

only if those relationships facilitate activities that are aligned with the school's goals and support the school's norms for effective instruction.

Students and Staff

At all three schools, the school's key constituencies, like Bryk and Schneider, link the school's small size to the importance of trust-building relationships. This view is consistent with Darling-Hammond and Falk's assertion that "Teachers are more effective when they know students well, when they understand how their students learn, and when they have more time with students to accomplish their goals." (p. 194) The NHCS middle school dean connects the school's small size to the quality of teachers' attention to their teaching and attention to exactly where their students are academically. She also connects the small class size (average of 22) at the school to the quality of teaching, noting that the school has committed significant resources to making it possible for math computation to be taught in classes of 11, and adding, "so in class there's no doubt that if you're teaching 11 kids you can individualize instruction a whole heck of a lot more than you can if you're [teaching] 22, and at 22 you can do a lot better than if you're teaching 35, which is what I used to teach in California." An RPC co-founder echoes this sentiment saying "Any teacher who's ever been in the classroom will tell you that it's more productive to have 20 kids in the room than 40 kids." The benefits of small classes are certainly evident to parents. A RPC parent notes "I like that the classrooms are very small, the setting. So your child gets the attention that he or she needs." At APR, the

Executive Director says of the school, “it works better because no one slips through the cracks because of those relationships that you can build with kids, with families over time.” An APR board member notes, “Someone is always watching you and keeping an eye on you and trying to work through issues with you.” A Roxbury Prep student explains, “[E]very time there's a problem or like something's bugging you, you can always talk to somebody. If something happened before school that you weren't comfortable with, you can always talk to somebody to make you safe.” The NHCS Principal similarly explains, “I always talk about family because I think [NHCS] really does feel like a family community and I think that's largely because of our size.” The theme of family, evident in many of the NHCS conversations, is undoubtedly linked to school size, classroom size, and that all of the teachers know each other well, know students well, and know students’ parents and families well. The connection between school size and relationships it perhaps best summed up by an NHCS parent who responded to the question of how Boston Public Schools could be made more like NHCS by saying, “if you get the size down, then you can impart vision, you can establish a culture more easily, expectations can be communicated, you know you'll know kids, you can develop relationships with kids and families.”

Teachers at Academy of the Pacific Rim, Neighborhood House, and Roxbury Prep are able to form relationships with students in both the traditional classroom context and advisory groups (wherein students are each matched with a staff member mentor). The APP Executive Director explains that he looks for teachers who are going to be effective in connecting with middle school students, saying of the teachers he screens for

“They love the humor involved and the craziness of what we do and they build relationships with kids.” The APR Executive Director believes that the relationships teachers form with students as a key driver of achievement because, in his view, adolescents function on an ethos of “I connect with you, therefore I perform for you.” At APR, teachers meet with their ten to twelve advisees formally once each week and check-in with their parents. The author of a 2004 New Yorker profile of APR was particularly struck by the role of advisory in the school’s culture, writing:

The emphasis on discipline was balanced by a student’s closeness to his assigned ‘academic adviser’—the staff member whom students thought of as ‘belonging to me.’ This adviser followed a child’s progress from grade to grade, fought for his interests, got to know his parents, and helped him with his algebra. At Pacific Rim, teachers spent nearly a quarter of their work lives tutoring and counseling individual students. (p. 168-169)

Like teachers at Academy of the Pacific Rim, NHCS teachers invest significant time in relationship building. When the key constituencies at NHCS describe the school as a “family,” they are explicitly emphasizing the importance of relationships to the school’s success. One of the strategies NHCS uses to cultivate student trust in their teachers and families’ trust in the school is differentiation. All constituencies report that the teachers work hard to tailor instruction to meet the needs of each student. A parent comments, “The teachers are extremely sensitive and caring towards each individual student’s need, and they’re aware that not all student’s learning capacity or at the same level. And they work very hard with family and students to be able to have the student feel that they’re receiving what [he or she] needs to be to be a successful student.” The advisory system at NHCS provides another venue for individualized attention as advisors monitor their advisees’ progress, help their advisees secure the support they need when they are struggling, and communicate with their advisees’ families. The NHCS middle school

dean emphasizes that students' relationships with staff don't develop in spite of the school's high expectations but rather because of them: "I think as much as our kids grump... 'This school is mean or strict,' or whatever, [more important is] the number of 8th graders who get up at graduation and say, 'This really . . . thank you for all the times that you pushed me to do this and not giving up on me, or enforcing this.'" One important strategy NHCS uses to reinforce these relationships and teachers' faith in students is celebrating student achievement. According to the NHCS 2004 Renewal Inspection Report, "Neighborhood House Charter School staff tries to reinforce students' ownership of their learning by constantly recognizing them for their academic work and contribution to the larger NHCS community." (p. 17) A Roxbury Prep parent trustee makes a similar connection between the school's high expectations and the strong relationships between staff and students: "I think what motivates the children at the school level is such a personal relationship that they have with their teachers and co-directors and anyone in the school. As for my daughter, I know that what pushes her is her dedication with her teachers. She sees that her teachers do not only let her do what's the normal. They want her to do what's more." Another Roxbury Prep parents says of students' relationships with teachers, "They feel like they have a friend, not just a teacher. They know that there's a teacher, but there's also a friend they can confide in, people that they trust." Tutoring, in addition to conveying the message that effort can yield success, also conveys to students that their teachers care about them. A Roxbury Prep student explains, "Another thing is that teachers here, they always kind of watch out for you. I remember when I was failing History class, she would always call my house

every day to tell my mother that I need to come to tutoring. So teachers here really care about the students.”

Interestingly, the high behavioral expectations at NHCS, APR, and RPC, may help to cultivate trusting relationships between students and their teachers. Sociologist Lisa Delpit (1995) argues that a key difference between how African-American and White students relate to teacher authority is that for White children teachers’ authority emanates from their role or institutional position, but for Black students teachers’ authority must be earned through personal characteristics and behavior. Delpit explains:

[B]ecause authority is earned, the teacher must consistently prove the characteristics that give her authority. These characteristics may vary across cultures, but in the black community they tend to cluster around several abilities. The authoritative teacher can control the class through exhibition of personal power; establishes meaningful interpersonal relationships that garner student respect; exhibits a strong belief that all students can learn; establishes a standard of achievement and ‘pushes’ the students to achieve that standard; and holds the attention of the students by incorporating interactional features of black communicative style in his or her teaching. (p. 35-36)

Delpit goes on to report students of color describing how much they appreciate teachers who set explicit boundaries and demand compliance. She tells the story of an African-American male student who describes a “mean” teacher as one of his favorite teachers. She adds, “To clarify, this student was proud of the teacher’s ‘meanness,’ an attribute he seemed to describe as the ability to run the class and pushing and expecting students to learn.” (p. 37) Indeed, Delpit contends that a major obstacle to the successful education of low income students of color is the reluctance of teachers – particularly White and/or middle class teachers – to give students explicit directions, both academic and behavioral. At APR, RPC, and NHCS, the willingness of teachers to insist on high behavioral expectations and to be explicit about who, in the words of the NHCS

headmaster, is the “adult” in the room and therefore in charge, may help students and their families trust in the teachers and their messages about how to achieve success. A particularly clear illustration of this phenomenon is a Roxbury Prep parent saying of a 6th grade math teacher, “Even Ms. Saenz who's very strict but in such a loving way. You felt her care for your child.”

Staff and Families

Staff at each of the schools talk about their relationship with families as a partnership – the partnership is operationalized in a variety of ways across the schools, including school-family contracts, frequent school-family communication, and initiatives to engage families in the school’s academic programs. The APR Charter Renewal Inspection Team offers a detailed account of trusting relationship between families and staff, reporting:

Partnership with families is one of the cornerstones of APR. As stated previously, contact with families is routine from frequent academic progress reports to the weekly journal. In addition, families, students and the school sign a contract to work together. In a focus group, parents commented that contact with families is not always negative; that teachers frequently call to inform parents of positive achievements or events by their children. (p. 22)

Parents at NHCS also speak warmly about their children’s teachers, commenting on both their hard work and evident love for students. One NHCS parent, contrasting the culture of NHCS with district schools, tells the story of the staff response to a family crisis she had, “It's more of a family focus that I like here. Every day they called me to see how me and my daughter was doing, my son was doing, so it was like the school took. . . anything happening in your family, they take you on as family. It's not like some Boston Public

Schools.” Here again, teachers’ work ethic has significant symbolic value – signaling that teachers commitment to students is deeply held. An APR parent says of the school’s staff, “They’re not like just teaching because they’re being paid to do it, they’re teaching because they love the kids. You can see the love for the kids. If the kids fail then they’re concerned. They’re so committed. They’re like very dedicated people. They stay over-time to get stuff done.” A Roxbury Prep parent offers a striking similar description of that school’s teachers, saying “These teachers are not just teachers 6 - 8 hours, these teachers are 24/7. That's the thing that separates them from the rest: the fact that they're teachers 24/7, 365.”

Charter schools may have an inherent advantage in shaping parents behavior because they are schools of choice – but one of the key innovations at RPC, APR, and NHCS is their success in finding ways to positively engage families in supporting the school’s academic mission. All three schools use their advisory systems to ensure that at least one member of the staff maintains regular communication with each student’s family. Advisors are charged with updating families on how their children are doing and recommending steps that might be taken at home to support students academically. These advisor-family relationships are a crucial tool for developing trust. An APR parent explains, “Each kid get an advisor like I can say to another parent here. Anything, they have a problem, they can consult with that person. One of the teachers will advise one of them. They can go to that person with any question, any problem that they have and they always help them out.” Parents at all three schools point out that they are better able to intervene early when their kids get off track because of advisory. For example, an NHCS parent comments, “Every week we get a phone call and I think that's wonderful because

that's one way that the parent knows just what's going on with their child each week, as opposed to some schools who will do it every time there's the end of a marking period and you don't find out that your child is doing terrible until after the grades have been posted.” An NHCS teacher echoes this sentiment, saying ““when parents have someone that's calling their house every week about their child not doing their homework, or their child doing homework... It makes them feel like, 'Oh well, second quarter grades are out and my child hasn't improved. I know that I receive these phone calls every week saying that my child's not doing their homework. What am I doing to help rectify that?’”

Beyond advisory programs, each school has developed additional layers of outreach. The NHCS 2004 Renewal Inspection Report explains, “A school based parent center offers valuable resources and services ranging from parenting courses on child behavior management to medical service referrals. Parents can request and receive translations services, get help with domestic issues, or help with children going on medication.” (p. 6)

A unique innovation at Roxbury Prep to help parents meet the expectations in the school's contract with families is the school's Homework Hotline. The school puts the homework on the school's voice mail each night, so that students and their families can check what the homework is and so parents never have to accept students' typical middle school claims that they can't remember what the homework is or lost the assignment.

Roxbury Prep also reaches out to parents through Family Involvement Committee meetings which focus on practical strategies for families to participate in their children's education – like a workshop in which literacy teachers modeled how parents might approach reading at home with their children. One parent says of Roxbury Prep's robust

efforts to engage families “Involvement is . . . you have to be involved as a parent. It's like you don't have a choice. They don't really give you a choice.”

Staff With Each Other

Describing the ideal professional development model for schools seeking to raise student achievement, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) write:

Habits and cultures inside schools must foster critical inquiry into teaching practices and student outcomes. They must be conducive to the formation of communities of practice that enable teachers to meet together to solve problems, consider new ideas, evaluate alternative, and frame schoolwide goals. (p. 600)

This is precisely the kind of environment of collaborative staff learning the school leaders and teachers at APR, RPC, and NHCS describe. The APR Charter Renewal Inspection Report describes various types of teacher collaboration at APR including everything from formal co-grading (where teachers jointly assess student work to ensure consistent standards across the school and promote shared reflection on assessment results) to informal sharing of curricular ideas and describes teachers as feeling great camaraderie with each other. An APR teacher reports, ““I would say that a huge part of working here is the collegiality that goes on between teachers. I think there's this emphasis on teamwork...” Indeed, the staff collaboration at APR is so readily apparent that a parent says of the school staff, “They work together. They don't work like individually, they work together as a team, so it's like a big family here. So that's the main thing.” Similar collaboration takes place at NHCS and RPC. The NHCS Renewal Inspection Team cited staff collaboration as an important feature of the staff experience at NHCS. Teachers describe a variety of school initiatives to foster shared reflection on practice including

two weeks of staff development time in August before students return, analysis of assessment results in grade-level team and departments, reading books jointly as a staff (e.g., Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children*) and discussing them, and teacher task forces to address specific challenges. Similarly, Roxbury Prep has a variety of systems in place to support teacher collaboration. In addition to three weeks of collaborative planning in August before students return, teachers meet weekly on Friday afternoons in grade-level teams to discuss the progress of individual students, and meet weekly on Friday afternoons in either a Literacy Inquiry Group (for teachers of writing, reading, and history) or Numeracy Group (for teachers of math, science, and computers) to discuss dilemmas they face in their classrooms by looking together at student work. To make time for these Friday afternoon meetings, Roxbury Prep actually ends classes early (2:00 PM, the time district schools end, rather than 4:15 PM) on Fridays. Teachers express tremendous appreciation for the opportunity to work closely with each other to continuously refine instruction. The Roxbury Prep Charter Renewal Inspection Team reports "One teacher commented in a teacher focus group, 'You don't teach in isolation here. Look at the schedule – it allows common planning time. You could work 70 to 80 hours a week anywhere, but would you want to?' Her tone, corroborated by the nodding heads around the group, clearly indicated that this is a place where she does not mind working long hours because of the opportunities for strong communication and professional support among peers." (p. 16)

Just as Bryk and Schneider (2002) discovered that relational trust was critical to school success in their study of Chicago school reform efforts, bridging the achievement gap at RPC, APR, and NHCS is a social process that relies on relational trust between

students and staff, between staff and students' families, and within each staff. Close relationships between the staff and students are cultivated through small school size and small class size (as Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine (1996) and Darling-Hammond (1997) found), systematic investment of teacher time in relationship building within the classroom through individualized instruction and outside the classroom through enrichment activities and tutoring (as Darling-Hammond (1997) and Ogbu and Simons (1998) advocate), and high behavioral expectations (as Delpit (1995) would predict). Strong partnerships between staff and families at RPC, APR, and NHCS are built on a foundation of parent appreciation for teachers' hard work on their children's behalf and close communication with families designed to engage them in the school's academic mission including advisory relationships, weekly or bi-weekly phone calls, frequent progress reports, family involvement seminars, and family support services. This trust building with families is particularly important because it may help schools to overcome some of the skepticism about educational institutions that Ogbu & Simons (1998) describe as an obstacle to educational success within involuntary minority communities accustomed to experiencing institutional racism. RPC, APR, and NHCS all dedicate significant time and resources to inquiry-based professional development, common curricular planning time, and shared analysis of assessment data. The school leaders have not only prioritized these activities in their development of their school calendars and schedules, but the Co-Director for Curriculum & Instruction at RPC, the middle school dean at NHCS, and the principal at APR also view the cultivation of collaborative staff learning as one of their core job responsibilities. As Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995), Darling-Hammond (1997), Elmore (1999), and Fullan (2002) would

suggest these initiatives and the resulting close staff relationships yield a staff culture that is characterized by thoughtful reflection on practice and shared problem solving.

A Culture of Excellence in Teaching That Challenges and Inspires

Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House all operate on the principle that a great school begins with great instruction. All of the schools have arrived at strikingly similar strategies for ensuring excellence in teaching: a rigorous selection process, distributed instructional leadership, removing or counseling-out ineffective teachers, and ensuring that teachers help students to see the connections between what they are learning and their own lives.

Teacher Selection

Sebring and Bryk explain that in higher-performing urban schools “Principals carefully recruit competent new teachers who will contribute to the emerging vision of the school...” (p. 442) This prioritization of teacher quality is confirmed by the finding of Sanders and Rivers (1996), in their study of the relationship between teacher quality and student performance in Tennessee, that low-achieving students gained about 14 points each year on the state test when taught by the least effective teachers but gained more than 53 points when taught by the most effective teachers. At Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House, the school leaders characterize staff hiring as crucial to their success. Roxbury Prep’s charter renewal application declares ““Roxbury Prep’s success is primarily due to the school’s phenomenal teaching

staff.” (p. 12) According to the RPC 2003-04 Annual Report, the school seeks to hire teachers who “(1) “are dedicated to and effective with urban middle school students of color;” (2) “have subject matter expertise and use a variety of teaching methods to engage students;” (3) “are committed to improving curriculum and instruction through collaboration and data analysis;” and (4) “communicate effectively with students, parents, colleagues, and community members.” (p. 17)

A Roxbury Prep Co-Director emphasizes the importance of using the screening process to identify candidates with deep content expertise, saying “...our teachers are sort of masters of their field and they love the specific subject matter that they're teaching. So our Math teachers are mathematicians, our Science teachers are scientists, our History teachers are historians, and that isn't always the case in schools.” Elmore (1995), similarly, identifies content expertise as critical to effective teaching: “teachers have to have considerable confidence in their own knowledge of the content they are teaching to think not simply about the facts and algorithms they are teaching but also about the manifestations of those things in the lives of children.” (p. 361) This view is reinforced by Monk’s analysis of data from the Longitudinal Survey of American Youth that “teacher content preparation as measured by the number of courses a teacher took in the subject area being taught is positively related to how much mathematics and science students learn at the secondary level.” (p. 142) A Roxbury Prep teacher notes that the school’s approach to curriculum and instruction in which teachers use the summer to identify school-specific standards and instructional strategies for helping students meet those standards in fact relies on content expertise: “You can't do that unless people are all experts in their field. And so all the teachers have a degree in what they're teaching, for

the most part, and they're all very smart people... Everyone knows a lot about what they're teaching and knows it well beyond a middle school level of understanding. So if you are an expert in Math, you can figure out what kids need to know to get to this next point.”

At NHCS, the headmaster offers a list of qualities that is similar to Roxbury Prep's when he explains that NHCS looks for teachers who are “cooperative, bright, intelligent, committed to kids... and an amazing high level of hard work.” Interestingly, both the NHCS headmaster and the middle school dean emphasize the role of intelligence and academic achievement in their selection of teachers and both see a relationship between that selection criterion and student outcomes. The middle school dean explains that , at NHCS, “We also have really, really smart teachers who themselves did a quality of work in middle school or high school or college that is in keeping right in line with the best districts and the best independent schools have done. I think that helps shape their expectations for what the kids should do.” This emphasis on teacher academic achievement is confirmed by the research literature. Ferguson and Ladd (1996), in a study of the relationship between teacher quality and student performance in Alabama, found that teacher performance on the ACT positively correlates to student achievement. Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine found that teacher verbal ability correlates positively to student performance when controlling for other factors. However, while Ferguson and Ladd and Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine found a correlation between teacher achievement on standardized tests and their students performance, neither could offer a conclusive statement of how teachers' achievement influences their students. Certainly, choice of vocabulary or the analytical reasoning underlying choices about particular

teaching strategies may be important factors, however, so too may be teachers' familiarity with rigorous expectations.

The APR Executive Director says of the kinds of staff APR seeks to recruit, "'I'm looking for people who are tough with high expectations, and at the same time they love doing what they're doing.'" Both the APR Executive Director and Principal describe looking for many of the same qualities at Roxbury Prep and Neighborhood House – and the APR Charter Renewal Inspection Report suggests that they have succeeded in recruiting people with those very qualities: "APR teachers have solid subject area knowledge and an unwavering commitment to student success... During focus groups and interviews, teachers confirmed their confidence that all students at APR can succeed and reiterated their dedication to helping their students thrive. In class visits, Renewal Team members observed classes that were rich in content." (p. 14) To find these teachers, the Executive Director explains that the school brings candidates "through a rigorous [process] from the first phone interview to the first interview to the second interview, which is sample teaching, debrief, and then checking as many references as I can possibly get, and then making sure that they spend some time here once we've hired them before the faculty orientation in August." The school leaders at Neighborhood House and Roxbury Prep describe similarly extensive selection processes that go beyond the traditional review of resumes and interviews to include submission of multiple essays, sample lessons, and candidate interviews with their potential colleagues at the schools. A Roxbury Prep co-director explains:

The hiring process is probably the most important thing that we do... I think studies clearly show that student achievement is largely based on the teacher who is teaching them in the classroom for the full 50 minutes. So if that person is not qualified, or if that person is not good, then your

results aren't going to be there and kids aren't going to learn and then it's not going to happen.
 The first step toward delivering high-quality instruction at these three schools would appear to be investing in truly rigorous up-front selection of staff.

Distributed Instructional Leadership

The dedication of the school leaders to perfecting the art and science of teaching at each school is evident in their obsession with continuous improvement. However, rather than rely exclusively on their own instructional skills to drive quality teaching, they have all sought to build staff cultures characterized by collaborative reflection on practice and continuous learning. As mentioned above in the discussion of staff trust – this approach is consistent with research findings on effective schools. According to Sebring and Bryk, principals in higher-performing urban schools “set high standards for teaching, understand how children learn, and encourage teachers to take risks and try new methods of teaching. They visit classrooms regularly, demonstrating their conviction and taking the instructional pulse of the school.” (p. 441) Newmann et. al. argue that creating the instructional coherence they found essential for school success requires “extensive, continuing communication among teachers, mutual assistance, and working together to improve instruction.” (p. 312) Similarly, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin argue (as do Birman et al., 2000) that achieving improved academic outcomes for students requires “providing occasions for teachers to reflect critically on their practice and to fashion new knowledge and beliefs about the content, pedagogy, and learners.” (p. 597)

Each of the schools has developed a leadership model that allows at least one of the school leaders to focus intensively on instruction. The Roxbury Prep Co-Director explains:

We have found, and I think it's fairly obvious, that if you go to a traditional school...there's usually a principal, maybe an assistant principal. But the principal is in charge of everything, in charge of student achievement, in charge of teaching, in charge of making sure the toilet is working, in charge of bus drivers, in charge of every facet of the school. What ends up happening is the task list is obviously too long, and so what gets put on the back burner is what's most important, which is student achievement and observing teachers and providing feedback.

As a result, Roxbury Prep has two co-directors: one responsible for curriculum and instruction, the other for operations and finance. They make all major school decisions together and both serve as ex officio non-voting Board members, but the co-director for curriculum and instruction is chiefly responsible for ensuring high-quality instruction. The Massachusetts 2020 report says of Roxbury Prep, “Teachers at Roxbury Prep receive tremendous guidance and support from the instruction-oriented co-director as well as from other teachers at the school. The overall effect of this institutional focus on teaching and professional development is to create a culture of healthy critique and continuous improvement.” (p. 32) Teachers at NHCS speak very positively about the instructional support they receive from their school leaders. One teacher says of the headmaster and middle school dean, “They identify your weaknesses and your strengths and help you to improve. Give you some type of plan, certain things you should focus on for the year.” A Neighborhood House Board member’s description of the relationship between the headmaster and teachers mirrors the high expectations/high support approach of teachers to their students: “[The headmaster has] got high expectations for the teachers. It's up to the teachers to teach those kids no matter what they get, what kids they get. And so he's

got those expectations but then he gives them huge support.” The Neighborhood House middle school dean in particular is charged with coordinating instruction in the middle grades and coaching teachers, while the headmaster focuses on larger organizational issues. An NHCS teacher says of the middle school dean, “when I started here, I met with her biweekly and sometimes weekly to discuss curriculum or anything I needed help with, which was again, lends to, speaks to how supportive she is, which is really nice.” APR has a similarly robust program of instructional support including frequent observations by the principal and two annual reviews. The Executive Director at APR is charged with taking off the Principal’s plate the finance, operations, and compliance issues that often distract principals from instructional leadership. Indeed, the APR Principal is a very hands-on instructional leaders; she explains “I observe on a daily basis, provide snapshots or feedback to teachers in writing and then conversation and follow-up on an on-going basis to all teachers.”

Beyond the role of the instruction leader in each school, Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House rely on many of the same mechanisms described above as essential to creating relational trust within each staff to support a culture of reflective practice. APR uses weekly department meetings, feedback from department chairs, co-grading, teacher task forces to address particular school-level challenges, and a system of five observations of each teacher per year by peers to ensure that teachers are continuously collaborating. In addition, each new teacher is assigned a staff mentor who can help that person become acclimated to the school’s expectations and approach. An APR teacher says of the staff culture, “There’s an emphasis on teamwork, whether it’s with the departments, or within grade levels, and I see the school

as having been pretty open to trying different models of ways that teachers can communicate and ways that teachers can work together.” At Neighborhood House, there are two weeks of staff development in August, grade-level and department meetings, faculty discussions of common readings, and teacher task forces to facilitate teachers working together to continuously improve curriculum and instruction. Three weeks of staff development time in August, early dismissal Fridays to accommodate grade-level and Inquiry Group meetings, department meetings, and regular opportunities for peer observation cultivate a culture of shared inquiry around curriculum and instruction at Roxbury Prep. More important than the specific venues for collaboration, is the systematic development of cultures in which the school staffs approach teaching as an intellectual task worthy of thoughtful reflection rather than a mechanical task. To illustrate, a Roxbury Prep teacher commenting on the school leaders’ role in supporting staff explains, “[O]ne of the things that [the Co-Director for Curriculum & Instruction] does really, really well is that, to use [another teacher’s] term, ‘He’s an intellectual geek just like the rest of us.’ So it’s OK to engage in two or three hour-long discussions about curriculum on an August afternoon when everybody’s hanging out at the beach.” For this teacher, a deep discussion outside of school time about the intricacies of curriculum is not a burden, but rather a symbol of the school’s culture of reflection about instruction.

Removing Low-Performing Teachers

The school leaders at RPC, NHCS, and APR all talk about the importance of removing low performers on the staff, just as Sebring & Bryk emphasize that principals in higher-performing schools “work to ‘counsel out’ nonperforming teachers.” (p. 442)

The NHCS school leaders talk about “counseling out” teachers who are not the right fit. The NHCS headmaster says that he tries to persuade the non-performers to resign and then explains, “Sometimes you have to do that with a teacher that is weak, you’ve got to move them on.” NHCS teachers link the departure of under-performing staff members to the school’s very high and very clear expectations. Asked about teacher termination, one NHCS teacher says simply, “I can see someone who’s not as motivated or who’s not as dedicated to the kids at the school. I could see them standing out.” An RPC co-founder offers an even more blunt characterization of teacher departures, “Teachers who were terminated mid year or who were not asked to return were, in our eyes, ineffective in the classroom. They simply weren’t doing what we thought was necessary to ensure that students achieve at the highest levels.” The decision is made only after a rigorous evaluation process. A Roxbury Prep teacher contrasts that process with her own experience at other schools and the experiences of other teachers she knows:

I’ve never heard of anyone actually having a review process like the one we have here where there’s a formal rubric where you’re rated on objective standards and given feedback and told what you do well and told what you can do better, in very clear, objective terms. As opposed to, ‘Well, you got seniority yesterday.’

Similar to the school leaders at Neighborhood House and Roxbury Prep, the APR principal recounts the school’s decision not to renew the contracts of several teachers and explains “We said, ‘These things must improve in order for your contract to be renewed. We need to see tangible improvement in these four areas based on this many observations.’ So it was very clear to those people that it did improve or it didn’t.” Asked to explain the reasons why a teacher would be terminated, the APR Executive Director explains, “[I]t’s hard to quantify, but in general it’s just not a good teaching fit. The

person can't enforce school culture, or students aren't able to . . . it's mainly around classroom management and creating a coherent, organized lesson.”

Relevant Instruction

Interestingly, none of the constituencies interviewed at any of the schools emphasized cultural relevance as it is traditionally understood as a key factor in the success of their students. None of the schools offer a curriculum that is particularly focused on African-American history, or African-American authors. The Neighborhood House headmaster even goes so far as to minimize the importance of culturally responsive instruction, saying “If our kids can't read and write and do Math . . . and I say our kids, African American, Latino kids in particularly . . . if they can't, we can give them all the culture in the world, but if they can't write about it or speak articulately and they can't articulate it in a fashion that others can understand, what use is it to be culturally responsive?” However, various constituencies at the three schools reported on the importance of instructional relevance – essentially, using “hooks” that help students connect the material to their own lives – to successful teaching at each school. At APR, the examples offered of instructional relevance included using hair braiding as an entry point for a series of lessons on geometric patterns and writing math problems that include students’ names. Ogbu and Simons talk about the need for teachers to develop an understanding of students’ cultural experiences and to use that knowledge to develop trust-building teacher strategies. This recommendation may be actualized in the “hooks” that APR, NHCS, and RPC teachers are using. Often, urban low income students of color do not have access to some of the connections to school content that more affluent

students do (e.g., “Oh, the Mona Lisa. I remember seeing that on our family trip to Paris.” or, less glamorously, “This math problem about planting a garden makes sense to me because my house has a front yard and we plan flowers in it each year.”). Their teachers need to find other bridges between their students and their content – this is the role of the hooks. Of the hair braiding project, an APR teacher recalls “I remember a student actually came, an old student that we had last year, came to me at the end of the year, she was going back to visit, and pulled a student's head to me and said, 'See the design on this? I did that and it's all Math!'" In a similar vein, Roxbury Prep's charter application declares “RPCS's founders believe that students are more likely to achieve objectives when connections are made between course work and issues relevant to students' lives” and cites in support of that assertion Linda Darling-Hammond's *The Right to Learn*. (p. 3) Roxbury Prep teachers describe an annual workshop where the staff discusses a chapter of Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children* and as one teacher explains, “talk about her research about teaching students of color and how that may look different from teaching [their] suburban White counterpart. I think there's definitely an awareness about that in terms of race, but there's also an awareness around class as well.” Interestingly, an NHCS parent, responding in part to other parents' concerns about the lack of racial diversity on the staff, emphasized the importance of where teachers lived to their ability to connect with students. She explains that she used to worry about staff diversity, “but I found out that some of the teachers live right around the neighborhood, so that kind of made me feel a little better because they're going through the same city stuff that my child does. Even though the culture is different, it's pretty much the same city street talk and all that kind of stuff, and they were able to understand what was going

on...” At Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House being able to connect with students’ experiences appears both to promote positive staff-student and staff-family relationships and to strengthen students’ academic engagement.

Ultimately, an effective school is only possible if there is effective teaching (see Sanders and Rivers (1996)). The strength of the teaching at RPC, APR, and NHCS is linked to the schools’ adoption of several practices identified in the research literature as critical to the success of schools effective in bridging the achievement gap. First, just as Sebring and Bryk (2002) found in Chicago, RPC, NHCS, and APR are highly selective about teacher hiring. All three schools carefully screen for qualities identified as critical to teacher success in the research literature including content expertise (Elmore, 1995; Monk 1994), academic achievement (Ferguson & Ladd, 1996; Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996), and high expectations for their students (Ferguson, 1998b; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Second, RPC, NHCS, and APR all have leaders who support teaching excellence by (1) providing systematic instructional leadership including regular feedback on observations of class, coaching on best practices, and even co-planning of lessons (Elmore, 1999); and (2) ensuring instructional program coherence in which school goals, curriculum and instruction, and professional development are closely aligned (Newmann et al., 2001; Kane & Lauricella, 2001). Third, instructional leadership at RPC, NHCS, and APR is distributed so that teachers are able to collaborate with and learn from their colleagues to refine their practice (Elmore, 2002; Shepard, 2000). Fourth, teachers who are not effective are given the support necessary to improve or removed, just as Sebring and Bryk (2002) documented in Chicago schools with superior results. Fifth, although none of the schools emphasize culturally responsive instruction as Ogbu and Simons

(1998) and Steele (1992) advocate, all of the schools do emphasize making instruction relevant to students' lives as is recommended in Darling-Hammond's *The Right to Learn* (p. 3).

VI -- CONCLUSION

The Research

This study began with the premise that since the hope of *Brown v. Board of Education* remains unfulfilled, the story of three charter schools that are successfully bridging the racial achievement gap is a story worth telling. This idea rested on a set of assumptions supported by generations of educational research:

- Assumption # 1: Schools have the capacity to be effective in bridging the achievement gap between African-American students and white students.
- Assumption # 2: Standardized test scores provide a useful measure of the effectiveness of individual schools in bridging the achievement gap between African-American students and white students.
- Assumption #3: As a result of their autonomy – defined as freedom plus accountability – charter schools are uniquely positioned (i.e., differently positioned than traditional district schools) to implement effective practices.
- Assumption #4: Decisions about budgets, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and school culture contribute to the effectiveness of three urban charter schools in bridging the achievement gap between African-American students and white students.

Building on these assumptions, it was possible to craft a set of research questions that would delve deeply into how the three schools were using their autonomy to achieve unusual results for African-American students:

- Research Question #1 – Budgets: How, if at all, do the case study schools allocate their resources to advance student achievement?
- Research Question #2 – Staffing: How, if at all, do the case study schools recruit, support, evaluate, and retain school staff to advance student achievement?
- Research Question #3 – Curriculum and Instruction: How, if at all, do the case study schools develop, assess, and refine their curricula to advance student achievement?
- Research Question #4 – School Culture: How, if at all, do the case study schools cultivate and sustain a student, parent, and staff culture to advance student achievement?

To answer these research questions, this study relied upon qualitative research conducted through interviews with the school leaders and focus groups with teachers, parents, trustees, and students (in the case of Roxbury Prep), as well as through review of several types of documents: those published by the three schools, those about the three schools published by the schools' authorizer, and those about the three schools published by independent sources. The data gathered through this research was presented and analyzed through case studies, detailing how the schools have used their autonomy with respect to budgets, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and school culture and how those decisions compare with research on best practices in raising the achievement of low-income students of color. A cross-case analysis led to the finding that while individual practices varied significantly across the schools, decision-making at all three schools was

driven by a common set of hypotheses about how to define their school cultures to bridge the achievement gap:

- A Culture That Teaches Effort Yields Success
- A Culture of High Expectations That Shapes Student Beliefs
- A Disciplined Culture That Yields A Physically and Emotionally Safe Context for Learning
- A Culture Built On Relationships That Yield Trust
- A Culture of Excellence in Teaching That Challenges and Inspires

Limitations

The narratives and analysis offered in this study presuppose the importance of the success of the Academy of the Pacific Rim, Neighborhood House, and Roxbury Prep. However, without the benefit of a randomized study with a control group of traditional district school students, it cannot be said with precision how much of an impact selection bias has in the impressive results of the schools under study. Without the benefit of the value-added analysis which is only now beginning to be possible via the Massachusetts Department of Education's data management systems, it cannot be said with precision how much of a difference attending these schools has made in their students' achievement. In addition, without the benefit of a longitudinal study of the graduates of the three schools, it is difficult to say with certainty that their students' relative success on state exams has ultimately translated into improved performance in high school, college, or the professional world. Yet, despite these limitations, the dramatic difference in state

exam performance between the largely low-income students of color at Academy of the Pacific Rim, Neighborhood House, and Roxbury Prep and their peers in the Boston Public Schools demands attention and exploration.

Ultimately, the pictures painted in this study of Academy of the Pacific Rim, Neighborhood House, and Roxbury Prep are incomplete. Although the data relied upon in the study includes documents published over the course of the schools' evolution, the primary means of data collection – interviews and focus groups – constitute snapshots of life within the schools. Relying on snapshots, the study can offer only glimpses of how the cultures described were created. These snapshots are the product of the imperfect recollection and inexact descriptions of participants in the schools' development, not the carefully documented observations of an objective third party. Although the Boston Public Schools system is often offered as a foil by the interview and focus group participants, it is not a significant focus of this study and so the validity of the characterizations offered by the participants are not tested within this study. Although the questions in readers' minds as they read this study may be beyond the ambition of the study, they are nagging questions nonetheless that may leave the reader wishing for more detail, more history, and more nuance. However, the case studies offered here are nonetheless important because they offer insights into three schools that are using the autonomy they have as charter schools to break the demographic mold.

Writing about the qualitative studies of the effective schools researchers, Cuban (1983) pointed out that for all their rich detail, they did not offer a “blueprint” for practitioners (p. 695). The stories they told of schools whose academic achievement defied demographic trends could not function as “how to” guides for those seeking to

replicate their success – because the experiences of those schools were, like the experiences of the three schools in this study, profoundly particular. However, despite the effective schools movement's failure to fulfill its promise of providing a precise recipe for education reform, there remains tremendous value in at least beginning to describe the ingredients that have led to the success of urban charter schools that are bridging the achievement gap. Thus, a further limitation of this study is that it can offer only instructive narratives, not a formula for building high-performing urban charter schools.

Implications for Practice

Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House have used their autonomy to achieve better results for their African-American students than the Boston Public Schools by establishing cultures that are unique in five key ways: each of the schools has a culture that teaches effort yields success; a culture of high expectations; a disciplined culture; a culture built on relationships; and a culture of excellence in teaching. These cultural choices are operationalized through a series of policy decisions in the areas of budget, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and school culture. The three schools have used their control of their budgets to make the decision to establish much smaller schools than the district, to limit class size below the district average, to extend learning time (either through an extended day or an extended year) beyond the district hours, and to invest significant financial resources (particularly staff time) in professional development. The three schools have used their control of staffing to establish co-leader

models in place of traditional principals in order to ensure sufficient attention to instructional leadership, to hire school leaders with clear educational visions and committed to distributed instructional leadership and real partnerships with families, to hire teachers with high expectations, strong academic backgrounds, and deep content knowledge, and to hold teachers accountable through regular evaluation and one-year contracts. The three schools have used their control of curriculum and instruction to build educational models in which the Massachusetts standards are a floor not a ceiling, in which teachers invest significant time in developing and refining curricula and instructional strategies based on assessment data (rather than simply relying solely on district-mandated programs), in which teachers continuously collaborate to improve their practice, and in which teachers strive to help students see the connections between what they are learning in school and their own lives. Finally, the three schools have built high expectations-high support school cultures through uniforms and stricter discipline than the district, through providing intensive academic support after school, on the weekends, and in the summer, by requiring teachers to serve as advisors to students and their families and to communicate with them regularly, through investing in robust family outreach, and by responding directly in the classroom and outside it to the sociological causes of the achievement gap that Ogbu and Simons, Steele, and Steele and Aronson describe.

As is often stated earlier in this study, despite consistency across the schools, the choices Academy of the Pacific Rim, Neighborhood House, and Roxbury Prep have made in using their autonomy cannot be viewed as a recipe for attaining similar achievement. As Rosenholtz (1985) might point out, school culture is better understood

as a process than as a list. That said, there is much that charter school founders and leaders might learn from the experiences of Academy of the Pacific Rim, Neighborhood House, and Roxbury Prep if they take from the schools' successes a lesson about the values that animate their high performing cultures. For example, the decisions all of the schools have made to stay small and to maintain small class sizes is important in this study not simply because it confirms claims made by effective schools researchers, but rather because the schools' decisions about school size and class size are linked to the five key cultural values to which they are committed: a culture that teaches effort yields success; a culture of high expectations; a disciplined culture; a culture built on relationships; and a culture of excellence in teaching. Small classes and small overall student loads allow teachers to spend more time working with individual students to help them track their own progress and develop their skills – thus reinforcing the principle that effort yields success. High expectations are easier to maintain when teachers know their students well (because of small school and class size), can identify whether a student's poor performance on an assessment reflects deficiencies in their effort or their understanding, and can respond accordingly. As all of the constituencies at Academy of the Pacific Rim, Roxbury Prep, and Neighborhood House pointed out, it is easier to maintain order and high standards for behavior when there are fewer students in each classroom and every adult in the school knows every student. Relationships between staff and students, between staff and each other, and between the staff and students' families are clearly key drivers of achievement at the three schools – these relationships are much easier to cultivate and sustain when there are fewer students in the classroom seeking the teacher's attention and when the school leaders can greet every parent by

name. As teachers at the three schools emphasized, it is easier to be a great classroom teacher when you teach a total of seventy-five students than when you teach one hundred fifty students. Fewer papers to grade, fewer parent calls to make, and fewer relationships to build translates into more careful planning, more thoughtful analysis of assessment results, and more time for observing colleagues. Arguably, a school could make the choice to have a larger enrollment or larger class size if that too could translate into the presence of the same animating values – for example, a larger school might yield greater resources (both financial and human) to direct to a robust extracurricular program that could foster the development of close relationships between staff and students in a different way from small classes.

Thus, to the extent that the case studies have implications for practitioners it is that these three schools have made a set of choices about their school cultures that the key constituencies believe are yielding superior outcomes to the performance of African-American students within the Boston Public Schools and state-wide. Charter founders – both school leaders and boards – may be able to enhance their chances of building high-achieving school cultures by learning from the cultural orientation adopted at Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House.

Implications for Policy and Recommendations for Changes to the Charter Law

Historically, charter advocates have argued that the greater autonomy afforded charter schools would translate into adoption of practices that would raise student achievement. Nathan (1996), an academic and charter school proponent active in the

effort to adopt charter schools in Minnesota, argues that charters are a response to the innovation-stifling culture of traditional school districts. Nathan writes:

The public school system often is unnecessarily bureaucratic and unresponsive, like many other monopolies. Sometimes administrators seem aloof or disinterested. Sometimes labor-management agreements seem to discourage committed teachers or parents... These problems are not going to be solved by a new superintendent or a new school board. They are central to a system where funds come to the district regardless of whether graduation rates or student achievement improves. (p. 16)

In place of the old district bureaucracies, early charter advocates envisioned nimble, entrepreneurial schools able to use their autonomy with respect to budgets, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and school culture to produce improved student outcomes. As Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000) write, “The genius of the charter concept is that it is demanding with respect to results, but relaxed about how those results are produced; tight as to ends, loose as to means.” (p. 71) In this market environment, the extraordinary results of schools like Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House should – according to the predictions of early charter advocates – lead to rapid adoption of their practices by other charter schools (and ultimately, if the market pressures are great enough, district schools as well). Interestingly, all three schools have actually made extensive efforts to share best practices. In particular, all three schools have participated in the work of the Project for School Innovation, a non-profit which has as its mission sharing effective strategies across schools.

However, broad imitation by traditional district schools and other charter schools of the innovations at Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House has not come to fruition, nor have districts taken steps to establish new schools modeled on these three success stories. This raises two questions: First, is the charter movement living up to its initial mission if it is not fulfilling the seventh purpose listed in

the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993: “to provide models for replication in other public schools?” Second, and more importantly, if state policymakers wanted to build on the success of Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House to enhance the charter initiative’s capacity to fulfill this promise, how could they do it? The discussion below attempts to answer that question by describing amendments to the Massachusetts charter school statute that could increase the number of charter schools like Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House, and broader changes in the policy environment that could drive adoption of the practices of the three schools within traditional district schools.

Recommendation: Change the application process to require applicants to describe how they will use assessment data to inform instruction.

The Massachusetts charter statute (in MGL Chapter 71 § 89 (f)) requires applicants to provide a description of “the educational program, instructional methodology and services to be offered to students.” The statute does not detail specific components of the description of the educational program. To remain true to the spirit of the charter initiative and to avoid undermining the entrepreneurial freedoms necessary to drive innovation, the charter law should not be proscriptive about the specific nature of the educational programs of charter schools. However, in light of the success of Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House, it is important to consider whether the application process could be adapted to help the authorizer determine whether an applicant is likely to adopt the cultural orientations that have facilitated the success of RPC, APR, and NHCS. The existing application criteria provide applicants

with the opportunity to address many aspects of their program that could support all of the cultural hypotheses of RPC, APR, and NHCS, but there is at least one such element that is not currently represented. The experience of the three schools clearly confirms the finding in education research that schools are more successful when they use assessment data as a tool for continuously refining curriculum and instruction. All three schools use data-driven instruction to express key cultural values: a culture that teaches effort yields success, a culture of high expectations, a culture of excellence in teaching, and a culture built on relationships. Therefore, the charter statute could require that charter applicants describe the internal assessment systems they plan to use and the processes they plan to implement to ensure that data from internal and external assessments are used to inform curriculum and instruction. This minor change certainly would not ensure that all charter schools would achieve results parallel to those achieved by Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House. However, requiring charter applicants to plan for the creation of data-driven cultures could increase the likelihood that their school leaders would see the creation of data-driven academic cultures as a core responsibility and the likelihood that schools would put in place the structures for collaborative reflection that have helped to build relational trust on the staffs of Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House.

Recommendation: Lift the cap to allow the creation of more charter schools modeled on Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House in high need districts

The Massachusetts charter statute (in MGL Chapter 71 § 89 (i)) caps charter school enrollment in three ways: (1) the law provides that only 120 charter schools may

operate in the Commonwealth and at any one time; and (2) in a single fiscal year, tuition payments to charter schools by a district cannot exceed nine percent of the district's net spending; and (3) the percentage of public school students in the Commonwealth attending charter schools cannot exceed four percent. Given that there are only 59 charter schools operating in the state serving roughly 20,000 students of the 972,000 students in Massachusetts, the element of the cap that most constrains the growth of charters in Massachusetts is the nine percent cap on district net spending (see Sachetti, 2006). Several of the state's lowest performing school districts are at or near the cap, including Boston, Lawrence, Fall River, Chelsea, and Holyoke (see Sagan & Teuber, 2007). To make possible the creation of more schools like Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House with the potential to dramatically boost the performance of low-income students of color, the charter statute could be amended to either eliminate the cap entirely for districts in the bottom twenty percent of MCAS performance or to at least allow tuition payments to charters to reach twenty-five percent of the districts net spending. Although charter schools in Massachusetts are outperforming the schools of the districts in which they are located (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006), aggregate data on charter school performance are mixed (American Federation of Teachers, 2002; Bifulco & Ladd, 2004; Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; Gill et al., 2001; Hoxby, 2004; Loveless, 2003; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006; Miron, 2005; Miron & Nelson, 2001; Miron, Wygant, Cullen, & Applegate, 2006; SRI International, 1997; UCLA, 1998; Zimmer & Budin, 2005) and recent studies of NAEP data – Braun, Jenkins, and Grigg (2006) and Lubienski and Lubienski (2006) – suggest that, controlling for student demographics, charter

schools nationally may perform less well than district schools. Therefore, it is important to note that the recommendation here is limited to the creation of more schools modeled on Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House – not in the sense that founders of new schools would have to promise to replicate the RPC, APR, and NHCS practices precisely, but rather that new school applicants would be required to persuade the authorizer they would embrace the cultural hypotheses that have led to the success of RPC, APR, and NHCS.

At this point in the evolution of the charter school movement, it is unclear what the tipping point might be at which high-performing charters might drive truly revolutionary change in districts. This is true in part because authorizers, including the Massachusetts Department of Education, have under-utilized their authority to close under-performing charter schools and so there is no model for a school district in which the charter schools in operation are uniformly high-performing. However, allowing the number of high-performing charters to grow to twenty-five percent of a district's spending could provide a valuable test case. At a minimum, the creation of more schools like Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House has the potential to improve opportunity for hundreds of students and families.

Recommendation: Allow multiple schools under one charter if the original charter school meets rigorous student achievement targets

A recent trend in the charter school movement has been the creation of non-profit charter management organizations that seek to replicate the success of high-performing models. Three of the best known examples are the KIPP Network (which is replicating

two high-performing flagship schools – one in the Bronx, New York and one in Houston, Texas), Achievement First (which is replicating New Haven’s successful Amistad Academy), and Uncommon Schools (which is replicating the success of several models, including Newark’s North Star Academy and one of the schools profiled in this study, Roxbury Prep). Each of these networks has relied on educational philosophies and practices parallel to those of Roxbury Prep, Neighborhood House, and APR. Although KIPP established a charter school in Lynn, Massachusetts, non-profit charter management organizations have been slow to locate in Massachusetts. One reason is the cap described above. However, a second obstacle is that under the Massachusetts charter statute a charter school operator seeking to replicate must assemble a new founding board and apply for a new charter for every single school the operator seeks to create. In contrast, several other states allow multiple schools to be operated on a single charter. Amending the Massachusetts charter would lower the costs associated with reporting to multiple boards and submitting multiple compliance reports (e.g., separate audits done for each school, separate annual reports generated by each school, etc.) which discourage replication. Charter school critics might object to a policy that will ease charter school replication because of the lack of compelling evidence that charters are consistently outperforming district schools (see American Federation of Teachers, 2002; Bifulco & Ladd, 2004; Braun, Jenkins, & Grigg (2006); Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; Gill et al., 2001; Hoxby, 2004; Loveless; 2003; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006; Miron, 2005; Miron & Nelson, 2001; Miron, Wygant, Cullen, & Applegate, 2006; SRI International, 1997; UCLA, 1998; Zimmer & Budin, 2005). This objection could best be addressed by only allowing a new school to be

opened under an existing charter if the original charter school has met rigorous student achievement targets. With this change, Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House might themselves be more likely to replicate, and the charter management organizations aligned with their approach might be more likely to replicate in Massachusetts, hence expanding educational opportunity by increasing the number of schools like Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House in Massachusetts.

Recommendation: Provide charter schools that meet rigorous student achievement targets with access to facilities funding, and create incentives for districts to provide charter schools with facilities

MGL Chapter 71 § 89 (mm) provides that “Notwithstanding any other provision of this section, no school building assistance funds, so-called, shall be awarded to a commonwealth charter school for the purpose of constructing, reconstructing or improving said school.” The inability of charter schools to access state building assistance funds makes facilities financing a significant obstacle to the replication of successful models, since potential operators – both existing schools and charter management organizations – are deterred by the need to raise substantial private capital for facilities. Both the Neighborhood House and Academy of the Pacific Rim described allocating substantial Board time to managing facilities construction and renovating projects. Both the Neighborhood House headmaster and Academy of the Pacific Rim executive director described fundraising for facilities as a significant burden on their time. Thus, barriers to replication in financial and human capital would be greatly reduced if the charter statute were amended in two ways: (1) to allow charter schools to

access the Commonwealth's building assistance funds; and (2) to provide incentives to districts to allow charter schools to utilize under-capacity district buildings (as they are able to do in New York City and, more recently, Newark, New Jersey). Critics of charter schools might oppose granting charter schools greater access to facilities because the charter experiment remains unproven (see American Federation of Teachers, 2002; Bifulco & Ladd, 2004; Braun, Jenkins, & Grigg (2006); Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; Gill et al., 2001; Hoxby, 2004; Loveless, 2003; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006; Miron, 2005; Miron & Nelson, 2001; Miron, Wygant, Cullen, & Applegate, 2006; SRI International, 1997; UCLA, 1998; Zimmer & Budin, 2005). This objection could best be addressed by linking access to facilities funding for a particular school to the school meeting rigorous student performance targets. Removing facilities as a barrier to replication has the potential to yield the creation of more schools like Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House which could provide new educational opportunities for low-income students of color across the state.

Implications for Policy and Recommendations for Changing the Massachusetts K-12 Policy Environment

Even if the number of approved charter applications aligned with the practices of Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House were to grow as a result of the changes in the charter statute described above, it would be difficult to achieve parallel results at significantly greater scale without two significant changes in the policy environment: a new human capital strategy for public education in

Massachusetts and a dramatic increase in the role of data in education policy-making to drive broader adoption of the effective practices of Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House.

Recommendation: Adopt A New Human Capital Strategy in Massachusetts K-12 Education

All of the five hypotheses for bridging the achievement gap that shape the cultures of Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House rely on recruiting, developing, and ultimately retaining or replenishing exceptional school leaders and teachers. Teaching students to believe that effort yields success requires a staff that firmly believes in that premise and has the skill to get students to accept it. From staying as late as they must to tutor struggling students to developing academic systems that help students see that they can get smart through hard work, the determination and talent of the staff is critical to shaping students' ways of thinking. Certainly, establishing and maintaining a culture of high expectations relies on the beliefs of the staff and their ability to get students and their families to buy-in to those expectations. This is illustrated perfectly by a Neighborhood House parent's explanation of why she chose the school for her child:

I went to the library, [the headmaster] was there. He . . . [shared] his mission, his goals, he was like a young boy with a with a brand new car, and he just knew that in 10 years we were going to be shining at the top of the hill and that drove me. . . he just knew that he could get a bunch of neighborhood children, community children and in spite of what wasn't successful at Boston Public Schools, he could make a success along the way. I wanted to be part of . . . that school....

Similarly, developing a disciplined culture requires a staff that is prepared to be unwavering in setting and vigilantly enforcing high behavioral expectations. As a

Roxbury Prep parent explains when describing the school's co-directors: "They don't sway; they're strict. But they really love these kids. I don't think it's about a paycheck with them. I do believe that they really, really at the end of the day they say, 'We're going to do this. We're going to succeed.'" Establishing relational trust with students and families relies on staff signaling through their words and actions that they care deeply about students and want to partner with families to work on behalf of their children. Similarly, relational trust within a school staff depends on individual staff members being open to collaboration and committed to receiving and giving critical feedback. Finally, excellence in teaching unquestionably relies on attracting teachers who are well-prepared and supporting their on-going development while counseling out under-performers. Thus, to get the results Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House have gotten at scale, new human capital strategies are required.

Recruiting and developing more talent to the ranks of urban school leaders and teachers requires a series of reforms. First, Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House have been able to attract and retain effective teachers (who might otherwise teach in the suburbs or private schools, or leave the profession) because they promise the opportunity to work in dynamic, achievement-oriented environments. To create this kind of environment in traditional district schools, principals in those schools would need to be empowered both with the autonomy to rapidly re-shape their budgets and educational programming in response to student needs and the authority to remove teachers who are under-performing. Second, Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House are all highly selective in their hiring. It is doubtful that sufficient numbers of teachers and school leaders with the teaching skill,

content knowledge, academic backgrounds, and willingness to collaborate are present in the existing pool. To increase the educator talent pool available to urban schools, two steps could be taken: (1) salaries for all public school educators in Massachusetts could be dramatically increased so that teaching is a more financially competitive option for academically accomplished undergraduates; and (2) additional compensation – in the form of incremental salary increases, loan reimbursement, or housing subsidies – could be provided to educators in schools that achieve significant academic gains for historically under-served students. Third, to increase the capacity of teachers within the current teaching pool, high performing charter schools and high performing charter management organizations could be authorized to create teacher preparation programs that grant teacher certification, or, if they are able to partner with a university, teacher certification and graduate degrees. In this way, schools like Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House would be able to train currently uncertified teachers in the educational practices that have led to their success. These new teacher preparation programs might then be able to replenish departing staff at high-performing charters and provide better prepared teachers for all schools. Ideally, the Commonwealth could offer to fund the participation of students in these new teacher preparation programs in exchange for a commitment to teach in under-performing districts for a certain period of time. Finally, the state must seize the opportunity to learn from the school leaders in both charter schools and district schools who are achieving superior results by carefully researching and documenting the leadership skills and leadership activities that are driving those results. From such a careful study could emerge a new model for certifying school leaders and compensating them that relies not on seat time in

graduate school or years of service, but rather on demonstrated skills and student achievement. Ultimately, the state's capacity to bridge the achievement gap at scale depends in large part on the quality of the talent pool in urban schools.

Recommendation: Enhance the Use of Data in Massachusetts K-12 Education Policy-Making

Although the adoption of Massachusetts state standards and the implementation of the MCAS, in combination with the data tracking provisions of No Child Left Behind, have significantly increased the availability of detailed information on student performance that policy-makers can use in decision-making, far more could be done to provide policy-makers with additional data for use in designing and evaluating strategies to improve student achievement. In particular, Massachusetts could adopt legislation to dramatically expand the capacity of its education data management system to allow the state to (1) use value-added measures to evaluate schools and initiatives; and (2) link student and teacher records in order to make better informed decisions about how to invest the state's education dollars and how to choose among policy alternatives.

Currently, every public school student in Massachusetts has a unique student identifier (similar to a social security number) but the state only uses them to track students' annual performance on the MCAS. Those identifiers could be used to generate robust student profiles including MCAS performance, grade-level promotion and retention information, attendance, and transfers between schools that can be updated over time. The Commonwealth could issue annual reports on the longitudinal progress of students enrolled in each school. This data could be used to supplement the annual report

cards schools now generated in compliance with No Child Left Behind and could be integrated into the state's school accountability system. Value-added data across multiple measures could eliminate the excuses some educators make when confronted by the results of high-performing charters like selection bias or teaching to the test, and further highlight the performance gap between successful schools and their under-performing peer schools. This value-added data would also allow administrators to assess the efficacy of individual innovations adopted from high-performing schools. For example, if a district initiates an extended-day program for struggling students to provide the kind of additional academic support found at Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House, district administrators and taxpayers would be able to easily evaluate the impact of that initiative on student performance relative to other interventions.

Although Massachusetts has a system of unique student identifiers, the Commonwealth does not yet have a system of unique teacher identifiers, nor does the Commonwealth have the capacity to link information on student performance to their specific teachers. The Commonwealth could create these identifiers and generate robust teacher profiles with information on key teacher characteristics including their undergraduate major, undergraduate minor, teacher exam scores, preparation program, years of experience, and certification status. This data could be used to supplement administrators' observations when evaluating teachers. It should also be used to evaluate the state's human capital strategies for urban public schools. Data on how teachers' undergraduate coursework, exam scores, preparation program, and certification status impact student performance could help to shape schools' approaches to hiring and the

Commonwealth's approach to funding teacher recruitment and development initiatives. For example, schools of education whose graduates consistently fail to help their students achieve measurable academic gains could lose their state authorization to certify teachers.

Implications for Future Research

Ultimately, the research in this study may be – in the words of the Purkey and Smith (1982) critique of the effective schools literature – too “frail a reed upon which to base a movement for school improvement.” (p. 65) Therefore, it is important to consider what a more robust approach to researching the questions that drove this study might look like.

A broader research base would provide a much more firm ground for practitioners and policymakers to move forward in trying to replicate the results achieved by Academy of the Pacific Rim, Neighborhood House, and Roxbury Prep. First, as discussed above in the limitations section, the stories of Academy of the Pacific Rim, Neighborhood House, and Roxbury Prep would be made far more compelling – and the results of a research study on them far more influential – if their results could be accompanied by a randomized study with a control-group of traditional district school students, value-added analysis of several classes of students at the schools, and a longitudinal study of the performance of the graduates of the three schools in high school and college. Second, much more could be understood about how the schools in this study are using their autonomy in the areas of budget and staffing if greater data were available about them (through careful quantitative research) and their peer schools – both traditional and

charter. In the area of budget, a detailed breakdown by category of revenue and expenses for a meaningful sample of charter and traditional district schools would provide substantial insights into how schools are allocating the resources and how those allocations correlate to achievement. In the area of staffing, far more biographical data on teachers – including such characteristics as state exam scores and competitiveness of undergraduate institutions – for a meaningful sample of charter and traditional district schools would provide substantial insights into how staffs differ across schools and how those differences correlate to achievement. Third, greater insights could be gained into how the three schools are using their autonomy in curriculum and instruction and school culture through extensive further qualitative research. Analysis of curriculum documents, observation notes on instruction and school routines, and further interviewing of teachers and students at the three schools under study and a meaningful sample of charter and traditional district schools could yield useful insights into how the three schools are operationalizing their five hypotheses about culture and how those behaviors compare and contrast with other schools. There is much more work to be done to tell the stories of these three schools with greater detail, nuance, and context.

Beyond a better accounting of the experiences of these three schools, the research activities described above would better inform policymakers and practitioners in Massachusetts about how well the charter initiative is living up to its promises. Similarly, other states could learn far more about their own charter initiatives by conducting parallel research – perhaps beginning with their highest performing schools or perhaps beginning simply with applying the research questions in this study to a

meaningful sample of charter and traditional district schools to better understand their budgets, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and school cultures.

An additional area for further research that emerges in the findings of this study is school leadership. Based on their analysis of the available research on school leadership, Leithwood et al. (2004) argue that “Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 3). Yet, the President of the Wallace Foundation, Christine DeVita, argues in the foreword to the Leithwood et al. (2004) study that, “What’s far less clear [than the importance of educational leadership], even after several decade of school renewal efforts, is just how leadership matters, how important those effects are in promoting the learning of all children, and what the essential ingredients of successful leadership are” (p. 1). Indeed, the research literature cited in this study (e.g., Bryk & Schneider (2000), Elmore (1999), Fullan (2002), Sebring & Bryk (2000), etc.) does a much better job describing the products of effective leadership – such as a collaborative staff culture or trust between staff and families – than it does describing the precise mechanisms by which leaders develop and sustain effective school cultures. This study suggests that the leaders’ decisions within the three charter schools under study about budgets, staffing, curriculum & instruction, and school culture have had a profound impact on the schools’ evolution. From the NHCS headmaster’s advocacy for investments in social services, to the co-director for curriculum & instruction at RPC helping teachers analyze data, to the principal at APR deciding to terminate an underperforming teacher, leaders can be seen playing a critical role in the extraordinary results of these case study schools. However, this study does not delve deeply into such topics as the daily activities of the school

leaders or the strategies they employ in managing their staffs or cultivating parent buy-in. Thus, this study confirms both Leithwood et al.'s (2004) finding that leaders matter and Devita's worry that we don't know much about how or why leaders matter. An important direction for future research would be a robust exploration of the nature of effective leadership in urban schools, not only in charters that are out-performing their demographic peers, but also in district schools that are out-performing their demographic peers.

Conclusion

The charter school initiative in Massachusetts began with the ambition to serve as a laboratory for innovation that would drive education reform. Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House are succeeding where other urban schools have largely failed for generations: they are bridging the achievement gap as measured by raw scores on the MCAS, the Massachusetts state exams for public school students. The success of these three schools in bridging the achievement gap is a result of five key cultural attributes necessary for schools to equip low income African-American students with the knowledge and skills to compete with their white and/or suburban peers:

- A Culture That Teaches Effort Yields Success
- A Culture of High Expectations That Shapes Student Beliefs
- A Disciplined Culture That Yields A Physically and Emotionally Safe Context for Learning
- A Culture Built On Relationships That Yield Trust

- A Culture of Excellence in Teaching That Challenges and Inspires

However, despite the success that Roxbury Prep, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Neighborhood House have enjoyed, the educational practices that have led to their success have not been widely replicated – neither through the creation of new charter schools with similar attributes, nor through assimilation of these attributes by existing charter schools or traditional district schools. If the assumption of this study is correct that practitioners and policymakers can learn from the experience of these three schools, then more research is required to validate and build on the findings of this study, more attention must be paid by practitioners to the cultural values that animate life within these schools, and significant changes are needed in the policy environment. If the promise of equality of educational opportunity represented by *Brown v. Board of Education* is to be fulfilled, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers must remain focused on trying to understand what makes the schools that defy their demography– like Academy of the Pacific Rim, Neighborhood House, and Roxbury Prep – work.

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