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Grads get nod from White House

Charter school pupils receive a Letter from Bush and visit from U.S. education official

By **RICK KARLIN**

ALBANY -- The 38 fourth-graders who finished their school year at Brighter Choice charter schools for boys and girls went home with special gifts Wednesday: letters of congratulation from President Bush and White House pens.

The keepsakes came courtesy of U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education Raymond Simon, who spoke to the young graduates, most of whom are headed for other charter schools across the city. Also addressing the group was New York state's education secretary, Manuel Rivera.

Brighter Choice was one of the first such schools nationally to offer single-sex classrooms, and Simon's presence testified to that and to the close ties Tom Carroll, one of the charter's founders, has with the White House on education issues.

Simon, who stood in for U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings after her last-minute cancellation, talked up both the charter school movement and the federal No Child Left Behind law, which Bush has asked Congress to reauthorize.

With Brighter Choice students



RAYMOND SIMON of the U.S. Department of Education speaks at Brighter Choice's ceremony. So did Manuel Rivera, New York's education secretary.

finishing their year nearly a month after the city's mainstream public schools, Simon said "part of the charter school movement is to provide a real-time laboratory" for new educational approaches.

A longer school day -- which the city district recently decided to adopt, too -- as well as uniforms and single-sex classes prompted Amelia Seel to put her children, Ahmed Muhammad, 8, and Amirah Muhammad, 10, in Brighter Choice. Amirah was among the fourth-graders who graduated on Wednesday, and Seel is trying to decide where to send the girl next year. She believes the single-sex concept worked well because boys and girls, in her experience, learn differently and are distracted by different things.

In addition to innovations like single-sex classes, Simon said the

path to academic success is pretty simple: Stay on task, and have a belief in children."

He also reiterated the characteristics of good schools, including strong principals and strong test results to help guide instruction and measure progress.

One of the underpinnings of No Child Left Behind is mandated testing in math and English in grades 3-8. With the law in its sixth year, Simon said, policymakers are also looking at how to improve high schools.

The Bush administration, for example, wants to provide high schools with \$1.2 billion in Title I money, which goes to schools with needy students. Typically, districts steer much of their Title I funds to the lower grades.

"We believe that will be a good jump-start," Simon said.

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NAVIYA LEE prepares to leave the fourth grade and Brighter Choice behind at the school's graduation Wednesday in Albany.