

Salem Community Charter School Executive Summary

This was prepared by the founding group of the Salem Community Charter School.

More than two dozen community partners, representing social service, college, medical, criminal justice and community-based organizations, have come together with the Salem Public Schools to address the high rate of high school dropouts in the City of Salem. Students, parents and teachers who have insight into the challenges faced by Salem's at-risk youth have joined them in this effort. They have put together a plan to found an innovative, off-site alternative public high school to help dropouts and at-risk youth earn a high school diploma, and continue on to college or meaningful employment.

The Salem Community Charter School will collaborate with a broad coalition of community partners to serve 125 students ages 15 - 21 who have dropped out of school or are at-risk of dropping out as a result of challenges and obstacles that interfere with school success. These challenges include, but are not limited to, social and emotional problems, family violence, substance abuse, court involvement, a history of foster placements, significant family distress, English language difficulties, learning disabilities and special needs. In addition to an academically rigorous program of study, students will receive supportive and therapeutic services to assist them in achieving a high school diploma and continuing on with higher education and/or work and career opportunities.

Fewer than 75% of Salem's students graduate high school in four years and only 80% within five years. The mission of the Salem Community Charter School will be to reduce the high rate of students failing to graduate from high school. Many at-risk students lead chaotic lives, and need intensive support and positive reinforcement to get through the school day. Students of the Salem Community Charter School will get the continuous support they need to overcome obstacles to their education. Families will be actively engaged and communicated with by the school. Family situations that impact learning, such as mental illness or domestic violence, will be addressed.

Salem High School has several programs to help at-risk youth, including a teen parent program, an on-site alternative program called the Bridge Academy, and the Freshman House, a small learning community to help freshman successfully transition to high school. Despite these measures, which are successful for many students, fewer than 75% of Salem's students graduate high school. Between 2005 and 2009, 242 students dropped out of Salem High School.

Salem's demographics result in higher numbers of youth being vulnerable to dropping out. A study of youth in 19 North Shore cities and towns, including Salem, conducted by the Children's Law Center of Massachusetts, found that:

- Males, low-income and minority youth are most at-risk to drop out of school.
- 11% of Salem's residents live in poverty. (Approximately 50% of Salem students qualify for free or reduced lunches.)
- More than 50% of the children living in poverty in Salem speak a language other than English at home.
- One out of every four Salem residents is a member of a minority group.
- Salem's Hispanic population is more than two times greater than that of the state and 1.5 times that of Essex County.
- Hispanic youth are most likely to drop out of school.

Clearly, a new approach is needed to meet the needs of these students. The consequences of doing nothing will be disastrous -- for the disaffected youth and the entire community. Studies show that dropouts are at higher risk of homelessness, unemployment and incarceration. The educational foundation of the Salem Community Charter School is the belief that Salem's most at-risk students can achieve academic success if they are provided with:

- A purposeful academic program, individualized to meet each student's needs, along with
- Intensive community support, therapies, mentoring and encouragement.

Following are the core components of the school:

1. **Individualized, competency-based and service/project-based instruction** will enable students who have failed in other programs to achieve success.
2. All students will complete a **final Capstone Project** that will involve research and/or community service on a topic of interest in the curriculum (student's choice). The Capstone Project will provide evidence that the student has obtained the skills and mastered the competencies expressed in the school's core values.
3. Each student will work with staff to develop a **clear post-graduation plan**.
4. An **individualized learning plan** will be developed for each student.
5. Students will receive **skills training for successful employment** and job placements and participate in work/study and community-based work experiences.
6. The school will operate on an **extended year** (11 month) calendar and a daily schedule of 9 am to 5 pm. Within that time frame, each student will follow a **flexible schedule** that takes account of personal needs and work requirements.
7. **On-site social services** will be provided by community agencies to enable students with emotional, social, physical, legal or financial problems to deal with those challenges effectively, in order to reduce obstacles to their successful completion of high school.
8. The school will be guided by the **Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools**.
9. The school will make **regular contact with students' families**, to actively engage them in supporting the student. Communications will be in English and Spanish.
10. Staff will take part in frequent, sustained **planning and professional development**.

The founders have the experience and qualifications necessary to carry out the proposal. Their skills and professional expertise include fiscal oversight, budgeting, fundraising, law, executive management, program design, therapeutic services, medicine, fitness, recreation, and education, as well as knowledge of and access to the population to be served. All have worked with youth and several have extensive experience with charter schools.