

What All Schools Can Learn From Boston's Pilot Schools

by Ellen Guiney, Executive Director

Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools Foundation

A car with the body of a young man with two shots to his head was recently found in a Boston elementary school parking lot. That reality profoundly affects life inside that school. The factors affecting the social order in urban schools quickly cross school boundaries and help make urban public school teaching today the most difficult job in America. When students, teachers, and leaders work together in a culture of trust and respect, however, teaching becomes more possible and sustainable.

A recent Boston Foundation report by the Center for Collaborative Education highlights the success of Boston's Pilot Schools, the twenty Boston schools that are free from contract provisions and school committee mandates. That status undoubtedly contributes to success, but another part of their success is a feature observers notice in visits to schools: a culture of trust, trust of students that their teachers will do what it takes to help them learn, trust among teachers that each is committed to the effort needed, and trust between the principal and teachers who listen to each other and take each other's perspectives into account as they make decisions for their students and their school. In these circumstances, teachers are encouraged to speak up, and their voices heard; so too are students and parents. There is a palpable sense that this is "our school" and these are "our kids." Mutual respect and collective responsibility prevail.

Trust by itself does not increase student learning, but it makes possible the hard work increasing student learning requires. School researchers increasingly are documenting that for a school to improve, a focus on instruction is essential and an overhaul of structural arrangements important, but neither will happen successfully without strong social relationships in the school. This is a lesson every school in the Commonwealth — Pilot on not — could pursue, whatever its restrictions, challenges, or resources.

How do schools build trust? Further studies of Pilots and other schools could provide more concrete guidance, but many say that it starts with the school leader. Principals establish respect when they actively listen to teachers' concerns and work with them to build a vision. They plan their year with teachers so that everyone learns and becomes part of a community. They engage all the teachers in the school to help them fill vacancies with replacements who want to be part of their work, a task easier to do in Pilots, but in fact possible in any Boston school. They take risks themselves and set aside positional authority. Most of all, they avoid arbitrary actions for students and teachers.

Survey and focus group data we have collected highlight troubled relationships in some Boston schools, particularly between leaders and teachers, and signal that increasing pressures for results and the tyranny of the day to day crowd out principals' taking time to build trust with teachers.

The Boston Foundation plans further studies to get underneath the success of Boston's Pilot Schools; examining their relationships and how they created them would be a valuable addition to our understanding about school improvement for all Boston's schools. Schools cannot overcome the social disorder around them, but they can create a culture of trust that makes urban teaching not only possible, but also valuable and rewarding. That may be the most important lesson of all about Boston's Pilots Schools.