

## Parents Provide Focus Group Recommendations to Assist Out-of-School Youth

**“It was very effective to have everyone in the room together...” - BPON parent focus group participant on teacher-parent collaborations**

By Matthew Miller, BPON Intern

Throughout the months of May and June, over 50 BPON parents came together to meet at locations across the city to discuss a matter of great importance to them: what we can do to prevent Boston youth from leaving school and to reconnect those that have already left to support services.

The focus groups were designed by BPON to incorporate the voice of parents in the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTTFG), a citywide planning group addressing policy and programmatic solutions to the issue of youth that are disconnected from the educational system.

The focus groups brought together parents from racially, linguistically, and geographically diverse backgrounds. BPON major grantees ACORN, City Life/Vida Urbana, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, East Boston Ecumenical Community Council, and Sociedad Latina hosted the discussions.

### The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTTFG)

The YTTFG planning group consists of the Boston Public Schools, youth and family development groups, workforce development organizations, alternative education programs, and State departments that have come together

to study and plan around the issue of disconnected youth.

The goals of the group are to create better comprehensive strategies to prevent youth from leaving school and to improve the success of Boston’s youth (both in and out of school) in the areas of education, training, and work opportunities.

YTTFG is currently planning a focus group for teachers and drafting policy recommendations and actions arising from the study. Year I of the planning grant will conclude in December. Year II will focus on implementing policy strategies. ♦

## BPON Parent Focus Group Results and Recommendations: An Overview

Please visit [www.bpon.org](http://www.bpon.org) for the full report on parents’ observations, recommendations, and solutions.

**Two main themes arose during the course of the parent focus groups. In order to help struggling students and prevent their disconnection from school, the school district and other support systems should:**

- ♦ Improve school climate to support effective parent engagement
- ♦ Increase the amount and quality of resources to meet the individual needs of children

**Recommendations to support effective parent engagement to support students:**

- ♦ Create a school climate that welcomes parents and encourages respect and support
- ♦ Increase school-based staff in support of parent engagement; provide trainings to teachers on how to engage parents
- ♦ Increase timely, effective communication to the home in the appropriate language, including information about resources available for struggling students
- ♦ Provide parents with trainings to support their children’s academic success
- ♦ Provide support for School Parent Councils and School Site Councils; give parents the space and opportunities to be involved in the school and to voice concerns

**Recommendations to increase amount and quality of resources to meet individual student needs:**

- ♦ Provide additional support to teachers in addressing individual student needs
- ♦ Consider and be aware of the daily life and individual emotional challenges facing students
- ♦ Begin interventions earlier in students’ academic careers

Other important issues that deserve mention include the need to overcome language barriers throughout the school system and the need for greater access to appropriate special education evaluation, placement and services.

## Boston Pilot Schools: Where Families Are Partners in Creating High Performing Schools

By Ruth Rodriguez, Boston Pilot Schools/ Horace Mann Network, Center for Collaborative Education (CCE)

The result of a unique partnership among the Boston Mayor, School Committee, Superintendent and Teachers Union, the Boston Pilot Schools first opened in 1995 to promote choices within the district. These schools were explicitly created to be models of educational innovation and to serve as research and development sites for effective public schools systems. As opposed to independent charter schools, Boston Pilot Schools are part of the Boston Public Schools system.

Pilot schools have a greater degree of autonomy than traditional public schools over budget, staffing, governance, school calendar and curriculum. This governance structure allows them the flexibility to organize schools and staffing to best meet the needs of their students.

Parent engagement is highly encouraged and critically important as the School Site Council takes on increased governance and policy-setting responsibility, including principal selection, supervision, and dismissal, though all decisions are overseen by the Superintendent.

Families and students choose Pilot Schools for a variety of reasons, such as academically challenging curricula and small personalized and supportive environments, in which teachers know each student well. Families also like the fact that students receive ample support to help them be successful and that many of the Pilot Schools offer a specialized or theme-based focus, such as the arts or health.

While serving students who are representative of the Boston Public Schools, and operating with the same per pupil budget, Boston Pilot Schools are, on the whole, performing above the Boston Public School district average. Pilot Schools have among the highest

student attendance, graduation and college-going rates, and the lowest suspension and transfer rates of district schools, while performing well on the state MCAS.

**Parent engagement is highly encouraged and critically important as the School Site Council takes on increased governance and policy-setting responsibility...**

### Boston Pilot Schools/ Horace Mann Network

Reflecting that most of the Pilots Schools are highly successful, the Boston Pilot Schools/Horace Mann Network at the Center for the Collaborative Education (CCE) has established a working relationship with the district in order to share effective instructional practices and professional development

techniques gleaned from Pilot School efforts. This year, we have started the Pilot School Network of Family Coordinators which will serve to support the family engagement work that is taking place at each of the Pilot schools. Currently the Network serves 6,000 plus students, 9% of the total Boston student population.

The Pilot Schools/Horace Mann Network believes in creating high performing schools in order to achieve a more just, democratic and equitable society. The Network firmly believes that those closest to the students are optimally the policy and decision makers, and that decisions should be determined through shared leadership in a collaborative way. Family engagement is promoted, and parents are respected, trusted and encouraged to participate in creating a successful teaching and learning experiences for all students. ♦

*The Center for Collaborative Education is a BPON member organization.*

## Want to find out more about Boston Pilot Schools for your child?

*In January, the Center for Collaborative Education will hold its:*

## Pilot Schools Expo

*Date, time and location to be announced. For more information, email [rrodriguez@ccebos.org](mailto:rrodriguez@ccebos.org).*