

Creating Schools That Work: Lessons for Reform from Successful Urban High Schools

Executive Summary

There is no more pressing problem in education today than closing the achievement gap between low-income, predominantly students of color in urban schools and their more advantaged middle-class peers in predominantly white suburban schools. *Head of the Class: Characteristics of Higher Performing Urban High Schools in Massachusetts*, a study by the Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC (CERP), identifies nine urban schools in Massachusetts that show, to varying degrees, that they can get impressive academic results with the student populations education reform is meant to serve. But if success in urban high schools is possible, the question before policymakers is this: how do you make every urban high school the kind of place where students, regardless of background, can get a high quality education?

Head of the Class identifies some of the characteristics of higher-performing urban high schools in Massachusetts. On the most general level, the CERP findings are consistent with a considerable academic literature on effective urban high schools. Such schools are typically marked by a culture that is single-minded in the best sense: they are highly focused on a core academic curriculum and college preparation. The faculty are highly skilled and share a commitment to work together to foster the success of all students. Students are well known by their teachers and receive personalized support and encouragement. There are clear, agreed-upon standards of performance for all members of the school community—administrators, teachers, parents, and students—with strong bonds of mutual commitment and obligation to achieve the school's mission.

If these characteristics of high-performing schools are well known, the policies that give schools these attributes remain more elusive. Examination of the nine schools singled out in the CERP study suggests certain principles that, if applied to urban high school reform, could lead to greater success for urban youth:

- **Small is better.** Even though small schools comprised less than one-third of the pool of urban high schools in the study, seven of the nine schools (78 percent) ranked as higher performing had enrollments of less than 400. Small schools not only dominate the list of better-performing schools, they also provide the only truly high-performing school: University Park Campus School, the only school in

the study to achieve MCAS results comparable to upper-middle-class suburban communities.

- **Autonomy on matters of staffing, budget, curriculum, governance, and time is as critical as size.** These small schools share a freedom from the bureaucratic constraints that prevent most urban schools from creating high-functioning learning environments. Seven of the nine schools cited as higher performing have substantial freedom over their resources and how they use them.
- **Choice is associated with achievement.** For the seven small schools designated as higher performing, students, faculty, and parents voluntarily elect to join the school, a process that helps create and sustain a culture of achievement.
- **Extra resources make a difference.** The schools in this study are entrepreneurial in acquiring additional public and private funds. They make judicious use of these funds to pay for additional support for students during the school day, as well as before- and after-school tutoring and Saturday or summer preparatory programs.
- **Well-conceived, structured, and supported inclusion programs can be effective in educating English language learners and students with special needs.** In all seven small schools, inclusion of English language learners and students with special needs is the philosophy and norm of practice. The design of these schools is based on the principle that all students can benefit from participation in a common core academic program, with appropriate accommodations for students' unique learning needs.
- **College and community partnerships help.** Each of the higher performing schools has a formal partnership with at least one university or corporation. University partnerships have a particularly powerful impact in supporting high professional standards and practice among faculty and a college-going culture among students.
- **Incorporating earlier grades is a potent strategy for closing the achievement gap in high school.** The two high schools with the highest proportion of students achieving proficient and advanced standing on MCAS begin working with students in the middle school grades.

- **Stronger school and student accountability provisions make a difference in creating academically challenging communities of learning.** Five of the nine schools—two Boston Pilot schools and three charter schools—are subject to a more rigorous and comprehensive accountability process than that for regular public schools.

The challenge, then, is to create the policy environment, at both the local and state levels, that enables more urban high schools to apply these principles in transforming secondary education for urban youth. With this in mind, we offer the following recommendations for districts and the state:

1. Create small high schools in grades 9-12.

At the state level:

Provide financial incentives for urban school districts to create small high schools. These should include establishing a new state renovation fund to help urban districts create small schools within existing facilities, and targeting state construction funds toward building small urban high schools or larger facilities that house multiple small high schools.

At the district level:

Adopt a local policy that charts a course toward small high schools. One means is the converting of existing large high schools into multiple small, autonomous high schools that share the same facility. Another is by identifying city-owned facilities that could house new small high schools.

2. Provide small high schools with charter-like autonomy over budget, staffing, curriculum, governance, time, and space.

At the state level:

Target small school incentives to districts that provide substantial autonomy for these schools and encourage the development of Horace Mann charter schools by making it easier and more attractive for schools to gain this charter status.

At the district level:

Negotiate contract language with all unions to create Pilot schools, modeled after the landmark agreement between the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union; in the absence of a Pilot agreement, grant a range of operating autonomies to new, small urban high schools.

3. Create a stronger accountability model that holds schools accountable for having effective practices for all students.

At the state level:

Adopt a school quality review model of accountability for all urban high schools that considers multiple

indicators of student engagement and performance and that assesses the “value-added” contribution of a high school to its students’ MCAS performance; strengthen charter school accountability to ensure that charter schools are representative of students in their host district; and require charter schools with patterns of low performance to adopt a proven urban school model or lose their charter.

At the district level:

Implement a school quality review model of accountability for all district high schools that includes multiple indicators of student engagement and performance and a value-added methodology to evaluate school performance on MCAS.

4. Leverage benefits of choice to build more effective school communities.

At the state level:

Increase the supply of small schools that serve students in underperforming districts by building bipartisan support for a system of small schools of choice; focusing the state’s intervention strategy for failing urban schools and districts on creating new, small school choice options for students and parents; and prioritizing charter awards to small schools in underperforming districts while ensuring that charter schools serve a cross-section of students.

At the district level:

Make the principle of voluntary membership in small, personalized, and academically challenging high schools for students and staff alike a cornerstone of district policy and teacher union labor agreements, phasing out large, failing high schools and replacing them with small, autonomous schools of choice.

5. Create effective inclusion programs for English language learners (ELL) and students with special needs.

At the state level:

Identify and promote, through revised regulations, effective inclusion programs and strategies for urban high school ELL and special needs students; collaborate with colleges and universities to revise teacher preparation programs to promote dual certification in academic content area and English as a second language or special education.

At the district level:

Create a process by which schools can serve substantially separate special education students in regular education classrooms with appropriate support; provide adequate language support to non-native English speaking students in regular academic classes and programs; and identify, highlight, and promote effective inclusion programs within the district for urban high school ELL and special needs students.

6. Create more 6-12 and 7-12 schools.

At the state level:

Provide incentives for urban school districts to create small high schools with grade 6-12 and 7-12 configurations, and give priority to this secondary school design in awarding Horace Mann and Commonwealth charters.

At the district level:

Make the creation of small secondary schools that start in grade six or seven a priority in high school reform initiatives.

7. Make college and community partnerships a cornerstone of state and district strategies to create high schools of excellence for low-income urban students and students of color.

At the state level:

Enlist every public college and university in the state to create at least one substantial university-school partnership with a small high school that enrolls a high percentage of low-income students and students of color; restore and increase spending in the state's Dual Enrollment Program to support low-income students and students of color who take college courses as part of the college-preparatory experience; and revise teacher training programs to include internships in partner schools in urban districts.

At the district level:

Make college partnerships an essential component of a district's small schools strategy and mobilize political, civic, and higher education partners to support a high-profile initiative to make college and community partnerships a cornerstone of the community's urban high school reform strategy; and identify ways to effectively target public and private support for academic and other enrichment activities to support coherent partnership models.

8. Provide high schools that enroll high percentages of low-income students and other high-need groups with increased resources.

At the state level:

Revise state per-pupil funding formulas to increase the weighting for urban high schools, and enact regulations that allow urban high schools to carry over funds from one fiscal year to the next.

At the district level:

Create weighted formulas when determining high school budgets, providing higher per pupil allocations to schools that serve students with the greatest needs, and give schools the flexibility to target resources by reallocating all centrally based professional development funds to the school level.

9. Provide strong incentives for higher performing urban schools to replicate their success.

At the state level:

Give priority in charter awards to the operators of higher performing urban schools who wish to create additional schools based on their models and practices, and to applicants that form replication partnerships with these school operators; and provide grant incentives to school districts to replicate successful models of small high schools.

At the district level:

Grant the leadership of high-performing small high schools in the district the authority to open and operate a second school site, and invite the operators of successful small urban schools elsewhere to replicate their models in the district.