



## Sweater weather arrives with cozy new looks

It's time to fall in love with pullovers, Fair Isles or hand-knit cowls. | PAGE F1

# THE BUFFALO NEWS SUNDAY

## Is the Patriots' dynasty fading?

Reports of New England's fall from dominance may be a bit premature. | Page B1



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UP TO \$607 IN SAVINGS

### HOW TO FIX BUFFALO'S SCHOOLS

## EMPOWERING STUDENTS AT TAPESTRY CHARTER



Principal, teachers develop winning formula for bringing up to speed – and sending on to college – teens from impoverished inner-city homes



Photos by Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Sixth  
in a series

BY SANDRA TAN / NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Milton Sheehan holds up a lime green beach ball covered with numbers. ¶ Sheehan is a math teacher at Tapestry Charter School in Buffalo. His short, spiked hair, olive-colored dress shirt and beige tie are secondary details to his key accessory: a black tactical vest with reflective, fluorescent yellow trim. He resembles a well-dressed crossing guard. ¶ Sheehan tosses the beach ball to each of his algebra and trigonometry students. Whatever number a student's right thumb lands on when the ball is caught is the question that student must answer from the Regents practice exam booklet. ¶ "Who needs help?" Sheehan asks during the last week of school before the Regents exams. ¶ Whatever help his students need, there is a good chance Sheehan carries a solution, either in his brain or in one of the 15 pockets and holders on his cheap, black vest. ¶ For a model of how to educate impoverished inner-city students, few schools beat Tapestry. The 13-year-old charter school's | SEE SCHOOLS ON PAGE A6

**Milton Sheehan, top, wearing his "tactical math vest," helps students solve Regents practice exam problems. At bottom left, Jaquoine Fogan and Lisa Vidal take notes; at right, Janai Murray takes part in daily quiet reading.**

BUFFALONEWS.COM/FIXINGSCHOOLS

## The dawn of a new day for the Bills

Ownership change kicks  
excitement level up a notch

BY VIC CARUCCI  
NEWS SPORTS REPORTER

Do you really need anything more than the New England Patriots in town and first place in the AFC East on the line to cause Ralph Wilson Stadium to shake with enough force to generate seismic activity today?

Probably not, but the Buffalo Bills will have something else to create even more excitement for a sellout crowd of nearly 70,000: new ownership.

Today will mark the first game with Terry and Kim Pegula as the Bills' owners. They're expected to be introduced on the field before kickoff. And they undoubtedly will receive a rousing ovation, primarily for putting to rest uncertainty about the franchise's future in Western New York since the passing of its founder, Ralph C. Wilson Jr., last March.

"I'm excited for the people, the fans, the organization, the region," Bills coach Doug Marrone said. "I've never looked at our fans as needing something to be electric, even as far as when I've been an opponent in this stadium. But to say it's going up a notch, obviously, I have to recognize that."

"I've always thought the fans have always been a big part of our success when we play at home. They can make a difference, and they did in" the 29-10 home-opening victory against Miami, only days after the Pegulas' agreement to purchase the Bills for \$1.4 billion became public.

The Bills and Patriots share 3-2 records, giving the Bills rare equal footing with a

See Pegula on Page A2

## Inmate deaths tied to private medical firm

State cites new hire  
by Niagara County

BY THOMAS J. PROHASKA  
NEWS NIAGARA REPORTER

LOCKPORT – A state investigation concludes that two inmates died four days apart in the Niagara County Jail in 2012, victims of "grossly inadequate" medical care and "patient abandonment."

Both inmates died two weeks after a Miami-based medical company took over medical care at the jail. The Niagara County Legislature hired Armor Correctional Health Services in hopes of saving money.

Daniel Pantera's death on Christmas morning 2012 was preventable, the state Commission of Correction's Medical Review Board concluded, citing "grossly inadequate medical and mental health care,"

See Deaths on Page A2

### INDEX

Books ..... D5  
Business ..... G1  
Crossword ..... F7, I4  
Gusto Sunday ..... D1  
Home & Style ..... F1  
Lottery numbers ..... C2  
Obituaries ..... C8  
NFL Sunday ..... B1  
Real Estate News ..... G4  
Science Page ..... H6  
Scoreboard ..... B15  
The Region ..... C1  
Travel ..... F10  
TV Topics ..... H1  
Viewpoints ..... H1  
Where We Live ..... C4

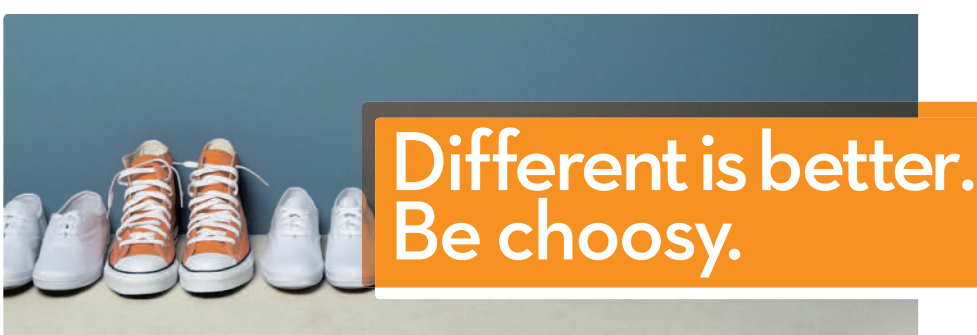


### WEATHER

Mostly sunny. High 61, low 47.  
Details on Page C10.



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## HOW TO FIX BUFFALO'S SCHOOLS



English teacher Sara Dolloff asks her exiting ninth-graders to write a letter to themselves reflecting on what they've learned during the school year.



Kayla Wood, right, cuts loose with a classmate to re-enact the "Friday chicken dance" each week in Milton Sheehan's 11th-grade crew.



All Tapestry high school students meet daily with a "crew" of 12 classmates who become their in-school family. Hillary Kelkenberg's 10th-grade crew trades stories about student drinking.



Che Brown, 14, and all other Tapestry Charter High School students, cease regular school work and read for personal enjoyment for 20 minutes every day as part of an effort to raise student literacy.



Andreia Wilson, 15, works with classmates in science class. She stands a better chance of passing the Regents exam now that her reading scores have gone up.

Photos by Derek Gee/Buffalo News

# STUDENTS KNOW HOW FAR THEY HAVE TO GO, AND WHY

## SCHOOLS • from A1

student population mirrors the city schools: three of every four students poor enough to qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch, the majority starting high school with reading skills below grade level.

Yet Tapestry graduates 93 percent of its students on time, and 80 percent of graduates go on to college in the fall.

The secret to Tapestry's success starts with the flexibility it has as a charter school, free from school system bureaucracy and many state and local regulations. It can adjust its schedule to meet the needs of students, teachers and parents. The administration can select and hire staff who embrace Tapestry's mission and model of teaching.

The teaching model is nontraditional. Students are pushed to regularly reflect on their own achievements and face their shortcomings with honesty. They meet daily with a "crew" of classmates who stick together for all four years, facing the ups and downs of life as an in-house family for kids who don't always have that kind of support at home. The faculty immerses students in projects that give their learning a purpose and instill kids with the belief that they have the power through education to shape their world.

And Tapestry students read. It's built into the daily schedule. Students may not always like it or be good at it, but they come to school knowing just how good or poor a reader they are, and challenge themselves to become more literate every day.

For two decades, charter schools like Tapestry have been a political dividend, pitting accountability-minded conservatives against more liberal-minded champions of traditional public schools.

But in recent years, those lines have blurred. Charter school successes have shifted the discussion from principled political philosophy to practical parent preference. Since 1999, the number of charter schools nationwide has grown from 1,500 to 6,000. The number of children attending charter schools has grown from 300,000 to more than 2 million.

It's easy to see why. When ranking the highest performing schools in Buffalo and New York State — particularly those serving high percentages of poor students — charter schools claim many top spots.



Anna Burton works on a project in English class. Students are told their Lexile scores, measuring reading comprehension, and encouraged to improve them.

### College-bound Tapestry students

Percentage of Tapestry high school graduates from the Class of 2013 who enrolled in college the fall immediately following graduation



Source: Tapestry Charter School and National Student Clearinghouse

Eliminate public schools that have admissions requirements to filter out low-achievers, and high-performing charter schools stand almost unrivaled.

Not all charter schools work. Some do worse than traditional public schools. Charters like Tapestry also have a leg up because they enroll fewer special-education students and English language learners than the district average. Some critics also argue that charter school parents tend to be more proactive and invested in their children's academic success.

But parents are voting with their feet. High-performing charter schools like Tapestry are flooded with student applications. In the high school alone, Tapestry typically wait-lists 200 students a year.

"All parents are looking for quality options for their children," said Principal Lynn Seagren Bass, "and when they hear of options that are working well for their neighbors and friends, they want their kids to be there. I have a lot of faith in the judgment of parents."

### Expectations and reflections

Tapestry Charter School began as a conversation in 1999 among five synagogue friends whose own children were attending Buffalo Public Schools. As educators and activists, including one who ran a preschool, they dreamed of building a school focused on arts, community and social responsibility.

Tapestry opened as an elementary school two years later. It expanded into the high school grades in 2006, again spurred by strong parent demand. The school now serves children in kindergarten through 12th grade in a building behind the North Buffalo Marshalls plaza in a space once occupied by a grocery store and call center.

The school received a \$14 million makeover in 2010 to hide its drab origins. It's a packed place, with storage spaces converted to offices and a music room rel-

egated to a large trailer in the backyard.

Alongside student artwork and exhibits, images of the Tapestry Compass pop up everywhere. That compass is a star with four long points, each compass tip pointing to a quality needed for a successful future: Perseverance, integrity, responsibility and respect.

Tapestry's values tend to squeeze out deception. Students typically know exactly how they are doing in school, how far they have to go, and why.

In Sarah Dolloff's English class, the walls explode with words both printed and handwritten. The wispy ninth-grade teacher, who has built her career at Tapestry, seizes on this last day of class before Regents exams to drive home how far each student has come since the fall.

She passes out light blue paper to every student and tells the class to look over all the work they have done for class this year, reflect on what they learned, then write a letter to their past selves — "the one just starting out ninth grade" — and tell that person what to expect.

Many essay responses are remarkably honest.

"Dear Me," writes Malcolm Powell at his binder-cluttered desk. "This year was just like last year. It wasn't hard, you just never did your homework."

The serious-minded 14-year-old goes on to tell himself that he is writing more, focusing on his grammar and thinking about poetry. After he's done, Malcolm leans back in his seat. He talks about his poetry.

"Before, I wrote the bare minimum," he says.

This kind of self-reflection isn't a classroom whim. It's built into the workings of the school and into the school calendar.

Instead of parent-teacher conferences at every grade level, the school reserves two full days for "student-directed" conferences where kids spend an hour sharing specific examples of their work with their parents. If it's poor work, it's obvious, and there's nothing left to do but explain. A teacher sits in to promote honesty.

Climbing the ladder to graduation is no mystery. Grading formulas are clear. And students aren't just graded for their academic knowledge. They receive a separate "habits of work" grade for conscientiousness, participation and effort. Students with good work habits get first choice of fun school activities, field trips

## By the numbers / Tapestry Charter High School and Buffalo district high schools

High School	4-year Graduation rate	2013 Enrollment	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	Multiracial	Students with disabilities	English language learners	Economically disadvantaged
Tapestry Charter High School	93%	327	23%	61%	9%	2%	5%	13%	5%	75%
Buffalo Public Schools (high schools)	56%	8,804	23%	51%	16%	8%	1%	17%	12%	65%

Source: 2013-14 demographic data from Tapestry Charter School, Buffalo Public Schools and New York State Education Department. Graduation rates are for August 2013.

and other perks.

Students who fall behind in their schoolwork — particularly freshmen — have built-in time to meet with teachers and catch up. One former freshman described the experience as being "hunted down" by the staff.

Rites of passage are common. All sophomores must assemble and present a "passage portfolio" to a panel of adults — including their parents and professionals from the community — defending their right to move to the higher grade. Seniors must write letters of advice to the freshmen and present an "apologia" to an adult panel, reflecting on their high school experience and why they deserve to graduate.

"Have you ever felt hopeless, truly hopeless?" says Oscar Wilson, an emotionally fragile senior whose voice rings with tear-inducing sincerity. "As if you have tried every possible solution and all has failed? You're waiting for an open door, but nothing is happening ... That is how my life has felt."

Dressed in a deep-blue shirt buttoned all the way up, he reads his apology, using the metaphor of driving a car down dark roads, negotiating traffic, and dealing with shiftless passengers and back-seat drivers. He talks about how he nearly failed freshman year, how he straightened up sophomore year, how he reached a new low point in his senior year but managed to find the strength to recover.

"I have stuck to the road that I am on," he says, "and I refuse to turn back."

Oscar now attends SUNY Fredonia State.

### Crew is family

The administrators and teachers at Tapestry don't assume that their students have strong family support at home. Instead, Tapestry makes sure every high school student has a supportive



### On the Web:

News reporters host a live chat about charter schools at noon Tuesday at BuffaloNews.com.

### About the series

How to Fix Buffalo's Schools is an occasional series highlighting urban schools across the country that have made outstanding progress on some of the seemingly intractable problems plaguing inner-city schools. The successful schools were selected through statistical analysis of data on academic performance and demographics. The schools chosen are some of the best examples of successfully educating students with backgrounds similar to those in the Buffalo Public Schools.

To read the first five parts of this series and for online-only features, go to BuffaloNews.com/Fixingschools.

**June 22:** *In the Bronx, a school for at-risk boys succeeds.*

**July 13:** *In Brooklyn, a model for teaching immigrants.*

**July 14:** *Buffalo's Lafayette High School struggles to teach immigrants.*

**Aug. 17:** *Newark's job training is a model for urban schools.*

**Oct. 5:** *CSAT Charter School graduates most students in county.*

family at school — a "crew" of 12.

Those 12 freshmen will stick together and meet daily for their entire high school careers. This is possible at Tapestry because even though the school year isn't any longer than at traditional public schools, Tapestry's school day is roughly an hour longer.

Daily crew meetings are led by a teacher who also serves as the main contact for these students' parents. But students do most of the talking. What they learn in crew has nothing to do with grades and everything to do with life.

In one 10th grade crew meeting, the day before prom, students sit in a circle and pass around Bobo, a stuffed elephant, and talk about drinking.

Buffalo Academy of the Sacred Heart before she transferred to Tapestry, recounts how a girlfriend got drunk at a dance at St. Joseph's Collegiate Institute, threw up in the bathroom and got thrown out of school.

Another crew member in a Lincoln-like top hat recalls a drunken friend who foolishly challenged another group of kids at 2 a.m.

"He got jumped and broke his arm," he

says, "and he lost everything he had on him."

In an 11th grade crew led by math teacher Sheehan, Alexandria Johnson and Kayla Wood spring to their feet, bending, stepping and gesturing wildly to the "Friday chicken dance song" that Sheehan calls up on his laptop. Earlier in the year, he had called up a YouTube video to show his students an example of the stupid things people do when they're drunk. Alex and Kayla were so amazed by the drunk guy's dance that they studied his every move and re-create the dance each Friday.

As the period winds down, Sheehan takes a last look at his crew.

"Be safe at prom," he tells them.

### Tapestry's advantage

Principal Bass sits in a lived-in office filled with posters and paper piles. Accountability reports, math planning folders, bookshelves and plastic crates of documents cover almost every flat surface. Images of the Dalai Lama, Albert Einstein and W.E.B. Du Bois hang overhead, along with a watercolor of a bird

her daughter painted at age 5.

Near the door hangs a graduation photo of her son, the reason Bass got involved in Tapestry. Her son enjoyed his early years at Buffalo's Olmsted School 64 until third grade.

After her son's miserable, tear-filled experience with his third-grade teacher, Bass took a chance on Tapestry because she knew the founder of the school, Joy Pepper. Back then, Tapestry was not a high-demand school with a long waiting list. It was a new elementary school recruiting families.

Bass, a school psychologist who worked for 10 years in the Buffalo Public Schools, was one of the people who pushed for the school's expansion and wound up leading the high school.

With short, straight, blondish-brown hair and unassuming glasses, Bass exudes both interest and warmth. But get her started on the "unfair" advantages Tapestry has over traditional public schools, and all that changes to hard conviction.

"It's a mistake to assume we just take kids who are easy," she says, "because we don't."

People who say that haven't seen her pick up the phone and call Child Protective Services, she says.

Only 30 percent of Tapestry's high school students come from Tapestry's elementary school (though that percentage increased this fall). The rest are chosen by lottery, and the majority enter at least a year behind in school academically.

"It's the game of taking what just is, and making it work," Bass says. "Just because people have a bad circumstance doesn't mean they can't learn."

She notes that even though Tapestry enrolls 13 percent of students with disabilities — compared with 17 percent in the Buffalo Public Schools — those students still graduate at a decent rate — 22 percent

See **Schools** on Page A8



HOW TO FIX  
BUFFALO'S SCHOOLS

‘TAKING WHAT IS, AND MAKING IT WORK’

SCHOOLS • from A7

earned a Regents diploma and 56 percent earned local diploma in 2013.

Tapestry may have some advantage over other schools because of its charter status, she says, but the school's charter status isn't the entire explanation for why her students succeed.

Bass spent 10 years processing students with special needs in the Buffalo Public Schools. Too often, she recalls, she ran into students and parents who were treated with pity, condescension and low expectations.

She referred to the school district's recent history of graduating only a quarter of its black, male students (the figure is 45 percent now). Would anyone have the gall to suggest that the parents of the failing 75 percent just didn't care about their kids' education? she asks.

"Don't make excuses for your graduation rate by just saying you've got the wrong kids," Bass said. "How disrespectful to parents."

Tapestry prides itself on getting more than 90 percent of its parents to attend student-led conferences and complete surveys. Most parents gush about the school culture and staff, though a few say students here get way more second chances than exist in the real world.

Bass doesn't apologize for that. She says it speaks to the school's message of perseverance: "You're going to get better. Don't ever give up."

Promoting literacy

You may not know what a Lexile score is. But every high school student at Tapestry does.

A Lexile score is a three- or four-digit number designed to help teachers assess a student's reading comprehension. At Tapestry, teachers share those numbers with their kids and throw down the challenge: This is your score. Let's see if you can raise it.

Without strong reading skills, the likelihood of a student graduating from high school is low. That's why Tapestry teachers try to develop a love of reading among their students.

One approach is sharing Lexile scores like video-game rankings.

The school also schedules 20 minutes of quiet reading time across the building every day, a feat made possible by the charter school's longer school day.

At 10:14 a.m., all classrooms fall still. Some teachers dim the lights as students pull out their latest favorite book and read at their desks. This isn't homework catch-up time. It is intended as a time when all kids read what they want – for fun.

Some students, though, are not ready for that independence.

Andrela Wilson isn't with the other kids in her class. The quiet, 14-year-old freshman with dark-framed glasses participates in a book club for those who don't want to, or aren't ready to, read alone. She's into "Catching Fire" from the Hunger Games series. Asked if she likes reading, she responds "yeah," before sheepishly shaking her head a moment later.

"I try to read," she explains. "I get bored."

When Andrela left the city's Martin Luther King Multicultural Institute and enrolled in Tapestry as a ninth grader last fall, her Lexile score was 832. To be considered reading at grade level, high school students should have a score of roughly 1,000 or greater.

Bass noted that students are almost guaranteed to fail the Regents Living Environment science exam without a Lexile score of at least 900.

Of all students entering ninth grade in the fall, 60 percent arrived reading below grade level, according to the schools' 2012-13 assessments. That figure dropped to 43 percent by the spring.

Shortly before the school day ends,



Derek Gee/Buffalo News

**Tapestry Charter High School Principal Lynn Seagren Bass says Tapestry is about community. "The magic of all this is just relationships," she says.**

Spending per student: a comparison

Spending per student, 2013-14



Note: The per-student expenditure figure for Buffalo Public Schools students excludes enrollment and spending for charter school students.

Sources: Calculations based on expenditure and enrollment information from Tapestry Charter School and the Buffalo Public Schools

Why Tapestry was chosen

In selecting the highest-performing local charter schools, The Buffalo News reviewed three years of graduation rates for Buffalo's district schools and charter high schools that draw the majority of their students from Buffalo.

The News then reviewed state and district attrition data to eliminate charter schools with high percentages of students leaving and returning to district public schools. This was done to ensure that the charters' high graduation rates were not the result of the school counseling out or expelling difficult or low-achieving students.

Finally, The News looked at the demographics of students enrolled in the charter schools to identify schools whose student populations resemble the district's enrollment in terms of race and poverty. Based on that analysis, both Tapestry Charter High School and the Charter High School for Applied Technologies clearly ranked at the top of the list. The Charter High School for Applied Technologies was profiled last week.

Andrela learns her Lexile score now stands at 1,002. A proud grin creases both corners of her mouth as she says it, as if she wants to smile bigger but self-consciousness won't let her.

Expeditions and engagement

Along one Tapestry hallway stands an image of ninth-graders wrapped in blue-and-yellow life jackets as they sail the Spirit of Buffalo.

"We are crew, not passengers" reads the motto beneath the ship.

Tapestry isn't the only school to have this motto. So do a number of other traditional public schools and charter schools who subscribe to the "expeditionary learning" model.

The motto emphasizes the idea that students participate in their own learning and are not simply recipients of information. To promote this, teachers create themed projects or "expeditions" that students dive into across all major subjects.

It might mean a "Here I Stand" expedition that focuses on ways students can inspire reform in their community.

Three ninth-graders eagerly walk along a long display of seven case studies associated with this expedition over the past several months. They talk about studying medical ethics and consent by reading about the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment and the Henrietta Lacks immortal cell line in English class.

They talk about researching cancer and conducting experiments, comparing healthy and cancerous cells under a microscope in Roswell Park Cancer Center's Pathology Department, as well as about dissecting a pig in science class.

"It was disgusting," says ninth-grader Kim Bostic, wrinkling her nose. "My eyes burned."

They tracked the spread of disease in math class, and talked about the birth of the Protestant Reformation, the printing press and the spread of information in global studies. In the end, all students had to develop cancer communications campaigns and present them to six staffers from Roswell Park.

Because these themed expeditions are interwoven among the students' subjects, Tapestry doesn't offer Advanced Placement classes. That's a trade-off everyone lives with for the sake of keeping all students engaged and growing as "whole" people, Principal Bass says.

The message to students: "Be good citizens. Create a world that's going to be better."

Teacher support

Tapestry's teachers face constant pressure to keep classes engaging and make sure no one falls far behind. To balance this, teachers receive a lot of autonomy and peer support. This translates into a staff more willing to stay late and do "whatever it takes" to graduate students on time.

This requires two things that come easier to charter schools: Hiring staff who believe in the charter school's mission and work ethic, and creating a schedule that allows built-in time for teacher training and peer support.

Back in Sheehan's algebra and trigonometry class, the lime green beach ball is making the rounds. One by one, students catch the ball, pick up their

Regents review book, then head to the white boards that cover most of the vertical space in Sheehan's room.

"Who needs help?" Sheehan asks.

He quickly gets a taker and reaches into his vest pocket for a red marker before approaching the board where one of the students has written out her equation. As others complete their equation assignments, Sheehan reaches into a different vest pocket for a stamp to mark their sheets before he tosses out the beach ball again for the next student.

Some mock Sheehan's "math geek vest." He calls it his best idea ever. In past years, he was forced to make repeated trips back to his desk because students weren't prepared with basics like pencils.

"I finally decided I wasn't going to let them distract me any more," he said.

Sheehan went to Amazon.com and bought his math geek vest for \$30. His vest holds: a ruler, pencils (he started out with 500 and now has zero), a star-shaped hole punch, a pencil sharpener, Wite-Out, a stapler, a camera (to snap photos of napping kids), dry-erase markers, an iPad stylus, tissues, Band-Aids and a clipped-on scientific calculator holster.

But he's not blind to the difficulty of his work. Like his colleagues, Sheehan often stays at school until dinnertime, working to get his students up to speed.

If he were teaching in the suburbs, he said, that effort would be rewarded with exceptional results. But here, he struggles to get students who are below grade level up to speed. When he sees many students' trigonometry scores are "below mediocre," frustration washes over him.

"I've put hundreds and hundreds of hours into getting them where they need to be," he said. "So that's what's tough."

Although the school day at Tapestry most days starts at 8:30 a.m. and ends at 3:36 p.m., students do not come to school until 10:20 a.m. on Mondays. From 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. on Mondays, teachers get together to meet, plan and learn.

Teachers, not administrators, determine what additional professional training they need. They also limit class sizes to 21 students or fewer in all major academic subjects.

Tapestry teachers aren't unionized, though some other charter schools are. Instead, the school has an Instructional Leadership Council, representing teacher leaders of each grade level and department.

Dolloff, the ninth-grade English teacher, remembers when she was in her fourth year at Tapestry Charter High School in an old building near Days Park. The building was packed, and the students seemed exceptionally difficult.

"There were times when we were thinking, 'I don't know if I can do this,'" she recalls.

As a result, all the teachers took a step back and worked with administrators to change the schedule, regroup the kids. They reorganized the entire ninth-grade program and created a special support period at the end of the day. It helped.

English teacher Geoff Schutte recalls teaching eighth-graders at Frederick Douglass Prep, a low-performing Rochester public school on the verge of closure seven years ago. The first year he was there, he worked tirelessly.

By his second year, he could feel the eroding of his commitment to stay late and push, despite administrator admonitions to "get scores up." The lanky, once-enthusiastic teacher felt more burned out in Rochester despite doing less work there than he does here.

"I've been given incredible professional autonomy," he says of his seven years at Tapestry. "That's why I love it."

Bass says she doesn't require any of her staff to stay late. But as a charter school principal, Bass does have control over who joins her school's staff.

"I can't order them to stay," she says. "I want to hire people who want to stay."

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