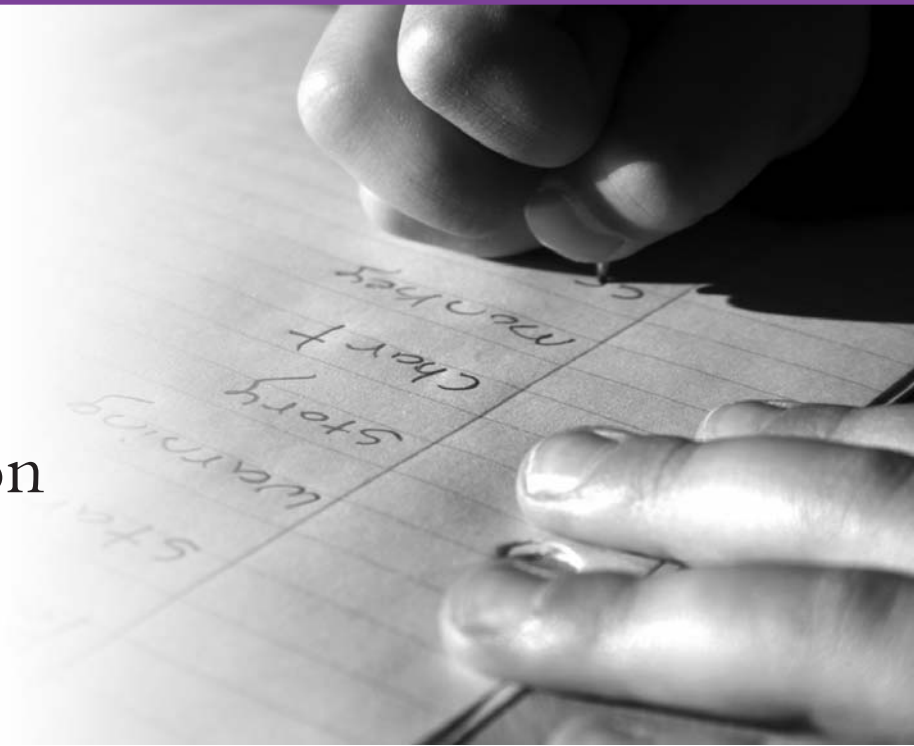


Literacy Instruction



Introduction

Literacy skills are the foundation of learning. Children who absorb literacy skills in elementary school will develop a love of learning, be able to comprehend a wide variety of information in different genres, and understand and appreciate how learning connects them to their own communities and to cultures across the world. By the end of third grade, children should be reading and writing with the ease, confidence, and understanding to be able to succeed to their potential in the fourth grade and beyond. Students who possess a solid foundation of literacy skills will become increasingly confident and able learners across a wide range of content areas as they progress through middle and high school.

The Literacy subcommittee of the Citizen Commission set out to examine the Boston Public Schools' (BPS) approach to literacy instruction over the past ten years, look closely at student achievement data, consider the challenges to achieving proficiency in literacy for all BPS students, and provide recommendations to the incoming superintendent.

How Has Boston Approached Improving Literacy?

Improving literacy instruction has been the district's flagship initiative during Superintendent Payzant's tenure. In partnership with the Boston Plan for Excellence and with upwards of \$65 million in funding over the past ten years, BPS has implemented a pedagogical approach—Readers' and Writers' Workshop—and a professional development model—Collaborative Coaching and Learning—with the goal of improving literacy instruction in every classroom, in every school, for every child.

Readers' and Writers' Workshop, or "workshop," is an instructional approach that seeks to "draw students into the hard work of learning and build their ability to function for themselves," in the words of the Boston Plan for Excellence. In a workshop classroom, the teacher "introduces a specific concept, and the teacher and students work to learn it, engaging in a high level of questioning and rigorous discourse." In 2003, to assist teachers in becoming skilled practitioners of the workshop approach, BPS adopted the Collaborative Coaching and Learning

The majority of students at every grade level tested in 2005 still fell short of achieving proficiency.



professional development model across the district. In this model, school-based coaches work with teams of teachers to provide on-site, continuous professional development. The CCL model emphasizes collective learning, discovery, observation, feedback, and reflection.

Despite the district's efforts, the measurable outcomes suggest that much remains to be done.

Student Outcomes

The enormous investment of financial and human resources to improve literacy instruction has yielded gains in the percentage of students passing the English language arts (ELA) MCAS. The failure rate of BPS 10th graders on the ELA MCAS dropped from 57% in 1998 to 27% in 2005.

However, the majority of students at every grade level tested in 2005 still fell short of achieving *proficiency* (defined as “demonstrating a solid understanding of challenging subject matter and solving a wide variety of problems” by the Massachusetts Department of Education). The percentage of students achieving an *advanced* score on the MCAS, “demonstrating a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of rigorous subject matter, and providing sophisticated solutions to complex problems,” ranges from 3% to 11% across grade levels and has remained essentially flat since 2002.

Gaps in achievement—specifically, the gap between students of color and white and Asian students, between regular and special education students, and between English language learners (ELLs) and native English speakers—are significant and in many cases have increased in recent years. The low rate of ELA proficiency across the system no doubt impacts subsequent student performance in other areas. The persistence of the achievement gap at the elementary level sets up a two-tiered system that leads to more opportunities for advanced work and exam school acceptance for white and Asian children and a higher dropout rate for Black and Latino students.

MCAS

Elementary Test Scores: At the third grade level, often considered a key benchmark for literacy, the percent scoring proficient declined from 35% to 31% between 2002 and 2005. At the fourth grade level, proficient/advanced was relatively flat, moving from 24% to 25%.

Middle and High School: Seventh and tenth grade scores from 2001 to 2005 show substantial gains in both the percentage passing and the percentage reaching proficient/advanced. However,

achievement gaps persist: 73% of white seventh graders and 68% of Asian seventh graders reached proficient/advanced by 2005, but only 35% of Black students and 32% of Latino students did. White tenth graders made substantial gains, going from 32% to 70% proficient/advanced from 1998 to 2005—a 49% increase, and Asian students showed a gain from 32% to 87%. Over the same period, the percentage reaching proficient/advanced increased from 4% to 26% among Black students and from 5% to 31% among Latino students.

National Tests

SAT: Sixty-three percent of the BPS class of 2004 took the SAT, scoring an average of 431 on the verbal section; the state average was 516, and the U.S. average was 508. BPS students' SAT scores dropped slightly from 2003 to 2004. However, between 1995 and 2004 the combined average verbal and math SAT scores of Boston students rose by 45 points, outpacing state and national gains.

National Assessment of Educational Progress:

Between 2003 and 2005, Boston's fourth and eighth grade results on the NAEP Trial Urban District reading exam were essentially flat, tracking slightly above the average results for students from large central cities. For fourth graders, 49% scored below the basic level, and 17% were at or above proficient; for eighth graders, 39% scored below the basic level, and 23% were at or above proficient. The percentage of minority students reaching proficiency was well below the overall average in both grades (11% of Black and 10% of Latino fourth graders and 14% of Black and 15% of Latino eighth graders). The gap between white students and students of color increased from 2003 to 2005 at both grade levels, with the exception of a

slight decrease in the gap between eighth-grade whites and Latinos.

After ten years of literacy-focused standards-based reform as the centerpiece of BPS's whole-school change efforts, it is fair and reasonable to ask why the majority of students in BPS are still not proficient in literacy skills. There is an urgent need to examine the district's reform initiatives to uncover new strategies that will accelerate increases in achievement.

The Need for Change

Explaining Student Outcomes: Areas for Examination

There is no single explanation of why student achievement in literacy has not increased at a faster rate over the past several years. Student outcome data is the result of a complex set of factors, some internal to the school community and some external. However, if BPS is going to realize the goal of literacy proficiency for all students, we believe the interrelated areas discussed below demand close examination—and a revised course of action—from the incoming superintendent.





Implementation of Workshop and CCL Across the District

Although BPS has mandated adoption of workshop and CCL throughout the district, the extent and quality of implementation is uneven. As one evaluator commented in an interview, “Coaching is absolutely uneven. Some coaches are great and have helped teachers change practices in the classroom. Some are not performing, not suited temperamentally, or not skilled in coaching.”

A 2003 memo by independent evaluators Education Matters outlined the conditions necessary for CCL to take root and flourish in a school:

- principal leadership and support
- knowledgeable and skilled literacy coaches

- a workable schedule (since CCL requires time for teachers to work collaboratively)
- a social context that supports and encourages collaboration among staff and a distributed leadership approach in which teachers and principals are eager to work together
- adequate grasp of and progress toward achieving the “Six Essentials of Whole-School Improvement.”¹

Education Matters found significant inconsistency in the quality of CCL implementation. They report that “requiring schools to implement CCL (or anything else) when they lack the infrastructure/context in which to do so, is a) a guarantee that coaching resources will be wasted, b) a likely way to persuade teachers and principals that this coaching model is ineffective or too hard to implement, and c) therefore a setback to the progress of instructional improvement that the district hopes to achieve and which its children deserve.”

A more recent Education Matters report focusing on high school reform reported little workshop-based instruction and continued obstacles to creating viable CCL groups in small high schools and small learning communities. Barriers included “scheduling, lack of administrator support, and, to some extent, lack of teacher support.”

Some experts interviewed by the Commission questioned whether CCL is an adequate vehicle for addressing the complex and difficult task of vastly improving teacher quality. CCL cannot fully meet the needs of teachers who are missing content knowledge, have weak classroom management skills, lack cultural competence, and actively or unwittingly communicate low expectations to their students.

One interviewee close to the reform efforts said, “Close to the majority of teachers don’t think that the kids can do as much as they are capable of... There is not a sense of urgency across the board.”

High quality implementation of CCL and a high-functioning workshop classroom will make a positive difference in student achievement. When implementation is uneven or nonexistent, positive results cannot be expected.

Expectations for Student, Teacher, and Administrator Performance

Low expectations of student performance can contribute to continuing achievement gaps. The impact of the district’s approach to this issue is unclear. We heard from many experts, both inside and outside the system, that low teacher expectations for minority, special education, and ELL students are extremely pervasive.

One interviewee close to the reform efforts said, “Close to the majority of teachers don’t think that the kids can do as much as they are capable of. We haven’t done a good enough job in getting these teachers to see kids do work that they didn’t think the kids could do. That’s what creates a sense of urgency, and they know they have to change what they are doing. There is not a sense of urgency across the board.”

One of the significant critiques contained in Education Matters’ high school report is the continuing lack of access to rigorous curricula for high school students who are not in exam schools: “If students are going to achieve at levels considered necessary for success in postsecondary education and/or work, then their schools must engage them in producing high quality work that represents the academic rigor desired by the

district and required for a score of ‘proficient’ on the state’s assessment. The data we collected from the students in our sample suggest that from their perspective, not only were most classes unengaging, for the most part a) their classes were not rigorous, and b) it was easy to get an A or B in most of them.”

Several people involved in reform efforts told us that the culture of BPS has historically bred low expectations not only among teachers for student performance but also among headmasters for teacher performance and administrators for school progress. Students and parents who attended the Commission’s public hearing made it clear that they believe the lack of access to rigorous material, uneven distribution of resources, and the absence of high standards outside the exam schools signifies the school system’s lack of respect for some groups of students and low expectations for their achievement.

Cultural Competence

All children come to school with sophisticated linguistic skills and with cultural knowledge and traditions. They are more likely to attach to school and invest in learning when educators view their home cultures as strengths and incorporate them into the instructional process. Students who see learning as compatible with their home culture and with the history, culture, and traditions of their racial and ethnic group are more likely to commit to acquiring fluency in, and knowledge of, the culture of power. Students of color whose racial and/or ethnic identity is

strong tend to do better in school than other students of color.

BPS has not paid enough attention to how issues of race, ethnicity, culture, and class inform its literacy reform initiatives. It is critical for school leaders to understand that these issues are central to school reform. Boston's literacy efforts must be designed to work with significant numbers of children who do not speak English as a first language, and the literature that is used should represent the backgrounds and cultures of the children.

Said one expert, “We have a lot of talent in this system, but we operate in silos.”

Central Organization

Many people, both inside and outside the school system, told us that the organization of the central office is an obstacle to school improvement in general and literacy instruction in particular. Among the complaints voiced are:

- The disjointed organization of literacy curricula and instruction efforts. CCL, led by the director of literacy and coaching, is not part of the department of curriculum and instruction. Meanwhile, two major curricula programs, Reading First and America's Choice, led by the director of English language arts for elementary students, are located in the department of curriculum and instruction. America's Choice and Reading First have their own set of literacy coaches. This fragmented organizational structure, and the “silo” behavior that follows from it, leads to incoherence in the district's overall approach to literacy

instruction and interferes with providing school staff with crucial support.

- The lack of opportunity for leaders of distinct academic reform initiatives, such as literacy and math, to learn from one another and engage in joint planning and strategizing.
- The gap in accountability for instructional leadership. The responsibility and authority for evaluating principals currently resides with the deputy superintendents for clusters and school leaders and is illogically separated from the department of teaching and learning.
- The lack of a functioning organizational structure to support high school reform efforts, which have at their core two goals: improving student literacy and reducing student alienation.
- A siloed organizational structure. The result is that the department of unified student services (responsible for special education) and the office of language learning and support services (responsible for ELLs) do not have adequate interaction with the department of teaching and learning.

Said one expert, “We have a lot of talent in this system, but we operate in silos. Literacy is the single most important piece kids need to wrap their heads around. They have to be highly literate when they leave. We have never generated a think tank around literacy where we pull from different departments to grapple with trying to bring some cohesiveness to this approach.”

Principal Leadership

Despite the fact that Superintendent Payzant has replaced nearly three-quarters of BPS principals during his tenure, the system still harbors weak

principals. Principal leadership is critical to implementing the district's school-improvement initiatives. It is also essential for creating partnerships with external agencies, which can bolster a school's resources and help address the nonacademic barriers that drag down student achievement. Critics pointed to professional development that has been, "too slow to move [principals] from 'I am the manager of my building' to 'I am the leader of my school.'"



Approach to Special Education Students and English Language Learners

The weaknesses of the district's approach to special education and ELL (detailed in other chapters in this report) have a direct impact on the literacy achievement scores of the entire district.

The district nominally requires CCL teams to include special education and ELL teachers, but this directive is not always followed. Many special education teachers have not participated in CCL or learned how to implement the workshop approach. Furthermore, regular education teachers who have special education students in their classrooms lack expertise in teaching this population. One principal of a school committed to inclusion told us that a highly skilled coach who is dual certified in special and regular education was able to convince teachers that special education students could perform at high levels. It is troubling that this level of attention to the instructional needs of special education students has not been replicated across the system.

As it is currently implemented, the CCL model does not provide sufficient support for teachers

attempting to address English language acquisition. Most coaches themselves do not have any substantive knowledge or training in English language acquisition or in literacy development in a second language.

Supplemental Tutoring

BPS has not sufficiently explored ways to supplement improved classroom instruction. Supplemental tutoring has been used effectively by other urban districts and has long been a core strategy of private and suburban schools for supporting students who face challenges. BPS does not appear to have a concerted districtwide tutoring strategy. The Boston Volunteer Literacy Collaborative is a coalition of major nonprofits that provide Boston public schools with tutors, some paid and some volunteer. These nonprofits—Boston Partners in Education, City Year, the Jewish Community Relations Council, and Generations, Inc.—have been meeting monthly for over three years to come up with strategies for improving their services and for getting more recognition from, and better coordination with, BPS. Historically, most of these organizations have formed school-by-school partnerships, with little or no coordination at the district level.

BPS does not have a high-level, districtwide strategy to leverage nonprofit CBOs whose mission is to provide services and programs to BPS students.



Maximizing Community Partnerships

A host of nonacademic factors—exposure to trauma, instability at home, mental and physical health issues—impact student readiness to learn and academic performance. Boston is fortunate to have a rich and complex array of community-based organizations (CBOs) providing some of the expertise, resources, and programming needed to address this array of nonacademic barriers to student success. There are thriving partnerships with CBOs in individual schools and in some clusters throughout the district.

The potential of community partnerships to improve literacy outcomes can be maximized by looking specifically at early literacy programming, family literacy strategies, and improving the literacy content of after-school programs.

BPS does not have a high level, districtwide strategy to leverage nonprofit CBOs whose mission is to provide services and programs to BPS students. Remarkably, there does not appear to be a single entity or person in all of BPS who has an accounting of every partnership in every school. CBOs find it difficult to partner with the BPS. At the Citizen Commission public hearing, a representative of a CBO remarked, “[BPS] assured us that they would like to work together, but we have not seen any support in helping to bring us to the table.”

Experts both within and outside the school system repeatedly referred to the topics covered in this section as obstacles to

successful literacy instruction. We also heard many of the same themes from the wide variety of constituents who testified at our public hearing. We believe the incoming superintendent and his or her team should closely examine each of these areas for their potential impact on the success of literacy instruction, seeking input from a wide range of stakeholders in the process. A targeted improvement effort could bring Boston significantly closer to realizing a vision of successful literacy instruction for all students.

Vision of Change

What Do We Want for Boston’s Students?

All students within BPS—regardless of race, ethnicity, special education or ELL status—will be offered the support they need to master

literacy skills, including a love of reading and the ability to confidently express themselves in writing. The increased self-esteem that accompanies this mastery will translate into success in all areas of academic work. All students will have access to rigorous, challenging, and engaging curricula throughout their elementary and secondary education.

Along with effective and engaging instruction in literacy, students will have ample opportunities and resources outside the classroom to improve, practice, and enhance their literacy skills. Supplemental tutoring using structured tutoring methods will be easily available. Students will also have a rich array of in-school and after-school literacy-enhancing extracurricular opportunities to choose from, such as student newspapers and book, debate, drama, poetry, and creative writing clubs. A citywide effort to ensure that young children participate in high quality enrichment activities—through preschool programs, child care centers, libraries, and at home—will equip children with the pre-literacy skills they will need when they enter kindergarten.

The BPS teaching staff will be more representative of the race and culture of the student population. They will have high expectations for all students, including those with disabilities, and act on that belief. Teachers will display strong cultural competence, content knowledge, and mastery of pedagogical approaches to addressing varied learning needs. Principals will provide effective instructional leadership and receive outstanding support from central district leadership.

The district will have a comprehensive strategy for engaging families and CBOs in the ongoing process of ensuring that all students reach their potential.

Five years after all the above elements are put into place, every BPS student will reach, at minimum, a score of proficiency on the ELA MCAS, and a significant percentage will achieve an advanced score.

Recommendations for Change

Teacher Quality

- Follow the recommendations in the chapters of this report that focus on human resources and on the Boston Teachers Union contract with BPS. Improving teacher recruitment, support, retention, and diversity will likely have significant impact on literacy instruction.

Overcoming the Achievement Gap

- Make cultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogy central and integral to literacy instruction.
- Develop and implement a professional development program that will help educators examine how their beliefs about the intellectual ability of Black and Latino students influence their educational practices and policy decisions.
- Provide professional development that will give teachers and principals the skills to design schools organized around a belief in the academic potential of Black and Latino students.

Successfully Implementing Workshop and CCL

- Secure ongoing, steady funding for literacy coaches.
- Provide literacy coaches with training in English language acquisition and in ELL literacy development.

- Provide regular education and special education teachers with professional development linked to current practices in standards-based reforms.
- Use coaches who are dual certified in both regular and special education to train teachers in differentiated instruction.
- Evaluate each school's progress in meeting the conditions for successful implementation of workshop and CCL detailed in Education Matters' 2003 report. Target resources and support to ensure that schools are adequately prepared to implement these initiatives.

Curriculum

- Ensure that all high schools provide curricula as challenging, broad, and coherent as those at Boston Latin School, Latin Academy, and other highly sought-after high schools.
- Ensure that advanced-work curricula are as available to Black and Latino students as they are to white and Asian-American students.
- Ensure that the high-standards curriculum is available to students with disabilities, both in inclusion and separate settings.
- Institutionalize an effort to help teachers develop challenging and robust curricula linked to the racial, cultural, and ethnic histories and traditions of BPS students. Help teachers align this curriculum to the state and national standards, and connect it to the "mainstream" curriculum.
- Examine expanding the use of the structured ELA curriculum currently being used by 34 out of 84 elementary schools.

Resources

- Eliminate the resource gaps between and within schools.

Accountability

- Create a system that holds principals accountable for instructional leadership and provides them with adequate support and professional development.
- Create a system that holds central office leadership accountable for the quality of its work, both at the school level and in the district as a whole.

Maximizing Community Partnerships

- Develop a districtwide tutoring strategy and policy that regards tutoring as a key tool for helping children acquire literacy skills. Regular, consistent tutoring (at least three days per week) by a qualified tutor using a scientifically based tutoring methodology has been proven to result in improved literacy skills and performance. Tutoring is currently a core component of the Reading First program. BPS should build on what has been learned about tutoring in that program and apply those lessons to tutoring in all schools. Principals and teachers and, most importantly, literacy coaches should be trained in how to incorporate tutoring into and after the school day.
- If BPS decides that tutoring will not be one of its core competencies, then it should fully embrace working with CBOs that provide that service, including City Year and the BELL Foundation. The department of curriculum and instruction has partnered with City Year to provide tutoring and other services to nine out of the twelve Reading First schools. The

BELL Foundation’s tutoring model has enabled children to reach proficiency. BPS should consider expanding these or other models in its overall strategic plan for tutoring.

- Expand engaging extracurricular activities that reinforce literacy skills by making reading and writing more relevant and exciting, such as drama, student journalism, debate, creative writing and book clubs, and service learning. BPS should take advantage of the broad array of nonprofit organizations that seek to provide literacy-enriching extracurricular activities. Citizen Schools, in particular, has a large, robust program that includes literacy and writing content and uses lawyers and other professionals as mentors.
- Increase support for the Boston Full Service Schools Roundtable, organized in 2003, a quasi-independent organization promoting comprehensive, full-service or community schools. The Roundtable helps schools form strategic partnerships with external organizations and could flourish with greater support from district leadership.
- Continue and expand support for the After-School Literacy Coaching Initiative, a promising collaboration of BPS, Massachusetts 2020, the Boston Plan for Excellence, and ReadBoston, which provides on-site literacy training and curriculum materials to after-school program staff.
- Increase investment in, and support of, BPS’s Bridging the Gap training series, designed to improve coordination between after-school activities and school-day instruction. Even more could be done systematically to connect teachers and after-school staff, including facilitating communication about specific students.
- Continue to actively promote the importance of early education and aggressively expand preschool classrooms throughout the district. To ensure that all children enter kindergarten with the skills they need, BPS should also consider expanding its partnerships with nonprofit organizations that serve the literacy needs of preschool children, including ReadBoston, Jumpstart for Young Children, and Boston Community Partnerships for Children, among others.

¹ Boston’s whole-school improvement effort is organized around these six essentials: “ONE: Focus on *literacy and mathematics*. TWO: Use *student work and data* to identify student needs, improve instruction and assess progress. THREE: Focus *professional development* to offer teachers and principals the skills they need to improve instruction. FOUR: Identify and replicate *best practices* for instruction. FIVE: Align all *resources* with the instructional focus. SIX: Engage *families, community and partners* to support Whole School Improvement.”

For more information, please contact:

Hubie Jones
Chair, Citizen Commission on Academic Success for Boston Children
Dean *Emeritus*, Boston University School of Social Work
Social Justice Entrepreneur in Residence, City Year
285 Columbus Avenue
Boston, MA 02116
(617) 927-2414
hjones@cityyear.org

John Mudd
Senior Project Director, Boston School Reform Project
25 Kingston Street, 2nd floor
Boston, MA 02111
(617) 357-8431 x221
jmudd@massadvocates.org

Copies of this report may be downloaded from <http://www.massadvocates.org>