

# NYC Charter Imports Model from Swedish For-Profit



Michelle Natal, 10, rests her head on her mother's shoulder during an open house this month for the Innovate Manhattan Charter School, the first U.S. school to be managed by Kunskapsskolan, Sweden's largest for-profit school chain.

—Emile Wamsteker for Education Week

## New School Is the Network's First in the United States

By [Sarah D. Sparks](#)

One of Sweden's [largest for-profit school networks](#) plans to gain a toehold in American public schooling by managing its first charter school in New York City this September—a possible sign of the times as U.S. educators and policymakers step up their focus on global competitiveness.

The transplantation process started with a name change, from the tongue-twisting Swedish Kunskapsskolan to Innovate Manhattan Charter School. The school's charter is held by an independent board—a nod to the city's restriction on for-profit companies directly owning or operating public schools—but Margaret “Peg” Hoey, the president of

Kunskapsskolan USA, said the staff is working to ensure the core Swedish instructional model won't be lost in translation.

“Even though there may just be one school here, we are really entering into a global community of practice,” she said.

Following the Swedish framework, the school will develop a learning plan for each of its 150 6th and 7th graders based on a 35-step road map for the content students are expected to know in each subject by the end of middle school. Core subjects such as reading and math are taught in multiage groups by step and reconfigured as students progress. Electives are taught by grade level.

Innovate Manhattan doesn't yet have final arrangements for facilities, but Ms. Hoey said the city has proposed that the school be set up in part of New York City's education department building.

The school's future principal is taking two weeks of intensive training at one of the network's schools in Sweden. She will continue to work with a mentor principal online when she returns to New York later this month, and will return to Sweden for two-week refresher training in spring 2012.

The charter school's board is seeking grants to send teachers overseas, too, but so far the instructors are meeting with their colleagues via Skype, an online videoconferencing program. American educators are working with colleagues in both Sweden and another Kunskapsskolan campus in London to develop an international data system to identify trends and share best practices.

“We're making this as close to what's happening in Sweden as is possible,” Ms. Hoey said.


The collaboration highlights the challenges in bringing such an education model to the United States. For example, while federal education law requires schools to report academic-achievement data based on a student's poverty, race, and ethnicity, Sweden does not allow schools to disaggregate data for ethnicity or race. Instead, Swedish schools report achievement based on whether the student is a first- or second-generation immigrant and by the education level of his or her parents.

## **Global Perspective**

Importing education models is not unusual. Several popular curricular approaches, such as Singapore Math and the International Baccalaureate program, are imports, but whole schools built on other countries' models traditionally have been associated with an embassy or a large immigrant or expatriate community.

That's changing, according to Sir Michael Barber, the head of McKinsey & Co.'s global education practice and the founder of the Education Delivery Institute in Washington,

which advises governments on education reform implementation. As more American students learn how they compare with global peers on assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, educators and policymakers have become more willing to import best practices.

Sir Michael [reported in 2007](#)  that globalization, which dramatically changed the way people choose commercial products and services, “is now forcing its effects on the public sector, too.”

In a [study](#) released last fall, McKinsey found that school districts that had successfully turned around academically and sustained their improvements used similar strategies and went through the same improvement stages, despite operating in 17 very different countries, including Ghana, Singapore, and the United States.

“We believe that the United States has a lot to learn from within the U.S., but it also has to learn from the rest of the world. You already see that the U.S. secretary of education [Arne Duncan], more than any of his predecessors, is thinking globally, reaching out to the rest of the world,” Sir Michael said in an interview last fall with *Education Week*.

Yet Thomas M. Smith, an associate professor of public policy and education and the director of the National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools, at Vanderbilt University, cautioned that a whole-school model is more difficult to transplant than individual practices.

“Over the longer term, there have been pressures for education systems in different countries to look more alike,” Mr. Smith said, “but you have to think of how a particular program looks in context, not just in what schooling looks like, but in the culture of learning in that country that will affect how the student approaches school.”

## Schooling Context

That’s been the case for the 33-school Kunskapsskolan chain, according to Peje Emilsson, the network’s executive chairman. He explained at a forum held last month by the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank, that Sweden takes a radically different approach to supporting schools. Besides municipal schools, the government provides a universal voucher for students to attend any public or private school in the country. Moreover, schools must take all students on a first-come, first-served basis and cannot charge more for tuition than the cost of the voucher.

In New York City, Ms. Hoey said, Kunskapsskolan will provide training and administrative services to implement the model for free for the first five years of Innovate Manhattan’s charter. New York state recently changed its law to forbid education-management organizations to operate charters directly, but the school got its charter before the law changed and has an independent board of trustees that contracted with the Swedish network. The differences in how public schools are supported and managed are

likely to affect how Kunskapsskolan replicates its model in the United States, Mr. Emilsson said.