



Inspiring Change: A Retrospective on the School on the Move Prize



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Message from the CEO



This year marks an important milestone—the twentieth awarding of EdVestors’ School on the Move Prize. For two decades, the Prize has celebrated Boston Public Schools that show what is possible when educators, students, and families come together in pursuit of continuous improvement. It has been both a recognition of excellence and a catalyst for learning across our city’s schools.

As we mark this milestone, we also embrace the opportunity to learn from Prize-winning school communities. Through this retrospective, our team sought to understand the Prize’s influence by listening to school leaders who have led this work—educators deeply committed to equity and opportunity for Boston’s students. Their reflections illuminate how recognition, validation, and shared learning influence the conditions for sustained school improvement.

Two ideas stand out. First, we were struck by how powerfully the Prize validated leaders’ instructional approaches, bolstering their confidence and commitment to continuous improvement for their schools and students. Second, we see great potential to expand opportunities for school leaders to learn from one another about the evidence-based practices recognized through the Prize.

Looking ahead, EdVestors will continue to honor schools that demonstrate progress, amplify what works, and create spaces where leaders can learn together. In doing so, we not only celebrate twenty years of the School on the Move Prize—we set the stage for the next chapter of improvement in Boston’s schools.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Marinell' followed by a stylized flourish.

Marinell Rousmaniere
President & CEO, EdVestors



Introduction



“A setback is just a setup for a comeback.”

It was a crisp and sunny October day in 2024 when hundreds of Boston Public Schools staff, local leaders, and community members gathered to celebrate the nineteenth awarding of the School on the Move Prize. As has happened each year, the emcee announced: “The winner of the nineteenth annual School on the Move prize for 2024 is... Mattahunt Elementary School!” The school’s principal, staff, teachers, and parents leapt up and celebrated, smiles and tears of joy across their faces. In the video streamed at the award ceremony about the Mattahunt, the school was acknowledged for its inclusive and academically rigorous environment, strong community and family engagement, and first-in-the-nation Haitian-Creole dual-language program. As Principal Walter Henderson said in his acceptance speech, “The Mattahunt story is a journey. Nine years ago, the Mattahunt was down and out. We were one of the lowest-performing schools in the state, but a setback is just a setup for a comeback.”

Overview

EdVestors' School on the Move Prize

Every student deserves to learn in an environment that fosters their growth and development. With this vision in mind, EdVestors created the School on the Move Prize (referred to as “the Prize” throughout this brief), in 2006, to spotlight the most notable schoolwide improvement efforts across the Boston Public Schools (BPS). Since then, the Prize has provided a platform to elevate the stories of schools that show what is possible when educators, students, and families work together toward continuous improvement.

BPS serves a diverse community of students who bring rich cultural and linguistic assets to their classrooms, and the district aims to ensure equitable opportunities for all students. The Prize celebrates schools that embody this commitment, highlighting improvement strategies that center equity, raise student outcomes, and strengthen school communities.

The Prize invites schools to participate in a competitive application process. Schools share their improvement stories, providing both quantitative and qualitative evidence of improved student and school outcomes, and articulate the strategies that have contributed to their success. While the application process has evolved, the Prize has consistently prioritized lifting up schools that connect school improvement strategies to demonstrated progress.

During each year's application process, an initial screening against the Prize criteria determines a group of semi-finalists, after which an external Selection Panel reviews and selects three finalist schools. The Panel then visits the finalists to experience the school communities first hand and selects a winner.

The Prize's Current Application Process

Schools apply through a rigorous, multi-round process designed to identify those that best embody the three Prize principles:

- 1 Evidence of improvement:** Demonstrating their plan has led to clear, measurable gains in student outcomes over time.
- 2 Focus on equity:** Identifying targeted strategies aimed at achieving equitable outcomes for historically underserved students as well as benefiting all learners.
- 3 Relevance to other schools:** Describing how these strategies can be adapted or replicated to benefit other schools in the district.

In the first round, any BPS school may apply. EdVestors staff offers guidance to help schools assess their fit based on criteria such as having a student population reflective of BPS, showing above-average progress toward state accountability targets or other clear evidence of improvement over three to five years, while demonstrating gains across student subgroups. A panel of EdVestors staff reviews these applications and selects six to eight semi-finalists that present the strongest cases for improvement.

Semi-finalists then submit an extended application, reviewed by an external Selection Panel using the same Prize principles to narrow the pool to three finalists. The final stage involves school visits, where the Selection Panel observes each finalist's strategies in action before selecting the Prize winner.

Throughout the application process, EdVestors staff provide extensive support through office hours, rubrics, and other resources to help schools identify and use evidence and address common questions.

History and Background

Two Decades of the School on the Move Prize

In fall 2006, EdVestors awarded the first Prize at a ceremony held at the Boston Public Library to the Sarah Greenwood Elementary School, a dual-language school in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. The first ceremony represented the actualization of EdVestors' vision to shine a spotlight on improving schools and offer an opportunity for Boston schools to receive citywide recognition and a meaningful financial award.

EdVestors co-founder and then Board Chair Phil Gordon conceived of the idea to highlight less well-known, yet influential, examples of school improvement. Modeled after the Broad Prize, which recognized strong performance in the nation's largest urban school districts with a cash prize of \$1 million, the Prize would award one school a generous \$100,000 that could be spent at the school's discretion.¹ The Prize was designed to incentivize schools to apply, with the hope that the positive spotlight would inspire other schools to adopt similar school improvement strategies in their own communities. This unique undertaking, a local non-profit organization awarding philanthropically raised funds for schools to spend at their discretion, attracted a broad set of partners and supporters in Boston's education community to the cause of school improvement.

In its first decade, the Prize benefited from the support of two influential figures in Boston. First, retiring BPS Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant, who EdVestors honored for his nationally-recognized decade-long commitment to closing existing achievement gaps by adding his name to the Prize. Second was five-term Mayor Thomas Menino. Mayor Menino attended every Prize ceremony during his tenure in office. This support from the Mayor elevated the importance of acknowledging and celebrating positive stories of improvement in the BPS.

During the early years of the Prize, EdVestors made several key decisions about how to identify improvement stories and award the Prize. EdVestors' founding staff established a rigorous application process focused on data. The founding SOM team invited schools to apply for the Prize if they met specific eligibility criteria based on performance indicators derived mainly from standardized test results. School teams then completed a comprehensive application, which required them to identify the strategies they prioritized and explain how these strategies aligned with demonstrated changes in key quantitative performance indicators.

Next, the founding staff convened a Prize Selection Panel of local business, higher education, and philanthropic leaders to review applications and visit finalist schools to determine which schools' improvement story best aligned with the established Prize selection principles. Convening a Selection Panel of notable local leaders bolstered the Prize's credibility, especially in the early years. Having these leaders operate outside of the purview of the BPS also established the Prize's independence.

Finally, the founding EdVestors staff decided to hold a public award ceremony each year to announce the winning school. Since the beginning, the Prize winner has remained a closely kept secret, creating authentic anticipation and celebration for the winning schools. The palpable energy at the annual Prize ceremony not only speaks to the joy the Prize-winning school experiences but also stands to inspire other schools across the district.

Over the two decades of the Prize, the specific selection criteria and processes have evolved. However, the current EdVestors School on the Move team (referred to in this brief as the "EdVestors team") remains committed to these Prize priorities: utilizing school-level data to demonstrate progress and maintaining the Prize's credibility and independence. The EdVestors team is also committed to incorporating learning from Prize-winning schools as a way to continue to inspire school improvement.

Methodology: Learning from The Prize's Winners

Reaching the twentieth anniversary of the Prize is a milestone that prompts reflection. The EdVestors team was interested in learning more about the influence of winning the Prize on school communities. To do so, the EdVestors School on the Move (SOM) research team set out to learn from the leaders of Prize-winning schools and gain an understanding of how winning the Prize may have shaped their perspectives on driving school improvement in a large, urban school district.²

Interviews with School on the Move Prize-winning school leaders.

The SOM research team interviewed 17 individuals who were in leadership positions (Principals, Headmasters, Heads of School, or other school leaders) when their schools won the Prize, or were a part of the team preparing the application.³ Appendix A lists the Prize-winning schools, by year, that had a leader participate in an interview in spring or summer 2025.⁴ Additionally, the SOM research team interviewed members of the EdVestors founding staff to gain insight into the original purpose of the Prize and how its application priorities have evolved.

The SOM research team developed a standardized set of interview questions to guide a 45- to 60-minute virtual or in-person interview with each leader. Interview questions focused on a number of topics related to a school's experience after winning the Prize, including:

- **Any perceptible changes** that winning the Prize had on the school community within the Prize-winning school year or in future years; and,
 - **The influence** that winning the Prize had on leaders, including their perspectives on driving school improvement and their approach to school leadership.
- ### Giving voice to school leaders' insights on winning the Prize.
- With interviews completed, the SOM research team compiled interview responses and identified common themes. Leaders shared their perspectives on what winning the Prize meant to their school community and their own school leadership. To prioritize these perspectives, the SOM research team has shared, to the extent possible, the exact words of school leaders while maintaining anonymity for the school community.
- This brief describes three key learnings about the influence of the Prize win on school communities and leaders. The brief also considers how the Prize can continue to uplift improvement stories in the interest of influencing systemic practice changes across the district.
- **Motivations** for applying for the Prize, and any reflections on completing the application process with staff;

Key Learning #1

“We had always known that we were doing the work, but having EdVestors and the Prize recognize it was different. It wasn’t just us saying it. It meant our hard work was seen, and that gave us confidence to keep moving forward.”



“We knew that we had something special. We knew that we had done a great job, and we had... been successful... it's really beautiful when you set a plan and you set a goal and you reach it. So it was thrilling.”

Valuable Recognition

The Prize offers school communities and leaders valuable recognition from a respected Boston education partner.

Powerful Endorsement

Winning the Prize served as a powerful endorsement of the instructional strategies implemented in schools and educators’ efforts to drive improvement.

Leaders reported a shared sense of elation among school team members attending the Prize ceremony, which boosted morale almost immediately. As one leader recounted: “The celebration itself, the day of the announcement, that mattered. Our teachers were proud. Our kids were proud. It felt like: finally, people are talking about [our school] for the right reasons. That boost to morale and how people looked at us—you can’t underestimate that.”

Entire school communities experienced a sense of pride when winning the Prize, as it reflected the hard work required to improve schools. For example, some leaders reported engaging the whole school community in celebrations. Leaders reported that, for teachers in particular, the Prize win acknowledged the school community’s results and made their hard work on behalf of students visible. Leaders named the importance of the external recognition the Prize provided for boosting teacher morale. As one leader described: “It was my first few years as a principal, and I was asking so much of my staff. The Prize was important because it told them: what you’re doing matters, your effort is seen. It wasn’t me saying it anymore, it was a respected group saying it.” Leaders also described how the Prize win bolstered: “a sense of teacher agency, the Prize reinforced that and communicated a trust [between leaders and teachers] that was invaluable.”

Furthermore, leaders described the Prize as an affirmation of the school’s vision for improvement and implementation. As one leader related: “When we had [the] banner in my office saying, ‘School on the Move Prize winner’, that was a game changer for the culture of our school. It acknowledged all the hard work that our teachers did. It acknowledged what I’ve always said to the teachers: we can do this. We have to have this self-belief in ourselves... We are the right people for the job.” The affirmation was meaningful, given the challenging work and unrelenting pace that drive school improvement. For example, leaders discussed the investments of time and energy to ensure that shared leadership with teachers guides school improvement. Others commented on the inherent demands of implementing and sustaining instructional approaches that allow all students access to rigorous, grade-level content. Leaders across different types of schools, and schools with different types of enrollment processes, all reported on the importance of the recognition that the Prize provides.

Momentum for Continuous Improvement

Leaders translated Prize recognition into momentum to pursue continuous improvement at their school.

Leaders reported that the Prize built collective will for the next phase of school improvement. Leaders described how they framed the Prize win with teachers as a runway to do more for students, rather than a capstone. As one leader recounted: “How do we make sure this isn’t the peak but the beginning of the next level of our work?”. Furthermore, leaders positioned the Prize win as a means to deepen their focus on the established school improvement approaches that contributed to their win.



“[The Prize] was a push to say, okay, what’s next? Where do we need to grow? How do we make sure this isn’t the peak but the beginning of the next level of our work?”

Leaders described the Prize as a “positive push” that energized staff and helped align less cohesive parts of their school communities around shared goals. The Prize reinforced a strong sense of shared accountability and helped sustain momentum for improvement. As one leader conveyed: “The lasting impact... I think, [is] the shared opportunity to articulate a theory of action that can propel forward the work, as well as kind of reflect and codify what’s what, and what has happened.” Some leaders reported that teachers were taking on more improvement work, while others noted that teachers expressed a desire to continue improving.

Vision Supported by Prize Funds

Leaders support their schoolwide vision for improvement with funds from the Prize.

Leaders utilized the funds to build capacity for their school’s vision for improvement, supporting the day-to-day needs of students, and enhancing curriculum and instruction. Many schools directed funds to professional learning, supplementing existing curriculum development and training. Others created leadership roles for teachers, providing coaching support or creating opportunities for collaboration and shared planning. “We wanted to use the money to build capacity... I don’t want it to be ...a one-time spending deal, and that’s not [going to] have long-term good outcomes for students.” In at least one case, the school dedicated Prize funds to curriculum development by providing time for cross-grade collaboration. Leaders reported being strategic about timing and sustainability. For example, some held back dollars in anticipation of slimmer budgets after the spend down of Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds.

Leaders invested in technology and materials to support individualized learning and curriculum, and one-to-one student-to-technology access via mobile labs, Chromebooks, and assistive devices. Others used the funds to strengthen core instruction and student support through targeted, high-dosage tutoring. Several schools prioritized climate and inclusion, creating sensory and occupational therapy spaces. Funds also supported community-building events, including field trips, celebrations, open houses, and book giveaways.

Evidence-based Improvement Practices

To what extent do Prize-winning schools implement evidence-based practices to improve schools?

In *Charting the Course: Four Years of the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize*, and the subsequent *Staying the Course: Sustaining Urban School Reform*, School on the Move research partners set out to understand and document common characteristics among Prize-winning schools' improvement stories.^{5,6} In conducting this research, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, the Prize's research partner at the time, highlighted the evidence-based practices that Prize winners implemented to drive school improvement. Drawing on the body of school improvement research conducted by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, *Staying the Course: Sustaining Urban School Reform* also focused on the evidence-based practices found to sustain improvement, especially in urban schools and districts. Many of these practices, listed below, are reflected in what Prize-winning leaders reported as essential school improvement strategies, such as shared ownership, internalizing high expectations for academic content in classrooms, and setting a vision for school improvement that engages the whole school community.

Schools that aim to initiate and sustain improvement implement:

- **Strong leadership and shared ownership**, in service of establishing collective responsibility for a vision for student learning, identifying teacher-leaders, and engaging them in decision-making on school improvement priorities.⁷
- **Meaningful teacher collaboration opportunities**, by fostering options for continuous learning for all educators, including peer feedback and peer collaboration.⁸
- **Effective use of data**, that utilizes grade-level appropriate assessments to review student performance to identify gaps in student mastery, identify classroom practices that are, and are not, working to improve student learning, and guide schoolwide decisions on instruction.⁹
- **Academic rigor and student support**, by internalizing a culture of high expectations for teachers and students, and identifying specific student learning priorities that are aligned with the school vision.¹⁰
- **Effective family and community partnerships**, so that the entire school community, including students and their families, is invested in the vision for improvement, and communicating about improvement goals that are accessible for all.

Highlighting the evidence-based practices that Prize-winning schools have implemented to initiate and sustain improvement is an important first step in sharing these practices in the interest of achieving systemic change.

Key Learning #2

“It was more important to see the school’s name out there... Families wanted to come and see the school before registration—[our school] was an option for more families now. Our heads were held high—even students.”



“It [the Prize win] changed the dialogue. It changed how we talked about what our work is... We had a wonderful school, we had a great school community... We did some really good work that first couple years there, it... just really helped us... get the word out about our school.”

Changing Perception

Winning the Prize frequently changed the community’s perception of the school, and translated into more resources for the Prize-winning school.

Greater Notoriety

The Prize often meant greater notoriety for the school in its community.

The recognition afforded by the Prize gave leaders the opportunity to share their school’s story of progress. As one leader described: “Having the chance to be able to tell [the school’s story], reflect on the strategies and communicate it outward, is something that school leaders don’t have the capacity to do, and it was a gift.”

The spotlight of the Prize and the additional attention given to a school’s improvement story often changed the perception of the school held in the community, increasing its visibility among prospective families. One leader described this: “For a lot of families, we weren’t even a choice at all, surrounded by high-achieving schools with very different populations. What we did was to break the narrative—a school with such a diverse group of learners. We were breaking a BPS narrative that these students could not achieve. We very clearly demonstrated that we could go against the narrative. The district was excited, ‘Look there is another high-quality school in this section of the city.’”

Many leaders reported that the value of the Prize’s recognition outweighed the Prize funds. One leader described it this way: “I think it was more impactful to have the recognition given versus the actual funds, because I think it, number one, validated so much for so many... And so it was an opportunity to reflect and celebrate, and also continue to think about what we can do even better. And so having that opportunity to do that just felt like a... needed win.”

More School Resources

The external recognition provided by the Prize often translates into more resources for the school.

In 2013, BPS adopted a school assignment policy giving families a range of elementary school options.¹¹ Within this assignment system, families weigh multiple options, and schools viewed as high quality can attract more students, increasing enrollment and, in turn, enhancing school-based funding. One school leader described the value of having interested prospective families from across the district: “When the enrollment showcases were happening... we had a lot more people joining... We had a huge pickup in... inclusion parents who wanted to come see [our school]... These are parents



“Some people have reached out outside of BPS, saying, oh, you guys are doing great things, we’d love to talk more about it. That was something I didn’t expect. The Prize opened doors for us with partners who didn’t know us before.”

who, not for nothing, are fighting over spots at other schools... These are parents who have agency, and they’re able to navigate. But it was... now there’s another school that people are talking about. Let’s go check it out.”

Additionally, school leaders reported increased interest among both new and existing community partners following the Prize win. Leaders often centered the Prize in pitches to secure additional donations or partnerships, citing the Prize as evidence of success that warranted investment. “I think it helped me realize the political nature of leadership... it’s not just what I do in my... building, it is also what I do outside of the building to reach out to different organizations that can also help and support, and so it definitely made me feel efficacious in that I can have conversations with donors. I can apply to grants, ...I can look for opportunities to come into our building and also revamp what needs to be revamped, or reimaged what needs to be reimaged.”



Sustaining Improvement

What lessons can be learned from Prize-winning schools about driving and sustaining improvement?

Prize-winning leaders described how the recognition for the demonstrated school improvement, which the Prize provided, fostered a sense of momentum for continued improvement in schools. For many schools, this desire to drive change also coincided with an expansion in enrollment, which would provide some schools with additional financial resources.

One could reasonably predict that the combination of a leader motivated to improve performance, along with access to additional resources, would position a school for greater success. However, not all schools have continued to improve since their Prize-winning moment. Analysis of the first ten Prize-winning schools, conducted as part of the *Staying the Course: Sustaining Urban School Reform* report, found that most schools continued to improve student performance in ELA, but had mixed results when considering math performance.¹²

What can be learned from the performance arcs of schools that improve but then plateau or even experience a decline in performance over time? These interviews with Prize-winning leaders may provide insights into the challenges schools face throughout their improvement journey.

Leaders discussed:

- School restructuring.** Over the last two decades, BPS has closed and merged schools, and made changes to grade configurations and programs housed in different school buildings in the interest of increasing access to a high-quality education. For school leaders, these changes can mean integrating large numbers of new students and staff into the school in a given year. Arriving students may have new or different learning needs compared to existing students. Leaders may need to grapple with how to deploy staff and approach community-building, while also moving forward with a vision for school improvement.
- External support for continuous improvement and practice sharing.** Leaders reported experiencing reactive rather than proactive support from the district and state. These leaders would have benefited from additional resources for their improvement strategies—especially as the school began to demonstrate progress. Leaders also shared how they had hoped that the strategies that helped them to win the Prize had been more widely disseminated for other schools to learn from their work.
- Teacher buy-in.** Leaders described the time commitment required to ensure that the school community is continually invested in the vision for school improvement. Leaders discussed this as being most important for teachers. One leader recalled a meeting with teachers to address their concerns about capacity: “I once gave them an index card. I said, ‘I know I put a lot on your plate, so tell me something that you want me to take off your plate.’... I said, ‘Oh, I have one more question... if your own children came here, would you want me to take that off your plate?’... It resonated with them to realize ‘it’s not about me.’ It’s not about them. It’s about the children we serve each and every day.”

Leaders described what are ultimately common challenges in school improvement. Opportunities for leaders to learn how other schools overcame these common challenges while improving can be a powerful tool to support continued improvement.

Key Learning #3

Validated Leadership

Leaders reported that the Prize win uniquely validated their instructional leadership and approach, and significantly strengthened their confidence and credibility as leaders.

“The Prize was an important moment for me. It made me reflect on my leadership and what I wanted to do next. It was validation that I could take on bigger challenges, and it did open doors professionally.”



“I think I have a lot more empathy for new leaders and leaders in general... I find myself feeling like leadership is hard, leadership is messy, leadership can be hostile. And I think that's what the difficult work of [school improvement] helped me see.”

Opportunities for Reflection

Winning the Prize provided leaders with a welcome opportunity for reflection on the progress they had made.

Leaders reported that completing the Prize application, participating in the selection process, and receiving the Prize provided an important opportunity for reflection on their leadership approach. As one leader described: “...What the School on the Move did for me was, it gave me that pause point to look back, to say, look at what we did...and very, very rarely in this work, do you have such an impactful pause point as the School on the Move did...” The Prize win also broadened their perspective on how to drive school improvement: “You now have resources. You now actually have this beautiful kind of data-driven thing that they've provided for you. Where do you want to go for the next five years?... Take what we have and expand it. And that's what we did. We looked at curriculum, we looked at professional development, we looked at how to continue to build those partnerships with our families and our kids.”

Further, many leaders reported that the validation that the Prize provided for their leadership approach was particularly critical. As one leader described it: “It was a proof point that when you empower teachers to be decision makers, to not just make decisions, but diagnose and initiate instructional change based upon real needs, [then] they identify and support them and nudge them and prod them to do that work, you win... When you empower students with voice and with choice and with being safe and being cared for and loved, you win... it's for so many of our families, this award shined a bright spotlight on folks who too often had to live in the shadows.”

Leaders in schools serving higher-need student populations viewed the award as proof that inclusive and rigorous approaches could yield results for all students, reaffirming their commitment to equity and student-centered practices. As one leader described: “I would say, [as] an instructional leader, a strong belief that the purpose of school is to have quality instruction... you can't be anti-racist... if your kids are not learning to read and write at high levels. So that has always been my motto. I believe that I do anti-racist work, but I do it through effective teaching and learning that, to me... [that is] number one.”

Advocate for Change

The Prize win bolstered leaders' confidence and credibility, and encouraged leaders to advocate for changes at their school.



“I can walk with a little bit more swagger now in certain meetings, because we're School on the Move.”

Leaders related that this validation of their instructional approach helped them grow confidence and credibility. Leaders explained how the recognition provided by the Prize was coupled with the opportunity to showcase to colleagues the value of the selected strategies identified in their Prize application. This opportunity highlighted the credibility generated by a Prize-winning leader's ability to drive improvement. As one leader recounted: “Every time you present new ideas or you want people to try things, it's always sort of based on if they have a belief in you as the leader presenting it. And so I think that probably I had ...an easier time proposing new ideas. Because they could see that some of our other ...ideas were okay.” Other leaders reported being asked to speak, share their practices, or take on new, more prominent leadership roles within the district after winning the Prize.

Leaders described an increased willingness to publicly state what mattered most to their school and to advocate for the necessary resources. As one school leader described: “The recognition from the Prize gave me the confidence to talk about our students... These are all marginalized students, and this is what we are doing. When [the district] rolled out [new curriculum], the district reached out. We would pilot anything if it was good for our kids. We spoke directly to [district leaders to suggest changes.] I would not be able to do that without being a School on the Move winner.”

Leading up to their Prize win, some schools had made improvements that moved them out of underperforming status in the state's accountability system. This type of performance improvement often means that schools lose the additional resources offered to underperforming schools. A leader described the role that the credibility associated with the Prize played in community advocacy for sustained resources. To paraphrase, “When you are no longer a low-performing school, the extra [instructional] time given to the school is taken back... Oh, you're doing so well. You don't need all that extra time... So our community responded, Well, what are we going to do? We came up with: let's write an innovation plan. And so we wrote an innovation plan to get our time back, because that was the only way we could get it back. Then, we voted, it was like 97%. So that was one of the things that we [accomplished.]”



“The Prize validated me as a leader. It gave me credibility with the district, with teachers, with families. I could speak up more confidently about what our school needed because I wasn’t just saying it—I had proof behind me.”

Recommitment to Improvement

School leaders recommitted to the challenging work of leading schools.

For many leaders, the validation that the Prize win offered proved to be a pivotal moment in their leadership development. Leaders reported that the recognition from an external organization meant their efforts to drive school improvement—amidst the challenging environment of an urban district—were not only effective in growing the school, but were also acknowledged and valued among a larger set of Boston education stakeholders. One leader described it this way: “I have a lot of friends who have left the profession of being a principal because it is just so hard to manage all the external things that are coming at you, but really focus on your school and what needs to happen. And so I think the value of this award lets people know you’re doing something good.”

Leaders also discussed their focus on balancing affirming leadership and holding teams accountable to high standards. One leader described the process of building teacher leadership at the school: “We put together teams of teachers so that they could see each other teach, and then we moved from that to them videotaping themselves and critiquing themselves, and sharing that with others. And so we just really went to this place of job embeddedness, where we could do work during our workday that benefited our practice all day. And so we became a job-embedded, professionally developed community.” Other leaders described approaching change with greater transparency or seeking deeper collaboration with teachers. One leader described it this way: “I really like to promote a sense of independence and build leadership within the building... I love to see people willing to take something on and fight for it, and...be part of the solution rather than the problem. So I think my leadership is trying to identify people in the faculty that are...positive and team players, and want to move the work forward.”



Recognizing Instructional Leadership

What is the value of recognition and validation to leaders?

Leaders naming the Prize win as a significant leadership development moment emerged as an important learning for the EdVestors team. The Prize win served as a re-energizing and motivating force for continued improvement in schools. These learnings could also highlight ways to enhance leader engagement and tenure.

National data, even those collected before the pandemic, paint a sobering picture of leader retention:

- Overall, school leaders remain in their position about 4 years, on average. There is an increased rate of leader turnover, contributing to shorter tenures, in lower-achieving schools or schools with higher poverty rates.¹³
- About 20 percent of school leaders change jobs in a given school year.¹⁴
- The majority of school leaders who leave each year leave for another profession, not another school.¹⁵

- Those leaders who report wanting to leave their position cite working conditions, including the long hours associated with successfully leading schools, as a primary reason for leaving.¹⁶

While questions about the career choices made by Prize-winning leaders were beyond the scope of this Prize retrospective, the majority of Prize-winning leaders who participated in interviews spent most of their school leadership careers in BPS and/or another urban district. Their perspectives on validation raise an interesting question about its role in extending the tenure of leaders in urban districts, an important goal given the education leadership challenges facing districts nationwide. Validation could be a powerful addition to a district's strategic approach to offering schools more proactive support for school improvement.



Future Considerations

Since its inception, the Prize has aimed to highlight the most notable school improvement stories in BPS as a means to both change the narrative about urban education and showcase what's possible when schools undertake improvement work. From their interviews with Prize-winning leaders, the SOM research team surfaced a few timely and relevant questions for the future of the Prize.



“I highly respect the principals that I work with... I had principals calling me saying, Hey, can we come and see what you're doing?... There's no greater honor than a colleague saying, can I come and see you and tell me what you're doing?”

Inspire BPS Schools

How can the Prize support schools telling their improvement stories in a way that inspires other BPS schools and influences changes in school improvement practices?

Over the last 20 years, the EdVestors team has designed opportunities for Prize winners to share their practices with other schools. This has included releasing briefs on promising improvement practices, creating tools to support the implementation of evidence-based improvement strategies, and hosting events to highlight these practices and tools. In addition, the EdVestors team maintains a close working relationship with BPS district leadership, providing an opportunity to share more about finalist schools' selected strategies from an external vantage point. The SOM research team learned that a few peer leaders approached Prize-winning leaders to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies and practices they implemented in their schools. These interactions built the confidence of Prize-winning leaders and provided other BPS leaders with specific, grounded advice on how to implement strategies with demonstrated links to school improvement.

There is likely untapped potential for leaders to learn from one another to drive school improvement in BPS. The district has existing structures that can be utilized to expand efforts in leader-to-leader learning. For example, BPS district leadership has established a regional superintendent structure that offers opportunities for leaders to collaborate and learn from one another. The subset of Prize-winning school leaders from Region 1 who were interviewed discussed the opportunities to learn with and from their peers that have been fostered within the region. Some of these collaborations focused on creating a continuous and consistent experience across schools in the region, including shared planning for middle school grades and the transition between K-6 schools and secondary schools. Many schools in Region 1 have made measurable improvements, and in fact, four of the last seven Prize-winning schools were from Region 1.

Looking forward, the EdVestors team will consider how to more intentionally partner with Prize-winning schools, regional superintendents, and the district to ensure more school leaders have opportunities to learn from peers.



“To win that Prize was... like a stamp of... you are the right guy for the job...because sometimes I was told I wasn’t right... So that... confirmation went volumes for me... It was like validation. For me. It was like people kind of respected me a little bit differently... and I definitely walked a little prouder.”

Systemic Practice Change

To what extent does validating school improvement approaches play a role in successful systemic practice change?

Leaders discussed the powerful validation offered by the Prize. This validation provided leaders with an opportunity to re-energize improvement efforts and reconsider what’s possible for their school community. However, it is more common for districts to hold schools and leaders accountable for declining performance than to acknowledge and laud the work that goes into improving schools.

The EdVestors team—working in collaboration with the BPS—might consider the following questions about whether, and how, validation could play a role in catalyzing school improvement:

- Could efforts to validate leaders’ school improvement successes be packaged with parallel strategies to drive practice changes district-wide?
- Does validating leaders’ instructional approach—which often results in recommitting to improvement—also lengthen their leadership tenure?
- Could lengthening leader tenure strengthen the cadre of urban leaders committed to school improvement?

Validating an instructional approach that has demonstrated progress for schools is a key ingredient in the recipe for shifting the narrative about what’s possible in urban schools.

Conclusion

By shining a spotlight on improving schools, the School on Move Prize offers a unique opportunity to celebrate urban schools that have demonstrated growth and success. Reflecting on the 20 years of the Prize, the EdVestors team has learned from the many voices of Prize-winning leaders about the power of recognition for their school communities. Looking ahead, the EdVestors team remains committed to the Prize recognizing schools that can articulate their school improvement strategies and present evidence using school-level data. Furthermore, the EdVestors team will continue to focus on maximizing learning—both to inspire changes in practice and position schools across the city for improvement.

Citations

- ¹ From 2002 to 2014, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation awarded the Broad Prize to a top performing urban school district based on the extent to which the district's standardized test scores had improved. The Broad Foundation donated the Prize funds to high school seniors in the winning districts attending college in the form of scholarships. Identifying urban districts that met Prize-established benchmarks, the notoriety that the Prize win garnered for districts, and the Prize funds were meant to inspire districts to make progress against existing achievement gaps in schools.
- ² The SOM research team, ideally, would have interviewed a number of school community members to capture robust perspectives on the influences of the Prize win on their school. However, the outreach required to do so given that the Prize has been awarded for nearly two decades was beyond the scope of this retrospective. Therefore, the SOM research team reached out to school leaders asking, specifically, about school community perspectives related to the Prize win.
- ³ The SOM research team sent an outreach email to all school leaders who remained working in—or were recently retired from—the education field during spring and summer 2025. There were 21 individuals that could have been interviewed, and 17 ultimately participated in an interview.
- ⁴ When school leaders changed in the year immediately following, or during, the award process, the SOM team interviewed both leaders. The Prize-winner leader provided information about motivations for applying for the Prize and perceptible changes in the year of the Prize win; the interview with the new leader focused on influences on the school community in the year(s) after the Prize win.
- ⁵ Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (2015). *Staying the Course: Sustaining Improvement in Urban Schools*. Retrieved from: <https://edvestors.org/media/pages/research-insights/staying-the-course-sustaining-improvement-in-urban-schools/4e64d0e900-1725327114/Staying-the-Course-Full-Report-Web-Version.pdf>
- ⁶ d'Entremont, C., Norton, J., Bennett, M., & Piazza, P. (2013). *Charting the Course: Four years of the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize*. *Journal of Education*, 192(2/3), 3-12.
- ⁷ Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- ⁸ Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ⁹ Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ¹⁰ Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ¹¹ Hill, N. E. (22 January 2019). *Good Schools Close to Home*. Harvard University School of Education Ed. Magazine. Retrieved from: <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/ed-magazine/19/01/good-schools-close-to-home#:~:text=In%20Boston%2C%20the%20district's%20original,burdens%20of%20transportation%20were%20formidable>.
- ¹² In more recent years, many schools across Boston and across Massachusetts, have not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels of achievement, contributing to an overall decline in performance.
- ¹³ This insight about principal turnover was measured before the impact of COVID-19 on educators, and is likely to be higher in more recent years. Levin, S., K. Bradley. (2016). *Understanding and Addressing Principal Turnover: A Review of the Research*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals. Retrieved from: https://www.nassp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/nassp_edit06-WEB-1.pdf
- ¹⁴ Taie, S., L. Lewis, J. Merlin. (July 2023). *Principal Attrition and Mobility Results From the 2021–22 Principal Follow-up Survey to the National Teacher and Principal Survey: First Look—Summary Report*. U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2023/2023046-summary.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Taie, S., L. Lewis, J. Merlin. (July 2023). *Principal Attrition and Mobility Results From the 2021–22 Principal Follow-up Survey to the National Teacher and Principal Survey: First Look—Summary Report*. U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2023/2023046-summary.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Levin, S., K. Bradley, C. Scott. (2019). *Principal Turnover: Insights from Current Principals*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals. Retrieved from: https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/347/download?inline&file=NASSP_LPI_Insights_Principals_BRIEF.pdf
- ¹⁷ School names presented here represent school names at the time of the School on the Move Prize win. School names that appear in parentheses are current school names.

Appendix A

Prize-winning schools where a leader participated in a 20th Year Retrospective Interview¹⁷

2007	Excel High School
2008	Samuel W. Mason Elementary School
2009	Boston Community Leadership Academy (Ruth Batson Academy)
2010	Joseph Lee Elementary School (Joseph Lee K-8 School)
2011	Clarence Edwards Middle School (closed)
2013	George H. Conley Elementary School
2014	William Monroe Trotter Innovation School (Trotter Elementary School)
2015	Jeremiah E. Burke High School (Albert D. Holland School of Technology)
2016	Phinneas Bates Elementary School
2018	Donald McKay K-8 School
2019	Harvard/Kent Elementary School
2020	F. Lyman Winship Elementary School
2021	James Otis Elementary School
2023	East Boston High School
2024	Mattahunt Elementary School



About EdVestors

EdVestors' mission is to advance equitable, meaningful education that prepares every Boston student to activate their power and shape their future. Founded in 2002 to connect Boston philanthropists with the city's public schools by identifying and shaping promising improvement efforts and matching them with donors, our strategies have evolved over the last 20-plus years. However, our focus remains on improving outcomes in Boston's public schools.

Today, EdVestors serves as a:

- 1 Connector** that partners with the district, schools, community-based organizations, higher education, and philanthropy to advance efforts in issue areas that are a priority for schools and students.
- 2 Catalyst** for systems change in Boston, creating pathways from classroom to career, ensuring access to arts education, improving math teaching and learning, and seeding racial equity efforts in schools.
- 3 Champion** that shines a light on the educators and schools that create and continuously improve learning environments where all students thrive.



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First awarded in 2006, the School on the Move Prize seeks to shine a light on the schools, leaders, and teachers who create and continuously improve learning environments where all students can thrive. By sharing the stories of how schools improve, we hope to help more schools make significant progress for their students.

Each fall, the School on the Move Prize recognizes one of the most improving Boston Public Schools. The Prize winner is awarded \$100,000, which includes \$80,000 of unrestricted funding for the school, and \$20,000 for dedicated research and dissemination activities related to School on the Move. In addition, the other two finalist schools are awarded \$10,000 each.





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