

Towns & Schools

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**A Charter School Success Story**

by Leslie Garisto Pfaff  
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Herbert Ruth of North Star Academy graduated Syracuse University in May 2008.

Herbert Ruth is grateful that his mother keeps a tidy house. Back in 1997, Paula Ruth was straightening up a mess of papers that had fallen out of her son's book bag when she came across a pamphlet from a fledgling Newark charter school called North Star Academy. That year the younger Ruth was due to start middle school, and up until that moment his mother had figured her only choices were to send him to live with her sister in Texas or her mother in South Jersey to escape what she considered subpar public schools. She submitted the North Star application one day before the deadline. Ruth was chosen 33rd out of a field of 36 in the entrance lottery.

This spring, he graduated from Syracuse University with a degree in history; now Ruth (above at right, with his roommate, Jonathan Davis) is back at Syracuse getting his master's in education. It is a state of affairs, he says, that would have been unthinkable had he not won that lottery. "Everything at North Star had more to it," Ruth recalls of those first days. "Everything was geared toward college. I'd never thought about college; I was barely thinking about going to high school." He had always been a smart kid, his mother says, but he lacked focus. "I was more interested in fitting in and being the class clown than getting grades," he admits.

But the staff at North Star did not give up on Ruth, barraging him with pep talks about his potential. One day in eighth grade it just sank in. "I got a good grade and I thought, 'Okay, I like the way this feels,'" he says. The passion to further his education would not have been there, he insists, without teachers like James Verrilli, whose unusual approach to sixth-grade history included conducting a class dressed as Christopher Columbus. It's something he can imagine himself doing a few years down the line. "I'd love to teach at North Star; I'm so thankful for it," he says. "When people in Syracuse ask where I'm from, I always start out with North Star. That's where everything began for me."

Charter Schools: Boon or Bust?


