

"A Vision For Success: City On A Hill Shapes Practice For A Changing World"

Flashback-

During the 2000-2001 school year, PSI collaborated with City on a Hill Charter School to **publish a book** documenting their practice of transitioning ninth grade students from underperforming middle schools to this high-performing high school. The practice was focused on explicit skill instruction and scaffolding; it included frequent monitoring of student performance, student-centered faculty meetings, and skill-centered field trips. ([http://www.psinnovation.org/what we do/dissemination/books/skills for success](http://www.psinnovation.org/what_we_do/dissemination/books/skills_for_success))

Update-

Today COAH is still one of Boston's most high performing charter schools. Freshmen are selected for the ninth grade class by lottery, and most come from traditional public schools. City on A Hill operates in new school building in Roxbury, Massachusetts, is overseen by a new school leader, and has expanded counseling and support personnel devoted the multiple aspects of student success.

The results speak for themselves

- For 11 straight years every City on a Hill graduate has been accepted into college
- In 2009, 100% of students passed the math and ELA sections of the MCAS
- In 2009, 98% passed the Science section on their first attempt
- A unique school culture supported by peer to peer and student efficacy is present

A team from PSI recently went to interview City on a Hill Director Erica Brown to learn how the school has adapted its model of focusing on student skills since the school and PSI published their book. Below are some highlights from our conversation.

What New Freshman Look Like

Admitting students through a blind lottery, most COAH high school freshman are coming from various Boston public middle schools. Since 2001, when No Child Left Behind was enacted and put greater emphasis on English and Math standardized test scores, the skills of incoming freshmen have gotten worse. The focus on improving MCAS scores to meet "Proficiency" standards has led many public middle schools to devote greater time to English and Math.

However, in middle schools with low levels of performance and weak school culture, additional time spent on English and Math is often wasted- some topics may be retaught 8 or 9 times with little success. This in turn takes time away from other valuable subjects

like Social Studies and Science, where students' skills have noticeably declined. As a result, the average new ninth grade student at COAH is still reading at a level of 5.4, or the 4th month of 5th grade. S/he has likely never passed an MCAS. Even the brightest and most skilled kids that arrive as freshman often have stagnated since 4th grade and have the worst study habits because of poor middle schools. Some high-performing middle schools, like Roxbury Prep and Edward Brooke Charter Schools, do catch students up, but they are the exception rather than the rule. The result is that incoming students need both quality content and a more defined learning culture.

A Two-Step Plan: Adult to Student Learning and Peer to Peer Learning

City on a Hill leadership immediately shows new students two things: how to avoid student-to-student conflict and how to “own” a new set of academic expectations. For incoming students, this grounding in the school’s culture occurs during “Freshman Academy.” To get a sense of how essential Freshman Academy is, here is the attendance policy from the school:

“All students who have accepted placement must attend a two-week summer session in order to complete enrollment. All students completing Freshman Academy and attending the first day of the fall quarter will be officially enrolled as City on a Hill students. Any student accepting enrollment prior to the start of the school year but not attending the first five days of school in September will be dropped from the rolls, and forfeits placement at the school.”

The majority of the students are dealing with common “developmental” issues. Roughly 85% of the issues students contend with are strikingly similar. Those issues are worked into a larger freshman curriculum on transitioning to City on A Hill. There are individual issues too, and they also shape practice. Teachers and leaders learn by watching students: where they go, who they stand next to, and how their body language might indicate how they are feeling. Constant observation drives individual interventions. Through this combination of quantitative and qualitative data, which is used in tandem with high levels of teacher-leader collaboration, trends emerge. These trends then influence updates to the freshman transitions curriculum, tweaked annually to ensure maximum impact and to ensure that COAH is a learning organization in the truest sense.

While Freshman Academy sets expectations from the school’s teachers and leadership, the ultimate goal is to create a self-correcting culture between underclassmen and upperclassmen. Teachers and administrators often observe upperclassmen conveying a sense of efficacy and agency onto the freshman. This student-as-mentor culture means that seniors often take the lead in promoting peer to peer learning. Observing this grassroots level of conversation and learning is one way that City on A Hill defines success.

A New Building Means a New Culture

City on a Hill's previous building was in the middle of Boston, which allowed the school to take advantage of great downtown field trips. However, the building inhibited the development of a strong school culture because it was shared with a YMCA; having 8 different entrances and students in the building at all time made it feel like a student-controlled space that adults "visited" every day. The new building is not in the heart of Boston, but it is an adult-controlled space that promotes *the culture of the mind*.

One example of how the new building promotes more effective school culture is demonstrated when a student arrives late for school in the morning. With only one entrance to the building, students must proceed to the main office before going to class. No matter the student's excuse for being late, the school's response is always the same: "It may not be your fault for coming late, but it's your *responsibility* to arrive on time."

Prior to the building change, it was nearly impossible for staff members to hold every student accountable, every day. The single entrance also allows Director Erica Brown to personally greet all students each morning, bringing students back into the COAH culture from the moment they walk through the door.

A Commitment to Best Practice: The Science Curriculum in 2010-11

The best schools evolve their practice at every level. Just like annually updating and improving the transition of ninth grade students into a new environment, City on a Hill approaches every aspect of their curriculum with a similar critical eye. And so, despite the fact that in the 2009 school year, 98% of students passed the science proficiency test, when a Science Lead Teacher approached the other teachers and the administration with a proposal to revamp the curriculum, everyone on board agreed that the science department could do better.

Currently, since most students arrive with poor science content knowledge, the 9th grade attempts to remediate this gap with a yearlong course. However, the school believes that the current transition into other science courses is not working well or cultivating the scientific skills that students should have. Looking ahead, the team plans to introduce Physics earlier to underclassmen so that their Math skills will also be bolstered concurrently. In addition, Science department plans to focus on developing scientific inquiry and experimentation skills in greater depth, which is already off to a running start with the school's annual Science Fair, where every high school junior is required to design and present an experiment. Designing the curriculum around the scientific method allows teachers to spend more time on higher-order thinking and writing skills and puts less pressure to teach an entire middle school science curriculum in one year, which is currently leading to less effective instruction.