s. “It breaks my heart.”

Segregation is typical nationwide. Seventy percent of black charter-school students across the country attended “racially isolated” schools, twice as many as the share in traditional public schools, according to the report from the Civil Rights Project at UCLA.

Half of all Latino charter-school students went to these intensely segregated schools, the study found. In the West and the South, the two most racially diverse regions of the country, “charters serve as havens for white flight from public schools,” the report said.

Hmong Roots

They also serve as havens for minority students who need extra help, said leaders of Minnesota charter schools.

Christianna Hang, founder of Hmong College Prep Academy, said she designed the school so children, mostly first-generation Americans, didn’t feel adrift in public schools as she did when she arrived in the U.S. in 1980.

In the Hmong academy’s central hallway, a tapestry depicts families living in Laos, fleeing the Vietnam War and arriving in America. The school’s roughly 700 students, in grades kindergarten through 12th grade, learn Hmong.

“I came here for my parents as much as for me,” said Mai Chee Xiong, a 17-year-old senior. “I was very Americanized. I wanted to be able to speak with them in our language, and I wanted to understand my roots.”

In the 2009-2010 school year, 26 percent of Hmong Academy students met or exceeded standards on state math exams, while 30 percent did so in reading. About half passed those tests in the St. Paul Public School District.

Harvard Banners

To raise expectations, classrooms adopt colleges, hanging banners from Harvard University, Yale University and Dartmouth College over their doors.

“If we don’t do something to help these kids, they will get lost,” Hang said. “If they drop out of school, they will never become productive citizens, and there’s no way they will achieve the American dream.”

Dugsi Academy, the school for East Africans, and Twin Cities German Immersion School make for some of St. Paul’s sharpest contrasts.

Until this school year, the two schools were neighbors, across a busy commercial thoroughfare in a racially diverse neighborhood. At different times of the day, the kids used a city playground in front of the German school for recess. Dugsi has since moved three miles away, across a highway from the Hmong academy.

The German Immersion School is a bright, airy former factory with exposed brick and high ceilings.

Fluent German

“Eva, was ist das?” kindergarten teacher Elena Heindl asked one morning earlier this month as she pointed a red flashlight to letters, eliciting the name of each one in German.

To succeed at the school, students must be fluent in German to enroll, unless they enter before second or third grade, Julie Elias, a parent, told prospective families on a tour this month.

“You can’t just move into the neighborhood if you want to go to our school,” Elias said. The school is legally required to take anyone picked in its lottery, though it counsels parents against enrolling in older grades without German knowledge, said Annika Fjelstad, its director.

The school, which includes many families with one parent who speaks German or that have German relatives, holds special events at the Germanic-American Institute in a $1.3 million St. Paul house with a ballroom. Children like to call the institute “our school’s mansion,” said Chris Weimholt, another parent giving the tour.

No Buses

In the 2009-2010 school year, 87 percent of children at the German school passed state math tests and 84 percent did so in reading, according to the
Minnesota Department of Education. Fifteen percent qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program, compared with 71 percent in St. Paul. The school doesn’t offer bus transportation, so most parents drive, often carpooling, Elias said.

The language requirement and lack of transportation prevents poor families from attending, said Greiling, the state legislator, who has toured the school. “A regular public school could never have that kind of bar,” she said. “It seems an odd thing that this would be legal.”

The German program doesn’t have buses because they would cost $100,000 a year, too heavy a burden for an expanding school of 274 that wants to maintain classes of 20 students, Fjelstad said. An immersion school can’t take kids who aren’t fluent after early grades, she said.

In February, the school formed an “inclusivity” task force to find ways to make the school more reflective of the community, Fjelstad said. The school will try to improve recruiting through its relationship with community organizations, such as a neighboring YMCA, she said.

International View

The school offers a different kind of diversity, said Weimholt, a nurse whose grandfather emigrated from Germany after World War I. “It doesn’t look diverse by skin color. But families straddle two different continents. The school truly has an international perspective.”

So does Dugsi Academy. Children learn Arabic and Somali along with English and traditional academic subjects. A caller last month heard no English on a school voice mail.

One morning in late November, a sixth-grade social-studies class discussed immigration with 28-year-old Khaleefah Abdallah, who himself fled Somalia 12 years ago. The boys wore jeans and sweatshirts. The girls sported hijabs, or traditional Muslim head coverings with skirts or long pants.

‘Melting Pot’

Abdallah asked his class about the idea of the American “melting pot:” immigrants assimilating into U.S. culture. He suggested another metaphor, a “salad bowl,” where people from different backgrounds mix while retaining their own identity.

“I agree with the salad bowl,” Fadumo Ahmed, 12, dressed in a black hijab and sneakers with pink laces, told the class. “We all come from different places, but we still want to keep our culture.”

Students shared stories of the challenge of co-existing in mainstream America.

Ahmed Hassan, 12, complained about a boy on a city playground who made fun of the long traditional robe he wore one Friday.

“He told me it looked like a skirt,” Hassan said. Abdallah told the class that, under the U.S. constitution, Americans have the freedom to express themselves through their clothing.

Test Scores

Dugsi, a low-slung red-brick building in an office park, has about 300 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Almost all qualify for federal free or reduced lunches, according to the state. Only 19 percent passed state math exams in the 2009-2010 school year, while 40 percent did so in reading.

The school’s test scores reflect families’ backgrounds. said Osman, the Dugsi director and a former employee of the U.S. Embassy in Somalia,
who emigrated to the U.S. in 1993. Parents work as cab drivers, nurses and grocers, Osman said. Many had no formal schooling.

It would be better if one day Somali students could go to school with children from other backgrounds, Osman said.

“That’s the beauty of America – Latinos, Caucasians, African-Americans and Native Americans, all together in the same building, eating lunch and in the same classrooms,” Osman said. “It would be something wonderful. That’s what I’m thinking of for my own kids and grandchildren.”

–Editors: Jonathan Kaufman, Lisa Wolfson
April 13, 2011 – The recipe sounds familiar: merit pay for teachers, rigorous testing, national academic standards. Is it a school turnaround effort in New York City, New Orleans, or Los Angeles? No, it’s happening in Shanghai.

Over the past decade, China has been able to achieve what has eluded generations of educators in the U.S., who have had to contend with political feuds, a history of local control of education policy and the inherent difficulties of reaching consensus in a democracy, Bloomberg Businessweek reports in its April 18 edition.

Shanghai, China’s largest city, with more than 20 million people, topped all rivals in the latest Programme for International Student Assessment, a closely watched gauge of educational achievement. The U.S. ranked 31st in math among the countries and regions tested, 23rd in science and 17th in reading. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan is envious of the Chinese.

“They took my playbook,” Duncan said in a telephone interview. “China is not just doing well in Shanghai. As a country, their pace of improvement is breathtaking.”

Consider the parallels: Shanghai used a school-renovation program to close its worst schools, according to a December report from the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which administers the international achievement test.

‘Master Teachers’

Duncan is pushing U.S. states and districts to fire principals and teachers in the worst-performing schools. To steel politicians’ resolve, he dangled more than $4 billion in school-improvement grants. His department asked for an additional $600 million for this program for next year.

Shanghai awards pay increases to “master teachers,” who are identified by administrators in schools with high scores on exit exams, said Andreas Schleicher, who oversees the OECD test.

Duncan also favors merit pay for instructors. His Race to the Top grants go to states that incorporate student achievement into teacher evaluations. A total of $4.35 billion in such grants were awarded in 2010. In his budget, President Barack Obama has asked for $900 million in additional funding for similar grants next year.

Authorities in Shanghai designed a curriculum to prepare students for rigorous college entrance exams. More than 80 percent of the city’s college-age students are admitted into universities, versus an average of 24 percent for all of China, according to the OECD. Duncan’s Race to the Top rewards states that adopt common academic standards developed by U.S. governors and school chiefs. Obama wants the U.S. to lead the world in college graduation rates by 2020.
Union Resistance

The U.S. can’t move as fast as China because of resistance from teachers unions and parents, said Russ Whitehurst, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington-based nonprofit public-policy group. Yet Whitehurst, who served in the Education Department under President George W. Bush, doesn’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing.

“Lots of people in education reform get themselves tied into knots in praise of the ability of an authoritarian regime to get things done,” Whitehurst said. “What gets lost is the price associated with the ability to move forward without the need for democratic dialogue.”

Randi Weingarten, president of the 1.5-million-member American Federation of Teachers, has visited China and was struck by how much confidence parents there have in the education system. She contrasts that to the U.S., where bashing teachers unions has become a favorite sport of politicians.

No ‘Snarkiness’

“In every country that is outpacing us, teaching and teachers are held in high regard,” Weingarten said. “You don’t hear any of this demonization or snarkiness about teachers.”

China’s education system draws criticism from some quarters because of its heavy emphasis on rote learning. Zhang Lin, a high school student in Shanghai, has to slog through four hours of homework every day. That leaves no time for extracurricular activities, including the “Brain Olympics” that her school sponsors. “Most of my homework is reciting or memorizing all kinds of stuff,” the 15-year-old said. “The homework takes up almost all of my time.”

Yong Zhao, an education professor at the University of Oregon, cautions that emulating China may dull America’s competitive advantage: creativity.

“When you hold Shanghai up as a model, you have to worry about whether the cure can kill you,” said Zhao, who specializes in comparative studies of education. “You ignore what has been sacrificed.”

—With assistance from Helen Yuan and Irene Shen in Shanghai

—Editors: Cristina Lindblad, Robin D. Schatz
March 31, 2011 – Taxpayer-funded KIPP schools, praised in the film “Waiting for Superman,” succeed in sending poor graduates to college because the lowest-performing students drop out or don’t enroll at all, a study found.

KIPP academies have higher attrition rates than traditional public schools and enroll fewer students with disabilities and limited English skills, according to the study released today by Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo and Columbia University’s Teachers College in New York. KIPP oversees a network of 99 charter schools, publicly funded institutions operated by outside organizations, and enrolls more than 27,000 students in 20 states and the District of Columbia.

The American Federation of Teachers, with 1.6 million members, is among the groups concerned that charter schools may “cherry pick” the best students, according to a union policy paper. The new study shows that KIPP isn’t educating the same population as local districts, undercutting its claims for superior academic performance, said Gary Miron, the lead author.

“There’s a perception that KIPP is a model for turning around troubled schools,” Miron, a professor at Western Michigan University, said in a telephone interview. “That’s a myth.”

**Flawed Methodology**

The study relies on inaccurate data and flawed methodology, said Steve Mancini, a spokesman for San Francisco-based KIPP, which stands for Knowledge is Power Program. Its approach, which feature a longer school day and three weeks of summer instruction, accounts for its superior results, he said.

“We attract a very motivated group of teachers who believe that not only all students can learn, but all students will learn,” Mancini said in a telephone interview. “We have a strong student culture. We set high standards for the kids.”

KIPP’s financial backers include the philanthropic foundations of the late Gap Inc. founder Donald Fisher, Microsoft Corp. Chairman Bill Gates, KB Home co-founder Eli Broad and Wal-Mart Stores Inc.’s Walton family.

Teachers Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin founded KIPP in 1994 after completing their work with “Teach for America,” which sends college graduates into public schools. The first academy opened in Houston and the second in New York City’s South Bronx. “Waiting for Superman,” directed by Academy Award winner Davis Guggenheim, chronicles how families enter lotteries to enroll in KIPP and other charter schools.

**Point of Agreement**

KIPP and the critical researchers agree the schools have strong academic results and draw more than their share of poor families.

More than 85 percent of KIPP alumni have gone to college, and more than 80 percent are eligible for federal free or reduced-price meals programs, according to its website.

The researchers said KIPP’s success results primarily from student selection and retention. Fifteen percent of KIPP students leave each year, five times the rate of the school districts from which the organization draws students, the study found, citing federal data.

Forty percent of black males depart KIPP from sixth- to eighth-grade and more low-performing kids leave and aren’t replaced, the study said.

KIPP runs schools for students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Sixty of the 99 are middle schools for fifth- to eighth-graders, according to the program’s website.
**English Skills**

About 12 percent of KIPP students have limited English skills, compared with 19.2 percent in the districts from which KIPP draws students, the study found. About 6 percent were classified as disabled students needing special education services, half the level in the regular public schools.

KIPP is working to recruit more students with disabilities and limited English skills, Mancini said.

KIPP’s annual attrition rate is 12 percent, Mancini said. He cited a KIPP-commissioned June 2010 study from Princeton, New Jersey-based Mathematica Policy Research Inc., which found that KIPP’s attrition rate wasn’t higher than that of the schools that students would have attended.

The Mathematica study looked at student-level data, while the Western Michigan research relied on publicly available federal information for districts and schools, Miron and Mancini said. The federal information includes errors and has missing data, Mancini said.

**Includes ‘Guestimates’**

For that reason, the Michigan study includes “guesstimates,” Mancini said. “They are not precise numbers.”

KIPP schools are also more richly funded than traditional public schools, the Western Michigan and Columbia study found. KIPP received $12,731 per student, compared with $9,579 for the average U.S. charter school and $11,937 for the average U.S. public-school district, according to researchers’ analysis of 2007-2008 federal data.

Adding another $5,760 in private contributions, KIPP received an average of $18,491 per student, or $6,500 more than local districts, the researchers said, citing public tax filings. The higher funding levels contradict the idea that KIPP can serve as a model for cash-strapped public schools, Miron said.

The researchers’ figure for private donations is about twice as high as the reality, said Mancini. The study used incomplete data and included money raised for capital projects, he said. KIPP typically gets $9,000 to $10,000 per student in public money, he said.

“We’re not spending demonstrably more” than local districts,” Mancini said.

—Editors: Robin D. Schatz, Andrew Pollack
August 8, 2011 – President Barack Obama’s administration will bypass Congress to override the nation’s main public-education law, granting waivers to states if they agree to his schools agenda.

States can avoid the No Child Left Behind law’s 2014 deadline for achieving 100 percent proficiency on standardized state reading and math exams if they sign off on yet-unspecified administration “reforms,” U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan and White House domestic policy adviser Melody Barnes said Aug. 5 in a press briefing.

Saying Congress has failed to take action to fix the nine-year-old law, the U.S. Education Department will offer states waivers as soon as this school year. Duncan opposes the legislation’s focus on holding schools accountable only through testing proficiency; which he has said encourages dumbed-down standards. About 80 percent of U.S. schools risk being labeled failing if the law isn’t changed.

“I can’t overemphasize how loud the outcry is for us to do something now,” Duncan said.

Duncan in June said the administration would grant the waivers if Congress failed to approve legislation changing it by the start of this school year – a deadline the legislature isn’t likely to meet.

**Washington Gridlock**

The administration’s waivers “could undermine” congressional efforts to change No Child Left Behind, John Kline, the Minnesota Republican who chairs the House education committee, said in a statement. Kline said he will be monitoring Duncan’s actions “to ensure they are consistent with the law and congressional intent.”

Kline’s committee is working on a series of bills to change the law. They include promoting the growth of charter schools – privately run public schools – and cutting spending by eliminating half of the federal education programs under the current law.

Tom Harkin, the Iowa Democrat and Senate education committee chairman, said he still hopes the Senate can produce a “comprehensive bill” reauthorizing No Child Left Behind.

“That said, it is undeniable that this Congress faces real challenges reaching bipartisan, bicameral agreement on anything,” Harkin said in a statement.

Duncan’s approach differs from past education department waivers – supported by many Republicans as a way to ease regulatory burdens – because the agency is attaching conditions to promote administration policies, said Jack Jennings, president of the Washington-based Center on Education Policy, a nonpartisan research organization.

**Executive Authority**

“This is a bold use of executive authority by Duncan,” Jennings, a former general counsel for the House education committee, said in a telephone interview. “Duncan is certainly determined to bring about school reform while he’s in office.”

No Child Left Behind, signed into law in 2002, is former President George W. Bush’s signature education initiative. Officially called the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the law requires schools to show that all students are proficient on state standardized reading and math tests by 2014. Schools also must demonstrate yearly progress toward that goal or risk losing federal money.

Though specifics haven’t been set for the waivers, schools would be released from that deadline and annual progress requirements if they agree to such changes as raising academic standards and evaluating teacher effectiveness based on student achievement and other measures, Duncan said. The department will make details public in September.

“We can’t afford to do nothing,” Duncan said.

—Editors: Lisa Wolfson, Donna Alvarado

*) Obama to Bypass Congress in Easing No Child Left Behind Law
* By John Hechinger • Bloomberg News