

Accelerating Achievement:
*Raising Rigor, Relevance, and Graduation Rates in
Boston Public High Schools*

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Introduction

When Dr. Carol Johnson delivered her *Acceleration* Agenda for improving the lives of Boston children through a quality education, she appeared to be sounding an alarm not only about an impending local crisis, but a state and national one as well.

On December 26, 2004 millions of people across the globe learned two things when Southeast Asia was struck by a tsunami. First, we learned how catastrophic tsunamis can be. Although many of us had heard the word *tsunami* before, we had no idea what havoc these massive tidal waves could wreak on hundreds of thousands of innocent bystanders, vacationers, and coastal dwellers. The second thing we learned was what I will refer to as the "slow-build, fast-kill" phenomenon. This refers to the fact that although the tsunami *yielded* its fury of 60-80 foot killer-waves in a matter of minutes, these waves had been the result of giant forces that had been *building* up deep in the earth's core for hundreds of years (National Geographic News). One reason more than 225,000 individuals lost their lives in the 2004 Tsunami was due to the fact that the cause of the crisis happened over time and beneath the surface - in other words not in plain view of those who would be impacted by its devastation. Another reason for the enormous loss of life was that thousands remained directly in the path of the raging waters. If they had had enough advanced warning, many could have performed a simple act that could have saved their lives: *moved to higher ground*. Unfortunately, there were woefully inadequate early warning systems.

In many ways, America may be in the "slow-build" stages of an economic Tsunami. And while there are early warning indications of this impending crisis, I question whether our national, state, and local responses have been seamless and coherent enough to create the level of urgency needed to move a nation to higher ground by rallying around its most vulnerable citizens. Only then can we preserve our international economic and humanitarian prominence.

So one may ask, what does such a negative prognosis have to do with high school students in Boston? I would argue that America's cities, Boston included, are at the epicenter of the quake-inducing, economic tsunami. According to the recent report commissioned by Governor Deval Patrick, *Ready for 21st Century Success: The New Promise of Public Education*,

Although Massachusetts continues to outpace the other 49 states academically, we cannot afford complacency. That is because much of the rest of the world has caught up and, in too many cases, surpasses U.S. achievement. Between 2000 and 2006, American students dropped from 18th to 25th place among industrialized countries in math and from 14th to 21st in science.... We used to lead the world in the percentage of students earning college degrees; we now rank 10th among industrialized nations in the percentage of 25-34-year-olds with an associate degree or higher, and we stand as one of the only nations where older adults are more educated than younger adults. Many Massachusetts young people — despite having earned their high school diplomas — have to take remedial math and

English classes to handle college-level work. In 2005, our public higher education system found that 37 percent of incoming freshmen from Massachusetts public high schools needed remedial assistance. (p. 6)

I posit that Boston's challenges are Massachusetts' challenges, and Massachusetts' challenges are this nation's challenges. No longer should we think in terms of urban, suburban, and rural, but rather in terms of us all being on the same beach and in the path of a same massive, economic wave. Perhaps some of us are closer to the wave than others, but we're all on the same beach.

Education is one the few ways to move to higher ground. What makes the life-giving and life-sustaining work of education so much more important in Boston and cities like it is the fact that there are very few positive, sustainable alternatives to a quality education for Black and Hispanic children in cities. For us, we either get a quality, rigorous, and relevant education, or we increase our chances of living a life of poverty, unhealthiness, crime, or early death. According to the 2007 Children's Defense Fund report, *America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline*,

A black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime; a Latino boy a 1 in 6 chance; and a White boy a 1 in 17 chance. Black juveniles are about four times as likely as their White peers to be incarcerated. Black youths are almost five times and Latino youths are more than twice as likely to be incarcerated as White youths for drug offenses. Today, 580,000 Black males are serving sentences in state or federal prison, while fewer than 40,000 Black males earn a bachelor's degree each year.

Having this much creative talent and genius pining away behind bars year after year is not only devastating to the individual lives of those touched by this tragedy, but it's becoming an economic wave that will be felt far beyond America's city limits.

So the question for us, who have a vested interest in the Boston Public Schools, is *how do we respond locally to Dr. Johnson's call to accelerate achievement for Boston Public High School students, and thereby fuel the urgency on the state and national level?* In other words, how do we think and work "glocally?" This term which has been used by internationally successful corporations such as SONY, suggests that we think globally and act locally. The following discussion seeks to answer Dr. Johnson's call by first outlining the methodology used to develop the findings regarding the challenges that face BPS high schools. Second, we will share examples of strengths and challenges that face BPS high schools. Next, we will use the district's framework to contextualize how we propose to address the high school challenges. Finally, we will provide specific recommendations for improving achievement and learning in the BPS high schools.

Methodology

In an effort to gain a holistic view of the strengths and challenges that made up the Boston Public High School experience, it was important to learn from as many sources as possible in a relatively short period of time. Consequently, we gathered information from four major areas. First, we began by meeting with each individual high

school **Headmaster**, who would ultimately implement and lead the Acceleration Agenda at the school level. Second, we took every opportunity to connect with and learn from **students and parents**, whether in person or through reports. These encounters ranged from authentic conversations with students on the "T," to more formalized focus groups with BSAC (Boston Student Advisory Council). Third, we read and learned from multiple **reports and evaluations** that have been written about Boston Public Schools, and more specifically BPS high schools. These reports (listed in Appendix 1B), provided helpful context and recommendations which informed this plan. Finally, in keeping with the idea of "glocal" thinking and action, we have used several **state, national, and international reports** to help align this plan to a broader best practices.

Findings

Although there are areas for growth and urgency in improving high schools in Boston, there are multiple strengths to build upon. For example, Boston has been able to do what many school districts across the country are yet struggling to do: provide a portfolio of high schools for students to access. These schools include Small Schools, Small Learning Community Schools, Exam Schools, Pilot Schools, and Alternative School. Several of these schools provide models of successful transformation and continuous learning. This "portfolio of schools" approach has enabled the district to develop smaller, thematic schools that might engage students in a more personalized manner. Another strength to build upon is the dedication and creativity of the school leaders, faculty and staff in schools. Finally, there is the matter of external partners. Boston is fortunate to be the beneficiary of multiple external service providers that exist for the sole purpose of improving the life chances of BPS students. The challenge will not be drumming-up support for high schools in the Superintendent's Acceleration Agenda, but rather ensuring that all drummers play with one syncopated rhythm.

Despite these strengths, the reality is that nearly 1,900 students dropped out of school in the SY 2007 cohort. Despite the focus on making schools smaller and more personalized, students are still falling through the cracks. Despite improvements in MCAS achievement scores, the vast majority of students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses in SY 2007-2008 were enrolled in one of BPS's three exam schools. Perhaps these data are warning signs of that impending economic and social tsunami, referenced earlier. The following are some of the challenges that appear to contribute to these negative outcomes. First, there is a need for more instructional coherence across all high schools. This speaks directly to high expectations for all students. **Instructional Coherence** would mean that all students are being challenged daily with a rigorous curriculum that is taught in a rigorous and relevant manner. This rigorous curriculum would also be aligned with the Massachusetts state curriculum frameworks. Furthermore, there would be common assessments that have been calibrated to ensure that there are common standards for performance. For example, there should be very little variance in the level of rigor from a 9th grade ELA course in one high school to the same 9th grade course in another high school. Instructional Coherence speaks to developing a level of consistency around the instructional core. Not only must students be expected to engage in rigorous content, but that content must be taught in a relevant and engaging way. Finally, there must be common assessments that ensure that all students are being measured against high standards.

One of the problems with simply raising expectations is that students who fail to meet those expectations often get frustrated and often become disengaged. The Parthenon Report identified several groups that drop out at rates higher than other groups. The report also suggested that the district think strategically in terms of *prevention*, *intervention*, and *recovery*. In other words, it's not enough to be reactive when it comes to dropout, the district must work diligently to prevent students from dropping out in the first place. It is our belief that instructional coherence would act as a preventative measure to keep students from dropping out. Another challenge we face at the high school level is providing students who are becoming disengaged with "safety nets" to prevent further decline. One way to prevent these students from becoming disengaged is by providing relevant and exciting lessons as well as by building respectful relationships. When students show signs of disengagement, schools, district offices, and community based organizations must be nimble enough to support them with appropriate **structures** and interventions to prevent students from completely dropping out. The message must be clear to these students: *we care too much to let you go!* Finally, when students do drop out, there must be a concerted "city-wide" effort to get these students reengaged "Back-on-track."

As noted earlier, despite the move to smaller schools and smaller learning environments for students, high school, and middle school students continue to be truant and drop out of school. The assumption should not be made that if you simply make schools smaller the people in them will automatically build meaningful **relationships** with one another. Students continue to message to any one who will listen that they are still looking for meaningful relationships. This was evident in the community forums that the district conducted in 2007 in response to the Parthenon Report. However, simply telling headmasters, faculty, staff, and students to build meaningful relationships with one another is not enough. There must be appropriate training for individuals and groups in order for sustained and viable relationships to happen.

Building on the District's Conceptual Framework

Under the leadership of Dr. Johnson, the district has adopted the **PELP Framework** (Appendix 1A) as the tool for framing the work of accelerating achievement for all students. In an effort to build off of this framework, I propose that we focus the High School work in four strategic focus areas: *Instruction, Structures, Relational-Trust, and Result/Data*. A brief description of each strategic focus area is listed below.

Instructional Focus is founded upon the principle that the seminal goal of high school improvement revolves around what Richard Elmore (2005) calls the instructional core. All efforts to improve high schools must see the "ultimate target" as increasing student learning by focusing on the relationship between student engagement, teacher practice, and rigorous and relevant content. One could argue that reform efforts that are not linked to improving the instructional core run the risk of being diversionary and having very little impact on growth in student learning or teacher practice. According to Elmore (2005), "If the purpose of leadership is the improvement of practice and performance, then the skills and knowledge that matter are those that bear on the creation of settings for learning focused on clear expectations of instruction" (p. 66-67).

Developing a culture of inquiry at the school level is critical to what Elmore calls the *creation of settings*. Since no school is the same, schools must become learning organizations where teams frequently analyze student performance data, ask questions about that performance and develop interventions and strategies at the classroom level to improve student performance as well as teacher practice.

Structural Focus is founded upon idea that improving the instructional core in schools requires school leaders and their teams to strategically utilize the resources of time, people, finances and programs to maximize student learning. Davis and Darling-Hammond (2005) sum it up in the following manner, “Schools that are successfully reinventing teaching and learning look quite different...largely invisible organizational features make teaching for understanding possible by structuring teachers’ and students’ work together more productively. In particular, schools that reach diverse learners effectively have restructured accountability and assessment, the organization of learning groups, decision-making processes, and staffing approaches. Without these structural changes [improvement practices] would be impossible to develop and sustain over time” (p. 46).

Relational-Trust Focus is grounded in the notion that effective school leadership ensures sustained improvement over time. Key to sustaining improvements over time is the leader's ability to build capacity among a broad spectrum of school stakeholders including, teachers, staff, parents and students. If the leader is the only one carrying the vision and the knowledge and skills to accomplish the vision, then improvements only last as long as the leader does. Relational-trust leadership highlights the leader's need to develop a culture in which relationship and trust-building are valued. According to Anthony Bryk (2002), “Good schools are intrinsically social enterprises that depend heavily on cooperative endeavors among the various participants who comprise the school community. Relational-trust constitutes the connective tissue that binds these individuals together around advancing the education and welfare of children. Improving schools requires us to think harder about how best to organize the work of adults and students so that this connective tissue remains healthy and strong” (p. 65).

Result-Driven Focus is founded on the belief that the ultimate goal of school improvement efforts is to produce results in student learning and performance. Although results come in multiple forms (i.e. student achievement data, discipline data, climate surveys, equity in access data, etc.) effective school leaders set targets, monitor progress towards those targets, make midcourse corrections, and hold themselves and others accountable for the results. Katheryn Boudett (2006) states the following, “Our experience working with schools has shown us that unless school leaders-principals in particular- are willing to champion the cause of analyzing data regularly and using the results to make decisions for the school, data work will not become a meaningful part of schoolwide reform” (p. 27).

Implications and Recommendations

The following list represents a brief summary of the recommendations for improving student achievement in Boston Public High Schools.

Instructionally Focused Strategies

Mayor Menino and Dr. Johnson have called for an expansion of **Advanced Placement** in BPS. Over the next three to five years, we look to double the number of students taking and achieving threes, fours, and fives on AP exams. The district will also add two **International Baccalaureate** schools to its repertoire of schools for students. Both AP and IB will increase student access to rigorous courses. The district should also conduct a full **instructional audit** of curricula, instructional practices, and assessments to determine coherence across the district and alignment with state frameworks. There is a strong need for the district to explore a **comprehensive assessment system** at the high school level. Such a system should include a **reading assessment for exiting 8th graders**, the results of which could be shared with high schools. High Schools could then shape specific literacy support for individual students. An appropriate reading assessment would provide teachers with specific feedback in the areas of need for individual students. **Professional development** must also be provided for leaders and teachers to address the needs of targeted populations including 9th graders, SPED, and ELL students. That professional development should be aligned to a **differentiated model of support** for schools. The broad topics for these PD opportunities should be *literacy, rigor, relevance, and relationships*. Finally, high school educators must **share best practices**. One irony of the innovation in BPS over the past few years is that educators come from around the country and the world to see what BPS has done with pilot schools and small schools. Yet, the district must find ways to ensure that educators in BPS high schools talk to one another across the city.

Structurally Focused Strategies

Although the instructional work is primary and at the core of all that we do, there are structures that must be put into place to support this instructional work. For example, the district should work on developing a **coherent dual enrollment / dual credit system**. With all the colleges and universities in the Boston area, there should be more systematized and seamless flow of high school students in and out of college courses throughout the city. After all, one of the districts primary goals for students is college access and success. For students who get off track during their high school career, the district needs to **implement full-year credit recovery** for students. If a student fails the first two marking periods of class, it does not make sense to wait for the student to fail the entire year. Credit recovery may allow that student to immediately engage in work to recapture what he failed, so that he does not lose an entire year. The Parthenon Report showed us that we must be more intentional in our effort to address the dropout issue. The report encouraged us to consider reconfiguring Alternative Education into Educational Options. We could use the report to be more strategic about the populations that we are targeting with specific programs. The district should also work to open a **transition center** for students who have dropped out and a **truancy center** for students who are on their way to dropping out. Other cities have combined these centers and created a dropout prevention center for students. The district should conduct a **comprehensive policy review** of those policies that impact high school students. These policies would include but not be limited to tardy policy, credit acquisition, use of grade point average, graduation requirements, Pathway policy, Ungraded policy, etc. To ensure that this works happens, we have already **developed the Office of High School Supports** which is charged with the task of coordinating the support and accountability

of high schools. As stated earlier, those supports will be driven by a **Differentiated Support model** that would take in consideration a school's AYP profile as well as individual needs.

Relational-Trust Focused Strategies

As stated earlier in this discussion, we have to do more than make schools small to ensure relationships. That is definitely the first step, but now we should provide **targeted training for faculty and staff in relationship-building**. This training does not always have to come in the traditional method of classroom instruction. For example, inviting teachers on "BPS Sunday" to be the honored guests of students who attend specific houses of worship in the city might go a long way to build relationships between students, parents, and schools. Students continue to need more than academic support to succeed, and while there are many partners and agencies that offer social, emotional, and mental health support, there is a need to **systematize community-based organization partnerships** to support students and families. As we stated earlier, there is a need to ensure that BPS and its partners are working in tandem to support students. One symbolic and substantive way to ensure this is by conducting **Bi-annual Partners' Conferences**. These conferences would be an opportunity for high schools, city-wide partners and agencies to come together, be introduced to one another, share best practices, and track common performance metrics. Finally, the district should explore a district-wide incentive plan to encourage student and family engagement. This engagement would encourage not only academic achievement but also engagement in **athletics and the arts**. We know that students who are engaged in extracurricular activities are more likely to show a stronger commitment to school.

Results-Driven Focused Strategies

The danger with listing the preceding strategies and recommendations is the risk that they will become activities that everyone focuses on rather than results. To avoid this activity-driven focus, which so often becomes the downfall of organizations, I propose that we align our work with the districts strategic goals and **use the district's performance targets to track the high school results**. It's also important that we **track performance metrics tenaciously**. We can't afford to wait for MCAS results in August! For example, we must look at daily attendance, weekly suspensions, quarterly benchmarks as well as post-graduation results. Only through a frequent and real-time focus on results can we learn and make the necessary changes. In order to track these data, the district desperately needs an integrated data management system. In conjunction with our Office of Instructional and Information Technology, several high schools are **piloting integrated data management system**. We look forward to the day when the entire district is operating on one system. Finally, in order to plant and cultivate a culture of inquiry in the district, we must provide **Inquiry-Based Training and Development for headmasters and teachers**. We will not be able to improve the life-condition of our high school students without a substantial investment in headmasters and teacher leaders. Providing them with training to become a "learning-school" is critical. We must support them in acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to save a generation, and thwart an impending economic, social and moral crisis.

Conclusion and Next Steps

One of the dangers of the preceding strategies is that they become simply activities. To be clear, the goal is not to simply implement a list of activities but rather to realize *results* in student engagement and achievement. For this reason, the Office of High School Supports will develop a **Performance Management Plan** that will enable multiple internal and external stakeholders to monitor the progress of the work. We, in the Office of High School Supports, realize that these recommendations extend beyond our office. The only way we will realize results is if we do as Dr. Johnson has asked us to do and work as a "team" with the multiple central offices to ensure not only that the proposed strategies occur, but that results happen for BPS high school students. This is an opportunity for us to build on the work that has already happened in the district, while responding to the urgency of that impending economic tsunami that I referred to earlier. America can't afford to allow its urban youth to be washed away in the tide of global competitiveness. If our cities get washed away, all of America will soon follow. China, India and other countries will gladly take our place.

For those of you who are left asking what can be done to support these efforts, I would suggest the following:

1. Share your **thoughts and feedback by emailing**: iscott2@boston.k12.ma.us
2. If you know students in BPS high schools **encourage and support** them in their efforts to take on rigorous learning opportunities.
3. If you know a student who has dropped out, **encourage them to reengage** with the system.
4. **Support legislation** that is specifically geared to addressing the dropout challenges in Massachusetts
5. **Support legislation** that is specifically geared to expanding dual enrollment opportunities for students

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Appendix 1A