

NEW MISSION HIGH SCHOOL: Building a Culture of College Success



The School on the Move (SOM) Prize recognizes individual schools within Boston Public Schools that have made significant progress in improving student achievement. Schools are invited to apply for the SOM Prize annually based on an analysis of their students' performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) over a four-year period. To be eligible, schools must show rates of improvement that are significantly greater than the district average and their student demographics must be representative of the district as a whole. In their application, invited schools describe the strategies they use to improve academic performance over the review period, including strengthening teaching and learning, using data effectively and improving school climate. An independent selection panel reviews applications and conducts site visits to select the winning school each year. Since its inauguration in 2006, seven schools, including New Mission High School in 2012, have won the Prize.

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**About The Rennie Center:**

The Rennie Center's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

Production:**EdVestors**

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**About Edvestors:**

EdVestors is a dynamic school change organization focused on accelerating substantive improvement in urban schools. Since 2002, the entrepreneurial non-profit has raised and targeted over \$16 million in private donations to urban schools for strategic improvement efforts. Targeted primarily in Boston, funded initiatives are carefully monitored for results and the most effective are distinguished for expansion and replication. Today, EdVestors employs three levers to drive change in urban schools: strategic philanthropic investment, education expertise and engaged implementation support.

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Introduction

In the tight-knit community of Hyde Park, a small Boston public high school is quietly and tenaciously changing the life trajectories of the students who enter its doors. Led by Headmaster Naia Wilson, New Mission High School excels at levels only found at some of the best schools in the nation. Students develop and stand out across multiple dimensions in academics, athletics, and extracurricular activities. New Mission students significantly outperformed their Boston Public School high school peers over the past three years, scoring more than 10 percentage points higher in English language arts and almost 20 percentage points higher in math in 2012 on MCAS testing (Figures 1 and 2). In addition, the four-year graduation rate at New Mission was more than 90 percent in 2012 – nearly 25 percentage points higher than the district average – with a proportion of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch higher than the city average (Figures 3 and 4).

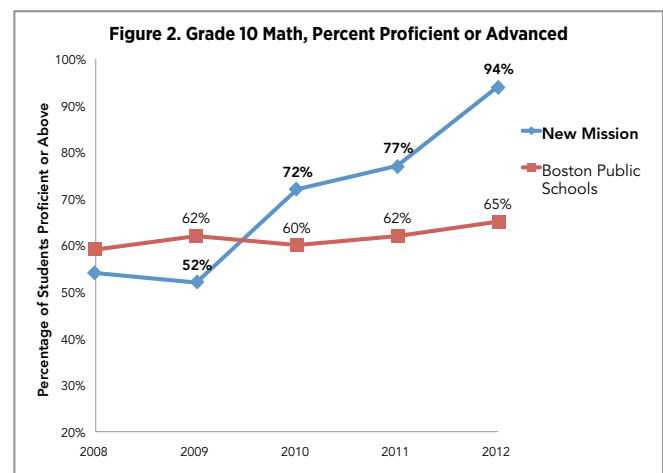
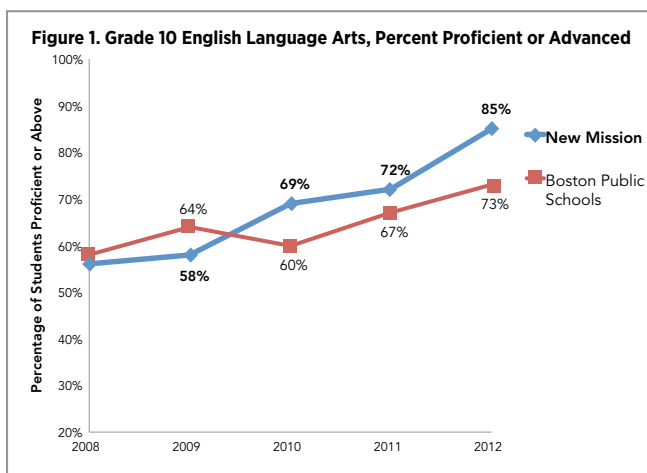
Graduates win some of the nation’s most prestigious scholarships; in 2010, three of eleven Gates Millennium Scholarship winners in Massachusetts were New Mission seniors; in 2013 another New Mission student won the Gates Scholarship. New Mission students carry that success outside the classroom. In 2011, the debate team was named Most Successful Team of the Year in the city and two members went on to represent the school at National Championships. Two years later the debate team placed top 20 in the nation. In athletics, the girls’ track and basketball teams were city champions in 2011 and the boys’ basketball team won back-to-back state championships in 2010 and 2011. The U.S. Department of Education named New Mission High School as one of four Blue Ribbon Schools in Massachusetts in 2013.

Such accomplishments would be impressive for any school in the Commonwealth. At New Mission,



three-fourths of students live in poverty, which brings additional challenges. Much can be learned from the sustained high-performance of the school. To discover what is driving this achievement, a case study design that incorporated interviews, focus groups, and document review was used. In all, nine staff members were interviewed at New Mission including the headmaster, director of curriculum, guidance counselor, athletic director, and several teachers.

The findings suggest three common practices form the foundation of New Mission’s effective approach to teaching and learning. **First**, there is strong leadership that is intentionally shared among all teachers and staff members at the school. Every teacher in the school serves on a school-wide leadership team or leads an out-of-school activity for students. Thoughtful systems and structures give teachers the time and support they need to meaningfully collaborate and help lead the school. **Second**, decisions are student-focused, data-driven, and based on holistic assessments of strengths and needs. Test scores are only one component in the decision-making process. Students also articulate their own dreams and concerns in reflecting on their academic and developmental progress. **Finally**, New Mission has an embedded culture of high ac-



ademic rigor coupled with personalized support. Strong and positive adult-student relationships enable New Mission to challenge students to excel and prepare them for college success.

The result is a high-performing school with strong family and community partnerships. Students excel in and out of the classroom, and share that success with their families and community. In turn, the school has seen increased engagement and pride from parents, family members, and community members. As Headmaster Wilson remarked: “New Mission’s success is not only good for students, but it is also a tremendous asset to the Hyde Park community.”

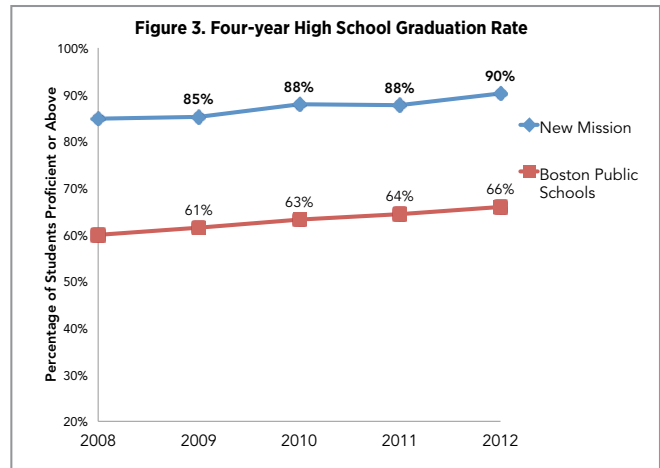


Figure 4. Demographics of New Mission High School and Boston Public Schools

	Total Students	African-American	Hispanic	White	Free/Reduced Lunch	English Language Learners	Special Education
New Mission	263	61%	32%	4%	78%	5%	18%
Boston	57,000	36%	40%	13%	72%	31%	19%

Three key practices driving the success at New Mission High School

1 Strong Leadership and Shared Ownership

- The headmaster and staff at New Mission developed a sense of shared responsibility for student success among all stakeholders. There is a common belief that students will excel and succeed in college with the entire community’s support.
- The school leadership intentionally developed “layers of leadership.” Leadership is distributed throughout the school using thoughtfully designed committee structures and communication systems.
- New Mission restructured its schedule to create multiple opportunities for team meetings and teacher collaboration.

2 Effective Use of Data to Improve Instruction

- Decisions about academic programming begin before students even enter New Mission. Prior to the start of the school year, staff meet in grade-level, content, and student support teams to discuss entering and returning students – their strengths and areas of concern.
- Teachers not only have access to rich student data, but they also receive professional support from peer teacher leaders and experts in the field to learn how to change their instruction in response to the data.
- A comprehensive system of assessments is complemented by student-led portfolios that empower students to take control of their learning.

3 Academic Rigor and Student Support

- The goal of being a college preparatory school drives the day-to-day work of the teachers, leaders, staff, and students at New Mission. Students are expected, and expect themselves, to succeed in college, not simply be ready for college.
- By the end of sophomore year, students are expected to lead their academic advising sessions and propose their own course schedules; by the end of junior year, students must identify where they will be applying to college and be ready to apply with essays prepared.
- High academic rigor is coupled with strong personalized support for students. The small size of the school and low staff turnover mean that teachers can get to know all the students.

Strong Leadership and Shared Ownership

When Naia Wilson became Headmaster in 2006, she began her tenure by establishing basic systems to create a safe learning environment where instruction could occur without disruption and the school started to build closer relationships with families and community organizations. The school's test scores and graduation rates gradually improved, but teachers and leaders saw even greater potential for New Mission students – success in college.

In 2009, Wilson and her staff launched an ambitious series of curricular and instructional reforms that re-envisioned New Mission as a high-performing college preparatory school. The curriculum incorporated more advanced content and tasks, and teachers raised their expectations of what students should know and be able to do. The shift put tremendous demands on the entire school community. It forced the school to hold a series of meetings with all stakeholders – teachers, students, staff, families, and the surrounding community – to discuss what becoming a college preparatory school would mean. Ultimately, New Mission leaders, teachers, and the school community developed a shared belief that they would all have to be responsible for the success of students if the school was to meet its new mission as a college prep school. As Wilson recounted, “We were forced to do it because you can't reach student success going it alone.” For their part, the students embraced the new direction and approached Wilson about implementing a school uniform policy that reflected a college prep culture. The uniform policy was affirmed by a vote of the entire school community.

Wilson began by intentionally developing “layers of leadership” in the school. Comprehensive and resilient systems and structures were designed to distribute leadership among teachers. The school now has 12 different teams led by teachers including the ten-member Instructional Leadership Team, a student support team composed of teachers and support services staff, content teams for Advanced Placement (AP), English language arts, math, history and science, and grade-level teams for 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades. The teams foster leadership among teachers as they share chairing the meetings and organizing the work. Teachers see their impact on the school as they move to implement decisions made in the teams, further empowering teachers to take ownership of the school.



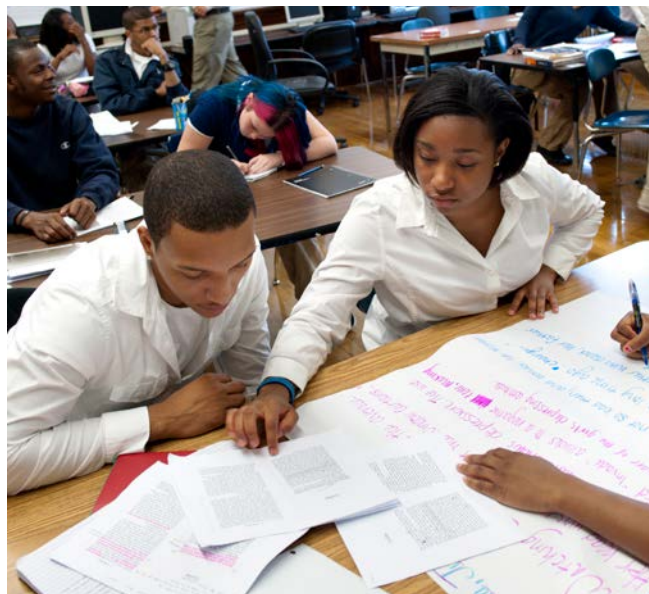
To facilitate this work, Wilson restructured the school day to create multiple opportunities for team meetings and teacher collaboration. While being a Boston pilot school¹ gave New Mission a bit more flexibility to implement a revised schedule and a slightly longer school day, most of the reforms focused on creating structured opportunities for collaboration. For example, the grade-level teams schedule time to meet once every week. Content teams also meet once every week. The Instructional Leadership Team meets every other week. All meetings have agendas developed using a common template, employ an inquiry-based protocol to examine practices, and are considered working sessions.

In this way, there are elements of standardization across the teams, even if the personalities on those teams vary. One teacher explained a typical meeting at New Mission: “The meetings are ‘inside-out.’ We start with a student, then ask what we can do to improve his or her learning. The meetings are dynamic working sessions to share and improve practice.” Having multiple teams means that every teacher in the school has to take on some type of leadership role, if not within a formal committee, then in some other aspect at the school. Emphasized a teacher: “Everyone has a leadership role at the school, whether you are a coach, serve on the governing board, or sit on the Instructional Leadership Team.”

Effective Use of Data to Improve Instruction

Decisions about academic programming is on-going and based on data. Prior to the start of the school year, teachers, guidance counselor, directors of curriculum, and others meet in grade-level, content, and student support teams to discuss entering and returning students – their strengths and areas of concern. For new students, the results from diagnostic assessments help to develop individualized schedules. Once enrolled, students continue to take a variety of assessments that help New Mission monitor achievement growth, modify course schedules, and adapt instructional practices. Data on individual students is shared using web-based Google documents, so every teacher in the school has access to the same information.

Teachers not only have access to rich student data, but they also receive the professional support necessary to change their instruction in response to the data. New Mission uses an instructional rounds model where teachers and school leaders observe lessons together with the goal of developing common language about high-quality instruction. Based on practice from the medical community, instructional rounds encourage teachers to collaborate around instruction, practice observation techniques, and reflect on patterns of instruction at the school. The school also employs the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program, which uses a framework to help students develop organizational, study, and leadership skills across content areas.



The system of assessments is complemented by student-led portfolio reviews that occur two times per year at the end of the fall and spring terms. In these reviews, students meet with their assigned advisor (usually a teacher) and parent or adult family member to review their academic progress. Students reflect on what they have learned over the term by examining an essential question from each core content area. In math, for example, students might respond to the question, “How can we use known information to determine unknown information in geometry?” The portfolios empower students to take control of their learning. Explained one teacher: “Students not only reflect on what they are learning, but how they are learning.”

The portfolio system helps New Mission move its data analysis beyond test scores. According to teachers, portfolios also facilitate shared responsibility and effective communication between the school and families. Through the portfolio process, teachers get to know students’ families better, creating opportunities for stronger teacher-student-family relationships. Because teachers know their students and their families so well, they feel empowered to probe for more information on students’ lives away from school. As one teacher said, “We know the students, their families and where they live.” Another teacher emphasized, “There is no place for a child to hide at New Mission. No child can fall through the cracks.”



1 The result of a partnership between the Boston public school system and the Boston Teachers Union, pilot schools were opened in 1995 to promote increased choice options within the district, largely in response to 1994 state legislation creating first-time charter schools. Each school has autonomy over its budget, staffing, governance, curriculum and assessment, and school calendar.

Academic Rigor and Student Support

The goal of being a college preparatory school drives the day-to-day work of the teachers, leaders, staff, and students at New Mission. The school staff – and students – have set expectations for college success, and the school has witnessed students' steady improvement in their SAT scores over the last three years (2009 to 2012). As one teacher said, "Our dedication to excellence – from the faculty and students to the custodians and cafeteria workers – is what makes New Mission successful."

One essential practice aimed at raising the level of rigor at New Mission is to give students a voice in their education and encourage them to use it. By the end of sophomore year, students are expected to lead their academic advising sessions and propose course schedules that meet college readiness goals; by the end of junior year students must know where they will be applying to college and be ready to apply. Empowering students in this way has also had some unexpected benefits. Teachers are now being held accountable by the students to set high expectations for learning. As one teacher explained, "We do everything we can to give students a voice. Students now buy into the school mission. So, if we don't hold them to high expectations, they let us know it!"

High academic rigor is coupled with strong personalized support for students. The small size of the school and low staff turnover means that teachers can get to know all the students. In addition, Wilson and the guidance counselor have one-on-one degree audit meetings with all students once every year to discuss grades and pathways toward graduation. The meetings always focus on being prepared for college success.



There are several other practices at the school that provide students with the extra support necessary to meet the school's expectations. A "step-up" day shows students what it will be like at the next grade level. Students spend an entire school day as if they were in the next grade level. The experience opens the eyes of students to the level of work they will be expected to do the following year. New Mission also offers Homework Academy – afterschool assistance from staff and teachers for any content area. Students underperforming in certain subjects are assigned mandatory Homework Academy. Finally, the school has a strong system of socio-emotional support as well. An in-house licensed social worker, intern, and partnerships with local community-based organizations ensure that needs beyond academics are met.

A Focus on Continuous Improvement

The leadership and staff at New Mission know that to help students overcome the challenges facing urban students, the school needs to keep improving. After briefly celebrating improved graduation rates and achievement scores, New Mission has set a new goal of having every student in the school achieve a college-ready score of 1650 or above on the SAT and 100 percent of graduates taking at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course before graduating. They are already well on their way in accomplishing

the latter; at least 80 percent of 2014 graduates are expected to have taken at least one AP course.

New Mission and the other seven SOM Prize-winning schools² are examples of how successful practices can lead to significant improvement. By intentionally sharing leadership, employing student-centered and data-driven decision making, and developing a culture of rigor and support, school leaders and teachers can impact the life trajectories of urban students.

² In addition to New Mission High School in 2012, prior School on the Move Prize winners include: the Sarah Greenwood K-8 School (2006), Excel High School (2007), Samuel Mason Elementary School (2008), Boston Community Leadership Academy (2009), Joseph Lee Elementary School (2010) and the Edwards Middle School (2011).



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