

Panel Report
Candidate Compass School Review
Boston Arts Academy
Boston Public Schools

Introduction

The Program

The Commonwealth Compass Schools Program is one part of the Massachusetts School and District Accountability System. The purpose of the Exemplary Schools Program is to recognize and celebrate improvement in Massachusetts' schools, and to disseminate information and encourage networking and sharing of ideas, effective practices, and models for success. The program is intended to provide a means for the schools to share their expertise with other schools in the state.

Based on the School Performance and Improvement Ratings issued in January 2001, and continued and/or significant improvement on the 2001 MCAS test results, the Department identified 175 schools that exceeded their expectations for improvement. These schools were invited to apply for consideration as candidates to serve as 2002 Commonwealth Compass Schools. Of the 84 schools who chose to apply by submitting information on the initiatives they have undertaken to improve student performance that they think have had the most positive impact on their results, seven high schools, eight elementary schools, and three middle schools were selected as finalists and scheduled for an on-site review to determine their willingness and capacity to serve. Data and information gathered from the applications and the review process of these schools will be published in a report this fall.

Schools selected to serve as 2002 Commonwealth Compass Schools will receive special recognition and a \$10,000 grant to support the participation of their administrators and staff in information sharing and dissemination activities over the next year.

The Report

This report summarizes the findings and analyses of the visiting team based on their May 6, 2003 site visit review of the Boston Arts Academy. The report will assist the Commissioner in determining which schools from among those visited will be designated to serve as Compass Schools in the state's new Exemplary Schools Program.

The Panel evaluated data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts, including the school's application to serve as a Compass School. The Panel then visited the school to meet with school leaders, staff, parents and students and visit classrooms in order to answer the following two key questions:

1. Is this school using effective improvement initiatives that could be replicated in other similarly profiled schools?

2. Are the conditions in place for this school to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives?

The Panel's responses to these two questions frame the report. In the process of answering these questions, the report focuses primarily on the initiatives that the school identified in its application as having had the most positive impact on student performance.

The findings and conclusions presented here are the product of analysis, discussion, and observation, and are based on the evidence made available to the Panel before and during their visit. A list of Panel members who participated in the Boston Arts Academy review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the Panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

Boston Arts Academy Profile

Enrollment

Boston Arts Academy is one of 22 secondary schools in Boston. The Boston Public School system houses 135 schools in total. Enrollment at the school between 1999-2002 steadily increased. The school serves students in 9th through 12th grade. In 1999, 142 students were enrolled at the school; in 2002, student enrollment reached 382—almost three times that of 1999. During that time, the student body consisted of 45 percent Black students, 35 percent White and 20 percent Hispanic. Fifty percent of the school's student between 1999 and 2002 were low-income. There is school-wide Title I program at this school

Of the entire student population at Boston Arts Academy during this time period, an average of 15 percent were non-native English speakers, and a declining percentage --averaging just under four percent -- were Limited English Proficient.

Over the last three years, attendance at this school steadily declined from 94.9 in 1999 to 89.7 in 2001, while the average number of days absent per student on the 180-day schedule doubled from 9.2 in 1999 to 18.5 in 2002. The school recorded no in-school suspensions between 1999 and 2001. There were no out-of-school suspensions until 2001, when the school registered a rate of 1.6 percent. Exclusions steadily declined from 14.1 in 1999, to a low of 3.1 in 2001. Retentions averaged one percent during that period, and the drop-out rate fluctuated between 2.1 and 4.3 percent.

Staffing

At the Boston Arts Academy, there are 40 classroom teachers, 18 specialist teachers, three guidance counselors, two administrators and two paraprofessionals. All teachers at this school are certified in the subjects they teach.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Boston Arts Academy are tested in the MCAS in grade 10 in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. In Cycle II (2001-2002), the school made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both ELA and mathematics for both years of the cycle.

Student Performance in English Language Arts

In Cycle II, the Boston Arts Academy received a performance rating of *Moderate*, based on its Proficiency Index (PI) of 75.6 in ELA. Its improvement was rated *Above Target* as the result of an increase of almost 30 points (28.3) as compared to its Cycle I (1999-2000) performance. Participation rates in the ELA testing in Cycle II were 95 percent in 2001 and 92 percent in 2002.

The performance of Regular Education students at Boston Arts Academy in Cycle II differed significantly from trends observed in Cycle I in that fewer percentages of students failed the test and increasing proportions of scores were found at the Proficient and Advanced levels. In the first year of Cycle I, only 10 percent of students scored in the Proficient range, 28 percent in Needs Improvement and 62 percent failed. In 2002, two percent scored at the Advanced level, 23 percent were Proficient, 34 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 42 percent failed. In 2001, the percentage of Advanced students increased to seven, as did those in Proficient to 38 percent. The proportion of students at the Needs Improvement level was 39, while those failing dropped to 16 percent. In 2002, the proportion of Advanced students doubled to 14 percent. Fourteen percent of students were Proficient, 31 percent in Needs Improvement, and 11 percent failed.

The number of Special Education and Limited English Proficient students at the Boston Arts Academy did not meet the minimum size requirements in either cycle in ELA.

Student Performance in Mathematics

In Cycle II, the Boston Arts Academy received a performance rating of *Low* based on a Proficiency Index of 60.4 in mathematics. For improvement, the school received a rating of *Above Target*, having gained an additional 30 points over its Cycle I PI. The school was also found to have made AYP in both years of Cycle II. Participation rates for Cycle II in the mathematics portion of the test were 99 percent in 2001 and 95 percent in 2002.

Regular Education student performance at Boston Arts Academy over the last four years in mathematics has been characterized by decreasing percentages of failing students and increasing proportions of Proficient and Advanced students. In 1999, only four percent of Regular Education students scored at the Proficient level in mathematics; 13 percent were at the Needs Improvement level, while 83 percent failed. In 2000, five percent of students were found to be Advanced, nine percent Proficient, 11 percent in Needs Improvement, and 76 percent failed. In 2001, four percent of students were Advanced, the percentage of Proficient students rose to 22 percent, those at the Needs Improvement level rose to 49 percent, and those failing fell to 25

percent. In 2002, 11 percent of students were Advanced, 27 percent Proficient, 34 percent in Needs Improvement, and 28 percent failed.

The number of Special Education and Limited English Proficient students at the Boston Arts Academy did not meet the minimum size requirements in either cycle in mathematics.

Panel Responses To The Key Questions

KEY QUESTION 1: Is This School Using Effective Improvement Initiatives That Could Be Replicated In Other Similarly Profiled Schools?

Yes, Boston Arts Academy (BAA) is using a variety of initiatives that could be replicated in other similarly profiled schools. The school and the Panel have identified three key initiatives along with two other strategies that support these and any other initiatives. The major initiatives linked to the increase in student attainment are 1) a school-wide focus on writing, including a team-taught advisory class with a focus on writing; 2) a four-pronged proactive approach to mathematics, including mandatory after-school tutoring or summer school, an additional math class for 9th and 10th grade students who are struggling, and an varied approach to the teaching of mathematics; and 3) a common focus on 2 key goals each year that serve as the focus for professional development and teachers' own personal goals. Besides the three initiatives related to the increases in student attainment, BAA also has two important factors that serve as models for developing school culture. First, the school has a culture of high expectations for both students and staff. This culture includes a constant reflection on their practice, often using school data as a starting point for the reflection. Second, the school has developed and uses a very inclusive style of decision-making where all stakeholders have input into all decisions that affect the school. The use of common planning time facilitates the decision-making process and provides time for reflection on their practice.

A. Which improvement initiatives have had the greatest impact on student performance results?

In the opinion of the Panel, the three major initiatives having the greatest impact on student performance results are the school-wide focus on writing, the four-pronged approach to math remediation, and the common school-wide goals which drive professional development and teachers' own professional goals. In addition to these initiatives, the school also possesses a culture of high expectations for both students and staff, and an inclusive process for decision-making.

School-wide focus on writing: Since the school opened it has had a focus on school-wide writing. The staff has a commitment to infusing writing throughout the curriculum. Students do numerous presentations in all of their classes and there is always an accompanying writing component to the project. The staff worked to develop common rubrics for assessing quality writing and a common language around the subject of writing. The "RICO" and "MEAL" methods were developed by the staff as a way to standardized expectations for writing. RICO stands for Refine,

Invent, Connect, and Own. This is the process that the entire school uses for projects. By instilling this notion of a scaffolding process, students expect to revise their work in order to reach a level of proficiency. MEAL stands for Main Idea, Evidence, Analysis, and Link. This is the format for the school-wide writing rubric. MEAL format essays start in the 9th grade and are used by all teachers in writing assignments.

Besides the common language and expectations, all staff team teach writing in the daily advisory period. Each grade level has a writing focus for the year and a culminating written project. In the 9th grade, the goal is to get students writing regularly. As a writing project, students learn to write autobiographies. In the 10th grade, the writing emphasis is on short stories. In the 11th grade, the focus is on how to write a persuasive essay on a controversial topic. All juniors must score a proficient rating of “3” on a 4 point rubric before going on to Senior Humanities. Seniors are expected to write grant proposals. In this school exit requirement, students write a grant proposal that is evaluated by an external committee. The committee chooses the strongest 20% of the proposals and recommends them for funding. Students must score a “proficient” mark in order to graduate.

Four-pronged approach to math: BAA has mandatory after school tutoring twice a week for students who are struggling with math. As part of the admissions process, parents sign a contract stating their child will attend the tutoring if necessary. BAA also developed its own math assessment it gives to 9th graders at the end of the year. Those who do not reach proficiency on the test attend four-week summer school program for two hours each day. Summer school typically focuses on three mathematical concepts: equations, slope, and graphing. Summer school instructors use a variety of approaches to ensure students understand these concepts. BAA also has an extra math class for 9th and 10th grade students who are struggling in math. This class is designed to be a support to the regular math class with more individualized help for each student. Also, the school is in the process of creating its own math curriculum by combining elements from IMP, Math Connections, and Connected Math, with a heavy emphasis on kinesthetic and visual approaches to learning math.

School-wide goals: BAA develops 2 key goals in the form of questions for each school year. Teachers then develop their own professional goals based on the school-wide goals. The 2 goals serve as the focus for professional development for the year and as a common discussion point for the staff. The school-wide goals are developed through an inclusive process of decision-making described above. Once the goals are in place, teachers then write how they will incorporate those goals into their teaching and also write one professional goal of their own. For example this year the two goals are: *How do we practice, teach, and assess for seriousness of purpose?* and: *How do we use differentiated instruction to support heterogeneous groups of students?* Based on the first goal, one math teacher decided to incorporate the RICO method more formally in his class by having students do a RICO portfolio at the end of each quarter with a section for each of the four components. Based on the second goal, one art teacher decided to examine how she can ensure Second Language Learners are taught reading well when she integrates it into her art curriculum.

The goals have been the focus for professional development at the school. In order to address the question of differentiated instruction, the entire staff received 25 hours of instruction from a

professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and 15 staff members have decided to continue in the coursework and become certified in special education. The school is now in the process of taking the conversation around the theory of differentiated instruction and learning how it works in practice. They do this through continual staff conversations and sharing and also through the next phase of their professional development. Each teacher has a professional development partner at the school. The partners observe each other during the year for progress towards each one's personal goals that are related to the school-wide goals.

School culture: The school's major initiatives to improve student achievement are an outgrowth of its culture of high expectations for both students and staff and inclusive decision-making. It is evident throughout the school that the staff has high expectation for all of the students. The RICO method results in students expecting to revise their work until it reaches proficiency. IN the focus group, parents of students on IEP's reported the school does not expect less from their children, but rather provides supports for them to reach proficiency. The school's own proficiency requirements for each grade level, accompanied by supports to reach proficiency, are other examples of the high expectations for students. Staff also has high expectations of itself. Throughout the visit, leadership and teachers all spoke about the continual conversations they have around their practice and what they can do to improve instruction and thus improve the students' learning. These conversations often begin with an examination of data. For example, leadership reported the staff looked at why students were failing in math class. This included conducting a survey of students and involving them in the discussion. They determined many students were not turning in their homework assignments because they did not understand how to do the work. The school then decided to add the additional math class, the after-school tutoring, and the summer school as was in which to intensify one-to-one instruction for students tailored to their identified areas of weakness. The staff also began to examine the math curriculum and, as discussed earlier, is in the process of refining its curriculum to best meet the students' needs by integrating kinesthetic and visual approaches to math. During the visit, the Panel sat in on a curriculum team meeting where they discussed some data around the number of students making honor roll each quarter. They broke the data down by grade level, art major, gender, and race. The team noticed a significantly lower number of African American males were making honor roll and began a discussion about how to further explore this and examine their practice as a staff. These are both examples of the ways in which the school utilizes common planning time to facilitate inclusive decision-making. Besides the curriculum team, the school also has a leadership team that meets weekly and a student government whose representatives attend the leadership team meetings. Departments also meet weekly and the entire staff meets every Friday afternoon.

B. How did the school plan their improvement initiatives and put them into practice?

The improvement initiatives are a result of the collaborative decision-making process at the school. BAA is in the unique position of starting as a new school with grades 9 and 10 five years ago. The writing initiatives were in place when the school opened. The initial faculty took the lead in developing it and the recruitment process for new teachers emphasizes writing. The beginning of the year professional development and the professional development partners help to orientate new teachers to the writing used at the school. After two years, the faculty decided

they needed something more focused and manageable before growing to a 9-12 school. They worked together and came up with RICO. The math initiatives are a result of constant reflection on the part of the staff during common planning times. The staff examined the data, then decided to implement the extra math class, the mandatory tutoring, and summer school as a way to increase the one-to-one instruction in math. The teachers are also in the process of working together to develop a curriculum that best meets the needs of their students. In deciding the goals for the year, the school uses an inclusive process. Recommendations for the goals come from other committees and go to the leadership team. The leadership team then decides on the goals and presents them to the faculty at the end of the year.

C. Does the school think these initiatives can be successfully used in similar schools? Why?

Yes, the school thinks these initiatives could be successfully used in similar schools. BAA has already shared its writing focus at a number of conferences. The writing component appears to be the most fully-implemented initiative. The school believes the content of the math would be more difficult to share since it is in the early stages of development, but feels it could easily share the process the staff went through to analyze students' strengths and weaknesses and the constant reflection on the initiatives through data analysis. The addition of an extra math class for struggling students as well as the focus of the after-school tutoring and summer school class could be replicated if the visiting school had the ability to modify its schedule and did not include the mandatory parent agreement for the tutoring and summer school. The school also feels other schools could replicate its approach to tying the staff development to the two common goals. Finally, the school also believes its process for inclusive decision-making could be replicated at other schools.

KEY QUESTION 2: Are The Conditions In Place For This School To Serve As A Model Of Effective Practices And Successful Improvement Initiatives?

Yes. Conditions are in place for this school to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives. Boston Arts Academy has articulate students, a committed and enthusiastic staff, and experienced leadership well qualified to share its initiatives with other educators. The writing and math initiatives clearly link to the school's significant gains over the last three years on the MCAS. The school-wide goals and their use as a focus for professional development, along with the culture of high expectations and inclusive decision-making all serve as examples of how the school implemented these initiatives and improved teaching and learning.

A. Do leadership and staff have a shared understanding and use a common language to describe the changes/initiatives that have led to improvements in teaching and learning?

Absolutely. The leadership, staff, and the students all have a shared understanding of the initiatives in place and use a common language to describe the initiatives in relation to the improvements in student achievement. Everyone was able to clearly articulate the writing and math initiatives, and how they implement the writing and math initiatives in their individual classrooms. Students were also very articulate in communicating the ways in which their teachers use RICO and MEALS and how these methods have become second-nature to them.

Teachers also were able to communicate the process for decision-making at the school and how they use the common school-wide goals to develop their own professional goals.

B. How effectively do leadership and staff articulate the connections between the specific changes and improvement initiatives they have implemented, and the gains made in student achievement?

Leadership and staff were very clearly able to articulate the connections between the changes in the improvement initiatives and improvements in teaching and learning. During the site visit, the teachers in the focus group clearly described how the school instills a culture of achievement through the writing and math initiatives and through differentiated instruction. They described how students demonstrate competency in the content through portfolios, projects, and, exhibitions. The teachers spoke about how all content areas have buy-in to the common goals and to the writing. Teachers also gave examples of how the initiatives had improved their practice. For example, one teacher reported that after going through the professional development for differentiated instruction, she employed literacy circles and notices students who were struggling as readers began to do better.

C. Is there a school wide focus on, and sufficient staff investment in, continued improvement of student performance?

Yes. There is a clear school-wide focus on and tremendous investment in continued improvement of student performance. BAA possesses a culture of constant reflection on their practice. Leadership and staff are continuously dialogue about the progress of the students. Parents and students are continuously asked for their input as well. The school's emphasis is on students demonstrating mastery through portfolios, projects, and exhibitions. A variety of benchmarks at each grade level ensure students achieve competency throughout their school career. For example, students do not go on to their senior humanities course until they pass the writing their junior year with a "3" on a 4 point rubric. Teachers report the writing expectations are based on college freshmen writing. The math benchmarks at the end of 9th grade ensure students who are not mastering the content receive support through the extra math class, summer school or after-school tutoring. The RICO process instills an expectation in students that they will always revise their first draft in order to make it a better piece of work. Also, the school has an Open Honors program where students may receive an honors designation in core subject areas by completing extra and more in-depth assignments.

D. Does the school appear to have the capacity to host site visits and to participate in various activities to share effective strategies and practices with other schools in the state?

Yes. The school appears to have the capacity to host site visits and take part in other activities to share its initiatives. The school has had varied experiences in sharing their work with others through membership in the Coalition of Essential Schools, New England Small Schools Network, and National Network for High Schools of the Arts. Staff members have experience in sharing their work both at conferences and during visits from other schools from all over the United States, as well as from Asia, Central and South America, and Europe. Leadership, staff, and students are all very articulate in describing the initiatives and how they have affected them

in each of their respective roles. The school is especially clear in sharing its writing initiatives and its use of common goals to drive professional development.

The school faces a slight challenge in describing their math initiatives and common planning time. For example, most schools could not enforce mandatory tutoring through a parent contract or summer school and since the math curriculum is still a work in progress, it is difficult to share. However, the school could easily share the process by which the school has made its decisions around math, especially its use of data driven decision-making and the use of student assessments to develop supports.

E. Does the Panel recommend that this school be designated to serve as a Commonwealth Compass School?

Yes. The Panel recommends that BAA be designated to serve as a Commonwealth Compass School. There are a number of improvement initiatives the school could share and the leadership, staff, and students are clearly able to communicate about them and articulate their link to the improvement in student achievement. The school is an exciting place to visit and there is a wealth of information the school is capable of sharing. The school's writing initiatives could be replicated by any school. The process of how the school made its decisions around the math initiatives, including the use of data, and the focus on students' individual weaknesses in math serve as excellent examples of implementing improvement initiatives. Also, the school's use of common goals to drive professional development and individual teacher growth can clearly be replicated by others. The school also serves as a strong example of how to create a student-centered culture with an emphasis on reflective practice.

CONCLUSION

Boston Arts Academy is an exciting place to visit with a staff and student body that are willing and extremely capable of articulating and demonstrating their improvement initiatives. BAA has three major initiatives that contribute to student improvement: a school wide focus on writing, a multi-step approach to identifying and supporting students with weaknesses in math, and the use of common school-wide goals. In addition, the school possesses a culture of high expectations for students and staff as well as an inclusive decision-making process. These serve as an important context for the improvement initiatives. Finally, BAA possesses the capability to host visitors or share its initiatives at conferences. The leadership, staff, and students are all warm, articulate, and clearly excited about their work.

**Appendix A
Panel Team Members**

Janet Schulze, Chair, Consultant, SchoolWorks

Jim Neary, Massachusetts Department of Education

Lisa Bryant, Executive Director, Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, Lowell Public Schools

JoAnne McInnis, Principal, A.C. Whelan School, Revere Public Schools

**APPENDIX B
Candidate Compass School Panel Review Schedule**

All activities take place at the school.

7:30—8:00 a.m. Panel meets to prepare for day
 8:00—8:30 a.m. Panelists meet with the Principal
 8:30—9:00 a.m. Panelists meet with focus groups

Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D—Chair
Student Focus Group	Parent Focus Group	Focus Group TBD	School Council Focus Group

9:00—11:00 a.m. Classroom observations and teacher interviews*

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D
9-10 a.m.	Observe teacher 1 and teacher 2	Observe teacher 3 and teacher 4	Observe teacher 5 and teacher 6	Observe teacher 7 and teacher 8
10-11 a.m.	Interview teacher 1 and teacher 2 individually	Interview teacher 3 and teacher 4 individually	Interview teacher 5 and teacher 6 individually	Interview teacher 7 and teacher 8 individually

11 a.m.—12:30 p.m. Panelists meet to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch)
 12:30—1:00 p.m. Panelists use time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information; including follow-up questions for the Principal or other staff members.
 1:00—2:00 p.m. Panelists meet with teachers in focus groups*

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D
1:00-1:30	Teacher	Focus Group 1	Teacher	Focus Group 3
1:30-2:00	Teacher	Focus Group 2	Teacher	Focus Group 4

2:00—2:15 p.m. Brief exit meeting with the Principal to outline next steps (all Panelists are present)

2:15—5 p.m.

Panelists deliberate, document evidence form conclusions

*Instructions for teacher observations, individual interviews, and focus groups

1. Classroom Observations .Panelists will observe two classes each, followed by individual interviews with the teachers observed. The purpose of the classroom observations in candidate Compass Schools is to learn the extent to which the improvement initiatives the school has described as having the most positive impact on student achievement are in evidence in the classroom and throughout the school. Observers will also gather additional detail/information on those specific programs and practices.
2. Individual Teacher Interviews The purpose of the teacher interview that follows the Panelist’s observation of that teacher’s classroom is to:
 - Clarify the evaluator’s impressions of the classroom dynamic and learning environment
 - Determine each teachers’ understanding of the initiatives cited in the application as having had the most positive impact on student achievement; and the extent to which the improvement initiatives are guiding their classroom practice (for instance, curriculum, instruction and assessment).
 - Determine what has changed at the school over the past three years.
 - Determine each teacher’s role in implementing the improvements made to student performance at the school.
3. Teacher Focus Groups The purpose of the teacher focus groups is to:
 - Determine each teachers’ understanding of the initiatives cited in the application as having had the most positive impact on student achievement; and the extent to which the improvement initiatives are guiding their classroom practice (for instance, curriculum, instruction and assessment).
 - Determine what has changed at the school over the past three years.
 - Determine each teacher’s role in implementing the improvements made to student performance at the school.

Taken together, the observations, individual teacher interviews, and teacher focus groups will provide a comprehensive view of the staff’s understanding of, and participation and investment in, the programs and strategies to improve student performance that could be shared by the