Overview

The Margarita Muñiz Academy is the district’s first dual-language high school with a focus on providing students with instruction in English and Spanish, as well as an emphasis on arts-based, technology, and experiential learning. The school, which was named after the late principal at the Rafael Hernández School—Boston’s dual-language elementary school—was founded with the mission to: “...prepare students to be engaged citizens and leaders who are fluent in English and Spanish. Muñiz Academy seeks to maximize each student’s potential, developing courageous learners and effective communicators who successfully complete higher education and pursue careers which fulfill their lives and strengthen their communities. As college preparatory high school, Muñiz Academy will serve as a model in secondary two-way bilingual education for the city, state and nation. Muñiz Academy follows the design principles and best practices of the national network of Expeditionary Learning Schools. Parents, families and community partners are close allies in supporting our students and realizing the school’s mission.”

Autonomies

- Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
- Schedule and Calendar
- Staffing
- Professional Development
- District Policies
- Budget

The Muñiz Academy used their autonomy over district policies to establish a Governing Board. According to the Muñiz Academy Innovation Plan:

The school's governing board will take the place of the school site council established at traditional district schools. The school envisions the governing board being similar in representation and purpose to area charter school governing boards, exercising significantly more decision-making responsibilities than traditional school site councils. The Superintendent and Headmaster will serve in ex-officio capacity. The board, which will include members of the school’s Innovation Committee, will be comprised of experts in the areas of education, non-profit management, business, and finance. The board will also include a parent representative elected annually by the school’s parent council, which will meet monthly and be open to all parents. The board will comply with all requirements relating to open meeting laws. Meetings will be held monthly at the school and open to the public. A separate foundation board will be established with the sole purpose of raising private donations to support expanded programming (e.g., El Sistema, after-school tutoring, etc.). (p. 38).

The members of the Governing Board also serve on the board of a separate 501c3 foundation that holds scholarship money for students at the school and participates in fundraising for programs. For example, the school is able to offer a ninth grade scholarship to fund the academic pursuits of one student every year, over the summer. One Governing Board member said that they actively seek grants and fundraising in order to bring more opportunities and flexibilities to the school. In their first year of
operation, the Board won a grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation that supported hiring the principal and planning for the school’s opening.

In another example of autonomy from district policy, the Governing Board formally evaluates the Headmaster, instead of the district academic superintendent. In turn, the Headmaster uses the autonomies for staffing and budget to hire the school’s faculty, which includes having a psychologist, social worker, and family engagement coordinator on staff.

The school also exercises its autonomies in curriculum and professional development to provide materials and supports for staff in order to enact the dual-language approach. They create curriculum to integrate arts-based, technology, and experiential learning experiences for students. In addition, the school offers classes in a college preparatory Expeditionary Learning (EL) program that are standards-based and taught in both English and Spanish. The Muñiz Academy educators use the EL program to promote culturally relevant learning expeditions based on real-world learning and fieldwork. Last, the school invests heavily in technology in order to support these learning goals and allow for differentiation, multi-modal learning opportunities, and enhanced assessment options for students.

Governing Board Formation and Membership

The Governing Board for the Muñiz Academy was formed when a small group came together first as an unofficial advisory group to create a vision for a dual-language high school in Boston. The founding members, including Margarita Muñiz, were committed to establishing a pathway for Boston bilingual students after they left the Hernandez K–8 school that took an “additive approach” to dual-language education. Many of the founding members knew each other because they were Barr Fellows, a fellowship that brings together Boston-area leaders and provides them with leadership development experiences. The founding members submitted the application for the Muñiz Academy to become an innovation school, and after their application was granted many of these members continued on the Governing Board.

Currently the Board has seven members with various roles in education: they are or have been principals of charter schools, district superintendents, district school committee members, community-based or arts-based organizational leaders, and leaders of education research organizations. The Board is also predominantly made up of members of the Latino/a community, and one Board member said everyone understands about “really celebrating young people and where they come from, supporting them to be proud of who they are and their cultural identity.” Last, many of the Board members have experience working with the Boston Public Schools but do not hold formal district positions.

They added to their membership by looking for others who were aligned with the mission and vision of the school, as well as people who had connections to districts and schools or community-based organizations. Although the first Board formed when people volunteered to join, the Board now recruits other members selectively based on the current needs and priorities of the school. The Board passed a bylaw that allowed for a range in the total number of Board members. Various members have specific roles, such as Board Chair and Board Clerk.

The Board meets regularly 5–6 times per year at the school, and also in subcommittees when needed. For example, there is a subcommittee that oversees the Headmaster’s evaluation. At their meetings, there is an agenda that includes the Headmaster’s report about the status of the school. One Board member said that they have “a consensus process” for making decisions, and they have “never had a challenge among the Board, everyone brings different expertise and we listen to each other.”

Governing Board Role

The Governing Board fills four primary roles: supporting the school Headmaster, evaluating the Headmaster, acting as a liaison with the district, and thinking strategically about the future and vision of the school.

The Board hears the Headmaster’s report about what is happening with the school building, the teachers, and the students. They provide advice, secure or recommend resources, and make connections between Muñiz Academy and other
districts and schools. The Headmaster said, “The board is key in how it offers support. The board supports our collective work with the district around key issues as we grow our school. I know that they are there to provide guidance and their voice if there is a bigger challenge.” The Board also acts as a liaison between the school and the district when needed. One Board member described that the “Board has been the voice to meet with the superintendent and the cabinet.” Most recently, the Board has been involved in discussions about preparing and expanding the facilities that are necessary in order for the school to acquire more grade levels. Securing the necessary facilities and being able to furnish and equip their classrooms are key priorities for the Governing Board. They work directly with the Boston Public Schools liaison to the innovation and charter schools, and Board members perceive that they have strong support from the current Boston interim superintendent.

The Board also has a subcommittee of three members that conducts the formal evaluation of the Headmaster, and they work to help her meet her professional goals, such as instituting teacher mentoring and teacher-led interest groups. The Board uses the formal Boston Public Schools system to input their evaluation data.

Last, the Board helps the Headmaster think purposefully about the school’s strategy and vision. They provide support for the school’s dual-language instructional model, such as working to find and secure standards-based resources that are at the appropriate level in Spanish. They also work to create community within the school and with the neighborhood. The Board participates in fundraising, and it has raised money from foundations that supported hiring the new Headmaster full-time for a planning year before the school opened in September 2012. The Board maintains clear distinctions between what the Board does and what the Headmaster does: they see themselves as a Governing Board, not an "operations board," and they only attend school committee meetings when needed.

Successes and Challenges

Successes

The Governing Board members and the Headmaster believe that the Muñiz Academy has been successful because the leaders all believe in the school’s mission and the school’s community. The Headmaster believes the Board members have a “deep commitment” and a “deep understanding of Boston and the Latino community.” The Board helped co-host several school events, such as a community breakfast for the neighborhood and a teachers’ appreciation luncheon at the end of the school year. One Board member said she was proud that Muñiz Academy is “one of the most highly selected schools after two years” within the district’s school assignment options, and that “we have 90 percent of families that come in for student-led conferences.” She added, “Many schools that I have worked with, families don’t feel like they have voice. Our families have voice. We are an innovation school and are accountable to the governing board, which is so diverse. We make sure that the school doesn’t become its own world excluding parents and partners.” Another Board member mentioned, “We hope that the school becomes a center of Latino leadership among the students.”

In another success, the Governing Board members and the Headmaster believe that having a full year to plan before the school officially opened was essential. During this first year, the Board secured money from foundations that paid the full salary of the incoming Headmaster. The Board also believes that choosing the right leader, who can then hire the right educators, was also extremely important to the success of the school. As one Board member explained, “We were fortunate to select the right person, and Dania Vasquez really emerged at the top of the pool quickly. She had experience with new schools, had the right interpersonal skills to connect with all stakeholders, parents, students, teachers, and a relationship with the school district.” Hiring the Headmaster for a full year before opening allowed for an extended period of planning and preparation.

In addition, the Governing Board members and Headmaster believe that they have a generally positive relationship with the district, and they attribute this to having a Headmaster and Board members who have held district roles or had district connections in Boston and elsewhere. Board members stated that the interim superintendent, John McDonough, has been particularly supportive of the school. One Board member gave

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— Governing Board Member
an example of this partnership by pointing out that during their planning year, they provided foundation money for the Headmaster’s salary, but the district paid for benefits. At the same time, Board members value the flexibility and autonomy that comes with being an innovation school, with one member saying, “I think being an innovation school makes us a little more nimble … An innovation school designation embeds some flexibility … We meet with parents, teachers talk to us, they come to meetings, which are open. There is a sense that there are a group of people here who really want to help us, they want to be our advocates.” They also believe that their autonomies allow them to be more creative with curriculum, staffing, funding, and planning. As an innovation school they believe they are accountable to their neighborhood and to the parents and students.

Challenges

The biggest challenge facing the Muñiz Academy is finding appropriate space and facilities for their growing high school population. One Board member explained that the issue of space and facilities falls under the responsibility of the Boston Public Schools district office. While they have been working with the district to resolve this issues regarding space, one Board member explained that even if the district is supportive, decisions might not be made in a timely manner: “that there are a lot of interlocking decisions that make it impossible to decide the Muñiz Academy space decision by itself.” The board recognizes that the facilities challenge for the school exists in the larger context of the district.

The Board attended a district School Committee meeting together with some parents of Muñiz Academy students, where they testified about the need for space given the school’s enrollment and goals. Although the Board believes that “starting small, with a plan for growth, was a very wise move,” key decisions must be made soon in order to secure permanent facilities so the school can continue to grow. Thus far, the Headmaster has been able to work with the Board to find alternative spaces, such as finding summer program partnerships with Boston University, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and outdoor camps in New Hampshire.

Next Steps for the Governing Board

In addition to securing the necessary facilities and space for the school, Governing Board members believe that they could still add to their membership, for example to have a parent serve on the board or add a member with expertise in other areas not currently represented. As one Board member pointed out, “Having a mix of people with different experience, backgrounds, and opportunities led to support in different ways. The constitution of the Board might include clients of school but also have the opportunities to help support from the community side.”