

# Closing the Achievement Gap

## **Program Tease**

### Graduation

THEODORE SERGI: I start from a presumption that our achievement gaps are unacceptable. And that our existing structure is not meeting the needs of all of our children.

DACIA TOLL: Our students, when they come to us, we give them diagnostic test in reading and math, if they're on average two years below grade level, I think that's representative of where most New Haven students are as an average.

NATALIE MISSAKIAN: What caught everybody's attention about Amistad is you had the New Haven kids basically scoring as well as kids in Greenwich, in some of the wealthiest suburbs in the state.

KEVIN: They're intelligent, caring, loving and most importantly they are family. (Applause) Ladies and gentlemen, take a look at our beautiful eighth grade.  
(Applause)

### Opening Animation/Titles

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: You probably wouldn't guess from looking at this bright bunch of youngsters just how much brighter their future has become. Welcome to graduation at Amistad Academy. A charter school that serves mostly black and Latino kids in grades five through eight in New Haven, Connecticut. They enter Amistad on average more than two years below grade level. But by the time they leave here most of these urban kids are doing as well or better than their suburban counterparts. It's a great success story that's offering new hope for kids who need it the most.

OPENING STANDUP: Hello, I'm Clarence Page. Our subject is one of America's biggest challenges. How do we close the persistent achievement gap between black students and white students? It's a very important question. But up until now, Americans have been reluctant to ask it. And the gap persists. Do we have any good model schools that have closed the gap? The answer is yes, we do. One of them is right here in New Haven, a public charter school called Amistad Academy. While most of Connecticut's black public school students lag far behind their white counterparts, the black students here at Amistad are virtually even. And, in writing, Amistad actually beat the state's average. How does Amistad do it? With good old-fashioned values. Instead of lowering standards, Amistad raised them. Instead of settling for merely good work, Amistad called for excellence. And the students answered the call. Over the next hour we'll see how Amistad did it ... and, more important, how other public schools can do it, too.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Christopher Jencks is a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He's written extensively on the black-white test score gap.

CLARENCE PAGE (on screen): Why have you and other social scientist decided to give so much attention to it?

CHRISTOPHER JENCKS: Well I think the reasons that social scientist have given a lot of attention to it has a lot to do with the fact that we've figured out that the test score gap played a very large role in explaining why it was that African Americans weren't graduating from college at the same rate as whites. And why the wage gap persists despite all kinds of things that we have tried to do about that. Those disparities almost disappear once you compare African Americans and whites who actually have the same test scores. So if you can narrow that test score gap, you might be able to do an awful lot economically and educationally besides just deal with the test scores.

CLARENCE PAGE: When I go to Amistad Academy, I see young people in uniforms. They've got special binders. They've got a long school day. I see teachers and students working closely together. What difference do these factors make? Is this a lot of show or do you think it's really making a difference?

CHRISTOPHER JENCKS: What they're doing is sending a message to these kids that this school is different from the one you were in before. This is a break with the past. These are kids who come in, they are not doing so well and they are being told "okay, this is going to be someplace different. We're going to ask more of you. You are going to do more." And a lot of these things are signals about you know, this is not like the elementary school that you went to. This is not like what is often a chaotic street and home environment and so forth. This is going to be quiet. It's going to be orderly. It's going to be well organized.

### First Day of School

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: The white t-shirts on these fifth graders indicate they are first year students. As such, they are about to sign a contract. They promise to live up to Amistad's academic standards and social rules. In return they get to move up from their white t-shirts to a blue Amistad shirt, their first step into their new commitment.

DACIA TOLL: What a great way for us to welcome our new fifth graders. We are very excited to have you with us and this is our opportunity as a community to come together and welcome you to our community. So you will be hearing quickly from a few Amistad students who have some words of wisdom and advice for you. So, fifth graders especially, listen up.

STUDENT #1: Welcome all new students, my name is Bernard Gary and I am in the seventh grade. I will be explaining the contract you are about to sign. The reason why Amistad has a contract is so that you know what your responsible for. It pretty simple, you need to live up to our REACH values. Respect, enthusiasm, achievement, citizenship, and hard work.

STUDENT #2: When you make your commitment to REACH you will be able to receive an Amistad shirt. This shirt means that you will show the REACH values 24/7.

DACIA TOLL: You have all signed your contract. You are committing your name. In that contract, you pledge to live up to the REACH values, to do your homework, top quality, complete, on time, each and every night. To show up to school everyday on time and to do everything it takes to be your absolute best. The moment you put on that shirt you become an Amistad Academy student. As Joshua told you, "we wear our shirts with pride." So at this time I would like to invite you to put on your shirts.

(Applause)

CLARENCE PAGE STANDUP: Amistad Academy tries to create a culture of achievement, both academically and socially. That's the message these fifth graders are hearing as they learn about their new life at Amistad and pledge to follow the school's values called Reach ... respect, enthusiasm, achievement, citizenship and hard work.

#### Fifth Graders going from Gym to class

KIM MOWERY: When we move from one class to another, in the halls.... Or when we move from breakfast to our classroom, we always walk in a line, and we're always going to walk in the same order. All right? Ms. Walling and I have made up an order for you to stand in.... And line up on this blue line

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Life at Amistad is very structured with high expectations and a relentless focus on the basics.

SUE WALLING: When you are walking do not touch anyone and do not talk....Alexandria is the first person in line and she's going to hold the door open ...

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Class culture is consciously built starting with simple classroom behaviors.

#### Student holds door open

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Students are taught how to walk in the halls, how to hold doors for their fellow students. How to pay attention in class. And when necessary how they will be punished.

CATRENNA: My first reaction to walking in the hallways was ... oh my gosh ... at my old school we actually didn't have to do this, so what is going on here? It was actually a big change...we have to be quiet when we walk in the hallways. But it actually got really good because I realized what the system was for and how it made this school better.

SUE WALLING: This is how I expect that you will come every morning ... is just this quietly, without talking to anyone, without disrupting anyone ... Doing a beautiful, beautiful job.

KEVIN: The rules that they have here, the mandatory rules ...I took them as something that I had to do to be better in the school. It's not really a struggle once you get to know them. But it's a struggle once they first tell you...you have to get out of your old customs, deal with new lines, organized binders, homework folders...getting them signed.

#### Classroom situation

KIM MOWERY: We expect you to follow directions the first time. We expect you to walk quietly in line...your sitting up straight and your facing forward. Good. Looks good.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: A special emphasis is placed on the REACH Values. The five values that govern Amistad life.

NASTASHIA: When I first came to Amistad Academy in the sixth grade it was hard because they wanted higher standards than my old school. And we had to live up to REACH values at Amistad, but in my old school they didn't mind how we really acted...so I had to get adjusted to showing respect, enthusiasm, achievement, citizenship, and hard work for the whole year.

### Classroom situation

Sue Walling: Which REACH values did you violate? Was I being respectful?

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Theodore Sergi served as the Commissioner of Education for the state of Connecticut.

THEODORE SERGI: I start from the presumption that our achievement gaps are unacceptable and that our existing structure is not meeting the needs of all of our children. If you sort of have an acceptance of this thing we might call "poor performance" or "less than the performance we would like for every child," then you need some new structures. You need to do some things differently.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Serving about 250 students in grades 5 through 8 Amistad was founded in 1999. That was when a group of Yale law students enlisted local business and community leaders behind a new idea for a new kind of school. With proper support inside and outside the classroom, the law students said, low income students in the city could perform just as well as better off students in the suburbs. That was the dream...

DACIA TOLL: Well when we set out to found Amistad, I think I in particular brought a fair amount of humility to it, not being a career educator. And so what we did was we ran around the country, in fact running as far away as Calgary, Canada to look at best practices. We did not bring any arrogance to it. We did not bring any divine insight to it. We needed to know what were other schools doing working with similar populations to the one we wanted to work with, but achieving dramatically different results.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: It may surprise you to hear that Amistad models its teaching structure after a small private school in far away Calgary, Canada. A private school for white students in Canada might seem like an odd model for a public school for black and Latino youngsters in New Haven. But one of Amistad's founders, Dacia Toll explains how that works.

DACIA TOLL: When you go there what amazed me in terms of being a private, white, special education school in Canada, one might be immediately struck by the differences between that context and us in urban America ... New Haven, Connecticut. And however, what you see upon in talking with the people there and upon really taking a look at their program is that the instructional truths are transcended. At least the instructional strategies are transcended. They have and we have, in many respects, a similar mission. They work with the population that comes to them, in general, years below grade level. As do we.

PETER ISTVANFFY(off camera): We met with the co-founders of the school about a year before it opened and

PETER ISTVANFFY: shared with them the process that we had gone through to initiate our school twenty years ago.

PETER ISTVANFFY(off camera): What we looked at was ... how were we going to replicate the success that we had in this environment in their context.

PETER ISTVANFFY: That involved the development of a specific training program for new staff members. And the goal when we developed the program was to

PETER ISTVANFFY (off camera): walk them through all of the things that you need to do to deliver instruction in terms of reading, writing and arithmetic.

PETER ISTVANFFY: As well as develop the culture that you want within your environment.

DACIA TOLL: In our first year they did all of our teacher training. By our second year we shared the teacher training.

DACIA TOLL (off camera): And now we're at the stage where it's really Amistad staff that is training new Amistad staff as appropriately as it should be. Our ideal way of bringing on new teachers is to have them spend the summer with us. First there is a full week of training ...

DACIA TOLL: ... sort of an Amistadization (sic) in some respects. And then that's followed by three weeks of actually teaching in our Summer schools.

DACIA TOLL (off camera): The most valuable professional development for teachers is actually being in the back of their room and providing them with feedback. On that lesson being in their context, seeing what the issues they're dealing with and coaching them as individuals.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: This concentration on teacher training really has one aim, and that's to get all the teachers on the same page, so they all have a similar teaching approach with their kids.

### Classroom training

DOUG McCURRY: But I'm basically going to pretend that this is the first day of class. And so part of what you're going to do on the first day is go through this system with your kids.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: It is this school wide emphasis on a consistent lesson plan format, coupled with Calgary's periodic assessments that sets Amistad apart from many schools.

DREMA BROWN (off camera): If they know that their reading teacher and their writing teacher and their math teacher

DREMA BROWN: are going to have the same sort of general classroom expectations ... meaning you know, you are not just going to shout out an answer, you are going to raise your hand, you're going to have this set procedure for how we get into groups ... I mean the more that you can have things done in a similar way, the more it stick for the kids. But also it eliminates confusion and opportunities for kids to get off task and do some things that necessarily aren't in their best interests or the best interests of the people around them.

## Classroom

STEPHANIE TATEL (off camera): At Amistad Academy we do a lot of work with the kids around their academic organization.

STEPHANIE TATEL: And the belief is that those are just skills that set them up for so much success.

KEVIN (student): Well the binders and folders, they help me get organized because you know where everything is at. And if something is due tomorrow, you know exactly where it is at and when you can do it. Time management, they're always telling me in high school that you have to have time management.

STEPHANIE TATEL: All your papers go back into your green folders. Team leaders pick them up and put them away. Everybody else put your binders up....

DOUG McCURRY(off screen): Those strategies we found, are just as important so we teach them how to organize their binder. We teach them how to write down the homework from the night before.

DOUG McCURRY: As silly as that sounds a lot of our fifth graders come in and don't really understand when the teacher puts the homework on the board, "what do you do then?"

DOUG McCURRY(off screen): And we teach them that. Teach them where to put their homework, how to do that, how to label the paper with your name and date on the upper right hand corner. There's all sorts of things like that, that are important that if kids can get that, then they are ready for high school.

DOUG McCURRY: Then they're ready for college.

DOUG McCURRY(off screen): All of our classes also start in the same way. We have five quick review ... what we call "Quick Questions."

## Montage of various teachers asking quick questions

JOHN KRAUSE: O.K. we have the five quick questions, they're on the front board.

TAMARA ORPUT: Everybody turn to your quick questions.

MARC MICHAELSON: O.K. quick questions.....

DE-LEA DEAN: Your binders should be out and you should be starting your quick questions, they're on the board....

NIKI REID (off screen): You only have about five of them.

NIKI REID: We give kids about five minutes to do them. And the purpose of them is to review. And the whole lesson plan is basically about review.

NIKI REID (off screen): Because you want them to have success at the beginning of class.

DOUG McCURRY: It's designed that they get four or five out of five right. So they are getting 80 to 100 percent right everyday. So they feel confident and they're reviewing.

### De-Lea Dean's class

DE-LEA DEAN: Where was the final trial of the Amistad case? Alex?

Alex: Washington D.C.

DE-LEA DEAN: Basically it's split, the first half of the class is review and the second half, you'll go into your new material for the day.

NIKI REID: And then at the end you do what's called "Independent Practice." And Independent Practice is letting them go on their own ... using their notes if they need to ... but to practice what they just learned. And then lastly you have what is your "Summary" or "Journal Writing" or something like that. And then the last thing is to make sure that they get their homework. And homework is always ... well we try to make sure that homework is always ... based on something they already know. So again they can have success. Because the job of homework shouldn't be to go home and have to have 50 people help me with my homework. The job should be homework reinforces something I already know.

DE-LEA DEAN : For example, if I introduce a concept on Monday they probably actually wouldn't have it on the homework until maybe Wednesday or Thursday until I am certain that almost everyone in the classroom has been trying their hardest and knows how to do it.

### John Krause's Class

JOHN KRAUSE (off screen): It's a very strong form of communication as to what the child is responsible for that night.

JOHN KRAUSE: So the child comes in the next day on the bus, all their homework is suppose to be complete. It's all supposed to be in one section of their homework folder.

JOHN KRAUSE (off screen): They put that homework folder, immediately when they come in, into a bin. And that's brought up to the classroom and then they have a teacher or students will go through it and check off whether the homework is done.

DOUG McCURRY (off screen): We're giving them homework that they know how to do. A lot of homework problems can be that the kid doesn't know how to do it.

DOUG McCURRY: We send kids home with work they know how to do for home. And then we start every class with stuff they know how to do. So we start and end class ... if you think of the beginning in homework ... with confident, cumulative review building. And then sandwich that with really clearly modeled new material. And that is where we really gained the power from Calgary.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Patricia Lucan is the President of the New Haven Federation of Teachers.

PATRICIA LUCAN: We need to differentiate between the district public schools and Amistad, which is a public school but does work differently. And it does work differently in its school day, the length of its day for one thing. It works differently in the fact that its teachers are not a part of the bargaining unit, which is the New Haven Federation of Teachers. It works differently in that it can set certain parameters for children's behavior and expectations. And it can insist on them.

Jose Peralta's office

JOSE PERALTA: If she kicks you off the bus indefinitely, because this is not the first time that you've been kicked off the bus...

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Once a student's behavior violates the REACH Values, the Dean of Students, Jose Peralta works with teachers, parents and students to resolve the issue.

JOSE PERALTA: Sometimes students are sent down to my office for fighting, putting their hands on another student, being disrespectful to the teacher ... calling the teacher a bad word, a bad name

JOSE PERALTA (off screen): you know, causing a raucous, being disruptive. I also see a lot of low-level infractions of the REACH Values.

JOSE PERALTA: ... and it's not because you can't do the work, it's because you're not doing it.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Punishment at Amistad is all about opening up a dialogue. To get to the root of the problems, Jose Peralta talks to as many teachers and others as possible. Small infractions tend to become larger problems if left unchecked. So the idea here is to address them early.

JOSE PERALTA: Any small thing that's left untouched ... for example the simple thing of not tucking your shirt in ... if we leave it unaddressed, then that sloppiness transcends into "I am not going to take pride in my work. I am not going to take pride in this. I am not going to take pride in that."

JOSE PERALTA (whispering): Is your shirt tucked in?

JOSE PERALTA: We try to address it from many different angles. And it's all about routines. Setting standards, setting expectations. This is what we want from you. This is why we want it from you and having that sense of buy in from the students.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Barbara Carroll is a social worker on the Amistad staff.

BARBARA CARROLL: When a kid is acting up here, we really look into what's going on with that student. I mean certainly the behavior isn't unacceptable. And they get that message that, that's inappropriate and unacceptable behavior. But then between Jose and I, I think that we really try to figure out what is going on for this student. I mean what really made them angry or what really made them act out so strongly. And try to help them negotiate their relationships better.

Barbara Carroll's office

BARBARA CARROLL: Can you say those feelings out loud?

STUDENT: Feelings are ... angry, frustrated, sadness, confused, boredom, and I don't care attitude.

BARBARA CARROLL: Right. Which one do you usually have?

STUDENT: Frustrated and don't care attitude.

BARBARA CARROLL (off screen): Kids are feeling angry. They feel like teachers are picking on them, things are not fair. There's a real sense of what's fair and not fair and what's just and not just to these students. Having students look at themselves and look at their behavior and look at how their behavior affects other people is a...

BARBARA CARROLL: ... crucial piece in helping them figure out how to get along with other people.

TAVANNA: I use to be ... lets just say "not the perfect student in the fifth grade" ... and the teachers, the principal, Ms. Toll, Mr. McCurry and my teachers, some of my friends too, has helped me. My behavior has changed. The attitude has really gone down. Now I'm used to helping my friends so they can get up to where I am at.

JESSIKA: Before I came to Amistad Academy, I was the person that nobody wanted to be around. They would talk about me and I would go up to them and confront them. And I would get in a big old argument and end up getting in trouble. But every since I've been at Amistad, I've calmed down a little bit. And "Second Step" helped me too.

### Second step class

KIM MOWERY: I'm going to ask you to answer a question on a piece of paper, and this is the question: What are some things that make you angry?

JOSE PERALTA (off screen): The school has invested a lot in this program called "Second Step", which is an anger management, violence prevention program.

JOSE PERALTA: Twice a week, every advisory group, for about 35 minutes has time to teach this. And it talks about impulse control, empathy, anger management.

KIM MOWERY: ... and now that you know how to recognize them what do you do instead of hauling off and hitting someone square in the jaw.

JOSE PERALTA (off screen): Each lesson is broken down in terms of classroom behavior that can be monitored both from a peer angle ... almost like a peer monitoring group ... as well as an individual person working on things.

JOSE PERALTA: And I think a lot of the students here ... especially in the fifth grade I've noticed this year ... don't have a clue about sometimes when they're angry how they hurt others or how they can put that negative energy out there.

SUE WALLING: Will you take your book and your pencil ... take your pencil with you and go to the timeout desk and you may leave your book there. I'm going to set three minutes on my timer and in three minutes I'm going to check in with you. I appreciate how everyone else is still working ...

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Teachers also have ways to deal with behavior issues within their classes. The main objective is to get the students to become self-reflective.

BARBARA CARROLL: Time out, there's a desk and there are sheets that students fill out which ask questions about which REACH Value did you violate? What was the situation that got you upset? What are you going to do in the future? What are three options that you can choose from to do it differently and be more successful?

SUE WALLING: ...and your going to treat your classmates the way they wish to be treated...Excellent. Do you feel like your ready to sit back down again?

BARBARA CARROLL: Some students that I know can get to that point, but it takes time for them to learn to do that. Because I don't think that typically we ask people to do that in our society. You know, we blame others for own behavior.

CLARENCE PAGE STANDUP: All of Amistad's students are chosen through the same lottery system as other public schools in New Haven. That means Amistad cannot skim high achievers. It has the same student mix as any other New Haven school. But as a charter school, Amistad's administrators and teachers have a lot more freedom to decide how their school day is structured which, by the way, runs from 8 in the morning to 5 in the afternoon. Everyday begins with the morning circle ... a time to reinforce Amistad's ideas about community. Misdeeds are apologized for. And outstanding achievement is recognized in a public way.

### Morning Circle

Students chanting....

JARED: I felt Morning Circle was a pretty good concept because it brought everyone in the school together just to share what's going around in the school. For example kids will get recognized for the good things that they did. And teachers can announce things.

FEMALE STUDENT: I would like to recognize Eri. She got the right answer on math and she was the first. She wasn't bragging. I think that shows respect, enthusiasm, and citizenship.

TINA: You recognize a student for showing the REACH Values or showing a particular REACH Value. And also you have apologize for being late or if you are suspended for any reason, then you apologize for that.

MALE STUDENT: I apologize to the community for being late.

DACIA TOLL (chanting): Are we ready to make the most of this day?

All students: We are!!!!

DACIA TOLL (chanting): Who are we proud to be?!!!

All students: Amistad Academy!!!

DACIA TOLL: Have a great day!

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: At Amistad the day is structured like this ... in the morning when the school hopes the student's minds will be fresh, they spend two hours on reading plus an hour on math and another hour on writing. Focusing more time on core skills helps students who are behind in those areas to catch up.

### Roxanna Lopez's reading class

ROXANNA LOPEZ: Dacia gave me an opportunity to think of what works, what doesn't work, adjust to fit the student's needs. And at the end of the day I think what the school is most concerned about is the outcome. Are students becoming better readers in the process? Are they becoming better thinkers? Are they becoming life long learners?

ROXANNA LOPEZ: Your going to see if you can meet your goal of reading 240 words in two minutes without making more than five errors....

ROXANNA LOPEZ: Decoding class is simply about "can you decode these words?" In some ways the initial step of reading is the children really need to understand how letters and sounds come together. Now once they have that, or as they are mastering that, there has to be meaning to these words. So now we're focusing on building both in pretty reluctant readers.

ROXANNA LOPEZ: Stop. Count the words. Raise your hand if the person who was reading made it to their goal...

### Carolyn Streets' reading class

CAROLYN STREETS: Everybody take your junior grade books and come over to the reading corner...

CAROLYN STREETS: Before I can even say "get your books and let's go to the reading corner" they are already over there. They're always eager to do their read aloud for that 20 minutes. And I start them off. I read a paragraph and they basically take it from there. It's a student run activity.

KENDALL: reads from a book...

TAVANNA: Before this I never really cared about reading. And now I love to read books all the time. I like reading. And my friends are like "why are you always reading books?" And I am like "I don't know. I just like to."

KIMBERLY TURNER: The other public school, it never was an issue that they had to read, which is important for kids to read. So at Amistad you must read. Every night you must read. Even the weekends you have to read and I have to sign the folder.

## Carolyn Streets' writing class

CAROLYN STREETS: In my writing class we apply a lot of the concepts that we learn in reading class. They make that connection between what they read and what they write. A lot of times students will come up to me and ask me how do they write something correctly? And I'll just usually say "well we read this, this morning and it's the same example. It's very similar. Go back to your novel and take a look. And that light comes on and they go "oh!"

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: The last 70 minutes of the school day is devoted to classes that feed the students creative side ... music ... sports ... art ... computer sciences.

DOUG McCURRY: We've really been able to design the program way we want. And that also allows us to be able to really focus on their core skills, but also have an enrichment program from four to five where they have arts and music and all those things that are getting cut in some other schools.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Amistad expects commitment from parents too. Parents are asked to sign a contract ... just like students do ... as a symbol of that commitment. This triangular support system parents, students and teachers is bound together by mutual agreement to support each other in a variety of ways. For one, it means parents are kept informed and involved with what's going on in the classroom from day one.

NIKI STURGIS: We decided to have a series of orientations. We felt like if we started with parents from the beginning, helping them to understand our mission, then we would have a lot more success academically with the students.

## Parent meeting

NIKI STURGIS: We don't want this to be a time when you all just come and listen to people just talk to you. We want to learn about you, also.

NIKI STURGIS (off screen): Getting the parents to buy into the mission was a good thing because they understood from the beginning ... "please don't be angry, when the kids come home with tons of homework. And please don't be angry ...

NIKI STURGIS: ...that we have the expectation that they do it. And if they don't then they are going to get in trouble. Please don't be angry that the day is very long, and we have no intention on changing that. Because there is a reason. You know, there is a reason for everything." So all of those sort of hard questions

NIKI STURGIS (off screen): ...that parents might have had ... all of those things were answered. What we were trying to do was to make parents feel like they could be apart in what their kids were doing.

NIKI STURGIS: Because we gave them the tools in order to make that happen.

DACIA TOLL: You are not just signing your kid up for the school...you are signing up, and that means that you are making a commitment...

DACIA TOLL (off screen): I think many of our parents are genuinely supportive of the school.

DACIA TOLL: I think it runs a wide spectrum. And there are some parents who are super involved and they consistently go the extra mile for their child and for the school as a whole.

DACIA TOLL: You are making a commitment to fifteen volunteer hours at the school. Before that gets to scary, PTO meetings count, report card night counts, all the parent night activities count...

DACIA TOLL: There are a lot more that are quietly supportive. And there are a handful that are not supportive. And you frequently see that coming out when there are discipline decisions that have to be made or where we're really trying to ratchet a student up in terms of commitment ... whether it's homework or attendance. And in those situations it is really tough. And we do try to bring that parent on board. I think we spend a lot of time talking with parents about why. Why we make certain decisions. Why we're asking for certain kinds of commitments from them or from their child.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Frequent meetings help keep parents informed about their child's education. It's part of the contract. Parents are told how the day will look for their child. What the homework folder looks like, how you check it and sign off on its completion. And these are the REACH ethics that each and every member of the Amistad community will aspire to live towards.

JONATHON BAILEY: The contract serves two purposes, one to get the family involved in the school, in their child's learning experiences. But also as a way to tie the parent to the school and have the parent be apart of the whole education process that their child is about to enter into.

SHARON BAILEY: I like the fact that Amistad Academy offered the contract because it made all parties accountable for the success of the student. You had to sign a contract as a parent saying that you had to sign the homework folder every night. That made you accountable. It also, like Jonathan said ... it also made you involved as a parent because you had to go through their homework. So it kind of made you involved in getting to know what they were learning in their classroom on a daily basis.

### Parents-Classroom situation

ROXANNA LOPEZ: If the homework comes in and it's not ... I've had this in the past where the paper maybe crumbled or may have some stains on it or it may have this and that ... that is not acceptable. That homework assignment will be redone during lunchtime. So again, these are just habits that I think we're trying to build positive citizens who are responsible to their community, who are responsible to themselves. And in a lot of these routines, we are just trying to instill that this is the way they need to be as students. So this is accountability both on the child, on my part and then on your part to read the homework assignment and do it. And then every single night students are responsible for reading at least 20 minutes a night. And that is just something that they have found. Research after research shows that children become better readers by reading.

YVONNE: First we do independent reading at home for 20 minutes. Then after that we will write down how many pages, what page we started and how many pages we read and the title of the book. And then we have what's called a "Reading Log" and we will write one or two sentences about the story.

NANCY ROSADO: She wasn't doing to good in reading. So by reading 20 minutes every day, it helps her improve in the skills, languages ... how she speaks ... so, I like that very much.

## Parent/Teacher meetings

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: The smaller school also helps to foster more personal relationships between the teachers and the student's family. At Amistad keeping parents informed about student growth is essential.

ROXANNA LOPEZ: speaks Spanish to a parent...

KENDALL PETRI: When I see a problem with a student who I have this much respect for and whom I have a relationship with the family, it is absolutely critical to me to feel that I have brought to your attention whatever news may not be conveyed to you by other teachers who don't know him as well.

KENDALL PETRI: You know, in a regular school environment you would only interact with a child about seven hours a day. We interact with these children about ten hours a day. And in many cases, much more. As a result we get to know the parents and the entire family much more intimately than we would in a typically situation.

KENDALL PETRI: I had conversations with the science teacher earlier on in the trimester ... since I was in the position of checking up on you, which the news was not so good ...

KEVIN: I had turned to the wrong friends and they were leading me astray. And so she was pounding me on being good behavior wise in class because I was distracting and I was distracted by others. And it showed in my grades. And during that conference she tried me that either that I have to change. Either I can go towards negative or I can go positive.

KENDALL PETRI: There is a percentage of parents who are not convinced that we are here for all of the right reasons. And that we have the experience and expertise to be making the very best decisions on behalf of their children. I think that confidence grows on an almost daily basis.

THEODORE SERGI: We recently completed a multi year study on our charter schools and our regional magnet schools and parents and students are very satisfied. They return year after year. They speak highly of the place. They know the principal, they know the teachers. They feel that the school knows their child. And they communicate more regularly. Now in a critical way there are those who would say "well it's easy, if you only have a hundred to 200 students, you can do a lot more than when you have a thousand." Maybe that tells us that we have to start to do more to break up our large schools. Now that raises all kinds of problems for people when they think about the expense of building a whole bunch of other buildings. But maybe there is more we can do within our large facilities to get to that very personal approach that's so desperately needed at that age. And particularly with youngsters who haven't been successful and may not have as much support in their homes and from their families.

CLARENCE PAGE STANDUP: Every two years, beginning with the fourth grade, the state administers what's called The Connecticut Mastery Test, or CMT to monitor student progress. In addition to that test, Amistad administers it's own test every six weeks. It's called the Curriculum Based Measurements, or CBM. Frequent testing enables teachers to closely monitor student progress and respond to problems before students fall behind.

## Drema Brown's Test Class

DOUG McCURRY(off screen): The state of Connecticut says that there is 55 or so discreet things that kids should be able to do.

DOUG McCURRY: And we've taken those and said "okay, if this is what they need to do by the end of the year, six weeks, they should be here. The next six weeks, they should be here, here and here." And so we give these assessments to make sure that the kids are mastering what they need to master. Because the worse thing that can happen is "okay we've tested them here and we've tested them here. They didn't know it here, they still don't know it there." That's not helpful for me. What's helpful for me as a school administrator and what's helpful, I think, for teachers is to use that information to guide instruction. So what we do when we find out the kids don't know it here, we try to figure out what can we do.

DREMA BROWN: The teachers correct it and kind of look at the results. Kind of say "oh well looks like maybe they didn't necessarily get, I don't know ... if we're talking about reading, finding the main idea. But they did get these things about characters." So maybe for the next six weeks, I can continue to focus on finding the main idea, but I don't have to spend so much time on characterization. And so it helps the teacher really focus his or her time and attention on the areas where the kids have shown to be a little weaker in.

## Doug/Teacher meeting

DOUG McCURRY: One of the things we try to do every six weeks is see which kids got it right and which kids got it wrong? What has my class mastered? I can just immediately incorporate and review it all year. What did only a few kids miss but enough that I want to attack it as a group? And then the follow up question being, what kids are falling through the cracks? If I see one kid missing all across the board, what interventions do I need to do? Do I need extra tutoring? Does he need to come in the morning et cetera.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Another goal of these six-week assessments is to help the kids alleviate anxiety, build self-esteem and become familiar with test taking so when they sit down to take the Connecticut Mastery Test, they have much more confidence.

INTRO: Natalie Missakian has been covering educational issues including Amistad Academy for the New Haven Register since the mid 1990s.

NATALIE MISSAKIAN: Amistad is a school where the majority of the kids are minorities. The majority of the kids living in poverty. All of them come from New Haven. Those are groups of kids that have tended historically to score far below the state average on the Connecticut Mastery Test. What caught everybody's attention about Amistad is that they sort of bucked that. They shattered that idea that these kids can't do well on these tests. They're doing it and they did it in a matter of a few years and not a matter of a decade. So I think ... I don't know if they can copy that in another school but, I think that it makes it more difficult for educators to sort of say that "it's out of our hands and that we can't do more than we're doing." I think Amistad proves that it can happen ... it can be done.

CLARENCE PAGE STANDUP with graphic: Improvements for students at Amistad have been nothing short of dramatic compared to their peers in New Haven or state wide. In math scores for example, there was almost no change from sixth grade to eighth grade for New Haven or Connecticut students overall. But Amistad students soared in that same two years. From 22 percent of mastery in math to 66 percent. Amistad showed even greater improvement in reading, they achieved 71 percent of mastery. Higher than other students city wide or statewide. And in writing, Amistad students blew everyone away ... to almost 90 percent. Citywide and statewide scores showed very little change in that same two-year period.

NATALIE MISSAKIAN: You had the New Haven kids basically scoring as well as kids in Greenwich, in some of the wealthiest suburbs above the state. And far above the state average. Eighty nine percent of kids scoring goal in an inner city school is not what we normally see here in Connecticut.

DOUG McCURRY: I actually feel somewhat lucky to be in Connecticut in that the standards are high. Connecticut is one of the wealthiest states in the country. And so historically, the SAT averages are some of the highest in the country. However, being in the urban area, the disparity between the rich and the poor is some of the greatest as well, but they set the standard high. And if our kids can meet Connecticut goal in reading, then they are ready for high school in reading. If they can meet the Connecticut in math, they are ready for high school math. They can write a writing prompt and do the grammar the way Connecticut says, they're ready for high school in writing. And so the test no longer becomes a scary thing for us, but becomes a really aspirational thing where we can say "look if we focus our energy on these clear standards, that also happen to be the ones assessed by the test, then we're going to get our kids ready." And so some people say "oh, that's teaching the test." It's not teaching the test, it's teaching to the very clear rigorous standards. In any good curriculum the assessment should match what you are teaching.

CLARENCE PAGE STANDUP: The state of Connecticut allows charter schools like Amistad to run themselves as if they were their own school district. As such, Amistad is held accountable directly to the state for test scores and student achievement.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: Once a year Amistad travels to the state Capitol to present an annual report on the school's operations to Connecticut's education commissioner and his staff.

### State Meeting

THEODORE SERGI: Is your program of instruction, your curriculum dramatically different or pretty much the same as what your original mission and submission to us was?

DACIA TOLL: To take reading as an example, every year we get better at becoming more and more standards based...

DACIA TOLL(off screen): Charter schools give you total control over budget and total control over hiring.

DACIA TOLL: There is little else that you need in terms of creating a successful school.

DACIA TOLL (off screen): Within that you are able to make all decisions that matter, in terms of selection of curriculum materials, instructional strategies and then in return, the state says they hold you accountable for results.

THEODORE SERGI: Let's talk about achievement...What really excites you the most about student achievements and what areas bother you still the most?

DACIA TOLL: Well, I think we've had dramatic math achievement....

THEODORE SERGI: I know you know I'm known to be cautious...I want to caution you about the use of the word dramatic unless you really think it's at that level.

DACIA TOLL: Do you think 2.7 grade levels in a single year is dramatic?

THEODORE SERGI: Well ... I think that would be dramatic. (laughter) But I'd want to scrutinize it a little more....

DACIA TOLL: You can scrutinize away commissioner....

THEODORE SERGI: I'd want to make sure your not doing as they do in some other school systems where you were excluding the kids who don't score that well....

THEODORE SERGI: It's difficult to run a school and we've had three close. One of which we asked to close, the other two voluntary put their charter back on the table for us saying that in fact it was too difficult and they hadn't felt successful.

THEODORE SERGI: I'm really pleased with what you've shown here and it is dramatic...

DACIA TOLL: If they are willing to close schools when they are not successful, then the charter school movement as a whole can be very successful. But it takes that kind of political willingness to admit when something is not working and to stop it.

DACIA TOLL: Last Fall we opened up 64 spots to new students ... basically all fifth grader coming in ... because we don't like to admit students after that point. And we received 487 applications through that schools of choice.

THEODORE SERGI: You started later than a lot of our other charter schools, but maybe you've had a better foundation in which to grow, including a pretty solid view of where you want to be. And while it may not be the right school for every student, it looks like you're meeting the needs of an awful lot of kids there. And I think this is what the charter school experiment in Connecticut was supposed to be.

CLARENCE PAGE STANDUP: Amistad teachers try to create a community that will encourage students to pursue the learning experience all the way through college. These seventh graders are visiting Washington College In Maryland for three days.

## Washington College Campus

MARC MICHAELSON: We're trying to open doors for our students and give them a sense of what's possible. Many of these students come from families where no one has been to college before. And they may not be thinking of that as a real possibility in their future. We want to give them a sense of what can be theirs if they really work hard for it.

TAVANNA: How many years do you have to come her for that?

JOHN TOLL: All our majors are four years, for the undergraduate degree.

## Students entering a building

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: John Toll is the President of Washington College in Maryland.

JOHN TOLL: We've had many important speakers here. We'd like to get the president, but he's been rather busy. But for example, Colin Powell, the Secretary of State came and spoke here.

MARC MICHAELSON: For many of our students, just a change to see what a college is all about will be an amazing experience for them. When someone mentions a college or a university, they will have a picture in their minds what this looks like, what the buildings are like.

## Chemistry Classroom

MARC MICHAELSON: What we're hoping will come out of that is a desire to really work hard to get into a good track in high school or a good private high school if possible. And then college as a possibility.

JOSH: What I am working for is the straight "A's." And just building an academic base that I know will at least get me a small scholarship so I won't have to have my parents work their butt off to get enough money to get me into college.

## Admission Offices

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER: During their visit the students even have a chance to experience what an admissions interview is like.

ADMISSIONS OFFICER #1: What do you see yourself pursuing in the future? Do you continue with a lot of these activities or...

JOSH: I'd say I would like to go along with my art and graphic design skills.....

DOUG McCURRY: I think part of the problem that's happening in urban areas is that we say "Oh, these kids aren't college material. This kid isn't that". No one would say that in Madison, Connecticut. Every single parent there thinks their kid is going to college. I want to make sure every kid has that option. But every single one of you should have in your mind, "I'm going off to high school and I am going to do well and I am going to have a very strong college option."

ADMISSIONS OFFICER #2: Tell me a bit about how you describe yourself?

TINA: I like to help my peers ... be a citizen.

BARBARA HOLDEN: They get a chance to go through the process of being admitted in college. Go through the process of attending a college class, the whole college setting. They start early, so that the idea of college is instilled into them at an early age. And I think that's just wonderful. The sooner we get them the better.

ADMISSIONS OFFICER #2: Well, Tina, thanks for coming and meeting with me today. I was very happy to meet you and I hope that we'll be on your list in the future, if possible, when apply to colleges.

TINA: Yes. I will put you in one of my top five.

ADMISSIONS OFFICER #2: Great, great good ...

DACIA TOLL: If we want to be a part of a public school reform conversation, then we have to play by the same rules. We cannot hand pick our students. We can't out the ones that are the most challenging. We can't spend a lot more money. We can't have class sizes that are a lot smaller unless we figured out a creative way to finance that within the existing budget. And it is important for us to play by the same rules.

DOUG MCCURRY: And we also, because of that, are not in the business of expelling kids. We will do everything in our power to keep kids here and to make them work here. Because we can't look people in the eye honestly and say "we've been really successful. Can you maybe think about doing what we're going?" Because the first thing they're going to say is "you don't have the same kids as we do." And then the discussion is over. But we can say "yes we do."

CLARENCE PAGE STANDUP: For the class of 2003, black students at Amistad almost closed their academic performance gap with the state's white students.

CLARENCE PAGE VOICEOVER with Graphic: In math for example, while the scores of black students overall continued to lag behind, black Amistad students rose rapidly to 64 percent of mastery. Only four points below the state's scores for white students. In reading, Amistad improved again, to almost 70 percent of mastery. Only 11 points below white Connecticut students. And in writing, Amistad students not only closed the gap with white students, they surpassed it. Look at this; black students at Amistad achieved 91 percent of mastery compared to 69 percent for the state's white students.

CLARENCE PAGE STANDUP: Eye opening performance like that is causing educators across the country to take a new look at what Amistad is doing.

CHRISTOPHER JENCKS: So the biggest thing I think they could do is just keep doing whatever they're doing and keep being an example that other people will have to sort of say "well why aren't you doing as well as Amistad? What do they know that you guys don't know over here?" And that gets harder and harder to ignore, the longer they've been there and the longer they've been doing it.

PATRICIA LUCAN: I would almost like to try charter schools that were union ... sanctioned union run ... so to speak schools where the teachers were union members. I personally, with some friends, would probably love to make an experiment of what we could do with some students if we didn't have to work under the constraints that the present district public school teachers have to work under. I know we could have success. I know we would really make some big difference. Smaller setting, longer school day, activities that are non-academic, character building and consequences for infractions of any of the rules. And with strict discipline and fairness, I think you'd have a winner.

CLOSING STANDUP: For years people didn't want to talk about the academic achievement gap between black and white students. But over the past decade a new candor has broken out and a new dialogue has begun to look for ways to close the gap. For many Americans this is the next great phase of the Civil Rights Revolution. It sounds like a utopian dream, but positive change is possible. After years without improvement in New Haven, people had begun to think improvements couldn't happen. Amistad has shown that they can. Reading, writing, and math scores are up. The students have a much brighter future. And educators across the country are taking a closer look to see how Amistad ideas can be implemented elsewhere. It all begins with a dream and a belief that those dreams can come true.

I'm Clarence Page.