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Uncommon Schools (B): Seeking Excellence at Scale through Standardized Practice

Three years ago in 2013, Brett Peiser, CEO of New York-headquartered charter management organization (CMO) Uncommon Schools (Uncommon), had been driven to reassess the non-profit's strategy. Uncommon had previously been structured as a decentralized "network of networks" that encouraged regional autonomy and innovation to provide low-income students with high-quality education. But 2013 standardized test results based on the new, more rigorous Common Core State Standards (Common Core) revealed that this strategy yielded too many variations in student scores.

In response, Peiser and the executive team decided to standardize certain practices across the organization. In 2015, he replaced the six highly independent regional managing directors with two chief schools officers (CSOs). (See **Exhibit 1**.) Former Managing Director Julie Jackson became CSO of elementary and middle schools, managing six associate managing directors (AMDs), 42 schools, and more than 1,000 instructors in six cities. Former Managing Director Paul Bambrick-Santoyo became CSO of high schools and professional development, responsible for one AMD, seven schools, and hundreds of instructors in four cities. The CSOs were supported by the three regional COOs, retained from the previous model. The COOs reported to Josh Phillips, who was named chief of innovation and school operations, a new position at the home office.

Uncommon had expanded during this strategic shift (see **Exhibit 2**) and by 2016 Uncommon had 49 schools in six regions with 2,100 staff and 14,000 students; 80% of students came from low-income families, and 94% were African American or Hispanic. In July 2016, Peiser now considered if further alignment of best practices would help Uncommon continue to grow while enabling its students to achieve high academic results. While consistency was important, Peiser wanted to retain Uncommon's ability to innovate, explaining, "To us, innovation is ensuring that what works in one school is considered in all schools, and that we stay ahead of new things that can make our schools better." Could Uncommon both innovate and standardize to achieve quality at scale?

Senior Lecturer John J-H Kim and Case Researcher Sarah McAra prepared this case. PELP cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

Standardization

In 2015, Peiser tasked CSOs Jackson and Bambrick-Santoyo with rolling out organization-wide systems, primarily focusing on academics and instruction. They decided to standardize the aspects they deemed essential to student success: curricula, professional development, and data. Other aspects would remain under the purview of school leaders. For example, the CSOs determined that all students in the same grade should have the same number of instructional minutes per subject, but they did not dictate in what order or at what time of day.

Ensuring that all students experienced consistent, rigorous, and joyful learning through standardized lesson plans was one of the first major changes.[a] To write the lesson plans, the home office convened a team of 60 teachers and deans who had excelled at creating their own academic content in specific subjects; a few became full-time lesson planners, while others remained in the classroom and participated on a part-time basis. "It works because it's not coming from the top, it's peer to peer," said Peiser. "A seventh grade math lesson may be coming from your neighbor across the hall." Moreover, every lesson plan was created by content-area experts and thus compensated for an instructor's potential knowledge gaps. By 2016, Uncommon had developed and trained instructors on lesson plans for K-8 math and reading. Science and history were being prepared in 2016, as was a standardized high school curriculum.

The CSOs introduced additional resources to help teachers with alignment. Bambrick-Santoyo led a content development team that codified professional development and trained instructors in techniques for lesson plan delivery across core subjects. Jackson oversaw the curriculum and assessment team (CAT) made up of subject-area experts that helped evaluate and align instruction for grades K-8. Yet the CSOs still anticipated—and hoped—that the classrooms would not become homogenous. "Two teachers can execute the same lesson plan, and the classrooms will look completely different because of the teachers' styles and personalities," said Lee McGovern.

Teachers' reactions to the standardized lesson plans were mixed. Some felt that they were losing their autonomy, while others were grateful for the plans because they no longer had to spend several hours every night creating their own. There were also some instructors who did not feel strongly either way. Peiser hoped that these efforts would reduce teachers' workloads and lower turnover. While he did not have a target turnover rate in mind, he felt that even historical rates, comparable to the national urban average, were too high. (By some estimates, high-poverty public schools had an annual teacher attrition rate of 20%.[1]) From the 2014-2015 school year to the 2015-2016 school year, Uncommon saw a 2% to 3% rise in turnover. However, it was difficult to determine if alignment had contributed; both the highest and lowest performing schools had higher attrition rates than in years past.

The CSOs also began collecting consistent data across the network to better monitor student progress and achievement. In 2015, they created standardized interim assessments (IAs) for English language arts (ELA) and math to replace the regional IAs that had developed under the network of networks structure. (See sample IA data in **Exhibit 3**.) Students took the exams every eight to ten weeks, and the CSOs analyzed results to determine if schools needed tailored support in certain areas or to identify what kind of professional development was needed across the entire network. CSOs also tracked other important indicators such as attendance, school culture, and teacher satisfaction, and monitored their portfolios through frequent school visits.

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[a] After Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York adopted the Common Core, Uncommon could use the same curriculum in every region for the first half of the year. For the second half, they used curricula customized for the respective state exams.

Improvement through Innovation

The Uncommon team considered standardization an important step towards increasing innovation. "Once we have consistent baselines, it will be easier to see where and how we need to innovate," said Phillips. He and the CSOs identified which tools and practices should be disseminated throughout the organization. Working groups made up of high-performing teachers then helped codify best practices and create professional development sessions to train their colleagues on implementation, such as how to "chart the error": how to write down the elements of a discussion on a whiteboard to enhance comprehension. Phillips also stayed abreast of innovations outside of Uncommon, but, as he noted, "We don't want to spend too much time learning and implementing big innovations like personalized learning before standardizing our known best practices. So many of our schools are working really well. We're confident all will start doing just as well once they're aligned to the core best practices."

Uncommon 2020: Achieve, Expand, Impact

The organizational restructuring coincided with the 2015 launch of a new strategic five-year plan. (See to **Exhibit 4.**) The first goal was to "achieve": ensure that 100% of schools closed the economic and racial achievement gap with state-wide averages. The second was to "expand": add 20-30 schools by 2020. The third was to "impact": share best practices internally and externally. Uncommon would have to hire around 2,000 teachers, 850 of whom would likely be brand new to teaching, to reach their expansion goals.[2] Said Phillips, "We have always thought that if we hire people who are mission-aligned, gritty, and have a basic skillset, then we can train them to be great teachers. Someday there may be a limit to that strategy, but we're certainly not there yet." They recognized that expansion may also strain the pipeline of leaders needed to fill the growing number of principal and AMD roles

Quality at Scale

In July 2016, as the 2015-2016 school year results came in, Peiser was optimistic about the alignment efforts so far. (See **Exhibits 5** and **6**.) Uncommon's results in almost every school had increased over the previous year at nearly twice the rate of state averages. In high schools, 2016 marked the third straight year where 100% of Uncommon's students were accepted into college, compared to 68% of nationwide white students and 82% of students from the top-income quartile.[3] For the first time, Uncommon's elementary and middle schools began to move collectively into the same quadrant of high performance among students receiving free and reduced-price lunch (i.e., economically disadvantaged). (See **Exhibit 7**.) "Our schools are now more consistently rigorous and our overall performance is stronger than ever before. Beyond our hard-working teachers, I think that's because of Julie and Paul, and their AMDs who are laser-focused on managing principals for success," said Peiser. However, there were some signs of concern; for instance, some middle schools had been slow to standardize because they had developed in a highly decentralized way.

Now Peiser wondered if Uncommon could continue to expand without compromising academic achievement. While he believed that alignment would help improve performance, he was concerned that it might constrain innovation and continuous improvement. "To create a system of highly effective schools, we've identified what we believe are a set of instructional and leadership practices that work well," said Peiser. "Are there are others? Absolutely. But are there others that can work for a system of 49 schools and 14,000 students? I'm not sure. Scale is the issue. Will we hit a ceiling with this strategy?"

Exhibit 1 Uncommon School Organizational Chart, 2016

Chief Executive Officer
Brett Peiser

School Instruction Management · School Operations Management · Home Office Management · Teach Like A Champion

Chief Schools Officer, 9-12 and K-12 Content Development — Paul Bambrick-Santoyo
- AMD Management
- K-12 Content Development
- College Completion

Chief Schools Officer, K-8 — Julie Jackson
- AMD Management
- K-8 Curriculum and Assessment

Chief of Innovation and School Operations — Josh Phillips
- IT/Data Mgt (App Support, Infrastructure, Product Solutions)
- Camp Uncommon

Chief Financial Officer
- Finance
- Accounting
- Real Estate and Facilities

Chief Advancement Officer
- Development
- Marketing
- External Relations
- Impact

Chief of Staff — Laura Lee McGovern
- Data Analytics
- Special Projects
- Recruitment

Sr. Advisor to the Executive Team
- Human Resources
- Talent Development
- Diversity

Managing Director — Doug Lemov
- Teach Like A Champion

Chief Operating Officer (Newark, Camden)
- ACOO Management
- School Support Team

Chief Operating Officer (NYC)
- ACOO Management
- Brooklyn Regional Team

Chief Operating Officer (Boston, Troy, Rochester)
- ACOO Management
- Boston, Troy, Rochester Regional Teams

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 2   Uncommon's Expansion Timeline, 1997-2016

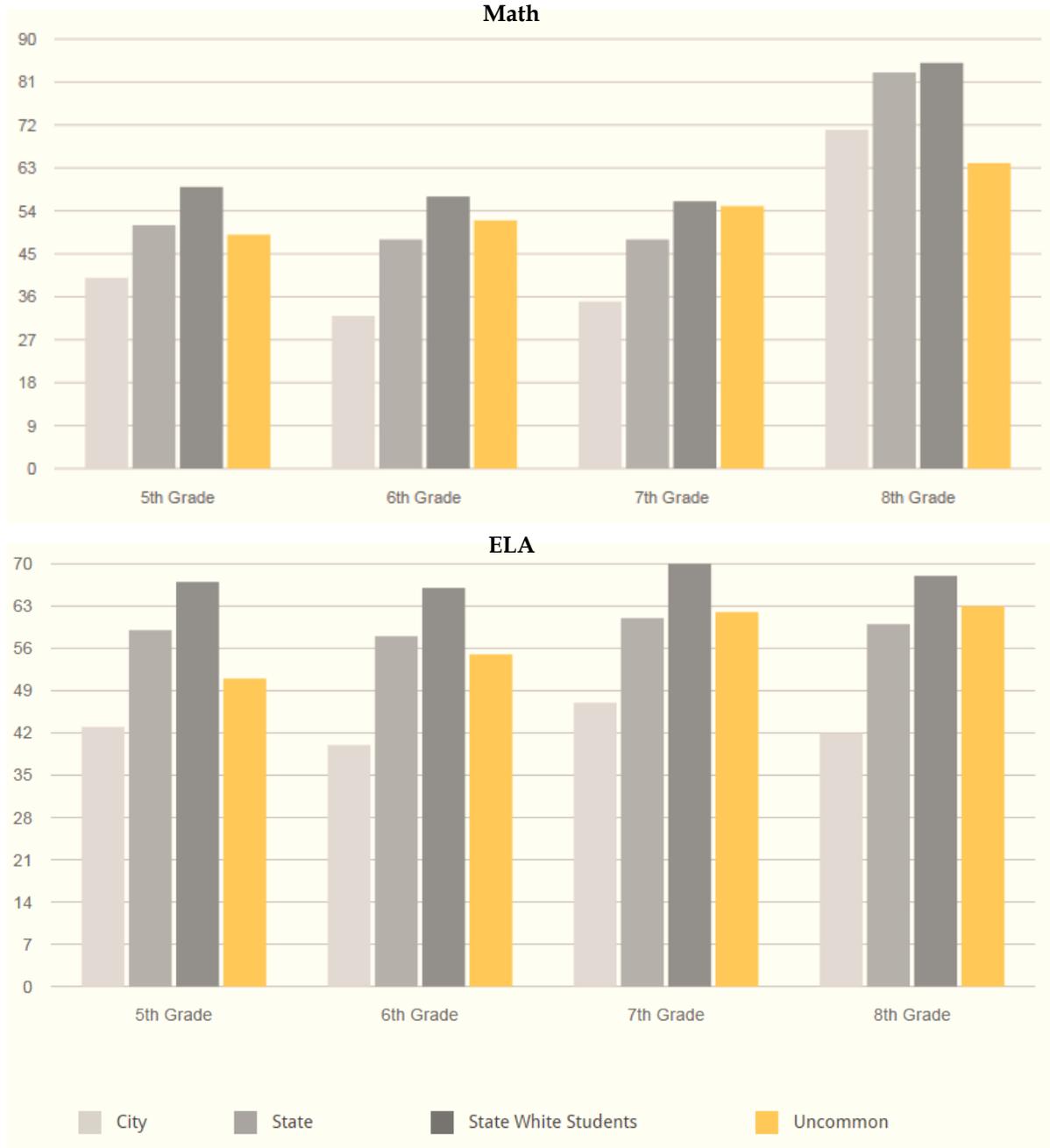| Year	School	Location
1997	North Star Academy - Downtown Middle School	Newark, NJ
1999	Roxbury Prep - Mission Hill Campus	Boston, MA
2000	North Star Academy - Washington Park High School	Newark, NJ
2004	Excellence Boys Charter School Elementary Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2005	North Star Academy - Clinton Hill Middle School	Newark, NJ
2005	Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School	Brooklyn, NY
2006	Leadership Prep Bedford Stuyvesant Elementary Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2006	Rochester Prep Middle School – Brooks Campus	Rochester, NY
2007	North Star Academy - Vailsburg Elementary School	Newark, NJ
2007	Kings Collegiate Charter School	Brooklyn, NY
2008	Excellence Boys Charter School Middle Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2008	Bedford Stuyvesant Collegiate Charter School	Brooklyn, NY
2009	Excellence Girls Charter School Elementary Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2009	Leadership Prep Brownsville Elementary Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2009	Brownsville Collegiate Charter School	Brooklyn, NY
2009	Uncommon Charter High School	Brooklyn, NY
2009	Troy Prep Middle School	Troy, NY
2010	North Star Academy - West Side Park Elementary School	Newark, NJ
2010	North Star Academy - Vailsburg Middle School	Newark, NJ
2010	Leadership Prep Ocean Hill Elementary Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2010	Leadership Prep Bedford Stuyvesant Middle Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2010	Ocean Hill Collegiate Charter School	Brooklyn, NY
2010	Brooklyn East Collegiate Charter School	Brooklyn, NY
2010	Rochester Prep Elementary School	Rochester, NY
2011	North Star Academy - Fairmount Elementary School	Newark, NJ
2011	Rochester Prep Middle School – West Campus	Rochester, NY
2011	Roxbury Prep - Lucy Stone Campus	Boston, MA
2011	Troy Prep Elementary School	Troy, NY
2012	North Star Academy - Liberty Elementary School	Newark, NJ
2012	North Star Academy - West Side Park Middle School	Newark, NJ
2012	Uncommon Collegiate Charter High School	Brooklyn, NY
2012	Roxbury Prep Charter School - Dorchester Campus	Boston, MA
2013	Rochester Prep Elementary School – West Campus	Rochester, NY
2013	Leadership Prep Canarsie Elementary Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2013	Leadership Prep Canarsie Middle Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2013	Leadership Prep Ocean Hill Middle Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2013	Excellence Girls Charter School Middle Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2013	Leadership Prep Brownsville Middle Academy	Brooklyn, NY
2014	North Star Academy – Alexander Street Elementary	Newark, NJ
2014	Uncommon Schools Camden Prep Elementary School	Camden, NJ
2014	Rochester Prep High School	Rochester, NY
2014	Uncommon Preparatory Charter High School	Brooklyn, NY
2015	Roxbury Prep High School	Boston, MA
2015	North Star Academy – Central Avenue Middle School	Newark, NJ
2016	Rochester Prep - Elementary School #3	Rochester, NY
2016	North Star Academy - Elementary School #6	Newark, NJ
2016	North Star Academy – Lincoln Park High School	Newark, NJ
2016	Uncommon Schools Camden Prep Middle School	Camden, NJ
2016	Kings Elementary School	Brooklyn, NY

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 3   Sample CSO Dashboard with Interim Assessment Data, Middle School Results, Select Schools, 2016

Metric	Target	Region 1												Region 2						Region 3			Region 4		
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
Performance (based on state targets)																									
ELA State Tests Gr 5-8: % scoring proficient or better		42%	37%	24%	34%	53%	32%	40%	38%	49%	57%	36%	38%	75%	74%	85%	75%	N/A	N/A	31%	28%	24%	64%	56%	53%
Math State Tests Gr 5-7: % scoring proficient or better		45%	36%	25%	52%	65%	43%	42%	48%	66%	57%	52%	50%	63%	66%	69%	57%	N/A	N/A	42%	34%	34%	54%	50%	60%
Gr 5 % scoring proficient or better		44%	28%	17%	35%	48%	42%	31%	33%	58%	54%	43%	32%	50%	62%	68%	57%	N/A	N/A	38%	18%	34%	44%	49%	53%
Gr 6 % scoring proficient or better		47%	39%	25%	56%	69%	37%	31%	47%	60%	57%	57%	55%	50%	60%	65%	42%	N/A	N/A	36%	39%	35%	52%	58%	46%
Gr 7 % scoring proficient or better		44%	43%	35%	63%	82%	49%	68%	65%	81%	59%	56%	65%	68%	75%	68%	59%	N/A	N/A	52%	46%	32%	48%	48%	69%
Gr 8 % scoring proficient or better		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	86%	70%	77%	73%	N/A	N/A				72%	45%	74%
Perf on quart. benchmark for below-bar schools																									
# Principal obs of teachers per past 30 days	3	39	33	64	45	16	33	58	11	35	15	30	56	20	37	25	19	186	#N/A	44	#N/A	28	34	52	#N/A
# Principal mtgs with teachers per past 30 days	3	17	8	8	20	3	18	20	4	14	10	18	4	0	36	0	4	28	#N/A	22	#N/A	6	3	19	#N/A
Avg Observations at school in past 30 days	3	2.35	1.56	5.39	3.19	3.2	2.62	3.2	3.53	3.94	3	2.7	5.84	2.8	2.9	3.25	2.61	10.1	#N/A	3.67	#N/A	3.78	5.63	2.97	#N/A
Avg Meetings w/ staff in past 30 days		1.06	0.44	0.91	2.06	0.5	2.07	1.3	1.87	1.94	1.4	1.87	1	1.3	2.3	1.31	0.97	1.79	#N/A	1.67	#N/A	1.09	1.25	1.16	#N/A
School Culture																									
School culture rubric score	3																								
Rigor rubric score	3																								
% of students OSS in the last 30 days	3%	7.0%	2.7%	16.3%	1.2%	5.4%	6.0%	2.9%	3.4%	2.9%	3.9%	6.0%	5.8%	4.9%	3.5%	2.0%	5.7%	1.1%	#N/A	2.8%	6.4%	0.0%	2.5%	1.5%	2.3%
% of students suspended at least once	3%	7.2%	2.8%	16.7%	1.2%	5.2%	6.1%	2.9%	3.7%	2.9%	4.0%	6.1%	5.9%	4.9%	4.1%	2.6%	5.7%	1.1%	1.8%	2.8%	6.4%	0.0%	2.5%	1.5%	2.7%
% of students suspended for 5+ days	2%	0.0%	0.6%	1.6%	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
% of students present this period	95%	97%	96%	94%	96%	97%	94%	98%	98%	97%	97%	99%	96%	97%	98%	97%	97%	98%	95%	96%	96%	97%	97%	97%	95%
% students tardy per day this period	5%	3%	7.7%	4.7%	5.0%	4.7%	4.8%	5.1%	6.2%	4.9%	6.3%	10.5%	10.5%	7.4%	5.1%	1.4%	6.4%	6.0%	11.9%	6.9%	3.8%	5.7%	6.6%	5.7%	7.3%
% of students attriting YTD (% of budgeted enrollment)	5%	2.2%	0.6%	0.9%	0.6%	0.3%	2.0%	0.6%	1.2%	1.2%	1.5%	0.3%	5.1%	0.6%	0.9%	0.3%	0.6%	1.1%	19.6%	3.1%	2.3%	2.2%	2.4%	2.1%	0.6%
Staff Culture																									
# of unfilled instructional positions	N/A	1	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	3	1	0	1
Avg. # of teacher absences YTD	N/A																								
# of midyear instructional departures YTD	N/A	1	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	0

X = above target   X = below target

Source: Adapted from company documents.

Exhibit 4   Uncommon's Five-Year Plan, 2015

Achieve 100% at or above bar

We work together to ensure that all of our schools close the achievement gap and drive all of our scholars to college graduation.

Expand 22,000 scholars served

We thoughtfully grow our network of schools to serve a greater number of scholars, families, and communities.

Impact SHARE best practices

We continue to share best practices in high-impact ways that develop staff and scholars inside and outside our schools.

Source: Company documents.

**Exhibit 5a**   Boston: % Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced by Grade, 2016

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 5b   Newark: % Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced by Grade, 2016

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 5c   Rochester: % Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced by Grade, 2016

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 5d   Troy: % Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced by Grade, 2016
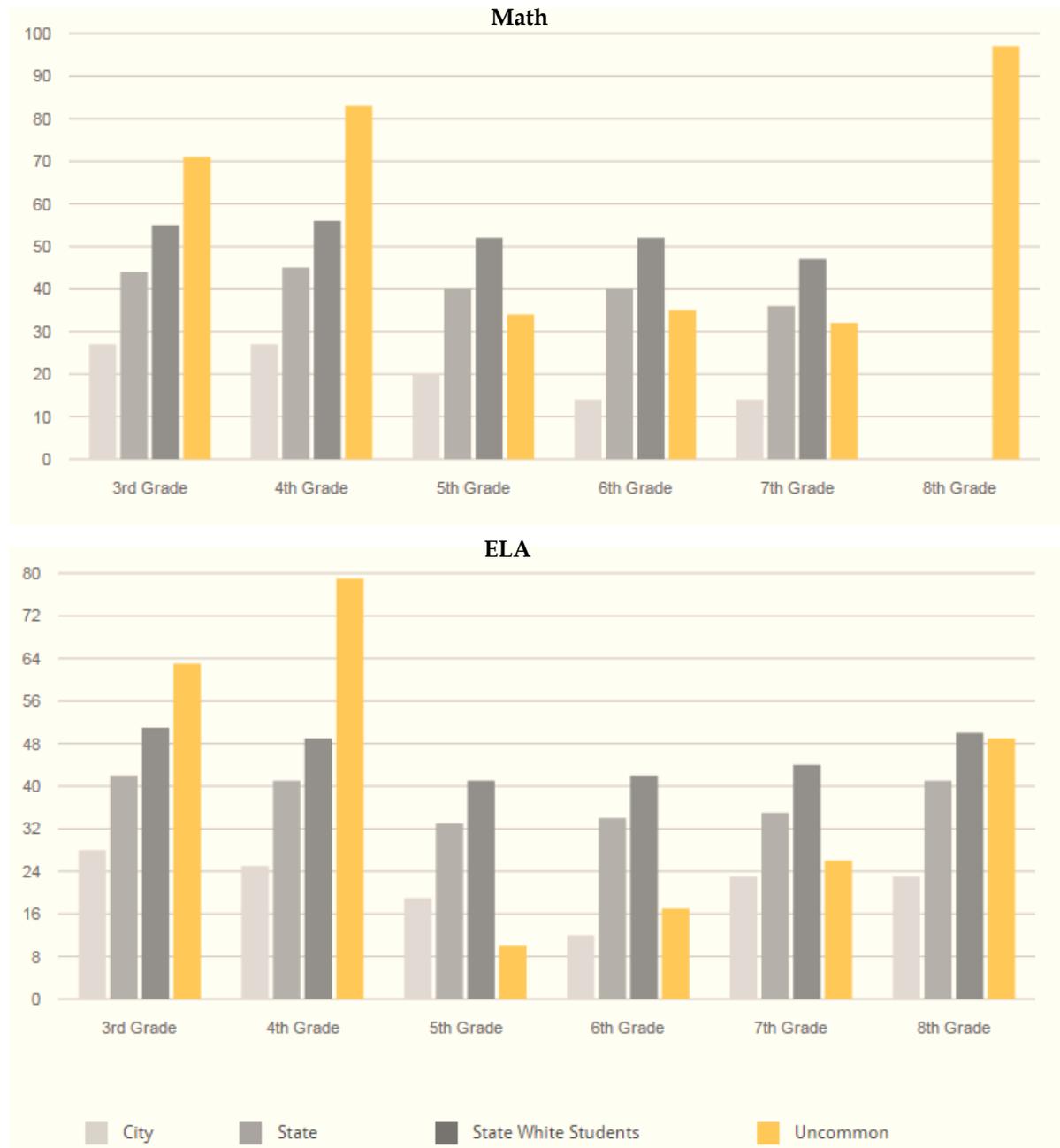
Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 5e   New York City: % Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced by Grade, 2016

Math

ELA
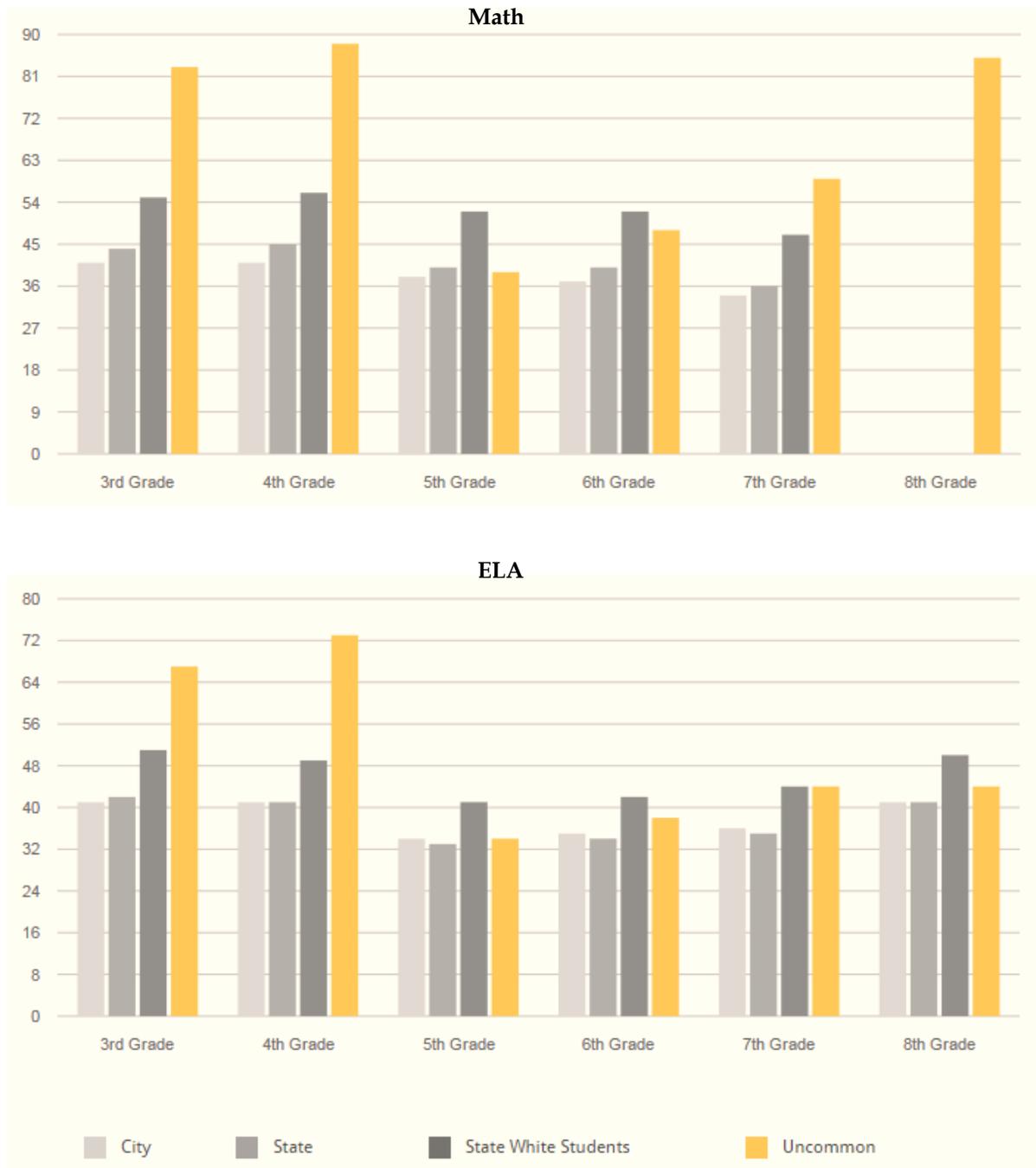
Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 6   New York City: Uncommon vs. District Middle Schools (grades 5-8), % Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced, 2015-2016
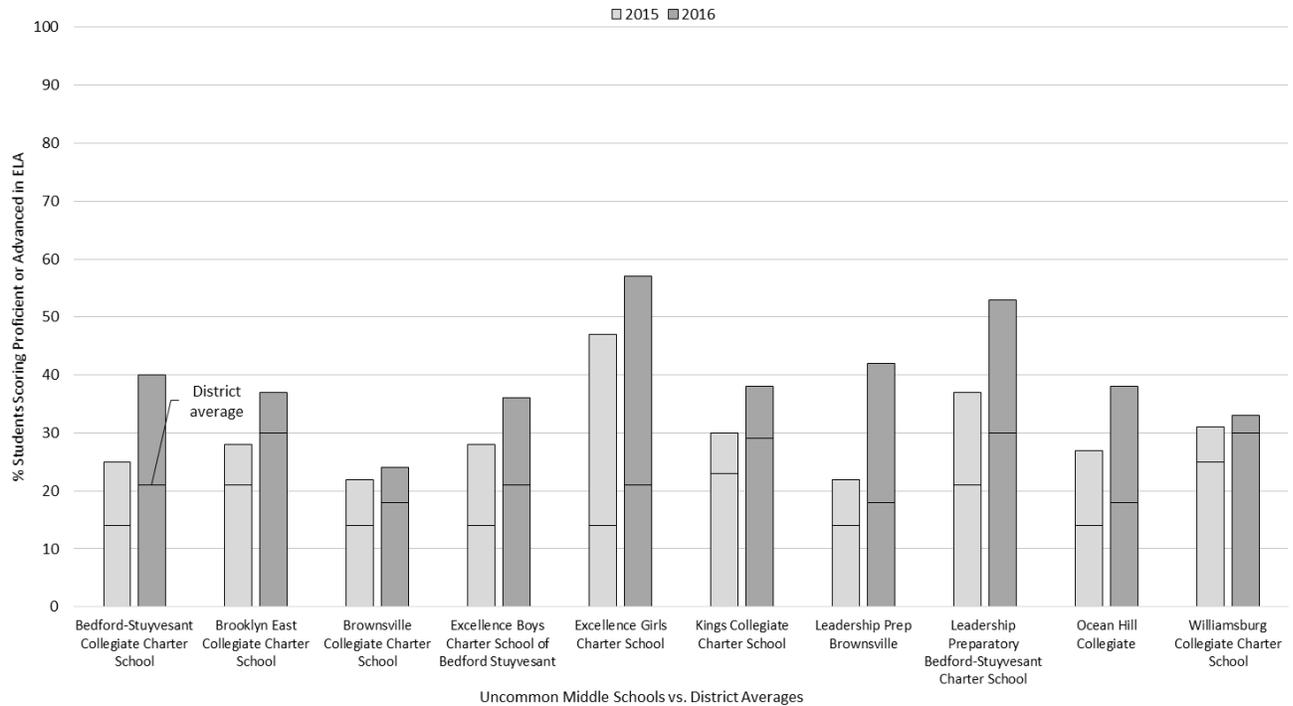
Source: Casewriter, compiled from The New York State Education Department, https://data.nysed.gov/, 2016, accessed March 2017.

Note: Horizontal bars represent the results for the school's district. For example, in 2015, 25% of students at Bedford-Stuyvesant Collegiate Charter School earned proficient or above in ELA, compared to 14% of students in the district.

In the 2015-2016 school year, Uncommon's New York schools moved to taking the more rigorous Algebra I Regents exam for 8th grade math instead of the state exam, therefore overall math results cannot be calculated in this manner for grades 5-8.

Exhibit 7   New York: Student Scores by % Economically Disadvantaged, ELA and Math, 2016
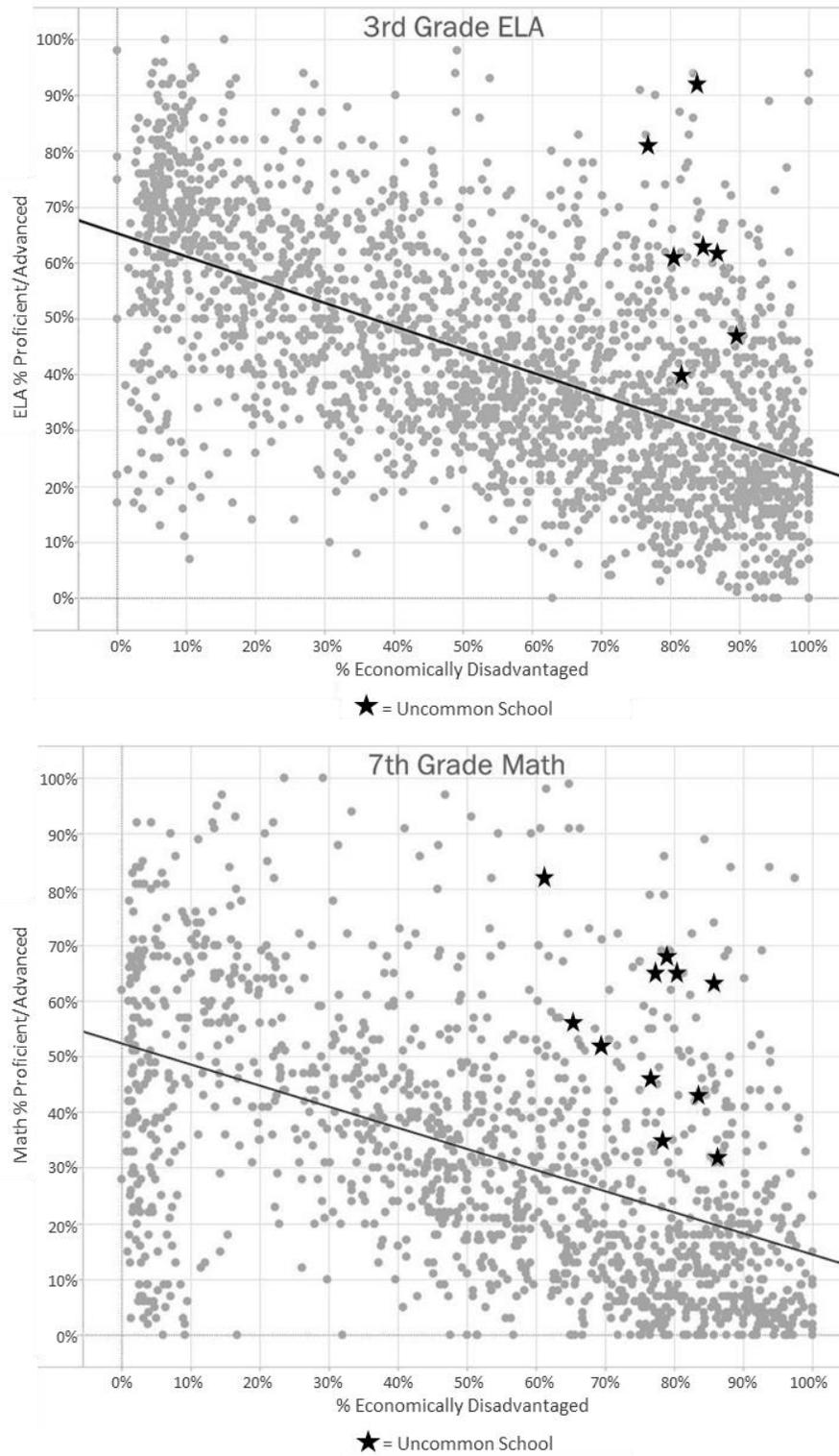
Source: Company documents.

[1] Paul Barnwell, "The Ongoing Struggle of Teacher Retention," *The Atlantic*, May 27, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/05/the-ongoing-struggle-of-teacher-retention/394211/, accessed March 2017.

[2] "Uncommon Schools," The Broad Foundation, March 2014, p. 7, http://broadfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/1864-uncommonschoolswhitepaper.pdf, accessed November 2016.

[3] "Uncommon|2021 Project Narrative," 2016, p. 14.