



The Research Bureau

It's all about autonomy

When you ask the CEO of a large company or a small business what contributes to success in a highly competitive environment, he will invariably mention the need for an educated, skilled workforce. Yet the media are filled with hand-wringing stories about the lackluster academic performance of the nation's students, especially, those of low-income and minority background in our urban school districts. The anecdotal evidence provided by educators for years has been confirmed by the implementation of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 and the Federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The former requires all students to pass English and math MCAS exams (and soon science and history exams as well) in order to receive a Massachusetts high school diploma, while the latter requires every child to reach a level of proficiency (as defined by each state) in English and mathematics by 2014. These goals seem impossible to attain for most urban schools. In the Worcester Public Schools, for example, 32 out of 44 schools, or 72%, have failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward attaining proficiency. Yet there are a fair number of urban schools in Massachusetts with similar populations as Worcester's that may well achieve it. What are they doing that accounts for the difference in performance?

Last spring, The Research Bureau issued a study based on a survey of the literature and extensive site visits to half a dozen schools to try to isolate the factors contributing to higher student performance,¹ and last month, we invited the leaders of four higher-performing urban schools to a public forum to share their views on "what makes a difference."²

The schools were: Media, Arts, and Technology (MATCH) Charter Public High School in Boston (grades 9-12); Tech Boston Academy, a pilot or in-district charter school in Boston (grades 9-12);³ University Park Campus School, a Worcester district school, run in partnership with Clark University (grades 7-12); and the Nativity School, a middle school for boys in grades 5-8, established in Worcester by the College of the Holy Cross and funded by grants and private donations. All of these schools have a majority of black and Hispanic students, and a fair share of special education and limited-English proficient students as well. Incoming students are generally two to three grades behind the entering grade, but within eighteen months, 95-100% of them are passing MCAS.

¹ *Improving Student Performance Under Education Reform: Practices In Urban School*, May 14, 2007 Report 07-01 go to www.wrrb.org

² *School Autonomy: Can It Improve Student Achievement?* October 26, 2007, Becker College co-presented with The Rennie Center for Education Policy and Research - Video available at www.wrrb.org

³ For a more extensive discussion of the concept and performance of pilot schools, see <C:\Documents and Settings\Administrator\Desktop\High-flying pilot schools - The Boston Globe.htm>

The leaders of these schools believe that the autonomy they have to make decisions at the school level creates opportunities to influence student performance. Examples of this autonomy include the following:

- ❖ School leaders have authority to select and assign staff to positions based on qualifications and performance without regard to seniority.
- ❖ School leaders have authority over their budgets. Even in pilot schools, they are given a lump sum from which to apportion expenditures to fit the schedule, curriculum, and services needed by their students.
- ❖ School leaders have authority over the length of the school day and year, the class schedule, the length of periods, and professional development. All of these schools have an extended day with tutoring sessions in the evening. They also have an extended school year with summer programs.
- ❖ School leaders have the authority to set working conditions. At Tech Boston, for example, teachers work 150 hours extra and are compensated for 50 hours by the district.
- ❖ School leaders develop partnerships with business and cultural institutions that broaden the educational opportunities for students and give the larger community a stake in the schools.
- ❖ When school leaders have this kind of flexibility, they include teachers and other staff in decision-making, thereby giving them a stake in the outcome. They are able to develop a team working environment based on a common set of standards and expectations.

According to Alan Safran, Executive Director of the MATCH School, “the evidence is clear: the same demographic population can perform very differently depending on school conditions. What prevents these results from occurring on a larger scale are union work rules, central district regulations, and even some state regulations. If we are to educate kids to the level needed for 21st century jobs and a productive life, education reform has to occur at the school level.”

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