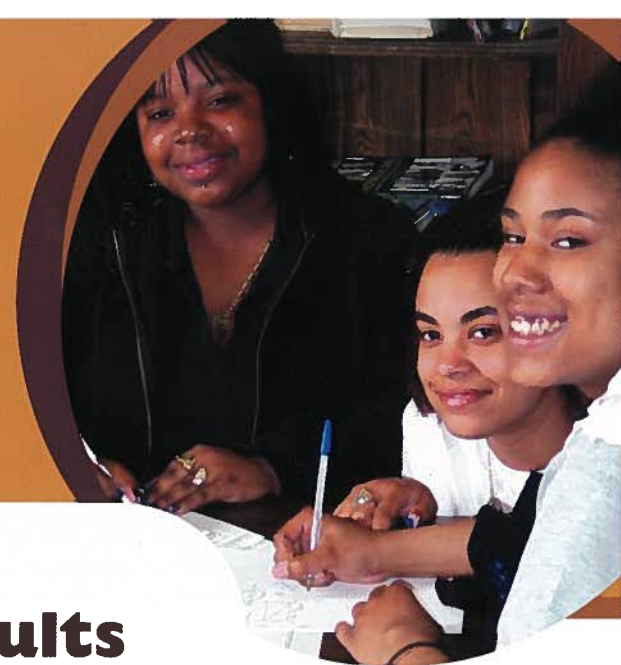


Boston Community Leadership Academy:



A Pilot School Story of Transformation and Results

At first, we thought just the school's title was going to change. We didn't realize that it was going to get a lot more academically rigorous. I think it was a great change.

—Boston High and BCLA Student

This is the story of how one poorly performing public school in Boston decided to become a Pilot School and transformed itself over a period of two years. Now one of Boston's more desirable high schools, with outcomes in testing and college placements among the best in the city, Boston Community Leadership Academy is gaining attention as a model for urban school transformation. It's a story of hard work and determination within the context of the Pilot School model of "autonomy and accountability" that allowed the school to shape its success.

In June 2000, the superintendent of the Boston Public Schools appointed a new principal to take over Boston High School. The school had been overcrowded and among the lowest-performing high schools in the district. The new principal immediately changed the focus of the school, which had been a work-study school with two shifts of students per day. Now it would be a college preparatory high school with a single full-day schedule, and with the goal of improving student performance. But progress was slow.

When the school department announced in 2001 that it would close the school, the principal led the staff, students, and families through a process that would keep it open. By June 2002, the teachers and staff had decided on a bold approach. They voted to convert Boston High into a Boston Pilot School, a uniquely independent kind of school within the public school system. A Pilot School is developed by the school's own community of teachers, administrators, families, neighbors, and students. Via a partnership between the school district and teachers union, the school is freed

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from district mandates and union work conditions, while gaining control over its budget, staffing, curriculum, governance, and schedule.

As first steps, the staff renamed the school Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA) to emphasize an important shift in teaching and learning expectations. They engaged the Center for Collaborative Education to assist them through the complex transition process. They also decided to reduce the student enrollment from 650 to 400 through graduation, attrition, and smaller incoming classes, with the intention of strengthening relationships between teachers and students.

The data from before and after the Pilot conversion provide evidence of substantially improved education and an improved school atmosphere. From 2000 to 2004,¹ attendance increased while suspensions and transfers out decreased (Table 1).

Year	School	Attendance (percent)	Suspensions (percent)	Transfers out of BCLA (percent)
2003–04	BCLA	94	18	6
2002–03	BCLA	88	21	10
2001–02	Boston High	86	25	17
2000–01	Boston High	85	19	19

At the same time, pass rates increased for both the English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics portions of the statewide MCAS exams. By 2004, more than 80% of students passed the ELA and Math exams.²

Why were students doing so much better after the Pilot School conversion?

There were a number of changes that together transformed the quality of education at BCLA.

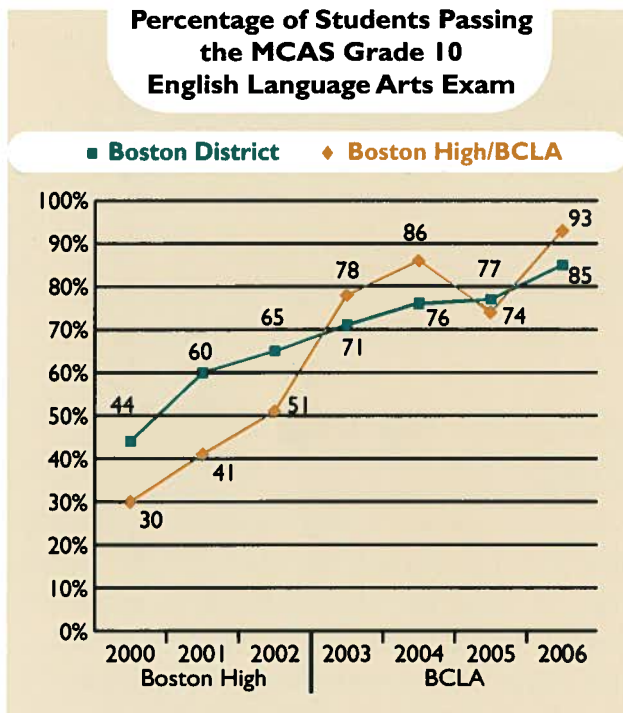
Changes in School Mission

One of the factors in BCLA’s evolution was its new mission. The staff and a design team—comprised of faculty, administrators, parents, community members, and students—collaboratively created BCLA’s mission statement:

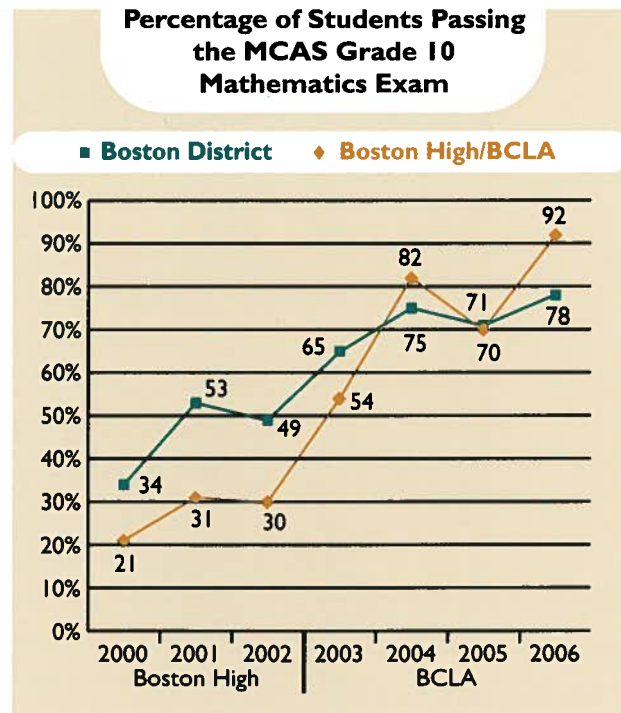
Boston Community Leadership Academy’s mission is to develop the capacity for leadership in all students, empowering them to make a positive contribution to their communities. BCLA’s rigorous curriculum prepares students to succeed in college, to lead fulfilled lives, and to participate in our diverse and complex democracy.

1. 2004 is the last year for which data is available.

2. Data available from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>



Graph 1: Passing Rates on the MCAS Exam in English Language Arts



Graph 2: Passing Rates on the MCAS Exam in Mathematics

The impact of the new mission was evident throughout the school, as reflected in the comments of the principal and a student:

Our vision is not only to make every student, when they leave us here, go to college, but to get them *through* college. —Principal

I like the idea of this school being a college prep school. We have a lot more discussions in the classroom, and the teachers are involving every student. It's just growing every year, I think, into something good. —Student

The expectation that students will go to college has had a profound impact on the classroom and on student motivation to learn.

Changes in Curriculum, Assessment, and Support

BCLA's curriculum is now driven by its mission to prepare students to succeed in college. Academic courses are sequenced to provide students with college prerequisites, including four years of math. Physics and five Advanced Placement classes have been added to the curriculum. Remedial classes have been eliminated. Less time in the schedule is allotted to electives, while student demand for the new elective offerings is greater than for the former offerings. Assessment in core courses now includes performance assessment, where students demonstrate proficiency through exhibitions and portfolios, not just by passing paper and pencil tests.

Advisories now provide an important means of improving relationships and school culture. Each student is assigned an advisor for grades 9–10, then a new advisor for grades 11–12. The advisory curriculum includes activities for getting to know each other, study and life skills, college preparation, and community service.

Changes in Staff Numbers and Roles

During the transition, BCLA was able to benefit from an infusion of new teachers and from their newfound freedom to allocate staff in such a way as to have maximum contact with students.

In its first year of Pilot operation in 2002–03, 24 of BCLA’s 64 staff members were new, contributing to a renewal of the school’s professional culture. As a benefit of Pilot staffing autonomy and greater budget flexibility, the school could focus on decreasing class size. That first year the average class size dropped from 28 to 22 students.

I had a class that had 28 students. There was no way we could deliver the instruction we wanted to when you have 28 kids in math class. So we opened another section and asked someone else to pick it up. You can do all this when you’re small and you have Pilot flexibility.

—Principal

A higher proportion of BCLA’s staff is now engaged in student support work compared to the former Boston High. Not only is the support staff larger, but other school staff have taken on increased support roles through the advisory program.

Changes in Leadership Roles and School Governance

Prior to the Pilot conversion, Boston High administrators practiced a traditional approach to governance: the principal made most decisions, and teachers were given little opportunity for input. Starting with the design team’s work toward Pilot status in 2001–02, decision making at the school began to involve teachers, students, and families.

New structures include official bodies designed to provide opportunities for staff, students, families, and community members to have a voice in decisions. The school’s governing board, leadership team, and curriculum team now make decisions collaboratively. The governing board is responsible for budget and policy decisions, principal evaluation, and community and business partnerships. The leadership team is organized to represent each small learning community and academic area, and focuses on teaching and learning matters. The curriculum team works with the director of curriculum and instruction to ensure alignment of their goals, projects, and timelines across content areas.



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Table 2. Summary of Changes Due to Autonomy and Heightened Accountability		
	Pre-Pilot	Post-Pilot
Mission	Work-study	College-preparatory and leadership
Enrollment	650	~400
Staffing Autonomy		
Number of staff	65	51
Student:teacher ratio	13:1	11:1
Percentage of professional staff classified as student support	14	20
Curriculum and Assessment Autonomy		
Remedial track of courses	Yes	No
Advanced Placement courses	No	Yes, 5
Performance assessments (such as portfolios and exhibitions)	No	Yes, ELA and math, all grades
Courses of choice (electives)	5	16
Advisory class	No	Yes
Governance Autonomy		
Governance model	Principal	Distributed
Teams for decision making	None	Governing board, leadership team, and curriculum team
Percentage of staff who are administrators	11	8
Schedule Autonomy		
Predominant instructional block (minutes)	58	109
Length of school day (minutes)	374	398
Time on core academic instruction per day (minutes)	222	263
Collaborative planning time per week (minutes)	None	425
Student Outcomes (Equity)		
ELA MCAS pass rate	30% (below BPS average)	87% (above BPS average)
Math MCAS pass rate	21% (below BPS average)	83% (above BPS average)
Graduates enrolling in postsecondary education	55%	75%

Changes in Use of Teacher and Student Time

In gaining control over schedule, BCLA was able to increase both student time spent in academics and time for teachers to meet with each other.

Research has shown that increased time for teacher collaboration and increased student academic engagement correlate with improved achievement. In the principal's first year at Boston High, the average length of the school day was 374 minutes, and the time spent on core academic instruction per day was 222 minutes. In 2005, the average length of the school day

increased to 398 minutes, with students spending an average of 263 minutes per day on core academic instruction, a more than 18% increase.

Class periods have lengthened from 58 minutes to 109 minutes, with some 53-minute classes. Once a week, students are released after a half day so that teachers have more time to meet and discuss their work among colleagues.

What is really happening in terms of teaching is just this opening up and sharing of practices. Now it's much more reflective. —Teacher

Summary of Changes from Boston High School to a Pilot School

Compared to Boston High School, BCLA has made great strides in student engagement and achievement by emphasizing a strong community culture, having the autonomy to shape its own organizational structure, establishing high expectations and respect for its students, and assuming shared responsibility for its program. Table 2 presents the major changes that occurred as a result of Boston High School's becoming a Pilot School.

Achievements and Challenges of Converting to Pilot Status

BCLA has gained much attention in Boston, as it has shown that with autonomy, commitment, and effort it is possible to make dramatic gains in student engagement and achievement. Students and their families are proud to be members of the BCLA community. This success has generated considerable interest within Boston to convert more regular public schools to Pilot School status.

Despite the gains, the BCLA still faces challenges as it continues on its journey to becoming a high-performing high school:

- Helping students acclimate to longer school days
- Resolving issues of access and equity with the introduction of more advanced course offerings
- Bringing shared decision making to the student level

It will be important to follow BCLA in future years. How will the school continue to grow and improve its culture and instruction? How will it meet these important challenges and maintain its current success? With a continued investment of hard work, commitment, and reflection, this Pilot School should provide inspiration and useful guidance to others on the same path towards transformation and results.

The mission of the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) is to transform schools to ensure that students succeed. We believe that schools should prepare every student to achieve academically and make a positive contribution to a democratic society. CCE partners with public schools and districts to create and sustain effective and equitable schools.

“Our vision is not only to make every student, when they leave us here, go to college, but to get them through college.”

—Principal