

“Literally, this school saved me!”

“It’s still school...but it’s a lot better”

In the Students’ Words:

**Findings from Three “Second-Chance” Charter Schools
for Middle and High School Students**

Report Prepared by:

**Dr. Michael Nakkula
University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education
Philadelphia, PA**

**Mr. John Harris
Applied Research Consulting
Washington, D.C.**

May 30, 2010

Introduction and Background of the Study

Over the past four school years – 2005-2006 through 2008-2009 – a research group led by professor Michael Nakkula has partnered with the Project for School Innovation (PSI) to study a cluster of charter schools that focus on middle and high school students faced with particularly high-risk circumstances. Those circumstances include, but are not limited to, intensive poverty, histories of school failure, family dysfunction and disintegration, and the students’ own cognitive and psychosocial challenges or vulnerabilities. Not all of the students are faced with the same pattern of challenges, of course, but each of them is exposed to or exhibits some combination of risk factors that has made academic achievement particularly challenging. The schools featured in this study are often called “second-chance charter schools,” because they target students who have failed in more mainstream educational settings, have experienced significant personal difficulties that made education inordinately challenging, or have simply opted for an alternative educational experience for any number of other reasons. At the outset of the study the schools included: Amesbury Academy of Strategic Learning (subsequently renamed Amesbury Academy Charter Public School – AACPS), Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA), Champion Charter Public School (CCPS), and Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS). After the second year of the study, however, CCPS was closed for a variety of logistical reasons; since then the study has focused on the other three schools.

It should be noted that the first three years of the study were conducted while professor Nakkula was at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In the fall of 2008 he assumed a position at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education. In order to continue with the study despite the move, professor Nakkula partnered with longtime colleague John Harris of Applied Research Consulting in Washington, D.C. Mr. Harris was instrumental in many facets of the most recent wave of the study described below, including the design of the data tracking tool and the collection and analysis of student interview data. This report reflects the collective work of Nakkula and Harris that was carried out during the 2008-2009 academic year. Before delving into that work, it is important to understand how the study evolved to the current status.

In the first year of the study, 2005-2006, the primary focus of the research was on the development of a survey tool that would allow the four schools to gain a clearer sense of how students perceived their accomplishments as well as their educational, social, and career development possibilities at their respective schools. Two versions of the survey (we use “survey” and “questionnaire” interchangeably in this report) were created, based in part on extensive input from each school’s leadership team. The first version is an open-ended questionnaire that allows students to provide responses to a range of questions in their own words. The second version is a composite of open-ended questions – but this time asked in a more structured format that allows students to rank order the priority of their responses – and multiple choice or “Likert-type” questions that allow students to circle the answer that best captures their response. The second version of the instrument was deemed more effective and served as the basis for the majority of the 2006-2007 work.

Over the course of the 2006-2007 academic year the composite student questionnaire was further revised and administered to nearly all the students (over 90%) in three of the four schools. Only students who were chronically absent or chose not to participate failed to complete the questionnaire, which was administered at two points in time: late fall/early winter of the school year (hereafter referred to as Time 1) and late in the spring, shortly before the end of the school year (Time 2). Another wave of modifications was made to the questionnaire, based on our experiences from the first administration, resulting in a finalized version for the spring or Time 2 administration. Because there was more we still hoped to learn from the original open-ended version of the questionnaire, the Amesbury school (AACPS), which includes many students with quite serious psychiatric diagnoses and special needs challenges, administered the open-ended version again in 2006-2007. Responses from that particular school were helpful to our ongoing refinement of a survey tool that will be most effective for other schools like those included in this study.

Questionnaire findings from years two and three of our study were fairly similar. During the 2007-2008 school year the surveys again were administered at two points in time, but only for the three schools that remained in the study. Champion Charter School closed during this period of our work. We saw a consistent pattern of students declaring a

strong interest in college across all three schools, but most prominently at the Lowell school (LMACS). As survey numbers were growing larger, we became progressively more confident that LMACS was highly focused on preparation for higher education or skilled vocational training, although, according to student surveys, college preparation was the far more common goal. BDEA and AACPS also showed strong interests in college, but with somewhat less specificity than at LMACS. That is, students spoke of college in more general terms at these two schools, whereas at LMACS college plans were presented more concretely, including specific colleges that students planned to attend.

A prominent theme at AACPS over the first three years of the study was an emphasis on caring teachers and the school being a respite from the stressors of the local public high school, and, at times, from family difficulties. The small school environment at AACPS allowed all students to get to know each other quite well and to develop close relationships with their teachers. This theme was prominent at LMACS also, and at BDEA to a lesser extent, but the small size at AACPS seemed to make a difference in students feeling known and supported. Future goals for AACPS were quite diverse, ranging from wanting to pursue a four-year college education to simply wanting a stable, peaceful life. Money concerns seemed less pronounced at AACPS than at the other two schools.

At BDEA there has been a strong focus on completing high school as a top priority, as well as staying safe in the face of community and prior school violence. College aspirations were certainly presented in the first three years of the study at BDEA, but the desire to secure steady employment was featured as well. BDEA underwent a great deal of transition during these first three years, with the school's longtime head leaving for her own career development. This shift may be reflected in students' survey responses to a degree in that there seemed to be less focus on school as a supportive environment in year three relative to the first two years. The year-four data collection was designed, in part, to gather information on how students were experiencing the school now that the new leadership team was more firmly intact.

Current Wave of the Study

The most recent or fourth-wave of the study allowed the research team to follow-up on the previous findings in more depth. Specifically, wave four included three primary data collection approaches. The first approach utilized a similar administration of the student survey, which was conducted at 2 points in time at all three schools: once in the fall or early winter for students enrolling late, and once during the spring. The main revision to the student survey component to our research was in the use of a more finely polished code book for calculating the students' survey responses (See Appendix A for copy of the survey, administration guide, and thematic codebook for categorizing written responses). The codebook evolved out of the full four years of the study and allowed for multiple coders to participate in the analysis in a consistent manner. An average of 35 students completed surveys at both points in time at AACPS; 55 students at LMACS; and 120 at BDEA.

For the first time in our study, we were able to conduct individual interviews with students from the study. We interviewed 10 students at each of the three schools for a total of 30. We selected first-year students in each school with the hope that we would be able to follow their development over subsequent years. A downside to selecting first-year students was that they had less experience in the schools than many of their peers. Nonetheless, students from each school provided rich interview data, which we summarize below. Please see Appendix B for a copy of the interview protocol.

The final data collection method for this wave of the study included the piloting of a comprehensive information tracking system. Although each of the schools records and tracks particular forms of data, it is not tracked commonly across the schools. Further, the data tracked does not capture all the important indicators of success and struggle in which the school leaders are interested. We piloted our new tracking tool for the students who were interviewed. School leaders entered information into the tracking tool for those 30 students for the purpose of determining whether the cost in data entry and data management time would be worth the benefit of capturing such information. We review the results of that pilot work below. Please see Appendix C for a copy of the tracking tool, along with instructions for using it.

In addition to the three primary means of data collection, the research team had an opportunity to meet with the school leaders via conference calls facilitated by Ruth Feldman of PSI. Ruth has helped sponsor and facilitate the study throughout each wave of the work. Information gleaned from the school leaders helped shape the structure and content of the tracking tool and the nature of the student interviews.

Summary of Findings

For ease of interpretation, this report again uses the review structure of the prior reports, which was organized by school. Before presenting the school-specific findings, however, we first present an overarching picture of what we learned across the three schools. Following that broad representation we then provide core themes that emerged from the surveys and interviews at each school, and relate those school-specific findings to the overall picture from the study. To help bring the findings to life, we utilize as much of the students' voice as possible through quotes from the surveys and the interviews, and we close each school-specific section with a case study that captures many of the themes present in the interviews for the respective schools. Toward the end of the report we summarize findings from our piloting of the tracking tool, and make recommendations for potential use of it in the future.

Overall Findings across the Three Schools

To the extent that the students' perspectives represent an accurate view of the impact of these schools on high school graduation and plans for postsecondary education and training, the picture is extraordinarily positive. In this overall summary we present both the survey and interview findings according to the major themes that emerged in the surveys and the interviews. In the school-specific sections that follow these themes are fleshed out in more depth at the school level. There is a good deal of repetition across sections, given that the overall school findings also need to be represented in the school-specific sections to a certain degree; as such, we keep the overall findings as succinct as possible.

Graduating from high school. Virtually all of the students across the three schools expected to graduate from high school. Given the size of the survey sample (over

200 students completed the surveys twice during the 2008-2009 school year), this is a very optimistic portrait of the students' expectations. On the student surveys, LMACS students were most likely to supply answers that made reference to wanting to succeed at a high level of academic performance en route to high school graduation, whereas AACPS students were most likely to link graduating with the reduced stress they experience due to personalized levels of teacher and staff support. BDEA students were most focused on getting a second chance to pursue a high school diploma and, on average, supplied the most responses related to gratitude in getting a second chance.

College Aspirations. The vast majority of the students across the three schools stated definitive hopes and plans to attend college. Of the three schools, LMACS students seemed to be best positioned to make the transition from high school to college in that they reported the most specific plans and the most concrete evidence of being prepared to do the work, including taking college courses while in high school. BDEA students too, however, showed a great deal of knowledge about colleges they would like to attend and majors they would like to pursue, but they were not as clear as the LMACS students regarding the degree to which they felt academically prepared to begin college-level work. At AACPS, the portrait of college planning was more generalized; that is, plans were not quite as explicitly articulated as for the other two schools and many students expressed a need for more challenging college-prep coursework. Overall, students at AACPS were a bit more focused on the here-and-now, emphasizing the support they receive in school and how that is helping them figure out the next steps in their lives.

At each school many students listed (on the student surveys) or talked about (in the interviews) community colleges as a first step toward an eventual four-year degree. There also were lots of cases in which only the community college experience was cited as a goal. Given the preponderance of community college responses, it would seem wise for each school to continue developing strong relationships with community colleges; more information on that score will be provided in the implications section at the end of the report.

College majors were listed by more than half of the students who stated a college goal on their surveys. Common majors included business, architecture, law, and the medical field, including nursing and, in a few cases, becoming a medical doctor. It was

not clear from the surveys or the interviews whether students had ample opportunities to learn about career possibilities that are linked with their strengths and interests. Given the high degree of college-oriented responses, it would seem that strong career counseling or career development exploration should be a priority at each of the schools.

General Vocational Aspirations. In addition to college-related responses, many students listed vocational goals that do not require a college education, but might rely on post-secondary training of other types. For example, as with each of the prior years of the study, a number of students listed wanting to open a beauty salon or a garage as a goal. Some of these students cite the need for advanced mechanics training or business management skills, but they do not necessarily link these needs with formal training experiences. Each of the schools seems to provide either formal or informal guidance for such vocational aspirations, but it is unclear whether the degree of support available is adequate for meeting the students' career and work-related needs. That issue should be reviewed at all three schools, based on the student responses.

Overall Career "Realism." We highlight this theme to capture a common concern related to future achievement aspirations, whether they are college-oriented, financially based, or centered around a passion such as music or athletics. It is unclear, based on the responses to the surveys and interviews, just how fully the students understand what is required to accomplish their strongest goals. The surveys indicate that students have a great deal of general knowledge related to getting accepted to college and landing a good job, but it is less clear how they might apply such knowledge to their specific career goals and aspirations. For example, some of the students espouse very lofty career ambitions, such as becoming a doctor or lawyer, but they do not present an understanding of the steps that they would need to take to accomplish those goals. Our surveys are not adequately designed to assess the degree of realism (knowing what one needs to do to accomplish their goals) in the students' goals and expectations. The interviews generally suggest that students' knowledge is lacking in this area, as is common among many high school populations. The main way in which students communicated an understanding of what is needed to accomplish their career ambitions is through the repeated recommendation for more advanced high school coursework as preparation for college.

Highly Supportive Teachers and other School Staff. Across all three schools, the students generally spoke in glowing terms of their teachers, counselors, and school leaders. In the school-specific findings section that follows we provide in-depth response from students regarding their relationships with teachers and the other adults in their schools. At BDEA the students describe teachers who are unwilling to accept failure and a commitment to stick with students regardless of their motivation in the moment. In this regard, BDEA is presented as a school in which the staff is committed to reaching students where they are and supporting them from there. The biggest criticism of the BDEA staff is being “too nice” at times and being “pushovers.” The students seem to acknowledge that special accommodations must be made for students with long histories of academic struggle and resulting alienation from school, but, nonetheless, there is substantial feedback from students that the school should hold everyone more accountable.

At AAPCS many students referenced the school environment feeling “like a family,” and contrasting that with experiences at their prior high school. On the student surveys, the school counselor was cited, along with key teachers, as confidantes who helped them through difficult times. The particularly small environment of AAPCS allows most of the students to form a strong relationship with at least one of the teachers. One student described a teacher providing guitar lessons after school, which he said was the highlight of his educational experience. Other students pointed to the role of the school counselor in helping them find apprenticeship opportunities and in helping them through personal difficulties in their lives.

LMACS students presented a combination of challenge and care when describing their teachers. It is hard to find a complaint about the school staff in either the surveys or the interviews. When asking how the school could be strengthened the students commonly stated that it is great as it is, and cited helping and demanding teachers as key reasons for that. In the surveys, a few students said that more advanced coursework would be helpful in preparing for college, including a foreign language and more advanced math. But overall the students state that the teachers and school staff demand a lot academically and provide the individualized support necessary to meet those demands.

Reengagement with Education and with Hope. Overall, the theme of reengagement best summarizes what we learned from the students, particularly through the interview portion of the study. Across all three schools, the students talked about feeling lost and in many cases giving up hope for a high school diploma and a future career. That theme is underscored in the case studies that follow and it can be seen in many of the quotes embedded in the school-specific findings that follow. The students describe long and intense histories of educational failure and emotional challenges associated with that failure. The schools represent a new start and when that start is linked with personal relationships with teachers and other school staff and, ultimately, educational success, the result is an experience of reengagement with something critical that has been lost: hope for a future marked by a feeling of pride and relative security.

In a prior report on this study, the “second-chance schools” were described as a first chance to feel successful for many of the students. That notion is relevant here as well. The experience of “reengagement” is, in many cases, engagement with school for the first time, at least the first time since early elementary school.

Loving School. Given the educational histories of many students in this study, the theme of “loving school” is perhaps the least expected. But as we talked with students and reviewed their interview responses, it is fair to say that the majority of them described loving their current school experience. At times this feeling was linked with positive relationships with teachers; at other times it was a deep appreciation for the ability to pace their work according to their schedules and abilities; and at other times loving school was rooted in a recognition of what might have been had this educational involvement never occurred. Many students described the gradual process of buying into their current schools and finding at some point that they were actually succeeding and wanting to wake up for school in the morning. For other students, “loving school” would be too strong a statement for capturing their experiences; they were just trying to get through and earn a diploma. Even in those cases, however, the larger experience was framed positively.

Accommodations and Innovations. Each of the schools made particular accommodations and implemented innovative strategies to support student engagement. Perhaps the most commonly mentioned was the evening program at BDEA, which served

many positive purposes for students. It allowed older students to feel more “adult” in the educational process, by allowing them to work during the day and go to school in the evening. Their peers also tended to be older. According to the interviewed students, BDEA also made accommodations for later arrivals in the morning, which helps students who work late at night. Some students did list a concern with such accommodations, arguing that many students take advantage of such latitude; more on this theme is presented in the BDEA school-specific section.

LMACS seems to provide the least latitude with respect to school start times and larger scheduling issues. However, students there were appreciative of the teachers’ ability to support them around their personal concerns and still push them toward higher goals, such as achieving a college degree. In this sense, LMACS did not emphasize innovation as much as it did stability and consistency. Being part of a *culture of challenge, support, and accountability* is what was new for the students at LMACS. While such a cultural reality might not reflect an innovative idea, it constituted a novel experience for most of the students. Whereas the other two schools offered students a chance to benefit if they engaged, LMACS *insisted* that they engage and made it worth their while to do so. Those students who could not meet the minimal accountability requirements, however, were not able to continue at the school. Of the three schools, LMACS implemented the most consistent policies related to attendance and behavior, and if those policies were violated students were required to leave.

The main innovation LMACS students cited in their surveys was the ability to take college coursework at Middlesex Community College. Several students rated this a key aspect of their experience at the school, and others listed it as an opportunity they hoped to access in the upcoming year. By strengthening the connection to college by allowing selected students to take community college coursework, the college-preparation theme at LMACS was more than an abstract notion; it was an everyday reality for many of the students.

AAPCS makes many accommodations based on individual student needs, according to the interview and survey data. The school’s policy is to retain and graduate as many of their students as possible, even when the commitment to school is marginal. By reaching out to students with attendance or commitment problems, the hope is that

learning relationships can be developed that result in longer-term commitment and educational accomplishments. The AAPCS student surveys indicate that the majority of the students have close relationships with at least one adult in the school, whether it is a teacher, counselor, or school administrator. These relationships, in some cases, seem to be the center of their educational experiences. In our interviews with AAPCS students, we learned of the gratitude many students feel in being met with a caring school environment, and we also learned of frustrations linked with feeling that the environment is not as academically rigorous as it might be. In fact, a key challenge for AAPCS seems to be determining how best to balance their culture of care and support with the right degree of academic rigor and individual challenge.

A commonly cited example of innovation at AAPCS is the student apprenticeship program, which allows students to work in the community under the mentoring of work supervisors and earn course credit for that opportunity. Although a few students shared meaningful examples of their apprenticeship work, the overall program remained a bit vague for us. It came across in the interviews and on the surveys as an important component of the school programming that might need modifications to be more meaningful for more students.

Personal Change and Growth. Among our interview sample, students at LMACS and BDEA, in particular, spoke about the importance of developing internal motivation. This emphasis often was framed in two ways: as an outcome of reengaging with education due to their experiences at the schools or as something needed in order to benefit from what the schools have to offer. At BDEA the emphasis was on learning that you have to do things for yourself because nobody else was going to do them for you. This response seemed, in part, to be a product of BDEA's focus on supporting students to learn at their own pace in a manner that was best for them. Such a focus requires internal commitment as well as external support, as the students put it in various terms. At LMACS, internal motivation was framed as taking responsibility for yourself—for your education, your behavior, your future. It was about taking responsibility for your half of the bargain. The most vivid stories of change shared by the LMACS students included an emphasis on becoming more responsible.

Stories of personal change and growth at AAPCS tended to emphasize emotional development linked with personalized support at the school. Students commonly emphasized the low stress level within the school as a key contributor to their growth. The relative lack of competitiveness seemed to allow them to find their footing over time. As one student put it, “what I like best here is that I can be myself.” That, she said, was new, given her past experience of intense anxiety in her previous school related to both social and academic competition. In short, *being known* sums up what many students at AAPCS describe. Having adults who know and care about them on a personal level was cited as central to feeling connected to school and growing as a person.

School-Specific Findings

In this section of the report we expand upon the general themes that ran across the three schools. As described above, we attempt to represent the school findings in the students’ own words as much as possible.

Amesbury Academy Charter Public School

AAPCS administered the student survey in January of 2009 to 37 students and again in June to 38 students. This sample size is approximately 30% larger than in prior years, and as such there is more information to report. Perhaps because the surveys were administered during the second half of the school year at both points in time, the results were quite consistent across the two administrations. As we found in the past across all three schools, earning money is a high-priority immediate goal for most students at AAPCS and “going to college” is the most commonly presented goal upon completion of high school. 21 of the 38 AAPCS students listed a college-related response as their top goal after graduating from high school and 7 others listed it as their second most important goal. In examining the AAPCS responses more closely, it seems that college in general is more of a focus than an interest in a particular area. This lack of specificity, although not necessarily problematic for this age group, might point to the potential benefit of introducing more opportunities for career exploration in some of the school counseling work. It is interesting that the school’s apprenticeship program was not

featured significantly in the students' responses, even though it is mentioned in the interviews and by the school leadership as an important aspect of the school's focus.

In exploring how the schools are most helpful in supporting the students in reaching their goals, caring teachers and a caring school environment was by far the most common response at AAPCS. 24 of the 38 students rated such supports as critical in the end of the year survey results. Sample answers included:

"teachers sticking by my side"

"I get one-on-one attention."

"The school showed me who I was as a person."

"Their support made me actually want to be successful again."

"helping me when I was homeless"

"This school gives you someone when you have no one"

"They love who you are"

This sample of responses reflects the larger feel of the student surveys at both points in time. There is a strong emphasis on personal and emotional support.

Although college was dominantly displayed with respect to future plans, there was little emphasis on academic rigor or college prep in the students' responses to how the school has been most helpful to them. There was, however, an emphasis on the small school and class sizes being helpful, and on gaining one-to-one and related forms of personalized support for accomplishing one's goals. One student provided interesting responses to how the school has helped him educationally:

"It teaches me things no other school could."

"Helps me with goal setting"

"They're appreciative of everything we do."

The students' responses link the personalized caring approach of AAPCS with an emphasis on supporting individualized learning goals. It seems fair to say that AAPCS is the most individualized of the three schools with respect to the focus on student growth. The small size allows the staff to meet students where they are and work with them accordingly.

In exploring what the students would like to see improved at AAPCS to make it even more helpful, several students focused on getting a better and bigger facility, which

would help reduce noise. Although the small school and class sizes are helpful in promoting concentration and focus, that benefit is reduced to a certain degree by the general noisiness of the building, which results from their being many spaces that do not include floor-to-ceiling walls. Several other students emphasized the need for more rigorous coursework, especially for students wanting to pursue college, and two students suggested getting rid of classmates who are disruptive or uncommitted to learning.

Finally, when asked what they were most proud of with respect to accomplishments over the past year, the students mostly emphasized staying in school, being promoted to the next grade, or graduating from high school. Due to the fairly small number of high school graduates in the sample, there was little mention of college prep, although three students did mention getting accepted into college or completing a college course as a primary accomplishment. One of the more interesting patterns of responses came from a student who listed the following sequence of answers to the survey prompt on accomplishments over the past year:

“getting through pregnancy”

“going to school everyday”

“going to work every day”

“meeting new people”

When asked what she would like to have improved upon, she said “I wish I would have tried harder to get good grades.” This profile of responses captures the complexity of some of the students’ lives, and how the small, caring school environment serves as a critical support on so many levels.

As with the prior three years of our study, the theme of guidance or broader school counseling support was very strong in the Amesbury data. In addition to listing counselors as key informants regarding college, counselors also were listed with similar frequency to family or friends for support related to personal problems. It seems clear from the Amesbury surveys that counseling support is strongly interwoven into the students’ efforts to manage school and personal life on a day-to-day basis, and in planning for college and other future aspirations. This year, however, there was a bit less emphasis among the Amesbury students on specific approaches to college preparation or other forms of postsecondary training. Integrating college preparation with life skills

support is obviously essential at this school, and it is reflected to a degree in the student questionnaire, but the college focus was less clear than in past years.

In summary, the strength of AAPCS, as reflected in the student surveys, lies in the caring relationships developed between the students and the school staff. Even in the brief survey replies, evidence of the school supporting the students through trying life challenges comes through clearly. The main area to consider for improvement, based on this data, is career exploration and specific forms of college preparation. The two focuses would seem to go hand-in-hand: career exploration, including an emphasis on particular colleges and college majors that address those career focuses. We emphasize college here, rather than vocational training, because the students overwhelmingly list college as their top future goal.

Interview Summary

As with each of the other schools, AAPCS students, on average, felt like they were performing much better academically than they were before coming to the school. Most importantly, though, they felt cared for and more engaged with the learning environment. There were more criticisms of the academic rigor as AAPCS than at the other two schools, but that criticism was balanced by a strong statement that the school is providing the individualized support, academically and emotionally, that the students need to stay in school, graduate, and move on either to college or some other form of postsecondary training.

Personal Challenges. We don't have the information to determine whether AAPCS has a higher percentage of students with psychological diagnoses, but each year we learn more about deep personal struggles from the AAPCS students than we do about students in the other two schools. With the interview component added to the study this year, personal challenges were again shared by AAPCS students who suggested that the school was vital to their coping with such challenges. One student shared the following example:

I wish I could keep my cool sometimes. I know I have bipolar. I've told my mom I have bipolar and anxiety. Just little things set me off, stupid little

things...I ended up throwing a drawing project I was working on because it stressed me out...I just flipped out.

When the students shared such examples they did so for the purpose of explaining how the school has been helpful with their particular challenges. Another student described a similar level of anxiety, although devoid of the “bipolar” component. She said “I just get really anxious...and I can’t deal with stress...or competition...There’s not much of that here...and that’s one of the most important things for me...I need a more laid back [environment].” When asked how AAPCS was working for her, she replied:

I’ve been getting better grades...I’m starting to straighten out. My mom’s proud of me. I’m doing the right thing. Now I’m not struggling as much. School was always a problem for me. It was the stress, mad stress. When I came here that all got lifted off my shoulders, because it was just less pressure here...I’m leaning what I need to learn slowly but surely. I’m caught up and everything. I’m not struggling and behind like last year. I’m actually going to graduate next year. This school is just right for some kids. I’m glad I’m here, not at Amesbury High. I feel like my life is getting straightened out.

Motivation to Change and Grow. Compared to the other two schools, students at AAPCS seemed to be most motivated by personal interests that they might be developing at the school, outside of school, or a combination of both. A student who was particularly interested in music holds some aspirations of becoming a professional musician, but adds that he is opposed to most forms of structured learning. He has learned to play guitar on his own and has had that interest deepened and reinforced through a teacher at the school who coaches him informally and by a counselor who has discussed possibilities of studying music at the Berklee School of Music in Boston. When asked what he can envision himself doing in the future he responded:

I’d like to own a guitar shop...anything that has to do with guitars...I was told by Bethany [counselor] that if I get good grades, I can get into Berklee for free, any college for free. Seems farfetched, but that’s what she said...I really do want to do that, but I’m not sure how to go about it yet...but that’s the grand goal...becoming a professional musician.

In reviewing this student's interview more carefully, it is interesting to see his shift from saying he had no career goals to describing the "grand goal." That shift seems related to his lack of understanding the steps needed to pursue his goal, and as such being a bit hesitant to discuss it.

Other students described becoming motivated by the internship or service-learning experience at the school. We discuss the nature of that experience in more depth below, but for our purposes here it is sufficient to note that the internships were one of the key motivators for many of the students; they helped orient some students toward possible career goals and helped make school-learning seem more relevant to those goals.

School Size. The smaller school and class size was a key issue at all three schools, but it was particularly featured in the AAPCS interviews. Students describe everyone knowing one another, and the family-like atmosphere that can be created due to the smaller school and class size. Occasionally students will say the small size is a problem, because "everyone knows everyone else's business."

Academic Rigor. At each school, students were asked to comment on how challenging they found the work compared to their prior school experiences. There were students at each school who thought the work was not as hard at their new schools compared to their mainstream high schools, and there were others who thought it was comparable. At AAPCS there were a range of perspectives. Some students said it was easier and slower-paced, but also that they covered the same amount of material over time. Whether or not that is factually true, it was the student's perspective. Some students said that they would not have gotten such good grades if they had done the same work at the comprehensive public school. They did not share that perspective as a criticism, but rather as a difference across the two environments. As one student put it:

I wouldn't say it's easier. I'd say the teachers lay it out to sound easier. They don't have big giant words. And it's broken down a lot more so we get a longer time to do it. But we still do all the same amount of work, pretty much.

This student continued by pointing out his view of the relationship between aspects of the school's structure and the needs of the students it serves:

There's not really much structure. I think we could be doing more serious work if it was more structured...But if it were harder here, some kids probably wouldn't come. I think it should stay how it is, really.

This perception was fairly common across the AAPCS interviews. The students were pretty much in accord that academic rigor is not the primary focus of the school; the focus is on helping each student progress according to his or her individual circumstances and desires. Another student explained a seeming discrepancy in perspectives on the degree of academic rigor at the school by stating that AAPCS gives you an opportunity to work toward better grades by providing feedback and second chances:

I did a paper in language arts and got a 96, I think. I had to write how my life related to a character from a book. I don't think I would have done as good [at my old school] because there they grade you more on grammar than they do here. Spelling, I suck at spelling. So I would have probably gotten a 70 or something...Here, if you do something wrong, they give you the paper back and tell you to find out what you did wrong so you don't get that bad of a grade. They give you a second chance.

This explanation captures the personalized and process-oriented nature of the academic work at AAPCS. As this student suggests, academic rigor is not compromised as much as personal meaning and individual progress is prioritized. A student with a long-standing learning disorder, which makes it hard for him to concentrate, stated what he found most helpful in the academic focus at the school: “There’s less just constant, repetitive, boring work here...That makes it easier for me to learn.”

Teaching Approaches and Quality. Although some of the students wished the level of academic rigor was higher in the school, almost all of them spoke positively of their teachers in very specific ways. Many linked teaching quality to class size as follows:

Here, there's not so many kids in a class. So, if you don't get something, ask them and they'll come right over. The teachers are a lot nicer. They know how to like work with kids here. A lot of kids here have different problems and different ways of learning and each teacher knows of some kind of way to get kids working and doing good.

The student's interpretation not only links teaching quality to class size, but also to the special learning needs many of the students present. Another student put the capacity to receive individualized attention in very succinct terms: "Just the 1-to-1. Anytime I need help in the class, I know that they can help me. I don't have to wait 20 minutes because they're helping other kids."

The intimate learning environment can have a downside, too, according to some of the students. The following student presents the plusses and minuses, as he sees them:

Teachers and students have totally different attitude towards each other here than where I was before. It's like more of a bond. Teachers will work with the students. Students will work with the teachers...I think the teachers here are really good at what they do...That makes the students want to do a lot more work...But sometimes things here are a little unfair compared to the high school. Sometimes they'll pick favorites when it comes to discipline or, like, getting coffee [from the coffee shop across the street]. Only certain people get to do that.

This student was explaining what he saw as particularly close relationships between teachers and favorite students, and he acknowledged not always being on the favored list due to disciplinary issues.

Perhaps the most pronounced teacher theme was the willingness to make individual accommodations to help students succeed. As one student put it, it starts with a positive attitude: "When they're explaining things to the class, they have a positive, not a pissed off approach." He added, "they're so legit about getting your work done. You get sick of hearing it. Just do your work...Just gotta get it done...But they will do anything to help you pass. They'll pull you aside for extra help, they'll keep you after, they'll try to put everything in simplest terms."

Simplifying, individualizing, reinforcing, and going the extra mile. This seems to sum up the teaching approach at AAPCS. A student who acknowledged struggling with occasional behavior challenges added, "They'll tell you to take a walk and cool off or you can go in a back room and just sit for a little while. But at the other school, you'd go to the office and get suspended [for some of the

things I do]. Again, at all levels of the school the approach at AAPCS is to retain students and work with all they have to bring—positive, negative, or neutral.

Accommodations and Innovation. We have touched on the in-classroom accommodations made by AAPCS teachers, but other aspects of the school culture were addressed as well. Students appreciate the later start time at the school and the opportunity to leave early for apprenticeships, service learning, or work opportunities. Students discussed service learning, internships, and apprenticeships as a singular type of opportunity, so we use those concepts interchangeably in discussing their experiences. This service-learning or internship component of AAPCS received the most mixed reviews from students. Most described it as an important opportunity, but many said it needed to be strengthened to be most effective.

In describing her internship, one student said, “It gets you more motivated. It, like, gives you more discipline...because if you don’t get all your hours you’re not going to pass the year. You’ll stay back. So, you have to do it. Once you’ve been forced to do it so many times here, you just start to do it. You get disciplined.” For this student, the service-learning requirement seemed to prepare her for real-world work-related skills. She completed her internship hours at a daycare center.

Another student said, “all my friends...they seem so immature now than they did before. I’m becoming more mature from having an internship. They don’t seem respectful at all. Everybody I know now seems so rude to me, and I’m just making new friends and stuff.” According to this student, the responsibilities of the internship experience resulted in her viewing everyday behavior in a different light. This result is consistent with the school’s rationale for having an internship requirement as part of their curriculum.

“I have an internship at Amesbury Elementary School,” a 14-year-old student. “I go there from 3-6 on Mondays and Wednesdays, and it’s the after-school program....I help take care of younger kids...I don’t like it because I don’t like kids...But I don’t mind it that much. Some days it’s annoying, some days it’s just fine...My guidance counselor helped me find it because I would have failed otherwise.” Although some students said the service-learning component was easy to complete, even through questionable

activities such as “watching my brother skateboard,” others said it was clearly mandatory and required for graduation.

This depiction of the internship requirement by a 16-year-old boy captures much of the value we heard and the idiosyncrasies of finding opportunities:

I got a couple of opportunities to actually get the info and all the knowledge I need to know about like... for plumbing and electricians. My uncle has a couple of people I can work with. That wouldn't have happened if I wasn't here because I wouldn't need a job. Now I got an electrician, a plumber and a bunch of people talkin' to me who run their own businesses and I can get all that knowledge and know all that and I can go to college and I can pass and doing something like that easily. So it's kind of given me a couple of opportunities already for something in the future...You need a job for the extra two hours because everyone else gets out at 2:30 or 3:00, maybe a little earlier. And if I was at Triton still, I wouldn't even have time to get a job. Because you get there at like 7:00 and I wouldn't get home until like 3:00. And then doing all the homework, take another hour. And then, where can you find a job where you can work from 4:00 to any other time...unless you work the weekend or something. What kid wants to work on the weekends?

This lengthy quote captures so many aspects of the internship experience: gaining skills and mentoring; learning about running businesses; focusing on college possibilities related to the internship; and the benefits of being in a school that makes learning-on-the-job possible. When the internship opportunities worked out well they seemed to be a highlight of the students' experience at AAPCS. When they didn't work they were viewed as a hassle and even confusing. “I really don't know what it [the service-learning component] is. It's just confusing to me.” Given these differing experiences, it seems that AAPCS would be well advised to strengthen this key component of their larger school focus.

Approaches to Accountability. Students expressed a great deal of ambivalence related to school policies for holding students accountable for attendance, academic performance, classroom behavior, and general respect for one another. On one hand

students said they appreciated the looser regulations than exist for most other schools. They recognize that the school leadership and their teachers are granting them certain privileges related to the degree of personal struggle many students are experiencing. As many students suggested, if the school were tougher many students would drop out. In other words, many students are at AAPCS as alternative to leaving school all together; if too many demands are placed on them drop out will become the more appealing option. AAPCS and LMACS hold down the two ends of the continuum in this regard. LMACS has a zero tolerance policy related to fighting other aspects of personal responsibility; AAPCS does everything it can to retain each and every one of its students. As a result, the school environment at AAPCS can become more chaotic; it includes students who might leave school if stricter rules are enforced.

A student who was an advocate of stronger reinforcement of school policies said, “As much time as you waste in class because kids don’t listen, you spend at 12:30 trying to catch up instead of going out for lunch.” This student felt like some of her school time and investment was being compromised by peers who are not as invested. She also emphasized that time spent in school is particularly critical because there is little homework:

The reason why everyone does better here is that there’s no homework. You don’t bring anything home. Everything is done in the school. If you get homework, you go home, nobody does their homework at home. They learn something in class, then they try to go home and do it, they can’t...also, they would lose things that went home.

This student was referring to peers who are not as invested as her when describing how they learn things in class that they cannot apply at home. “Many of them don’t listen, so they can’t do it on their own.”

Case Study: David

David’s case touches on many of the themes addressed above. None of the cases are broadly representative of the larger student experiences at the schools, but David’s case certainly underscores much of what is working at AAPCS. David came to AAPCS from a neighboring community approximately ten miles from Amesbury. He struggled in

middle school and was going to be held back in the high school so he transferred to AAPCS. He was completing his first year in the school when we interviewed him. The following interview vignette is presented largely in David's own words and is organized by key themes that emerged.

Previous School Performance

I used to get in fights. I got suspended more than once. I also got detentions and in and out-of-school suspensions. Most of the time, I didn't do anything really bad to get it. Once or twice I did something. Or I just retaliated...I guess I just had a bad reputation there.

No way, the teachers don't help you there. If you ever went to [Prior School], you would see it right away, that they don't communicate as good as, say, here. They just basically, if you do...if the principal sees the fight or a teacher, you're guaranteed of going to court and then, depending on your age, going to jail.

The teachers didn't like me. I would get in trouble for talking after they told me I could talk. The teachers would escalate problems. They would crack on me but let every other kid in the room talk. The principal got on their sides. I didn't do work, I had bad grades, and I got mad. The Principal kicked me out.

I had a fight and ended up in court. The Principal said I started it, but I didn't. I could tell none of them [principal and teachers] wanted to talk about anything or just see what the problem is. They'd rather just resolve it in court. That's another reason I didn't like the school. They wouldn't talk about anything. It'd just be what they said, and that's it. And if you try to explain it, you just get in more trouble. I just didn't understand the way that school works.

The Transfer to AAPCS

I'd rather go to this school than probably any other school. The way teachers are teaching the classes. I think it's really good...the way they talk about stuff. The only problem learning for me in this school is when it gets loud. That's the only thing that

really bothers me. But it's been getting better because of meetings about how to make it quieter. There's too many good things and really little bad things.

Here, there's not so many kids in a class. So, if you don't get something, ask them and they'll come right over. There's not too many kids in the class. The teachers are a lot nicer. They know how to like work with kids here. A lot of kids here have different problems and different ways of learning and each teacher knows of some kind of way to get kids working and doing good. It's easier for me to understand. At my old school there were bigger classes, like 25 to 30 kids in a class. The teachers can't get around to everybody as quick in classes that big.

My grades have changed completely. I went from, like, Cs and Ds, and like failing some classes, and as of last quarter I didn't even have a C. I had As and Bs. And I'm still doing that good... It's not because it's easier here, it's because you get the help you need and teachers listen.

It's about the Teachers, about the People

The teachers are laid back, easier to get along with. And I can actually sit and do my work. Because I can't work just being completely silent and not being able to talk. And that's just helped me a lot, to have freedom. To be able to get up and stretch if I have to. Some kids get mad easy or off topic quick. And those kids...they'll take 'em in a back room or something or somewhere comfortable for them, and they'll just sit there with them or a couple of other students...and they'll give them the extra help they need. Definitely, the teachers here are more respectful than at my old school.

One of my teachers, Erin, can tell if I can't get something by the look on my face, and she comes over to help. I never had teacher who did that before.

They all help me if I need help with anything that has to do with work in school or something out of school. I can talk with them...at special times, like guidance. If they're not working with another kid...just ask them if they have a couple of minutes to talk. They'll talk. Or just advising class, or to homeroom teachers, principal, anybody. It's a lot more comfortable here. If I have like a problem or something I can go talk to them

about it. If I get in a fight or something out of school and I don't know what to do, there's always someone here I can talk to and give me advice about what I should do.

The teachers can tell if I'm mad...or mad at someone...and separate him so he can do his work. They'll say 'get fresh air or something.' They'll come to me. That's way different.

The principal is kind of the same as Chuck [with whom he argued at first, before forging a positive relationship]. We argued and then we each got over it and we talked. That's all better, and she just told me the same thing Chuck did. Tell her when I'm getting mad and if I'm getting mad when I'm in class...come talk to her and I can sit right there and do my work.

Now, since things are getting better, if I need more space or something I just go ask them. So they've both [principal and teacher] made it so if I get mad I can move around better without escalating it. And that never happened at my other school either. As soon as I was mad, the teachers, they would just make it worse. They'd call on you for every single question. Just stuff you didn't even know. Go to the board. If you didn't do it right, they're like 'oh you're not paying attention.' They just always throw something on you. I haven't gotten that once here.

Disruptions

Sometimes, I'll be a little off topic, like talking. Get a little less work done. I talk too much. Not like loud and non-stop talking. You gotta be like really doing the work....If the teacher's talking or something, yeah, be quiet and listen.

But if we're just doing a worksheet or something and sitting next to someone, you can talk. Don't be loud, don't be really loud because other people are working. I like that. I like it better being able to talk, because I'm more comfortable sitting there doing the work. It puts me in a better mood doing the work...makes me wanna work...because I can talk. I can do my work at the same time, and not get in trouble for it.

The number of students who are paying attention really varies. Like Monday, you know Mondays, everyone's like in and out. We get here, we're tired. The other days...it's different kids each time. There's always someone who's into it. Like, usually there's about half into it, 5-6 kids [out of 12]...who are listening. Then, there are like two in the

middle that are like listening/talking. I'm usually one of the kids who's talking a little bit, but still listening. It might not look like I'm listening, but I really am. Then there's the rest of kids, they're the ones who just talk. They don't really care about the work. They just don't pay attention. It's not always like that, but sometimes.

In health class the teacher can be like 4 feet in front of me and I can barely hear [because students are so loud]. Maybe [teachers should] be a little more strict. [In English class], they will take like 20 minutes of the class to get settled. Don't ask five times for the same thing. If [students] are not gonna work, have them sit in the principal's office or something.

They have something called 'time on learning,' which means "as much time as you waste in class, you spend at 12:30...having to stay during lunch period...But that doesn't really do anything. If there were consequences like 'time out of learning,' they would finally stop.

Academic Rigor and Support

I did a 6-8 paragraph essay in English explaining how to make cereal. It wasn't the easiest project...but I got it done. I got an A. At my old school I think I would have got like, probably, a B- or a C. I couldn't tell you why. I wasn't supposed to be in 9th grade, from what my teachers said...they said I should have stayed in 8th grade...that's why I came here. At that school...they would mess with your grades a little bit. When I did my good work I didn't get the grade I should have got. Over there the schoolwork is harder because there is less time to do it. Less support, too. Here it's no easier but you have more time and more help.

Pretty much everybody will do well here...if they really want it. Kids who don't care won't make it. They'll end up in jail or something...There's not much you can do for some of them

We have, what, 12 kids in class total...and we're in the same classes together all day. Even if we don't pay attention all the time...we have time to get things done. I'm getting everything done...history's hard for me...but I'm going to graduate...Everyone can do it here...if they want to...there's people here to help you.

Service Learning

[Much of this quote was used above for the larger school-specific findings section, but is important to repeat here as a key part of David's story.]

The work-study thing is something that can keep you busy. You need a job for the extra two hours because everyone else gets out at 2:30 or 3:00, maybe a little earlier. And if I was at my old school still, I wouldn't even have time to get a job. Because you get there at like 7:00 and I wouldn't get home until like 3:00. And then doing all the homework, that would take another hour. And then, where can you find a job where you can work from 4:00 to any other time unless you work the weekend or something. What kid wants to work on the weekends?

I work over 24 hours per week organizing things, side jobs. I'm making money and it's not even that bad. Now I've got things I can do for jobs. I get a couple of opportunities to actually get the info and all the knowledge I need to know about like... for plumbing and electricians. My uncle has a couple of people I can work with. That wouldn't have happened if I wasn't here because I wouldn't need a job. Now I got an electrician, a plumber and a bunch of people talkin' to me who run their own businesses and I can get all that knowledge and know all that, and I can go to college and I can pass and then do something like that easily. So it's kind of given me a couple of opportunities already for something in the future.

My uncle and the school helped me get my job. The Art Studio teacher found me two jobs. The first job didn't work out because I was too young. The other one wasn't hiring. Then I talked to my uncle. I wouldn't have asked him if I didn't need a job.

Beyond AAPCS

Basically, school comes with me out of school. Because I'm doing the work [homework] I should be doing out of school. That takes 10 hours, at least, out of the week of whatever else I could be getting into or something. So school actually keeps me from getting into trouble. And it helps keep me out of it because now I've got a job. I've gotta go to the job [to pass school]. I can't get in trouble or something...and still graduate.

I want to graduate, get my diploma. It's easier here to work—have a job—and graduate. I want to graduate...but I've got a small lingering doubt based on my history [prior to coming to AAPCS], but I really think I will, partly because of how I'm doing here.

I'm 50/50 on college. If I can do something, why go to college? I'll do it if I really have to.

I'm not sure about what job I want. I'm young, so I can try a bunch of different things. I'll try motorcycle racing if I can find a sponsor...Electrician would be kinda cool. I could go to school for it. I'll figure out what I like and go back to school for it.

The job requirement at this school has already prepped me for two possible careers.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School

LMACS was able to collect data on a large percentage of their student body at Time 1 and Time 2, with 53 students providing usable data in the fall and 55 in the spring. As with AAPCS, results were quite consistent across the two administration periods, so the priority here will be on summarizing the findings from the spring administration.

Regarding plans for the upcoming year, the LMACS students were much more likely to list college plans than over the past three years. During the 2007-2008 school year, approximately 37% of the LMACS students ranked graduating from high school as their top goal: during the 2008-2009 school year less than 20% of the students ranked graduation or grade promotion as a top goal. The major emphasis during the 2008-2009 school year was on exploring college or beginning college, with approximately 27% of the students listing this response as their top priority. LMACS relationship with Middlesex Community College seems to play a strong role in facilitating college course taking while in high school and learning about specific college majors. It should also be noted that although Middlesex Community College is specifically listed several times, several other colleges are included as well, such as Salem State and U Mass – Lowell.

In looking at specific things the students said they wanted to accomplish over the next year, the following examples reflect patterns from the larger pool of answers:

“take biology at Middlesex Community College”

“attend Boston Architectural college’

“start French culinary school”

The level of specificity in the students’ college plans is reflected in these statements.

Other comments focused on academic improvement:

“keeping honor roll”

“do better next year”

“get As and Bs in college”

“become school president”

One student listed the following goals for the upcoming year in order:

“Do better next year”

“become a better student”

“come to school on time”

“participate always”

“never fail”

Although this student’s responses do not reflect the high end of academic achievement that was apparent in the overall goal-setting picture for LMACS, it shows an emphasis on consistent, realistic improvement. That the student would list five answers is a testament of sorts to his motivation to succeed.

Overall, the pattern of responses for goals for the upcoming year was heavily oriented toward college and academic improvement. There was less focus than in prior years on getting a job and staying out of trouble with the law, although such goals were clearly stated, just not as the top priorities.

When looking further into specific plans beyond the upcoming year, the LMACS picture is even clearer. College attendance and graduation is again the highest rated future goal, with approximately 40% of the students listing it as their top goal, and another 35% ranking it second or third. Other students who did not rate college graduation as their most important future goal, listed career responses that imply the need for a college degree, such as: “working as a psychologist,” and “working in the criminal justice department.” And, again, the nature of college involvement is quite specific in the students’ responses:

“4 years at U-Mass Lowell for criminal justice”

“Go straight to 4-year college, not Middlesex”

“U-Mass to continue my schooling after Middlesex”

“transfer to Salem State”

“finish college in the next 3 years”

The degree of specificity in the responses suggests that the LMACS students are not just preparing for college in general, but are formulating and working on particular college plans.

Perhaps consistent with LMACS focus on academic improvement and career preparation, teacher and school staff aren't listed as the top supports for students personal challenges to the same degree as is the case for AAPCS. However, when asked how the school has been most helpful to them, caring teachers and other staff come up as a common reply. Even then, however, the answers have more of an academic focus than a personal one:

“the teachers are so much better here”

“I'm comfortable asking the teachers questions”

“the school has helped me better myself by teachers really caring and talking one-on one”

“the teachers help me try harder”

Clearly, these responses aren't purely academic or future oriented; they reflect immediate personal concern as well. But the overall flavor of teacher support in the student questionnaires is on helping students succeed and build a positive future. Other ways in which we have seen LMACS attempt to support students are reflected in the surveys as well, such as the focus on respect for others and personal accountability. The following student responses capture that focus:

“They teach ethical values”

“helps me to be responsible”

“They've helped me face reality”

There is a strong emphasis on accountability and real-world decision making at LMACS, as we have learned through observations of the school over the past four years, and interviews with both the school staff and students. That accountability ethic will be addressed further in the interview summary to follow.

In providing feedback on how the school could improve, the students' most common response was "nothing" or some variation on that theme:

"The school is everything I could ask for."

"Nothing! You helped me enough."

"Nothing. I accomplished all I came here for."

Some students, however, thought there should be more course offerings related to college preparation:

"Offer a foreign language course"

"Have higher offering than algebra 2"

A number of students focused on structural issues like wanting a cigarette break during the day and more field trips. And three students suggested that the school should help students find jobs. Overall, the student responses on how to improve the school suggest that they are exceptionally happy with the current model, but would like some modifications with respect to advanced coursework and career preparation.

The last noteworthy finding from the LMACS student surveys focuses on accomplishments from the past year. Overwhelmingly, the students point to academic success in one form or another, with 60% reporting improved grades or other forms of high achievement as their greatest accomplishment. Other responses included stopping smoking, getting a job, and becoming happier and more confident.

In comparing the LMACS responses from the 2008-2009 academic year to those of the prior years, there is much less emphasis on involvement with the law and much more on high achievement and planning for college. Based on the interviews we conducted at the school, it seems that the student population has remained similar over time: students with lengthy histories of school and legal challenges. Now, however, the primary focus seems to be less on these concerns and more on what is possible now and in the future.

Interview Summary

Students at LMACS provided a fairly universal portrait of feeling like the school staff was doing all it could to make the school the best experience it could be for the population of students served. What stands out most is the consistent picture of students

being challenged to achieve at the highest level possible with the support needed to meet those achievement expectations. The notion of accountability comes through strongly in the LMACS interviews as well. Students state clearly that the school personnel expect them, the students, to take full advantage of the opportunity being granted. In other words, students at LMACS are expected to go beyond obtaining a high school diploma; they are expected to perform at a high level academically and to channel that achievement into college admission letters or other post-secondary training experiences. It is clear, though, that college preparation is the priority at LMACS, according to the student interviews.

General Perceptions of the School Environment. Not all students at LMACS were equally motivated to attend college, but even those who were less engaged academically portrayed the school in largely positive terms. As one student put it, “It’s still school, but I it’s so much better. I just don’t like school. I get tired and bored. I’ve got a wicked short attention span. I hate being in the same classroom...I don’t understand as much as other kids do. I take longer.” This student went on to clarify how LMACS helps him, even though he’s not a highly motivated learner and one who struggles with formal classroom structures. The individual attention and generally engaging teachers, he said, allowed him to get the most out of the school.

Although most LMACS students transfer in from Lowell High School (LHS) or elsewhere, some begin in the 9th grade. One such student described her decision to attend the school as follows:

I was going to try LHS, but I didn’t want to jump into a big high school...LMACS seemed like what I needed. It was small, everything was really tight...You could just tell that the teachers cared about students, and that brings the best out of a student...If you come here and you know someone wants you to be here, that helps a lot...You just get the vibe that everyone knows everyone and it’s a big family...You see pictures on the walls of the graduating classes, you see people talk...I talked to Dr. McDevitt, who is the principal here...the first day. The way she talked to everyone, you could tell she really cared. It wasn’t just students, it was more than students. It was more like family.

This student's description of her first impressions of LMACS is consistent with what we heard from her peers: committed, caring teachers; pride in the student body, including graduates; the feeling of a family atmosphere. As the student continued her story, she continues to rave about what she has experienced at the school:

It's awesome. I love it. It brought out the best in me. It's what I needed. They don't just teach you, they kind of open up your eyes to other stuff you could possibly be doing. I've gone on the ocean summit field trip...and we went to Boston and we learned about global warming and stuff and it was a...good learning experience. I don't think I would have gotten the chance to do that at my old school...Here, it's equal opportunities for everyone. Any student that wants to do anything, the teachers will help you 100%.

Personal Accountability. In many places throughout this report we've addressed the issue of student accountability, which came through most strongly in the interviews at LMACS. Students at this school discussed LMACS philosophy of living ethically and responsibly. This philosophy includes taking personal responsibility for decision-making and the willingness to contribute to the larger community by recognizing that working together will lead to greater gains than working independently. In short, the students at LMACS say that everyone is held accountable for doing their fair share. Although there are many interesting examples of students discussing accountability, the one that follows provides a fairly unique variation on the theme. The quote was shared by the student cited above who said she hated school:

I dread it. But I will be at McDonalds without college. I'd rather spend four years hating my life going to college than in 10 years being a bum. I see my dad, he does carpets, and it's slave work. He goes to work at 7a.m. and doesn't come home until late. It's around the clock work for the same money. My mom got pregnant when she was a senior in high school. And she got nowhere in life. My sister had a baby and she dropped out of school..[So], I hate school...but I like being here...I have to be here [to avoid the things my family has gone through]. Without the friends and talking, though, I would hate it.

This student provides a compelling example of taking personal responsibility for her life, including getting a college education even though that seems thoroughly unappealing to her. When she sizes up the consequences of not getting an education, the case is clear. Whether this student learned to take on this level of responsibility through LMACS or brought it with her, her story is moving. It is rare for students who state such strong antipathy toward formal education to invest so clearly.

Students commonly discussed the joy and gratification they felt when their being accountable started to pay off.

I am now one of the best students in my math class...I studied more than I ever did before...and I understand everything...I was surprised...by how good I did...I went out and bought some new jeans to celebrate my first A...I'm not surprised anymore...and now it's easier to pay attention because I know I know this, how to do [math]...and, yeah, it's happening in other classes too.

We heard repeated stories along the lines of this one, in which accountability is linked with the rewards of success.

Several students underscored how accountability is not open to negotiation, stating that the school policy “won’t let you disengage...and there’s zero acceptance of skipping classes.” A student who initially voiced disagreement with certain aspects of the accountability policies later placed them in a more positive light:

The 5 absence thing is a little much. But I can understand where they're coming from because kids will skip one day and think, oh, I missed the work from that day so I'm just gonna skip today. Then, I missed two days, I might as well stay out this week. Absences add up real fast. But if you're not gonna be like that, if I stay out one day, it's just one day. I know I'm going the next day. That's how you have to be.

Another student contrasted LMACS approach to promoting accountability with the approach at the local high school:

In LHS you can sleep in the back of the class and no one will say anything to you. The teachers here will make sure you're doing what you need to do. I've tried to sleep in class. The teachers will come over and say you

need to do your work. I usually do my work...They [the teachers] get involved at LMACS...they follow up if you're not in school. That's different from LHS [where] a machine calls your house if you're not there. That's about it.

Academic Rigor. LMACS was the only school of the three in which students generally claimed it was as or more challenging than the public schools they had attended previously. One student said the work can seem easier because the teachers are helpful:

Usually when people say charter school it's like, 'oh that's for dropouts, it's for stupid kids, they have easier classes.' But it's just like any other school. The classes are just like regular high school classes, but the teachers care about you and they make sure you do your work. It makes you want to come to school...And they'll help you if you need help.

Other students concurred: “The work is pretty much the same. Actually, I think this work is a little bit harder.” Another added, “I’ve never studied for tests before. But I have to for this school.” A third student summed up several points related to academic rigor at LMACS:

Definitely, it is challenging. It's not like a joke of a school. There is difficult work, you have to keep up with assignments and stuff. But it's so easy to come here and learn. If you're here every day, you get the lesson, you get what we're talking about, you can follow along. It's not as hard to do [challenging work] here because the way they present it to you. At the other high schools they just threw it at you. [My math work], it's difficult, but not impossible...because of how they teach.

This story links academic rigor with accountability, suggesting that the rigor can be met if students apply themselves consistently and access the support of their teachers. Although the majority of the LMACS students felt the school was quite challenging, and in many cases add that they think they're being well prepared to begin college upon graduation, some others stated that it could be more rigorous. As one student said, “I think they go by effort here. Some of the teachers say they grade you by effort and participation...just effort and participation. [In English class] I don't think the spelling

matters. I don't think they look for spelling problems." Although this was not a commonly shared perception, this student was not alone in feeling that the school could be more challenging in certain respects.

One of the more common ways in which the academic approach to the school is organized is captured in the following quote:

The classes always seem really easy...because we do a lot of group discussions. It's more active. It's not like they're going to give you a paper and you have to do it. I like being more active. I'd rather work with a bunch of people and be more talkative than have to just sit there.

This approach might be summed up as active and interactive learning. Students frequently discussed liking the opportunities for hands-on learning and working with one another. One student said, "I'm in event planning...like Cambodian dinners...I went to 9-10 events last year [as part of a class project on event planning.]" It is unclear from our interviews whether such learning opportunities were common at LMACS, but for those experiencing them the response was clearly positive.

Teacher-Student Relationships. Although much of what has been written in the sections above touches on the nature of teacher-student relationships at LMACS, it is important to emphasize the importance of that theme given how prominently it was depicted in the interviews. As we have noted previously in this report, there is a culture of respect and accountability that runs throughout LMACS. The following quote begins to capture that cultural reality:

One time we all had a meeting tougher. The teachers were saying good things about the students, the students were saying good things about the teachers. We all have respect for each other. If something has happened at the school, like spring fling is coming up, then everyone wants everyone to go. They want people to have a good time.

This student, like many others, made it clear that although the teachers demand a high level of accountability, they also treat the students like real people and care about them deeply. In trying to put words to the impact of that care and support on her life, one student said, "It makes me think how crazy, it is that this environment, this school..."

Literally, this school saved me.” The student went on to describe the level of hopelessness she felt before coming to LMACS and building meaningful relationships with teachers, the school leadership team, and her peers.

Another student compared her relationship with teachers in the classroom with those she experienced before coming to LMACS. “In [my old school] there are like 30-40 kids in a class and you’ve got teachers who, if you don’t understand the work they’re going on to the next level...Here, they like stop and ask what don’t you get, what don’t you understand...Like, if I don’t understand something, they’ll take it back a step so I can move onto the next level.”

The quotes from the following student capture the surprise some of the students feel in response to their teachers’ commitments to them:

The teachers really set you up for success...They pretty much give you that motivation that you need. A lot of kids here don’t have the home life, the motivation at home to go out and do what’s right at school...but the staff here really helps you do that. They look at you as...you could come here thinking you’re not really anything at all. Teachers...can turn you into someone who’s capable of doing what you want to do in life. I didn’t expect that.

Other students stated that all the teachers have been helpful to them, with some playing specific learning roles. One said, “I’ve never really gotten into a book. He’s [English teacher] the first person ever to get me reading.” This student went on to describe how the more intimate school environment at LMACS allows teachers to play a more concerted role in the lives of students. “Here, the teachers care about you. At Lowell High they’ll be like who cares, because they have so many students. But here, they get to know every student.” He continued by saying he even felt known by teachers he’d never had for a class and wondered how that is possible, suggesting that perhaps they study the pictures of all the students on the walls.

The following examples also shed light on the power of teacher-student relationships at LMACS. A student who was having trouble reading said, “My teacher, she sat me down. She said you seem like you’re having trouble reading. I have one of her classes. I’m doing wicked good in that class now. I think I’m getting an A in there. So

that really helped me, talking to her.” Another student added, “They want you to graduate, they want you to succeed. At some other schools, they’re just there to get money. I just like coming in now. They know what my weaknesses are. If I need help, they will help me.” A student discussing her perspective on her teachers said, “In my math class, the teacher goes through it until you understand it. At Lowell High, the teachers go through it for two days and then there’s a big test.”

The Culture of LMACS. Several of the points already addressed in this report might be organized under the category of school culture. LMACS clearly works hard as a community in developing its culture of accountability and mutual respect. The school has a well-known ethics code that emphasizes fair treatment and mutuality. Students discussed the ethics code, including its focus on privilege and responsibility. Privilege was described as something that is earned through hard work and respect toward others. Getting a quality education, for example, is viewed as a privilege not enjoyed by many students elsewhere.

Being “treated like adults” is a central feature of the LMACS culture that is most appreciated by the students. In return for such treatment the students are expected to act like adults. Part of acting like an adult is accepting the zero tolerance policy for skipping school and harming others. The code of respect is taken seriously, according to students, with expulsion being mandatory for certain offenses, including fighting. The following examples were cited by an LMACS student as evidence that the culture is effective:

I like that you get respected here, that’s the #1 thing. You don’t get treated like a little kid. You show respect, you get respect. In my old school, they looked down on you. This school follows through on ethics...Everyone knows everybody and everybody gets respected. If you don’t, you’re done. If you don’t do that, show respect, you get an ethical review and you can get kicked out...Last year there was a fight in front of Dr. McDermott’s office, and some kid just knocked out this other kid and he just, for him to be able to step back and not hit him back, it shows he wanted to be in school. He just stepped back and it was like, you’re gone. He was like it’s not worth getting kicked out of school for. Retaliation would have resulted in expulsion. It doesn’t matter who hit who first.

This quote captures the bottom line culture of respect and accountability that we heard of time and again at LMACS. The school's philosophy implies that learning happens everywhere and always at the school, and that the lessons to be extracted are best reinforced when the cultural norms are applied as fairly and consistently as possible.

Carryover beyond School. To what extent does the culture of LMACS carry over to the outside world? Although this question is hard to answer from the data available, some students did discuss the impact of the school on their larger life experiences. A male student in our interview sample shared the following story.

I definitely see school effecting me outside. I was more depressed back then, when I came here, not feeling good about myself at all. When you come to school and you have people who make you feel like you are special, capable of reaching your goals, it makes you want to come back to school every day. And then when you're out of school, you still carry that, you're not going to get drunk. You think twice about doing stupid stuff. I kind of look at the world different since coming here, look at myself different. I don't look at my weaknesses all the time. I'm more focused on my strengths.

As with so many of the quotes from LMACS students, this one is loaded with insights. With little prompting, this student was able to cite the impact of the school on him both within and beyond the school walls. When asked whether his story was unique or could apply to other students he added:

I guarantee it...It's the school and it's your willingness to change...If you come here with an open mind and you want the best for yourself, you want to change, they'll help you do that..The school is willing to help anyone that's willing to help themselves... If students don't benefit, it's their fault...This school will take anybody...and it makes kids think...The diploma is so close. Your goals are so close and easy to get at...If you can separate school life from stupid party life and keep that on the side and balance the two, if you can do that...you'll do OK here.

This student went on to state that even his peers who drink heavily outside of school and use drugs are able to achieve at LMACS. Even for those students, he said, it's "way easier to come here and focus on your school work" than it would be in other schools. Once again, the theme of accountability can be heard throughout this story. As with the larger LMACS story, this is not a tale of idealism but one of matter-of-fact personal and collective responsibility.

In the case study of Christina that follows many of the themes outlined above are integrated in one student's self-portrait of her experience at the school. While the level of articulation and insight reflected in Christina's case is somewhat unique to her, the themes she presents are quite representative of the larger LMACS experience.

Case Study: Christina

Christina's perceptions about herself, her experience at prior schools, and her observations of LMACS capture a striking amount of what we heard from the LMACS interview participants. The following is her story, told in her words as completely as possible. Christina was nearly 18-years-old at the time of our interview and just about to wrap up her junior year of high school. She came to LMACS well behind academically, having completed only a couple high school courses successfully.

Previous Experience

I always had trouble with school, just being in school and with the other kids. I was lost. My mom would work at 6am. My mom has four other kids. She would leave and I would just stay home all day. Or I would check in and come home. Nobody would know. I would come home and hang with the wrong crowd. Get suspended for not going. [My friends] ran away, I ran away with them. We go to parties. Drink. I would do that stupid stuff with them. I was getting arrested constantly, on the verge of getting locked up. One day I just came [to school] and I was scared...I was scared I was going to change [and I didn't know how].

They didn't give you that much help. They wouldn't give me the extra help I needed. [At Lowell High School (LHS)], Teachers would see me...oh, she's skipping, get her suspended. So I would get mad at teachers and I wouldn't come. Built on it, just wouldn't

come to school. Truant officer would come. I would start hanging with other kids who didn't want to come to school either. I got used to this thing of not going to school. I started hanging with people who didn't want to go to school either. I was scared of changing. I was scared of going to school. I didn't know how to do right. I got arrested.

Struggled at First

When I came here last year, I was in the court system. My lawyers told me about this school. It was smaller. The teachers are friendly. And it really is.

I said I wanted to [do well], but I wasn't really ready. At first, I was nervous. It went bad. I was skipping classes, doing bad. I was built up with all the problems. I didn't even care. I didn't even take the time to think about school; I was in school just to get that out of the way. I was skipping.

[The school leadership team gave Christina another chance, despite her poor attendance and occasional violations of school policy in her first year.]

Started Thriving

I came back next year like a fresh start and I haven't been in trouble ever since. I don't even get sent to the principal's office. I think it's because I've been down that road before and the teachers here told me 'do you want to be here or do you want to be kicked out of school? Do you want to not get an education or do you want to come to school and get the education and get the help you need?' So when I come to school every day I see it's cool, it's better. The teachers talk to you. I don't want to be kicked out, I don't want to be in trouble. [When I came back,] I really did want to be here. I just blew it out with A's and B's.

Literally, this school saved me. I just love this school.

Identity Shift

All of a sudden, I don't remember having an A on my report card in two years. To all of a sudden, I got an A. It got me excited. It made me think I can do this. Now, A's and B's since. I think what motivated me was my report card. My teachers told me, when you see your report card and you see how you're doing, you're going to be surprised. You just start brand new and build up the whole thing, and now I'm going to be a senior next

year. It just amazed me. It pushes me more. I don't want to go back to that lifestyle. I go to school every day, on time.

I always had the intelligence to put my grades up there so I wouldn't fail. I always had the brains to do it, but I was just bad, acting up. I didn't like it. But now like I see when I came to this school and I started changing and I realized I need to be in school. There's other things, there's other expectations. There's another life besides chilling on the streets all the time. I think that's why I come to school, because I'm sick of the streets. That's exactly why I come to school. What motivates me is staying off the streets. I'd rather hang out at school than hang out on the streets. That's a change.

I think of [the stress related to school] all the time. At times when I'm here I do get aggravated, stressed out. But if you think about school as the major priority, just like get it out of the way...if I'm at school, that's all I think about it school. After school whatever I'm stressing about, that's what it is. They don't stress you out here as much as...I don't see this school as a stress anymore. Since I've been doing well, the more I do well the more it doesn't stress me out. There's people here who, they come to school whenever they want. They're like separate people, they're so in their old ways. But if you just come in here and learn to deal with school and it's way easier because I know I stayed in school. I never even went. If you think that at the end of the day I'm going to be further towards a diploma, there's no stress.

Sometimes I come here and I'm in a bad mood and I want to go home, and I think go home and do what? Sit here and get an absent from that class, to do nothing. Or to hang out on the streets. I can do that after school. Why not just wait. I just think of that goal all the time. And they remind me of it all the time.

It's all so easy. Once you start getting into a routine—at first it was hard for me—but once I got that first report card, I got in a routine. This is my new routine. I just got used to it. Coming to school, doing the right thing. It's better than feeling like a loser. It's better than being home all day.

Bond with Teachers

The teachers are friendly. They're so enthusiastic. They want to be here more than you. Across the board. All of them. I feel bad, if I got close with them and I sit here messing up. Not only for myself, but I look at my teachers and I kind of got a relationship with them. They're trying for me. Why aren't I trying? Everybody here, when you don't go to school. They know. They're like why didn't you go to school? Everybody becomes worried about it. They're like 'what happened?' Instead of being at LHS and a security guard is grabbing you and you know?

Academic support

The environment is smaller, the teachers helped me more. Classes are way smaller, so it's way more comfortable. In mainstream classes, there are like 30-40 kids in a class and you've got teachers who, if you don't understand the work they're going on to the next level. Here, they like stop and ask what don't you get, what don't you understand? I can help you out. Like if I don't understand something, she'll take it back a step so I can move onto the next level.

Nonacademic support

The teachers aren't just somebody who's going to be like 'go to class.' They're like 'oh, are you alright?' They're not more of an authority figure, they're more a pal who understands you. If you're going through a bad problem they'll sit you aside, give you someone to talk to. It's just a better way of learning. If I'm mad or sad they go 'Do you need to talk about something, Christina, go for a walk?' There were moments when I'd be in class and I'd be like I don't want to be here, I want to get out of here. And the teacher would ask me what's going on, what's happening? And it would just calm me inside. They'd help me with my work if I needed help. There were times that I wanted to walk out, and there were times that I did. But I always came back to the thought I don't want to go back to that lifestyle, be a dropout or be a loser. And they tell you that all the time... Well you could leave here and you could lose your last chance, or you could stay here and make it easier. It's your choice. They'll give you so much chances. They'll give you chances after your choice. They'll be like, 'Do you want to do this, do you want to go?'

Social Culture of the School

How we all interact together. Our culture. How the students come together. We'll sit there in assemblies and talk about our ideas. We have such an interactive environment. If someone wants to have a trip, we'll all raise the fundraising money. Like \$2,000 for prom this year. We come together. We're good when we work together. It should be our motto: we work together.

Social Support from Friends

The people I hung out with, they were just like me. They all dropped out and went to school. It's kind of like we push each other. We pushed each other all back in [to school]. Now, I don't think about other things like running away and not listening to my mom. I think more about my future, like my education, I need to graduate. I'm not going to be a loser. There's no way. At times, I have friends outside who are like 'come chill'...whatever. I have family like that. But I look at them as my old life. My friends, we aren't as close as we were before, except for the ones who came with me. They're doing as good as me.

Academic Rigor

The classes always seem really easy [because we work together]. We do a lot of group discussions. It's more active. It's not like they're going to give you a paper and you have to do it. I like being more active. I'd rather work with a bunch of people and be more talkative than have to just sit there.

Goals, Academic and Career

My goal right now is to go to college, but...I'm going to wait to see how it goes the next couple of months and see where I want to be...I know I want to go out of state somewhere...I want to go to New York to college...I used to think I would never go farther than UMass Lowell...But I know I want to do criminal justice and be a parole officer...And I know I want to go to a four-year college...Miss McDermott said I should go to Middlesex [Community College] first, and get my two years there...do the criminal justice major and then transfer...But I want to go straight to a four-year

college...criminal justice...I used to hate my parole officer, then I realized she's the one who helped me the most.

Family History and Motivation

[Brother went to college but didn't like it. Dropped out after freshman year. That scares her.]

Me and my brother were really close. He's smart. He got accepted to Rochester. He deferred to go to community college...and didn't finish...That's why I don't want to do that [start at community college]...I want to go straight to a 4-year [college].

But I always tell him, go to school, go to school. When I was in the routine of being on the streets, smoking all day, doing this doing that, just being stupid, he'd kind of join on with me. Then I kind of got on that path and he's just... you're the leader? Everybody thinks I'm the oldest.

I'm kinda scared in some ways, oh what if I do that. But then again, if I just keep doing this and if I just keep thinking just forget about everything else, like those days when you're mad or tired and you just want to go back to sleep. There's mornings I wake up when I'm exhausted. I went to bed at 3 a.m. but I just get up and get dressed and go to school. 'Just go. Just go, Christina. Just go.'

Effect on Life Outside of School

When I go home, I check in with my mom—that's an automatic thing. I hang out at friends homes, listen to music, the gym. It's a daily routine. Sometimes I get bored with it (going to school every day). Sometimes I look for a change. Before, I used to be scared of change. I was sick of change. I was like, I want to be bad, I want to do whatever I want and run free. Now, the more I get older the more I change.

My mom's pretty bipolar with it. Some days me and my mom, our relationship is weird, some days she just thinks about all the bad stuff I do, I did. Like running away, she just brings it back up. It just puts a boulder on my shoulder. She still sees me as this adolescent kid. She's starting to actually believe I'm doing well. She's all for it now. She's not really involved with activities I do in school, or whatever. I'm gonna say I...double or triple times care more about school than she does. I signed myself up for

this school. I'm gonna say she's been there, but she really hasn't. Some days she'll be like 'oh, good job in school.' I wish she'd seen more of what I'm doing. I wish she understood that I'm really doing good now. I think she understands I'm doing good. She sees my grades and stuff. But like the last two years, I've done so horrible [in the past], she's just starting to understand how well I am doing. Like MCAS day she called me and she's like you have to be there. I'm like Mom, I'm going to be there.

How LMACS is Preparing her for the Future

This whole year, I changed so much in a mature way. I think by next year I'll pretty much be ready [for college]. I'm like halfway there. I think I'm well prepared to take that next step. Academically, yeah. The things I was weak at, I'm getting better at. I think I'm definitely academically ready to do that [take the step of going to college].

I work really good when I'm working in pairs. Pairs or a group...or presenting something. I can sit there in front of the classroom and talk to anybody...But not writing, just sitting there writing paragraphs. I'm not good at that. I have to be more interactive or someone has to understand it and explain it to me. I'm doing really good in biology right now. Biology and History are my best [subjects] right now. [In those classes], they just tell it to us, so I get it better...The hardest thing for me is MCAS prep because I'm not good at algebra and math problems.

On how LMACS can Improve

[Jokingly says]: They can get rid of the absences rule. But really, I love this school so much...Maybe they can improve our classes a little...a little more structure. Everyone's been helpful to me...and other kids here...Ms. Brown, Ms. Lineer...and Ms. McDevitt has helped me a lot. Any time I needed some to talk to...she settled it out.

Other Challenges

There was a point in my freshman year when I was a new kid in school. I wasn't doing good in school at all. I was getting 50's 50's 50's. That's the worst grade you can get...I was getting these bad grades because I wouldn't go to class. I wouldn't go to class because I didn't like the environment. So I said 'screw this.' I felt like everybody is at school doing good and I can't do this. So I got depressed, so I started running away and

started acting out. So there was probably a period of 6 months that I was depressed. I would stay home, and when I did go out I would smoke, get high, drink. I got tired of being a loser and being depressed and I just changed...I'm so glad I didn't wait now, because I'm 17. I would have been graduating when I'm like 20. I'm glad I took advantage of it because the school has a lot to offer.

Making “the Shift” Together

My cousin is like 16 years old. He stays home all day, smokes weed. He's home all the time. He does nothing. I got bored with that. I got bored with staying home all day. Finally, me and a couple of my friends would tire of it too. We're like look what we do all day. We tell ourselves for weeks, every single day, this is what we do all day guys. We sit here all day and don't do nothing. Finally I was like, 'I'm gonna sign up for that school.' 2-3 of my friends, we signed up for it, we all got accepted. We're like we've gotta do this together. I think if anything, my friends, we all shifted and then we came to the school and then my friends would see me doing better and I'd see them. And we all shifted to this point where we realized we were doing good. It's like me, we all were 'oh my god we have As and Bs.' We managed to just shift to this point where everything's good. Everything's good. We have a career path, we're doing something right. And just like me, they don't like to be in the streets. I don't like to be in the streets all day. We're in the streets after school. We're in the streets in the morning. But school is something that is for us. It's meaningful. It means something. It's a big change for me to move past that point where I was doing nothing.

Boston Day and Evening Academy

Survey Results

BDEA again submitted a large number of surveys for both the fall and spring administrations. In the winter (Time 1) 122 surveys were completed and in the spring (Time 2) 110 were completed. For our purposes here, we draw from both sets of surveys but focus mostly on the spring administration as we did for the other schools.

When projecting ahead for goals for the upcoming year, approximately 45% of the BDEA students listed getting their diploma or advancing to the next grade level [even though the school technically does not have grade levels] as their top goal for the year, with another 23% listing this as a second or third ranked goal. The next highest group of priorities was college-related responses, with approximately 15% of the students ranking this goal first and another 48% ranking it second or third. While the overall percentage of college-related responses is similar to the prior academic year, more BDEA students rated immediate school performance more highly than last year, with college following afterward. Other highly rated goals for the upcoming year included work or finding a job, which was the top rated goal by approximately 8% of the students, and a second, third, or fourth ranked goal by many other students.

With respect to future goals beyond the upcoming year, BDEA students focused squarely on college admission and college success, with over 60% of the students ranking this their top longer-term goal and approximately 80% ranking it in their top three goals. In other words, based on the students' survey responses, the vast majority of BDEA students hope to pursue college-related careers. When looking at the specific responses more carefully, a broad range of specific college-related response were shared:

“I want to go to college for business”

“I want to go to Bunker Hill [Community College] for nursing”

“I hope to get accepted at Harvard”

“If possible get to Boston College, if not any college, to study medicine and become a doctor”

“Get into the school of my choice”

Clearly, the BDEA students have given a good deal of consideration to specific colleges and specific college majors. Of the three schools, BDEA students seem to have the highest aspirations. How do they feel their school is helping them to meet these aspirations? The following responses capture some of their replies:

“BDEA helps me focus on my goals”

“The school has given me a second chance to accomplish my goals”

“It has given education in a different way that helps me.”

“This school gave my life new meaning and gave me a second chance to become

someone better”

Such replies were not uncommon. Well over 50% of the students listed replies that emphasize customized, caring teaching. And the theme of getting a second chance at life comes through strongly.

One particular type of response from the BDEA student surveys capture what we have come to believe is the core theme of this study: “The school helped me become engaged in learning.” Engagement or re-engagement with learning: that theme resonates loudly throughout the BDEA survey data, and is clearly present across all three schools. For the BDEA students, this re-engagement seems to occur in a number of ways. Some students state that the evening hours allow them to work and not give up on their educational and career goals. Others say the teachers “help you through the process” of getting back into school and back on track in general. One student bluntly stated: “They educate me,” seemingly implying that that basic task should not be taken for granted.

The high aspirations of the BDEA students are particularly striking given the wide range of challenges they report facing, such as serious health problems, family economic challenges, deaths to family members or friends, depression, and single parenting. Overall, the BDEA students were somewhat more transparent about their personal challenges than the students in the other two schools, and also listed many ways in which they cope with these stressors:

“Coming to terms with myself and focusing on what I need to do as opposed to what I want to do.”

“Staying focused and away from those who are bringing me down”

“I decided to take a writing class over at Benjamin Franklin Institute to better my writing skills.”

“Working hard and pressing on”

“Staying determined and focused”

“Honestly, if I tell it would hold me back. I’ve developed a mindset to just do, and I keep the solutions to doing inside. Talk is cheap.”

These matter-of-fact and poignant responses to challenges faced by the students can be seen throughout the surveys. One gets the impression that this is a group of young people

who have faced many difficulties and, in part through the support of the school, have grown determined to transcend those difficulties and build a life they can embrace.

When asked what their major accomplishments have been over the past year, the students cited such responses as:

- “Stepping into BDEA and enrolling”
- “Graduating and getting ready for college”
- “Fighting depression”
- “Reading and writing”
- “Having my baby”

The range of accomplishments was vast, but the most common category was educational success in one form or another: graduating, learning more, becoming more focused in school, and doing well on the school’s benchmark assessment system. This category of responses was followed by example of coping with personal challenges, such as depression or other health issues.

Overall, the survey results depict a BDEA student population that presents a vast amount of challenges and an overarching feeling of resilience or determination to succeed regardless of the barriers encountered. Of the three schools, the BDEA student responses most clearly show an appreciation for a second chance at an education, a successful career, and a better quality of life.

Interview Summary

As the following categories of responses suggest, interviewed students at BDEA depicted a complex picture of challenging life experiences, a highly supportive school environment for the most part, high ideals for their future prospects, and somewhat mixed views of how prepared they feel for accomplishing their goals. Overall, though, the students attribute to BDEA and its teachers a great degree of appreciation for the possibilities the school has created.

General perception of the school environment. In some respects, the ten students interviewed at BDEA presented a more tempered view of their school, one that mixed the many positive elements mentioned with concerns about fellow students’ performance, academic rigor, and the level of expectations demanded of students. Nonetheless, the

overall perception of the environment was highly positive. The students felt safe and supported in contrast to how many of them stated they felt at their prior schools. As one student put it, after discussing safety and related concerns that he views as common among his friends' experiences elsewhere:

This school, it's recommendable. It needs to be recommended to a lot of students who are out of high school [dropped out] and not going to go anywhere in life. This is a second chance for them." And, as another student stated, "I actually love it... it's my peace. Because there's a lot of drama at home so I come here to get my peace...It's my money...It's a place where students come to get their education...not to fight.

These comments capture common responses across all ten interviews and help create the larger context within which critiques of academic rigor must be placed.

A particularly eloquent student shared her perspective on why BDEA is helpful to her and how it could be to others.

If not for this school I'd be in my bed sleeping right now. I'd be doing nothing...I think this school is good for kids. A lot of kids come here and be different people in school and then go out of school and be a different person. They could be angry, mad at home, come to school and be happy. It feels different, this school makes you feel different. I didn't really like school...now I wake up every morning and go to school. Past few days I've woken up at 6a.m. I've been sick with something. That's like crazy. So I get up early and do what I've got to do and go to school. I know if I could do it, I know anyone else could do it. Because I've been out of school for three years...If I could jump in here, put my toe in the water and see if it's cold, if I could jump in there I know a lot of kids could do it. I'm not saying I'm trying to be a role model.

This depiction of a second chance that's working is perhaps the most powerful aspect of the BDEA interviews.

Part of what seems to make BDEA appealing to students is the user-friendly nature of the school structure for non-traditional students—that is, students who are out of the cycle of being able to meet the demands of a typical school environment. Students

frequently mentioned the *benchmark assessment system* as a helpful modification over the standard grading system. The benchmarks allow students to meet their academic goals in a manner and on a time schedule that fits with their capabilities, both academically and logistically. For example, if students need to progress more slowly due to work or childcare demands, the benchmark system allows them to plan accordingly.

Another key feature of BDEA is the evening course schedule. Interviewed students from the evening program were, on average, the most positive reports of their experience at the school.

As with all three schools, the smaller class sizes at BDEA were viewed as a highly positive aspect of the school environment.

Classes are a lot smaller, it's a lot easier to concentrate. At [former high school], it was a little more out of control. Classes were too big. Teachers were a little inexperienced because it was their first year or something. Teachers here are a lot more experienced. They have funner classes. So it is a lot easier to learn. The work there is harder, so you're forced to learn more. But here it's a lot easier to focus. So you're able to take in everything that's given to you. Over there, there's more given to you, but it's harder to take in everything.

This quote serves as a good segue into the section on academic rigor that follows. The student providing the quote acknowledges that the work was more challenging at her former school, but that the lessons weren't accessible due to the school being more "out of control" and the teachers being less experienced. A key aspect of this quote is that the small class size of BDEA allows teachers to adapt and pace the teaching of the content to the students' interests and abilities.

Academic Rigor. The majority of the BDEA students interviewed felt that the school could be more academically rigorous, although most also seemed to appreciate the flexibility that allowed students to achieve at their own pace. In this sense, the question of academic rigor is a complex one. Students want the necessary challenges to succeed at the college level after graduation, but they also recognize the need for an educational structure that allows them complete high school even though many of the students have struggled elsewhere.

“At times it’s a little too easy,” said one student who has made great progress and is a strong advocate of the school, “but there are some teachers...who make it harder.” Another student said, “it’s easier than [regular] public school, but it is still a challenge for me.” Like some of his peers, this student acknowledged that he needed support to make it through to graduation given his track record, and the relatively less-challenging curriculum, at least with respect to pacing, was welcomed.

A particularly insightful second-year student at BDEA put the issue of academic rigor in an interesting light:

It’s a little bit easier [here]. It’s a lot of work. But the way you go about it is a little more laid back. You’re not being pushed to do work. You go at your own pace. But you can’t go too slowly because the work does come. You have to do it at a certain time. You do have deadlines. But it’s a little more laid back than [prior high school]. I think I...can learn just as much [here as at prior school]. It depends on how focused I am and how much I pay attention in class and how often I’m here.

In many respects this quote captures a common sentiment among the BDEA interview sample. Students repeatedly state that you get out of the school what you put in. Of the three schools, BDEA students were clearest about the responsibility for their educational success being in their hands. For those who want to take advantage of the structure of the school, according to the students, the opportunity for success is there.

The flip side of BDEA’s approach to granting the students a great deal of autonomy for their educational success, according to the students, is that there can be a lack of accountability for student failure or underperformance. “Some...teachers are...the push-over type...They just let the kids just do [whatever]...They’ll let that go for a few days and then get annoyed and tell them they should transfer out or not come.” Although this perception of teacher and student accountability was not necessarily the norm among the interviewed students, it was common for students to feel that the school could set higher expectations across the board, even for those students who are really struggling just to make it there.

At times the BDEA approach is presented in strikingly pragmatic terms that capture the reality of the students' life situations and engrained attitudes toward school. Some of the descriptions of homework policies capture this view. "Yeah. They give homework. But they know if you go home with homework most kids just don't do it. So they try to get most work done inside school so you won't have homework. That's what makes it better." Another student provided a different perspective. "It depends on the class. Some classes give a lot of homework, some give a normal amount. I'd say...since my schedule consists of humanities, algebra A, geometry, and evolution, I'd say I do at least 2-3 hours of homework a day. Or, to be more precise, about 12 hours per week or so." As with many aspects of BDEA, it seems that the degree of homework students receive is based on what their life circumstances can handle. Those taking more advanced coursework receive more extensive homework assignments, according to the students.

Relationships with Teachers. The larger picture of academic rigor at BDEA is linked with the students' views of and relationships with their teachers. The view of teachers was largely positive across the board, despite the concerns of some teachers being too easy or "pushovers," as one of the students put it. The following collection of quotes is generally representative of the interviewed students' responses:

The teachers are good teachers. I like how they teach. I understand better, how they teach me.

Teachers are cool. One thing I like about the teachers is they have patience. They're willing to take time and work with you...and let you go to student support [if you need to].

It's a lot easier here. I wouldn't say easy as far as the work goes, but it's easy-going, it's a safer environment. The teachers are a lot more in tune with the students. The teachers are very respectful. I have a one-on-one with my teachers. I think it's an overall good experience.

All of my teachers have been helpful. So I can't single out. If there's something I have to get done...or let's say I'm not working right now and I need to get a job, I can always come to one of the staff members here...and ask them to help look for a job. If not refer me [to a job

themselves], they can help me look for one. If I need extra help with an assignment and it's not that particular teacher, I can go to that teacher and they can always help me. Because they're willing to help and they won't say no.

One summation of the BDEA students' views of their teachers is the willingness to meet students where they are and to support them accordingly. "In my old school, it was just like 'here here's your paper, do it.' Here...they're going to help you little by little until you understand it completely." Another student said, "my teachers are all positive. You don't see any teachers saying you don't want to do nothing in your lifetime or you're not going to get nowhere with your life, or you're going to be a nobody. They keep stressing until they know you're going to get the work done and you're going to pass their class."

Personal Challenges. The BDEA students were quite open regarding the challenges they faced in their lives, challenges that made school success more difficult, but challenges which they were trying to either meet or use as inspiration in their current efforts to succeed.

One of the students discussed needing to manage child rearing along with her own education. "I had a kid...so I had to take care of my business and...make sure I could take care of my own child...It wasn't easy all the time."

One of the male students described his mother's strong efforts as not being enough to keep him on track earlier in his life. "I grew up without a father. Look what that led me to. I had nobody pressing me to go to school. My mother raised me good, but that's a mother versus [raising] a boy. It's not going to matter. A boy needs a father figure in his life."

Personal Change. The personal challenges students shared were met by many poignant examples of personal change. "As soon as I got here I just took off. Very quickly, I began doing a lot of work. I got promoted to 11th grade and then 12th grade in one year [informal promotion, since there are no actual grade levels at BDEA]...I took MCAS and got a very high score, so that saved me the trouble of taking some classes." As this student explained how she changed course so dramatically, she suggested that being in school with other students who were trying to improve their lives and with a teaching staff that genuinely supported these efforts was enough to make the difference.

Another student expressed her self-described turnaround as follows:

It's [BDEA] making me a better person. Because I'm more focused, I feel like I can get somewhere in life. Before at [prior school], I was just like 'Oh, I want to get out of here and go home and just lay down.' Here I can just come and get my work done, I feel like I can get my work done and feel like I can do something, get a lot done, a lot accomplished. I've changed. A lot has changed about me. I have goals now. I want to get a lot done.

The degree to which some students claim to have changed personally and academically is captured vividly in the case study of Bianca that follows. The change Bianca describes follows particularly challenging struggles in the middle school years and a general feeling that educational success and the achievement of meaningful life goals were slipping away.

Case Study: Bianca

Bianca is a 17-year-old female student at BDEA. It is her first-year student at the school, having arrived at the beginning of the 2008-2009 academic year after struggling through the past three years in one of Boston's public middle schools. According to Bianca, she began to struggle toward the end of the 6th grade, was held back in 7th grade and repeated it, and although she completed her 8th-grade year at the school she was not promoted to 9th grade. Given that she was substantially over age for middle school and needed extra support for high school, BDEA seemed like a good choice.

Regarding her middle school experience, Bianca said "they didn't want to keep me...I was having a hard time with my father not being at home...disappearing...That hit me hard." Bianca acknowledged needing support to stay in school and succeed, but added "the counseling there [at prior school] sucks." Whether Bianca was open to support in the midst of her middle school struggles is impossible to know, but it is clear that middle school did not work for her, given that she repeated one grade and was not promoted to high school. Fortunately, she said, one of her favorite middle school teacher spoke with her about BDEA and arranged for a visit to the school.

BDEA: A New Start

I like this school, and that's a first. Because I've never been to a school that I've attended every single day...It's like schools you see on t.v....The students here, they get along a

little too much sometimes...it might be a little too good to be real. It's really good. It's too good! (laughing) Seems kinda funky. I'm trying to figure it out [whether it's for real]. In here you wear whatever, you're free to be you...I don't even realize I'm learning, but we are in a fun way. We have fun in class. I actually look forward school. It's a long commute, but I look forward to it.

Individual Attention

I like the small classes. In my old school, it was just like here, here's your paper, do it. You need help, I'm over there. Here, they give you your paper and they sit with you and they work with it with you. Like they're not going to give you the answers, they're going to help you little by little until you understand it completely.

Teachers

The teachers here, especially Ms. Jean Marie, Ms. Merchinko, and Mr. Johnson they give you like the push, 100%. Mr. [male teacher's name] is the nicest person ever. They will stay on you, like the type of stay on you that gets aggravating. But they do it because they care so much. Like they're always so happy and they care. They're like, 'you have to do it.' They're the type that'll call you every morning just to wake you up. They stick to you like glue. Even if you don't need help, they make sure you're doing it like you should.

Student Support

They have to be the dopest [most awesome] student support I ever met. They're there for you 100%. You can call them anytime. And they're so easy to talk to. They're easy when they have to be, they're really nice. But when they have to be tough on you, they really will. To keep you going, they'll give you little rewards. Like movie tickets, just little stuff. That's cool, so we're gonna want to come to school just to get it.

They helped me [with problems] all the time. I went through a big change that everybody knows because...I always come to school happy, so for maybe two weeks I came to school real down, sad, kinda angry. And they helped me get over that completely. They told me about places where I can go, like groups of kids that go through the same things as me. And I could go there, talk, people talk about it and not just sit there and talk to them about it. It helped me out. They offered to do home visits. They offered to like find a way to talk to my teachers... [Bianca was having a problem with her mom at home. They sent letters to her mom to reassure her that she's doing well.] My mom has seen how well I'm doing, how much I've changed.

According to Bianca, the student support team at BDEA responds similarly to all students, but places extra effort into those students they think really need it.

Accommodations and Reengagement

Bianca discussed the importance of BDEA's benchmark system of assessment, which is particularly helpful to students who come in feeling far behind grade level. At the time of our interview, she claims to have reached 24 benchmarks for math and 10 for humanities, which, she implied, created a good deal of momentum for moving forward.

I can graduate on my own time. My whole attitude has changed completely since I came here. I come here every day with a smile on my face...I actually like seeing my peers...I saw one of my old teachers [elementary school]...and she was shocked to hear how good I'm doing...My mom is shocked too.

I used to wake up and be like, 'I'm not goin.' My mom would say 'okay.' Now she asks, 'Do you want to stay home?' I be like, 'no I'm going to school.' I want to go to school. If I miss one day, I feel ...so bummed, because I feel like missed a whole day full of good stuff...Teachers here aren't surprised. They say the tests showed I could do well.

There are other kids from my old [middle] school who are her. One of them, he was out of control. He never came to school. I see him every day here. All the time, he's always saying hi to the teachers. He's real polite. He does all his work. I've seen his work ethic, I guess you could say, benchmarks like crazy. And I was shocked. At other school he had straight F's.

Academics, Rigor, Accountability

At times it's a little too easy. Yeah, I get a little bored. In science all the time, I'm like, 'I learned this in middle school.' Stop bringing middle school back. I just came out of there. I want to learn something new. Something I don't already know. [My science teacher] knows I'm bored and he'll have my sit there and write what she thinks they should change.

But there's some teachers who think you learn better if everything's harder. Math classes are more difficult. But more teachers need to be tougher on some of the kids who don't do anything. There are some that come to school maybe once a week. All the time. There's a lot of kids like that...usually just doodling...listening to their music, just out of it.

Some of the teachers are a little too nice, a little push-over type. I've seen teachers who cried over the littlest things. Student might do something that annoys them and they start to cry. Half the time, I see the teacher do nothing [when kids don't do their work or show up regularly]. Sometimes they can be a pushover because they just let the kid just do [whatever]. Teachers need to be a little more tough. They need to get on them [the students who are not trying their hardest].

After discussing the teachers' roles in the accountability process, Bianca argues that ultimately it's up to the individual student:

You're choosing what you're doing. You came to this school because you want to graduate sooner.

Carryover for Self and Others

With everything so positive in school, I tend to bring it out of school. Now, everything goes well at home. I feel more safe outside of the school because teachers stand out on street. Everybody knows everybody. You never really see fights at school.

Before, after school I used to go to Dudley [neighborhood location] and hang with friends...and get home late...Then there was constant fighting at home...I didn't want to be inside my house... Everything at home has gotten better. Since my attitude has changed, I've changed my mom's attitude, I've changed my dad's attitude...and my [siblings].

Now, I go straight home on the bus...I hang out with brother... help my mom around the house. My mom, she's liking it, my attitude change. Instead of being out, I'm home now...I go home and there's a lot to it...helping out the family.

In talking about how the school environment affects other students, Bianca made reference to students who might be gang involved.

It's funny, because literally the moment they enter the front door they leave everything outside. So they get back outside and that's when they're back on their grind. They take their hats off, respectful, everything's just changed. Yeah, they might have their little flag hanging off their back pocket, because that's them. But you odn't see them throwing up signs, all that stuff. They leave that behind. Of course, there might still be a little drama, mostly with the females. That doesn't stop inside or out. But that's one thing I was really surprised at. I would expect, like, you know, here comes one kid from one project and another kid from another, and...the two they look at each other and they're gonna start a fight. That's what I was expecting. They look at each other, they walk by, they might be friends. Where they come from might...collide, but they still, hey, that's outside.

Next Steps

I want to go to college to be an E.R. [emergency room doctor]...But next year, I want to graduate...that's my number 1...Am I sure I can do it? Yeah, 100%!

Overview of the Tracking Tool Findings

We piloted the tracking tool (please see Appendix D) during this wave of the study to help determine whether the creation and utilization of a common database management approach might prove helpful to the three schools. In that regard, the tracking tool component of our study was not intended to generate new information or insight on the students, but rather to explore a common data gathering approach. Overall,

the results of the pilot were mixed. School leaders were able to collect data from the 30 interviewed students and we found we were able to summarize that information succinctly. It was not clear, however, whether broader-based use of the tool was worth the cost in time necessary to collect the information. In the short-term, the school leaders have agree to consider the tool for further development and perhaps join in pursuing addition funding to further development of it. In its current form, the tracking tool proved to costly in time to administer it to all students across the schools. The following summary captures the highlights from our efforts to create and pilot the tracking instrument.

The tracking tool collects data that may be considered in three broad categories: demographic/descriptive (e.g., gender, ethnicity); predictive (e.g., time at school, challenges experienced); and, outcomes (e.g., incidents experienced, rated behavioral trajectory). The small sample size available from each school makes it difficult to do much substantive analysis in relation to any one school. Nonetheless, when combined, a number of interesting observations emerged. The following is a sample of findings related to all three schools when the data is combined, including themes that stand out and are representative of the types of insights that might be gained from this kind of data organizing instrument:

- When all three schools are considered together, it does not appear that any one demographic/descriptor strongly predicts different outcomes for students. Gender may prove to be an exception when analyses can include more data. Girls tended to be rated substantially more positively than boys on several outcome variables, but the differences were not statistically significant.
- Students across schools tended to be *less* likely to require intervention for disruption the more “engagement” was rated as a major reason they left their last school. By comparison, they tended to be more likely to require interventions for disruption if they left their last school due to logistical or serious/legal issues.
- Students across schools tended to be *more* likely to require intervention for serious/legal issues the more serious/legal issues were rated as a major reason they left their last school. Leaving school due to logistical issues also significantly

predicted serious/legal incidents at school last year. Engagement ratings did not relate to serious/legal incidents.

- Engagement was significantly more likely to be an issue for students rated as experiencing greater educational, psychological, or situational challenges. The degree to which students tend to experience physical challenges appears to be relevant to only serious/legal issues, with higher ratings on one significantly correlated with higher ratings on the other. With the exception of physical challenges relating to serious/legal issues, challenges appeared to relate very little to disruption or serious/legal issues.

To reiterate our reminder at the outset of this section of the report, the tracking tool findings summarized here are not intended to be statements on the students or the schools. Rather, the sample of findings serves as an example of the type of analyses that could come from a data management approach that was commonly used across schools. Such an approach would allow the schools to correlate school progress with various aspects of students' attitudes and behaviors, and compare trends across the network of similar "second-chance schools." Our recommendation is that the schools convene again with PSI to determine whether to pursue the ongoing development either of this specific tool or another common database management approach.

Implications from the Full Study

This extensive report covers a great deal of ground related to the students' perspectives on their experiences at the three schools. As this summary of findings indicates, all three schools seem to work very well for the majority of their students, although they each carry out their mission in different ways. AAPCS seems to focus most powerfully on one-to-one academic and emotional support for its students. The school provides a great deal of leeway for students to struggle and still remain in school. And its service-learning or internship requirement was found to be instrumental to students' growth in specific cases. BDEA seems to focus most strongly on creating an adaptive environment that allows students to complete their diploma requirements either in the day or the evening with teachers who seem deeply committed to helping the students' graduate. BDEA students report very high aspirations, in many cases, for postsecondary

education, but many question whether they are being prepared well enough to meet those aspirations. And LMACS uses a strong and consistent system of mutuality and accountability to help students not only graduate from high school but also prepare for college. Given some of these findings, from the students' perspective, we close with potential considerations for strengthening each of the schools.

At AAPCS the students highlighted a tension between being known personally and supported on a one-to-one basis and the small class sizes being too familiar and loud at times. It would seem that the school leadership team might spend time planning an approach that continues to capitalize on the familiarity and individualized supports available, while also strengthening consistent guidelines for classroom behavior and accountability. This is not a suggestion to stop students from talking or collaborating in class, but rather to set clearer limits on the level of interaction that is tolerable, given many students' needs for a quieter environment in which to focus. Students love the freedom of AAPCS, but the consistently ask for more structure and clearer limits as well.

AAPCS would also be wise to consistently review its service-learning/internship program. Given that students provided such powerful examples for how this component of the school can be helpful, it would seem important to make the opportunity successfully available for more students. This is a difficult challenge to meet, given all the in-school work that needs to be done for "second-chance" students, but the service learning component clearly seems worth investing in.

At BDEA the call from students is for a bit more academic rigor and clearer connections to postsecondary opportunities. BDEA has the most diversity of the three schools in lots of ways, including academically. The school has many older students in the evening program and a range of ages and educational levels in the day program. Meeting this diversity of needs has to be a key challenge. One way to meet a broad range of educational needs is to strengthen career education opportunities on an ongoing basis. For example, since many of the students aspire to attend college even though their current academic performance will make their future educational and career goals difficult to obtain, it would be helpful to counsel students in the direction of their goals, including setting up academic improvement plans. We got a strong sense from the interviews that many of the students would work harder if they had a clearer idea of what their

postsecondary goals require of them in the moment—primarily, stronger academic effort and performance.

BDEA students were universally positive about feeling safe in the school following histories of the opposite feelings in many other schools. Building on this culture of safety and security might be a core theme for the school. It would seem that the leverage that comes from helping students feel safe in school might be utilized to motivate them to take best advantage of this opportunity. Clearly, many students are doing just that, but other students suggest that some of their peers are wasting an opportunity because they don't fully realize what they have.

Finally, LMACS seems clearly focused on college preparation. That theme came through over and over in the student surveys and interviews. Although the students were almost universally positive about the opportunity to prepare for college at LMACS, some stated that the school should have more rigorous coursework in place to help them pursue certain majors. The two courses that stand out as specific recommendations were a foreign language and more advanced math. It seems worth reviewing the curriculum to see if it is feasible to incorporate more advanced learning opportunities for those students who want to pursue them.

LMACS has established a culture of mutual responsibility and personal accountability. It would seem important to underscore this cultural reality in every way possible, given how positively students describe it. Further, the school might consider how to hold something like “personal accountability goal setting,” in which students have an opportunity to set high goals for themselves and work through specific plans for achieving those goals. It feels like LMACS is on the doorstep for doing something like this and truly being a model for high achievement for students seeking a second chance at both a high school education and a professional career.

Appendix A

Student Survey, Administration and Scoring Guide, and Codebook for Survey Themes

Appendix A.1: Student Survey (See separate attachment for Student Survey)

Appendix A.2: Administration and Scoring Guide (See next page)

Appendix A.3 Survey Themes (See attachment A.3)

Appendix A.2: Second Chance Charter Schools Student Survey Administration and Scoring Guide

Step 1: Informing the Students. Please let the students know that they are being asked to complete a voluntary survey that will allow you, and others who keep their school running, to gain a better understanding of their interests and concerns. You can let them know that the information they provide will help you and other educators to better design the quality of the education you provide. Please add that the focus is on both current issues that relate to their present education at your school and on their plans for the future. Please also let them know that the surveys will be administered at two points in time: near the beginning and end of the school year to see how their interests and concerns have changed.

Step 2: Group Administration. Try to administer the surveys in groups. Large groups are fine if you have enough administrators. There should be enough people there to answer questions and help keep the students focused. Let the students know there are no rights or wrong answers, only opinions. We are interested in their opinions. Please also add that it is important that they answer as fully and thoughtfully as possible in order for their answers to reflect how they really feel. Let them know they can raise their hands to ask questions if any of the questions are confusing. Ask the students to raise their hands when they are done with the surveys. A survey administrator should go to each student to pick up the completed survey and ask if they finished it completely and if they have any questions. Gather up all the completed surveys and store them until you are ready to send or deliver to the evaluation team or whoever will analyze them.

Step 3: Getting a Strong Completion Rate. Try to set up alternative survey times to get students who missed the main session. It's important to get as close to 100% completion rates as possible in order for the data to be useful.

Guidelines for individual and group administration:

- 1) Please ask students to complete all pages of the survey and check to see they've done so when they submit their surveys.
- 2) Share with students that information will be held confidential; no names will be shared publicly but rather, we are looking for general trends and patterns about their impressions of school and self.
- 3) State whether there is a time limit (according to your school's schedule), but that there are no right or wrong answers.
- 4) A reminder up front would be helpful to clarify that most questions have two steps; 1st step is to list responses, 2nd step is to prioritize their responses according to how important they are to them.
- 5) Let students know that the information will help you and others in MA create better and stronger schools for other similar students seeking a H.S. diploma, and is therefore very important.
- 6) Please remind them that only they can provide the sort of expert information needed from this survey: what they actually experience at the school and what they hope for in the present and future.

Step 4: Analyzing the Data – see Coding Manual below

Other issues:

Student identification: Ideally, you'd place codes on the surveys rather than the students' names and then make a code sheet to match the coded surveys with the names. That is fairly time consuming, however, so if you prefer you can ask the students to neatly print their first name and last initial on the surveys.

Confidentiality: The students should know that their answers will be kept completely confidential and that their names will not be associated with any reports written from the information they provide. They should also know that school personnel will not use their answers to influence their grades or status at the school.

IF YOU USE THE STUDENT SURVEY AT YOUR SCHOOL WE WOULD APPRECIATE YOU FORWARDING THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION TO INFO@PSINNOVATION.ORG FOR FUNDING AND DATA PURPOSES

School Name
School Mailing Address
School Phone Number
Contact Person Name
Contact Person Email Address

Scoring and Coding for the Second Chance Charter School Student Survey

The Student Survey has 20 questions or items that prompt students to either submit short answer responses or circle options that best reflect their thoughts or preferences. Most of the 20 questions require students to complete two steps. The first step requires them to list their responses to the question asked. Students can list up to five responses. The second step asks students to rank order the responses they listed for the specific question. For example, if a student lists five responses to the first prompt, which asks them to list hopes, plans, or goals for the coming year, the next step is to ask them to rank order those responses from 1 to 5. The survey has a clear space for ranking the responses.

The combination of open-ended responses with rank-ordering enhances the overall power of the student survey. First, it allows for the coding of themes that come from the open-ended responses; see the next section (Appendix A.3) for a listing and definition of themes that were gleaned from the survey for this report; note that these are not the same themes derived from the student interviews, although they overlap a good bit. Student interview themes are addressed throughout the 2010 report. Secondly, the rank-ordering of survey responses allows us to see which themes were most prominent or important to the students. The report addresses this by focusing on a discussion of themes that were ranked most highly by the students. Although we did not list a comprehensive summary

of how the themes were ranked for each question in the survey, that approach could be used in future studies.

In addition to the questions that ask students to list and rank-order responses, there are eight questions or sub-questions in the survey that ask students to circle the number that best reflects their best answer. These eight questions are straight-forward and very consistent with what students might see on a multiple-choice test. Our experience is that they have little to no problem responding to these questions. When added together, these items reflect a score that we call “academic self-efficacy.” The items represent a combination of perspective on how much one has accomplished, how much effort one has put into learning, and how confident they are that they can do well. In past waves of our study we added up the scores and used them as a preliminary indicator of academic self-efficacy. We did not use these scores for the current report because we have not been able to validate this portion of the measure, and we have not correlated the scores with other outcomes to this point. As such, this section of the instrument should be viewed as exploratory and a work-in-progress, and scores from this sub-component should be reported with appropriate cautions.

Data Entry and Data Management

Data derived from the Student Survey can be managed easily within an Excel or similar data-management system. For the 2010 report, we organized all survey data in Excel spreadsheets, using the following column headings: Student ID (names were not included to protect confidentiality, but a name with matching ID sheet was maintained), School attended, grade in school, number of years attending the school, followed by a column for each question and each potential response from the survey. Following a column that includes a verbatim reporting of the students’ responses, there are additional columns for codes give to those responses and the appropriate ranking for that response. The end result is a long spread sheet that captures all of the students responses, codes for those responses, and rankings of the responses. If further guidance is needed for organizing a database for the student survey, please contact Mike Nakkula, the lead research for the study, at mnakkula@gse.upenn.edu.

Appendix A.3: Coding derived from the student survey (see separate attachment)

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Second-Chance Schools Study

Note: As interviewer prepares for the interview, he or she will informally get to know the student a bit, making small talk, helping make the student comfortable.

1. Begin by saying the student's first name on tape so that we have an extra record of that. So start with something like: "This is an interview with John and [student's first name, say Ruth]. As I mentioned before we started, Ruth, the purpose of these interviews is to get the students' views on how they see the school – what they like and what they would like to see changed or improved – and to hear how the students' are experiencing the schools, including how the school is or is not helping them move forward. Before getting into our discussion of the school, though, I'd like to hear a little about you as a person. So let's start with this question:
2. How long have you been at [school name]? What brought you here initially?
3. Is your plan to graduate from this school? If so, where do you see yourself going educationally or careerwise after graduation?
4. How sure do you feel that this is what you want to do in the future? How well do you think you're prepared to take these steps down the road? What is the school doing to help you?
5. How would you describe the school?
 - a. Potential prompts:
 - i. What do you see as its main purpose?
 - ii. What does an average day look like here?
6. What have you found most helpful about the school?
7. What would you like to see changed at the school?
8. Everyone has challenges from outside of school that they bring with them? What do you see as the main challenges you're dealing with that affect you in school?
9. How, if at all, has the school supported you through these challenges? Is there anything they could have done better in this area?
10. Academically what do you find most difficult or challenging? How has the school responded to your needs in this area?
11. [If this information has not been already gathered:] What makes the school either a good or bad fit for you personally? Are there ways in which your personal learning needs are addressed or not addressed here? Can you give me an example?
12. Emphasis: be sure to have gained a sense of how the students feel about the schools' support of them versus simply a list of what they like and don't like.

Appendix C

Tracking Tool: See Attachment C