

New Voices Middle School Proposal to the Kinder Morgan Foundation

ORGANIZATION	New Voices Middle School/M/S. 443 Parent Association, Inc.	330 18 th Street Brooklyn, NY 11215	718-965-0390
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PROGRAM NAME	Relevant Readers		
REQUEST AMOUNT	\$5,000		

History and Mission

New Voices was established to provide 6th-8th graders students with a challenging educational environment in which instruction in core academic subjects is infused with and enhanced by the integration of the visual and performing arts. New Voices offers electives and concentrated instruction in the arts disciplines of visual arts, dance, instrumental music, chorus, theater, and graphic arts.

New Voices was originally a program within M.S. 142; it became an independent middle school in 2003. Over the last 10 years, under the leadership of Principal Frank Giordano, the school has built a solid reputation as a solid, balanced academic and performance arts school. Unlike other selective middle schools, where students are admitted based on an existing talent, New Voices accepts students who want to develop an artistic specialty. This alone is a feat as training middle school students to, for example, how to play an instrument for the first time, is challenging...but New Voices does this with flair and much success. As a result, graduating 8th graders gravitate to highly respected NYC arts-specialized high schools, as well as schools with recognized academic programs.

New Voices engages 531 students in a rigorous arts and academic curriculum. Demographically, the student body breaks down as follows: 40% -Hispanic; 27% -White; 15% -African American; 18%- mix of multi-racial, Asian, American Indian, and others not identified. Almost 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced school lunch. The federal Department of Education cites New Voices as a low-income school. It is inclusive, catering to students at all academic levels and those with special learning needs and varied learning styles. It gets high marks from NYC DOE for reducing the achievement gap between special and general education students.

Programs, activities, and accomplishments Mr. Giordano emphasizes academic proficiency, as evidenced by the intensive programming described below.

- **Mathematics:** New Voices balances basic skills and conceptual understanding as students build new mathematical ideas, and then practically apply these skills and knowledge through a workshop model. The school offers Regents math classes.
- **Humanities:** The school uses an interdisciplinary, understanding-based approach to ELA and Social Studies instruction. Reading, writing, and the study of history, geography, and current events are blended together.
- **Science:** This subject engages students in hands-on lab activities, as well as in an integration of literacy and mathematics. The school offers Regent science classes.
- **Technology:** The Computer Graphic Arts studio features a full class set of iMac computers with software that includes HyperStudio and Adobe Photoshop. Students use a computerized keyboard in music class. The school has several mobile rolling computer labs, i-Pad carts, and smart boards for teacher and student use. Students use an online math program called ALEKS.
- **Foreign Language:** Eighth graders have four periods a week of Latin.

The school's arts programming is aligned with the NYC DOE *Blueprint for Teaching and Learning*, and supports the *Common Core Learning Standards* in ELA and Math. Sixth graders have classes in all arts subjects in order to develop their understanding of the unique qualities of each art form, and experience and appreciate the elements that unite the arts across disciplines. In the 7th grade, students select one arts discipline as their "major" that they will continue through the 8th grade, delving with much depth into their choice. Students also prepare and document work in portfolios that are critical for specialized high schools' admissions requirements. Throughout the year, students in all grades have a variety of opportunities to present their work to the greater community.

New Voices boasts myriad accomplishments, such as:

- The NYC DOE Office of Arts and Special Projects named New Voices as one of ten Exemplar Sites for Arts Education.

- According to a rating posted on *The Schoolboards.com*, New Voices placed among the Top 20 Brooklyn Middle Schools based on the 2013 NY State Math & ELA tests.
- New Voices received an A on its 2011-2012 and 2012-13 DOE Progress Reports.
- In the 2011 *NY Times* article “As Best Schools Compete for Best Performers, Students May Be Left Behind,” New Voices is featured as among the more desired Brooklyn District 15 middle schools.
- In the 2012 *WNYC* piece “Middle School Grades Reflect High School Prep,” New Voices is cited as a school that excels in preparing middle school students for high school
- *Inside Schools.org*, in its October 2012 piece “Noteworthy special education: middle schools,” places New Voices among five Brooklyn schools noted for its special education services, in this case collaborative team teaching.
- In 2010, *The Blackboard Awards: Honoring Excellence in Education* recognized New Voices as a Rising Star Middle School.
- In 2008, the *Daily News* cited New Voices as one of the Brooklyn schools considered to be one of NYC’s best public schools.

Statement of Need As noted above, New Voices is an inclusive school serving students at all academic levels. Just over 20% benefit from special education services; at least 1/3 in each academic class has one or more learning needs. Teachers are challenged to provide instruction and academic support to students with specific learning needs to boost their performance and skill, while ensuring the learning process is enjoyable, engaging and meaningful. These factors play a particular role for Ms. Hannah Labovitch, the 7th grade humanities teacher seeking foundation support to build struggling readers’ literacy skills. She underscores other obstacles that impede the literacy development of at least 60 students across her classes:

- 40% have individualized education plans as a result of literacy disabilities, emotional and behavioral issues, and attention deficit challenges.
- 70% are of diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds: There are first and second generation Latinos representing countries that include the Dominican Republic, Central America, and Mexico. Other students have their roots in the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Russia. Thus, many students are bilingual and emergent bilingual. Some are fluent in neither English nor their first language due to interrupted or inadequate early schooling. Others are the first in their family to learn English, and thus are “translators” for their parents.
- Some of the students in this class will be the first in their family to go to and graduate from high school.

The impact of these factors-coupled with the absence of books that captivate struggling readers’ interests, are culturally relevant, and are recently published-is the under development of the skills and desire necessary for life long reading pursuits. While students do make gains in ELA and the humanities, many do not reach their literacy potential.

Program Description Relevant Readers will involve 60 reluctant and struggling 7th grade readers (representing varied neighborhoods in Brooklyn’s School District 15) in classroom book clubs to read newly released and culturally relevant books. These small in-class clubs bring together students who share similar reading interests and levels. For Relevant Readers, a collection of literature that appeals to these students is what a foundation grant would enable Ms. Labovitch to purchase.

The project goal is to keep students engaged in and excited about reading, and build their skills through literature that is meaningful to them. With support from the teacher, students read and discuss a novel that not only matches their reading skill, but that also helps them to connect to their cultural backgrounds; introduces them to protagonists to whom they can relate; and ultimately ignites their interest, curiosity, and imagination. Ultimately, the book clubs:

- Motivate students to keep up with their daily reading requirements
- Help students develop and apply skills of participation that develop their habits as lifelong readers
- Make reading a community activity that engages student proclivity for socializing, therefore increasing interest and success in reading
- Build student confidence and autonomy, demonstrated when they eventually choose their club book, assign readings, direct discussions, and self-assess
- Provide a bridge for students to read more difficult texts over time
- Promote a student-centered literacy model
- Aid reading comprehension in students at all reading levels
- Extend critical thinking and improve communication skills through discussions of books, ideas, literature, etc.

Goals, objectives and tactics

Relevant Readers is designed to achieve the following goals:

- Promote the joy of reading among struggling 7th grade readers
- Advance students' literacy skills

The program's specific objectives are to:

- Raise the reading grades and scores (to demonstrate fluency and proficiency) of 60 7th grade struggling readers by at least 50%
- Generate attitudinal shifts toward reading and writing among struggling readers
- Grow students' reading repertoires as evidenced by selection of genres over the course of the school year
- Improve a range of skills—from literacy to collaboration to analytical thinking

Tactics:

- Purchase books that struggling readers will enjoy. The preferred collections have adventures, realistic fiction, diverse characters, and socio-emotional issues important to middle "schoolers." The current classroom library does not have this range of genres nor newly released books that students love. Among the titles Ms. Labovitch would like to include in the class are: *Awakening*, one of the Tankborn series by Karen Sandler; *The Cruisers* by Walter Dean Meyers, *Outlaw* by Stephen Davies; *Charm & Strange* by Stephanie Kuehn; *The Dork Diaries* series (5,6,7,8); *The Demonata* series by Darren Shan; Cassandra Clare's *City of Heavenly Fire*, *City of Lost Souls*, and *City of Fallen Angels*; *After and Now*, a Holocaust series by Morris Gleitzman, and Tim Federle's *Better Nate than Never*.
- Students are assigned to book club groups of two to six, depending on which students work well together, their reading levels, who is interested in which book, and the number of copies of each book available.
- Teachers guide book selection, discussion, and assignments to model process.
- Each student is responsible for completing a specific reading assignment beyond school hours.
- Students keep a two-column notebook in which they track thoughts about the book, pose questions, and write comments, all of which drive their discussion with book club peers.
- After clubs finish assigned books, they share what they have read with the entire class through a visual and oral presentation, collaboratively designed.
- Over time, students take more responsibility for their reading by selecting books to read, determining the reading pace, preparing for and running club discussions, and assessing their performance individually and as a group.

Timeline and Collaboration Relevant Readers will be implemented at the start of the 2014-2015 school year. During the early part of September, the teachers will assess students to determine their reading levels and set goals for their literacy advancement. At the end of September, Ms. Labovitch will create book clubs that partner students with similar reading levels and interests; these clubs will get underway after this placement process. The program will be ongoing. The primary partner is New Voices' Parent Association, which raises funds for program support. Project Cicero (<http://projectcicero.org/>) is a potential provider of books.

Results and Measures Based on a previous informal experience with book clubs in this 7th grade classroom, and what research has shown the impact of these clubs to be on struggling reader, it is anticipated that students will be able to:

- Identify, analyze, think, talk, and write about, and respond to text elements in a variety of ways
- Develop literary theories or ideas and use evidence to support these theories or ideas
- Discuss, define, and explore unfamiliar words
- Respond to questions and discussions with relevant and focused comments
- Engage in behaviors that elicit and sustain meaningful, skills-building conversations and interactions encouraging the successful completion of reading tasks and goals attainment
- Demonstrate greater interest in and excitement about reading, and in expanding of reading repertoires
- Improve their listening skills

Specific methods that will be used to measure success are:

- Student reading logs and journals, writing assignments, and related
- Teacher observation of and rubrics gauging student book club participation and performance
- Quality and depth of book club presentations
- Routine individualized reading assessments, class tests, and homework, along with student self-assessments
- State acuity, practice, and annual ELA exams