

# Steven J. Adamowski: What Achievement First has achieved

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When I took over as superintendent of the Hartford Public Schools in 2006, one of the first things I did was to call Dacia Toll, the president of Achievement First, to ask her to bring her high-performing school model to my district.

I made the call for two reasons: Connecticut had passed legislation that permitted public-school districts to enter into collaborative agreements with charter-management organizations, and Achievement First was one network operator that was well known for providing excellent schools in high-poverty areas. Most importantly, Achievement First had a track record of enabling its students to close the achievement gap.

Under the terms of the arrangement, Hartford Public Schools provided a physical plant, utilities, custodial and other support services, while Achievement First provided the instruction and operated the school according to its successful model. As with all schools in our portfolio, Hartford sets the neighborhood attendance area and claims the school's results on state assessments.

The results have been nothing short of astounding and rewarding. Achievement First now operates two high-performing schools in Hartford that serve 600 students.

Those two schools, the Achievement First Hartford Academy Elementary School and the Achievement First Hartford Academy Middle School, are consistently ranked at the highest level within our school accountability plan that assesses both overall student achievement and growth in student achievement.

On the 2011 Connecticut Mastery Test, our statewide assessment, Achievement First Hartford Academy sixth graders outperformed their Hartford peers by 18 percentage points, significantly narrowing the achievement gap with students in suburban schools. Since my tenure began, the number of schools testing at "Goal," Connecticut's highest achievement category, has increased from five to 11 schools. That means that 11 Hartford Public Schools have effectively closed the achievement gap. The Achievement First Hartford Academies are two of those schools.

But I also made the call because I knew that Achievement First would be a valuable partner in our larger school-reform efforts. Today, students in Hartford have improved at a faster rate than any of Connecticut's other large

cities.

Achievement First did not catalyze this entire turnaround effort, but was an important piece of the puzzle. Because we value its training and coaching of leaders, we have placed one or two of our own resident principals in training at Achievement First schools each year for the past two years. During this coming school year, Achievement First will also be providing these residents the professional development they need to become our next generation of high-performing, entrepreneurial school leaders.

We have also benefited from AF's willingness to share its curriculum and other tools essential to school success. This year, for example, the district is working to modify or replace our current district assessments in both reading and math. Achievement First provided the district its entire set of K-8 interim assessments to use or draw upon as we rethink our approach. This partnership has been invaluable to the district and is a wonderful demonstration of the way in which Charter Management Organizations and districts can work as partners to share best practices, rather than as adversaries, in ensuring the best possible education for all students.

As we all know, there are institutional interests across the country, and in every city, that resist change necessary to close the achievement gap. They fail to take a long-range view or to understand that, as long as our states continue to maintain an achievement gap based on income, the economy and quality of life for everyone will diminish. Achievement First schools have proven that demographics do not have to be destiny. It is within our capacity to have high-poverty/high-performing schools in urban areas.

When the opportunity to bring an Achievement First school came to my city, we grabbed it. That has proven to be one of the best decisions of Hartford's education reform and renaissance.

*Steven J. Adamowski is superintendent of Hartford public schools.*