

Academic Excellence in Public Education

Governor Patrick's and Boston's Mayor Menino's proposals to lift the cap on charter public schools have led to discussion about the achievements of charter schools and whether those showing superior results have "cherry-picked" their students. Charter schools' greatest potential lies in their ability to serve as nimble learning laboratories where new ideas can be tried and where the best can then be replicated on larger scale. Berkshire Arts and Technology Charter Public School (BArT) is an example of one that has grown quickly through its most formative years and has embraced "best practices" from charter schools working with a wide variety of students. This openness to good ideas has resulted in dramatic results with a student population that, in terms of numbers of students requiring special education services, more than matches the sending districts.

After four years of hard work, BArT's founders were pleased with the school's accomplishments as we eyed our first graduating class. These accomplishments included a warm and welcoming atmosphere, a strong sense of community and a terrific faculty supporting our students so well that their self-confidence increased and they learned to present themselves and their work professionally. Our graduating students, many of whom had started as 9th graders with us, were leaving with a rich education in the arts and technology that is very much in line with the strategic plan for the Berkshires. Despite these accomplishments, we were disappointed with standardized test results that did not reflect the hard work and skill of the stakeholders.

Puzzled by the shortfall in these standardized tests, the trustees asked a resource center for charter schools to facilitate a review by faculty, administration, staff and trustees to answer the question, "What needs to change for our students to achieve the highest levels of academic achievement?" We declared that there were no "sacred cows"; everything was up for discussion other than the core mission of offering a college preparatory curriculum.

Galvanized by the feedback from this honest self-appraisal, administrators and faculty visited selected, high-performing charter schools for focused learning of proven methodologies. In business, this is known as "best-in-class benchmarking" and of course it only works if you are willing to take the lessons to heart, make changes, test the results, modify as needed and be prepared to do what is needed for continuous improvement.

We adjusted the school's mission statement to emphasize college preparation and we focused the whole school – faculty, students and administration on a clear goal of dramatically improving each student's academic performance. We continuously reinforced the message throughout the year.

The essence of what has led to the performance improvements is as follows:

- Frequent assessments. State test (MCAS) results are received only once a year – in September, after the new school year is underway and weeks after our teachers' intensive summer professional development and preparation period. Much more frequent feedback on student progress was essential and was achieved through investments in software applications and testing services.
- Frequent feedback to staff and students: we couldn't tell anyone how they were doing if school leaders weren't in teachers' classrooms and teachers weren't informing students how they were doing.
- Frequent course corrections to achieve the results we knew were possible. As an organization, we had to be willing to embrace change and do "whatever it takes" - including modifying

curriculum, implementing a rigorous assessment schedule, giving up some autonomy as teachers and administrators, providing lagging students with additional time in core subjects and after school coaching, grouping students by the level of the curriculum they had mastered and making time for all the conversations about how to achieve desired results.

We found that students were motivated by seeing how well they progressed. Our staff rewarded and recognized individuals or groups making the most progress. And that progress has been remarkable. The external Stanford Achievement Test (SAT 10) results show that on average our students gain about two grades worth of progress in one year and outperform their peers across the US taking this test. From the MCAS benchmark tests, other internal tests and preliminary MCAS results we can see that we have dramatically improved overall academic performance.

Central to BArT's success has been its ongoing commitment to hard work, a rich, inquiry based curriculum, a comprehensive portfolio review process, and a culture where attention and support are provided to all students. Our teachers receive over 100 hours per year of professional development, including two to three weeks of professional development in August to collaborate with each other and learn from experts how to better support their students. Our students will return a week before their peers and attend classes for 30% more time than in the surrounding districts in order to succeed academically. In short, we know that there are no shortcuts. In order to change outcomes, all stakeholders must put in extraordinary time and effort to see success. At BArT we are proud that this is the rule rather than the exception and we look forward to continuing the amazing improvement in academic success of last year while maintaining our commitment to preparing all students for college in a safe and welcoming environment.

BArT is always open to visitors. Come by and see what we are doing and why we are so proud! There will be an open house on Thursday, from August 20, 2009 from 6:00 pm-8:00 pm that is open to the public.

Charlie Toomajian, Founding Trustee and first Chair, Berkshire Arts & Technology Charter Public School
Pam Johnson, Founding Trustee, Berkshire Arts & Technology Charter Public School

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