



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MANNING

INCLUSION MEANS EVERYONE

The halls of the Phineas Bates Elementary School buzz with activity. Students hustle with instruments to music class. Leaders and teachers greet each student by name. Two students lead the school in the Pledge of Allegiance in English and Spanish. These hallmarks of this tight-knit elementary school community demonstrate the shared values of equity and inclusion that infuse the school culture. The Phineas Bates joins a select group of rapidly improving schools, recognized by EdVestors' annual School on the Move Prize. How the Bates created this highly effective learning community may prove instructive for other schools looking to improve.

TEACHER LEADERS DRIVE THE WORK

Leaders and teachers worked together as key decision-makers on teaching and learning issues. School leader, Andrew Vega, started a listening campaign at the beginning of his tenure as principal—meeting for an hour with every teacher. The goal was to understand existing teacher culture and engage teacher voice on student learning issues. A common theme emerged: teachers wanted more autonomy to make decisions about teaching and learning. Teachers voiced a strong desire to have every teacher serve on the instructional leadership team (ILT), an uncommon practice in the district. Putting a premium on the ILT as a vehicle for teacher voice in decision-making, school leaders allocated the bulk of school-level professional development hours to ILT meeting time. Eventually, teachers owned agenda-setting and facilitation of these meetings—transforming an opportunity for teacher voice into a structure for teacher leadership.

Leaders focused on supporting teachers to improve, and differentiate, classroom practices. New leaders and teachers are struck by the tight-knit school community; collegiality characterizes relationships among teachers. Upon his arrival, the principal began to translate this high degree of community identity among staff into more formalized structures of peer support for teachers' classroom practice. The goal was explicit: improve classroom pedagogy while simultaneously raising expectations for student learning, so that all students could access rigorous course work. The principal structured a school schedule that created weekly common planning time for teachers, using protocols to focus on teaching and learning issues and to maximize collaboration. School leaders invested resources—time, expertise, and peer-to-peer mentoring—to support teachers. In turn, teachers were motivated to tackle the challenges to ensure all students could learn at the highest levels.

INCLUSION AND EQUITY AS CORE VALUES

The Bates leaders and teachers committed themselves to an inclusive school culture. When the district asked the Bates to increase the educational options for students with disabilities, the Bates staff approached this work by defining what it means to be an inclusive school. The school community wanted a broader definition that mirrored diversity at the Bates—inclusivity in regard to socio-economic status, race, family composition, and sexual orientation, in addition to student learning needs. Teachers and leaders then focused on identifying where gaps in equity and opportunity existed. Staff took a hard look at Advanced Work Classrooms (AWCs) where students were being sorted into two academic tracks based on a test in the fall of 3rd grade. The whole-school ILT voted to replace AWCs with new rigorous coursework available to all students, and teachers committed themselves to the “heavy lift” required to support all learners.

Community-wide conversations about race and equity were a critical step in reaching inclusion goals. Teachers played an important leadership role in ensuring that school values were widely shared. “We are an inclusion school. We honor diversity. And we want to celebrate our differences.” With this level of buy-in to school values among teachers, the principal invited a local community partner to initiate and facilitate dialogues about

“The teacher leadership and autonomy has been huge. We have more say in decision-making... We're able to make decisions in the best interest of our students.”

BATES THIRD GRADE TEACHER

race among teachers and families. Parents provided powerful comments on equity of opportunity for students, as well as their own engagement in school leadership and decision-making structures. Parents articulated that the opinions most often heard in School Site Council meetings were not reflective of the diversity of the school community. This led to thoughtful and careful work to include more parent voices in productive conversations about the Bates school community, and it worked. By the following school year, School Site Council membership was fifty percent more diverse.

LEARNING IS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL

Teachers and leaders prioritized teaching social-emotional skills to foster student engagement. In raising expectations for student learning, teachers and leaders at the Bates recognized the need to increase students' sense of ownership in their own learning. They placed a premium on student engagement when making the decision to implement the Social Thinking® curriculum that focused on direct instruction of social-emotional skills, like social awareness, self-awareness, and self-management. A focus on these skills reinforced the commonly-held values of inclusion and equity, and ensured that the Bates would be a safe place for all students to learn. Perhaps more importantly, a focus on social-emotional learning helped build strong habits for students to be successful beyond the classroom. The Social Thinking® approach and aligned curriculum provided a common language for student-teacher and peer interactions, universal protocols for behavior, and the ability to track student development and growth. Teachers and leaders point to improved student behavior, increased participation in student leadership opportunities, and enhanced student voice at the Bates as outcomes of this work.

“We can see outcomes from this work. Before we had students having big reactions to issues around them. Now any teacher can ask: ‘Was your reaction right-sized to the problem?’ and the students will adjust their behavior because we all communicate the same expectations.”

BATES KINDERGARTEN TEACHER



IN SUMMARY

Reflecting on the significant school-level changes that led to rapid improvement in student outcomes, the story of the Phineas Bates Elementary School demonstrates what is possible when a commonly-held set of values, focused on equity and inclusion, define school priorities. At the Bates, leadership is widely distributed, teachers share collective responsibility for student learning at the highest levels, and trusting relationships among students, teachers, leaders and families characterize community interactions. In the words of one teacher: “We know how good this community is, and we won’t go back.” Everyone at the Bates is invested in the school’s continued success.

TO LEARN MORE

about these school improvement strategies, please visit www.edvestors.org/bestpractices to view the accompanying best practice videos.

ABOUT THE SCHOOL ON THE MOVE PRIZE

The Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize recognizes one of the most improving Boston Public Schools each fall. While acknowledging the tremendous amount of work needed to ensure every student in Boston receives a world class education, we seek to shine a light on those schools, leaders, and teachers who are getting it right and have significantly improved outcomes for students. By sharing the stories of how schools are able to improve, we hope to help more schools make significant progress for their students. The School on the Move Prize comes with a \$100,000 award from EdVestors, public recognition, and the opportunity for the winning school to document and share replicable strategies.