

# Inside Urban Charter Schools

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Presentation

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Inside Urban  
Charter Schools

Promising Practices and Strategies  
in Five High-Performing Schools



By Katherine K. Merseth

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With a foreword by S. Paul Keville

# Presentation Overview

- Overview of the Study
  - Review of Purpose and the 5 Case Study Sites
- Cross-Case Analysis and Findings
  - Culture & Mission
  - Getting the Right People
  - Structures & Systems
  - Instruction
- Beyond the Study
  - Concerns about the Future and Replication
- Questions & Answers

# Who were the Schools?

- Schools located in high poverty districts
- Schools with renewed charters
- Schools that made AYP in 2006
- Schools outperforming sending districts on MCAS
- Study conducted from January 2007-January 2009
- Academy of the Pacific Rim
- Boston Collegiate Charter School
- Lawrence Community Day
- MATCH
- Roxbury Preparatory Charter School

# The 5 Case Studies



# BOSTON COLLEGIATE CHARTER SCHOOL

## Dorchester, Massachusetts



Founded in 1998  
412 Students in Grades 5-12

64% White  
27% African-American  
6% Hispanic  
2% Asian  
1% Multi-race non-Hispanic

17% Special Education  
42% Low Income  
4-Year Graduation Rate = 93%  
2005-2006 Dropout Rate = 0%

# COMMUNITY DAY CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL

## Lawrence, Massachusetts



Founded in 1995  
330 Students in Grades K-8

87% Hispanic  
9% White  
2% African-American  
1% Asian  
1% Multi-race

18% Special Education  
64% Low Income  
80% First Language not English

# THE MATCH CHARTER PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

## Boston, Massachusetts



Founded in 2000  
220 Students in Grades 9-12

62% African American  
30% Hispanic  
4% White  
2% Asian  
2% Multi-race non-Hispanic

11% Special Education  
70% Low Income  
4 Year Graduation Rate = 60%  
2005-2006 Drop Out Rate = 3.2%

# ROXBURY PREPARATORY CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL

## Roxbury, Massachusetts



Founded in 1999  
198 Students in  
Grades 6-8

61.1% African American  
32.8% Hispanic  
1.5% Native American  
4.5% Multi-race non-  
Hispanic

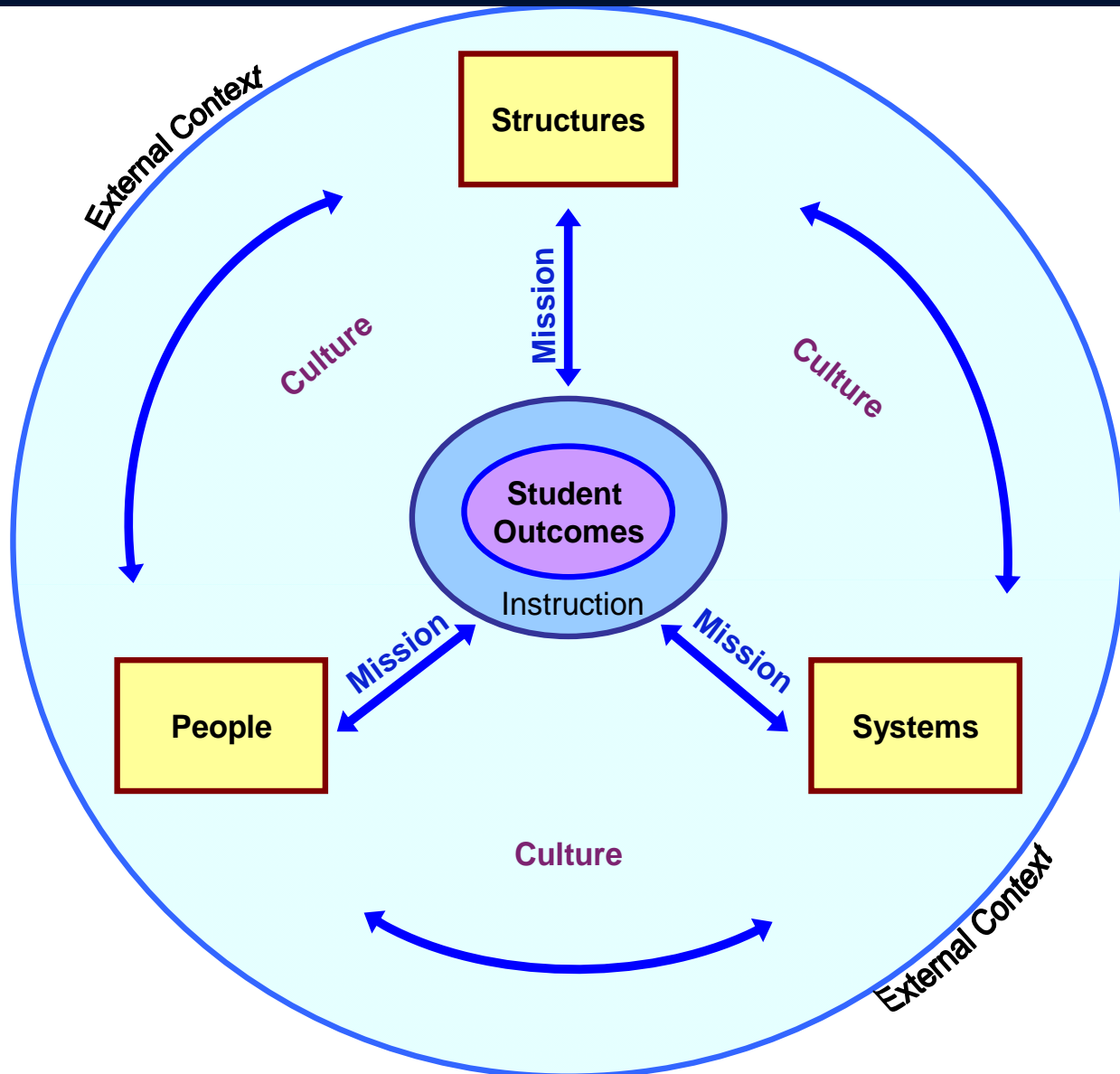
11.6% Special Education  
69.7% Low Income

# All these schools are...

- Small
- Mature
- Nimble and Entrepreneurial
- Filled with adults who believe in the purpose and mission of the school

Why can't all schools look like this?

# Cross-Case Analysis



# Looking Across these schools

## What makes these schools successful?

- A clear mission and a broadly shared and strong institutional culture
- Purposefully chosen teachers and administrators who “fit” the organization’s culture
- Organizational structures and systems that support student learning
- Specific classroom procedures
- COHERENCE across all

# School Culture: Mission, Theories of Action, and Operating Assumptions

# Mission Statements

The mission of Boston Collegiate Charter School is to prepare each student for college.

The MATCH Charter Public High School prepares Boston students to succeed in college and beyond.

Roxbury Preparatory Charter School, a public school that serves grades 6-8, prepares its students to enter, succeed in, and graduate from college.

# Theories of Action

We believe that combining high academic and behavioral expectations with tremendous support; insuring consistency, order, and structure throughout the school; and, ensuring that all teachers are outstanding and supported will prepare students to excel in college and beyond.

- Boston Collegiate

If a school creates a culture in which teachers are freed from behavior management issues and organizational operations to focus on teaching, and kids are focused and trying reasonably hard to learn, then students will achieve academic success.

- MATCH

# Norms & Operating Assumptions

- High expectations for students “No Excuses”
- High expectations for families “Buy-in”
- High expectations for staff “Whatever it takes”
- A commitment to continuous improvement
- Complete dedication to the mission

**The Right People:  
Leadership  
Hiring and Retention**

# Leadership

- Leadership tasks vary across schools
- Varying involvement in classrooms
- Some schools split management and instructional roles
- Some more shared than others
- Not always the charismatic leader

# The Importance of Hiring

“Hiring is the most important thing that we do. It's a huge, huge, huge luxury that cannot be overstated with charter school leaders...So that's the major advantage that we have as a charter school. We try to take full advantage of that, and we spend a significant amount of time on the hiring process...”

- Roxbury Prep Administrator

# What is the hiring process?

## A Typical Hiring Process: A Winnowing

- Job Posted, 100's of Resumes flood in
- 10 phone interviews, several called back
- On-site interviews
- Sometimes observed in current teaching job
- Invited to teach sample lesson
- Feedback from teachers, administrators, students
- Second visit to to meet staff, see school, observe.  
Receive feedback
- Discuss strengths & weaknesses and explicit consideration if the candidate will fit into school culture

# Some differences in what the schools look for

“When your mission is to get [students] prepared for college and know that socially they can handle that and that they’re going to be resilient, and when they get kicked down they’re going to come back fighting, they need to be surrounded by love at the school in order to help foster that. If they’re not, then we’re in big trouble. So I’m just eager to meet as many candidates as I can that are going to love our students.”

- Boston Collegiate Administrator

“We want someone who’s pretty much ready to sell their soul to the devil, who’s not going to have any sort of private life at all – a minimal one. Because when you come here, you have to obviously devote yourself to at least 12 hours a day, and that doesn’t include weekends. So you want someone who is very young and has a lot of energy.”

- MATCH Administrator

# Why do teachers leave these schools?

“Not a good fit could mean a lot of things. Typically it’s because they don’t get the no-excuses, urgency piece, or they’re general teachers, or they’re of the go-it-alone mentality, or overwhelmed, you know just really struggle.”

- APR Administrator

“We lose teachers every year when teaching staff have children or they get married - especially when they have children. It seems to be really challenging trying to balance both here.”

- MATCH Administrator

# Philosophies about teacher retention?

- Some willing to accept turnover as a tradeoff for teacher commitment
- Others feel that turnover is “culturally devastating” or unsustainable
- Willingness to accept turnover is a luxury of reputation and location

# Is there a Human Resource–Supply Challenge in Scaling up these High Performing Charters?

No

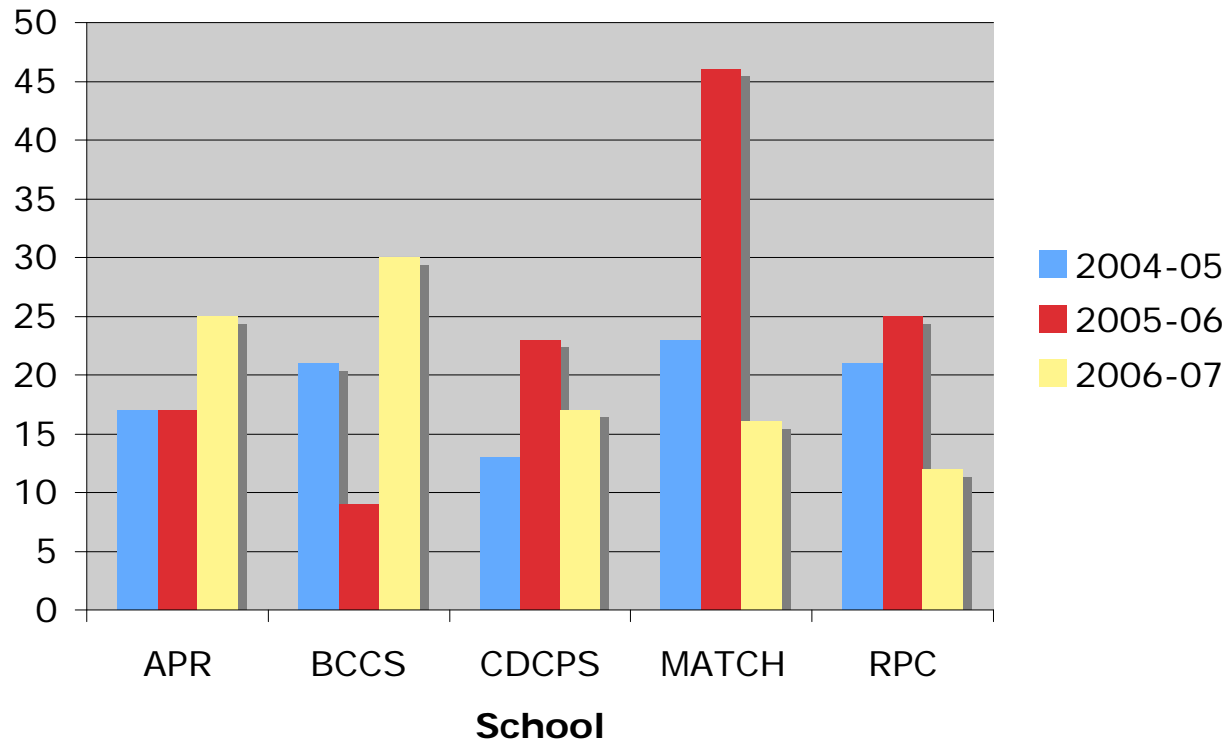
Yes

“Do I wish ultimately everyone who’s good, everyone who came and it worked out and was very effective, stayed for five to seven years? Sure, the school would be stronger... We try to put systems in place so that we’re not starting over every time we have a new teacher.”

“I think that one of the things that we’re interested in, in terms of being sustainable and replicable, is finding that [work life] balance. If you can’t work here and also have a family and manage your life and grow in a career, then we’re failing as a school. If we’re just turning people over who are young and leave, then you know, that’s not the school I want this to be.”

# What is the turnover in these schools?

**Annual Teacher Turnover Rates in the Three Most Recent School Years**



# **Systems and Structures: Getting Organized for Instruction**

# Structures – Time and People

- Extended day and school year
- Scheduling to reflect priorities
- Assignment of Students – advisories, tutors, team-teachers
  - MATCH Tutors

# Systems

- Data Driven Teaching
  - Classroom Observation in Some Schools
  - Interim Assessments tied to MCAS
  - Follow Up Tutoring
- Student Accountability for Behavior
  - Student & Family Handbooks
  - School-wide Discipline Plans
  - Parent Buy-In
- School-Wide Systems
  - Homework Club
  - Thursday Assessments

**Instruction:**  
**Going Inside the Classrooms**

# Instructional Philosophy

“Our philosophy is [that] we have a greater school culture that allows each teacher the maximum opportunities for them to use that time well. Our culture allows fifty-six minutes of learning to really be fifty-six minutes.... **It’s not like we have unique, amazing ideas of how to teach math... We don’t have an overarching philosophy of ‘How to actually teach,’ ‘How to actually instruct.’ It’s more of making sure that there is no time wasted.** And how to use that time is up to you.”

- School Administrator

# Classrooms of High Performing Urban Charters

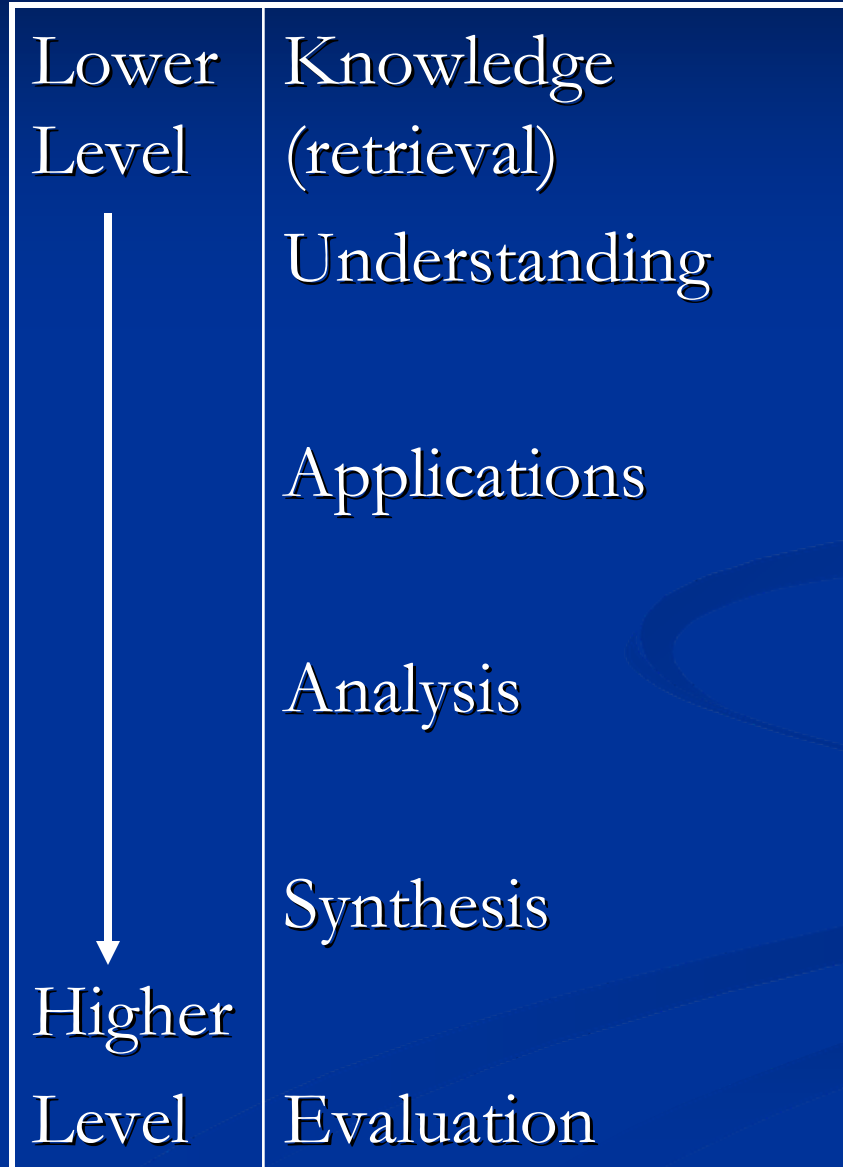
The 'Black Box' of  
Instruction

- External Dimensions are well defined
  - Lessons tightly aligned to state standards
  - Test Preparation
  - Format of lesson delivery
  - Sense of Urgency
  - Kids are 'busy'
- But busy at what?



# Variations in Instructional Tasks

## Blooms Taxonomy



# Is the Varied Instructional Practice across the classrooms in these schools surprising?

- Yes-- given the enormous and pervasive cultural coherence within these schools
- But systems and structures, mission and coherence TRUMP varied instruction and a tendency toward low level cognitive tasks.
- So does varied instruction matter?
- **MAYBE**

## A QUESTION:

What explains the fact that MATCH and BCCS ranked in the top 20 high schools in the state on the MCAS Verbal and Math scores in the spring of 2008, testing 100% of their tenth graders, while in the following fall of 2008, these same students (all 100%) receive combined SAT Verbal and Math scores of 920 (MATCH) and 1039 (BCCS)?

# MCAS vs. SAT

	MCAS Proficient + Advanced	SAT Verbal Math Total
BCCS Math	100%	545M
BCCS ELA	93%	<u>494V</u>
		1039
MATCH Math	100%	490M
MATCH ELA	98%	<u>430V</u>
		920

# Instruction:

## Performance on MCAS vs. Attainment and Success in College

- All score exceptionally well (usually 100% proficiency) on state MCAS exams.

<http://vimeo.com/6872050>

# Additional Questions / Research

- Do charter kids succeed in college or drop out when the tight control is removed? In other words, are these schools unnecessarily paternalistic?
- Is success on state competency exams just a 'sucker's game' for urban charter schools?
- Human Capital questions: As charters grow will they be able to find sufficient numbers of teachers willing to 'sell their souls to the devil'?
- What will the growing interest and presence of unions do to the charter movement?

# More Questions

- Are these schools “Drop Out Factories”? Is it their fault if kids transfer back to BPS after passing the MCAS?
- Do they discriminate against SPED students? What is the right standard? Boston’s 20.9% SPED rate or the State’s 17.1 or APR’s 13.9, BCCS 17.2, MATCH 7.9? Community Day’s 18%
- What about LEP?
- What are your questions?