

Deeper Learning Comes to Brockton

With more than 4,200 students, Brockton High School (BHS) is by far the largest high school in Massachusetts. Like many urban high schools, it had struggled for a number of years with high dropout rates, serious discipline infractions, and poor academic performance generally. The school and district leadership had taken the position that little could be done to improve the school because of the large number of poor and disadvantaged students it served. The city of Brockton, like many formerly industrial, economically depressed cities in the northeastern region of the United States and the rust belt, has high rates of intergenerational poverty, unemployment, crime, and substance abuse.

A broad variety of educational programs (e.g., interventions to support at-risk students and academic supports that were largely remedial) were available at the school, but there was little focus on ensuring that these programs were effective and that they were meeting the needs of students. Administrators at the school were accused of having a passive approach toward the academic challenges facing the school, and many teachers took the position that it was up to the students to take advantage of what was available. One longtime principal of BHS often told the faculty that “students have a right to fail.”

Who Attends Brockton High School?

The student population of BHS is racially and socioeconomically diverse. Approximately 60% of the students are identified as Black, which includes African Americans, Cape Verdeans, Haitians, and many other immigrants from countries around the world who do not speak English as their first language. The school population is 22% White, 12% Latino, 2% multi-race, and 2% Asian American, while 17% of students are classified as Limited English

Proficient and 11% receive special education services. Overall, approximately 40% come from families that do not speak English as their first language, and 76% come from families in poverty and qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education classified over 80% of students at BHS as “High Needs.”

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High-Stakes Testing: The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

In 1998, Massachusetts introduced the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), a high-stakes exam (covering both ELA and mathematics) that all students in the 10th grade are required to take and pass to earn a diploma. When the results of the first MCAS were released, BHS was ranked as one of the lowest performing schools in the Commonwealth with a 44% failure rate and a 22% proficiency rate in English Language Arts. In mathematics, the failure rate was 75% and proficiency was only 7%. Based on their performance, hundreds of BHS students were at risk of being denied diplomas when the state put its new requirements into effect in 2002. When similar results were obtained the following year, BHS was featured on the front page of the *Boston Globe* as one of the worst schools in the state and described as a “cesspool.”²²

Interestingly, instead of responding to the article with anger after the school was labeled a failure, district officials and teachers were prompted to act. Recognizing that many students entered high school with weak literacy skills—and that the mathematics and language arts portions of the exam required strong literacy skills—veteran teachers argued to the new principal that every teacher at BHS would have to start teaching and reinforcing literacy in their classrooms. The principal acknowledged the need to strengthen the literacy skills of students but said that she could not force teachers to embrace this strategy. The teachers responded by stating that they could begin by “working with the willing.”

Teachers take action

Calling themselves the Restructuring Committee, the teachers began their first meeting by posting the MCAS scores with a question: Is this the best we can be? Initially, the committee thought that it could improve test scores by focusing solely on preparing students for the test. They noticed that in the first 3 years of testing, there were several questions and readings pertaining to Shakespeare. Assuming that this would continue to be the case, they launched what they called a “Shakespearean offensive,” getting teachers throughout the school to teach a Shakespearean text. However, the following year there were no questions on Shakespeare on the MCAS and they soon realized that the “Shakespearean offensive” was a mistake. **The Restructuring Committee concluded that school improvement could never be about outguessing the test or preparing by simply providing students with test-taking skills.**

After closely examining the data from the previous year’s exam they determined that their students were struggling in reading, problem solving, vocabulary, thinking, and reasoning skills. They also recognized that failure was not limited to any one subgroup. Therefore, they concluded that they could not address the problem only through remediation to students who were failing. Rather, the data clearly revealed that failure was widespread, and therefore changes in teaching and learning would have to occur throughout the school.

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Deeper Learning as an Improvement Strategy

While urban districts in other parts of the state that were faced with similar challenges focused on test preparation through prepackaged courses to avoid high rates of failure,²³ **BHS set off on a path to make deeper learning its high-leverage improvement strategy. The** committee asked a series of questions that helped them to develop and frame their work:

- **What are we teaching, how are we teaching it, and how do we know the students are actually learning it?** The leadership group recognized that most classes at the school were focused primarily on delivering content. As in most high schools, BHS was compartmentalized into highly structured departments. Although many teachers were knowledgeable in their content areas, most taught in a manner that paid very little attention to evidence of student learning—they covered the material and students were expected to learn it. Many other teachers struggled with classroom management and relied primarily on lecture and worksheets. In response to the question about how they knew the

students had learned the material, the leadership group came to the painful realization that teachers had not been focused on evidence of learning at all.

- **What do our students need to know and be able to do to be successful on the MCAS, in their classes, and in their lives beyond school?** This generated what was perhaps one of the richest discussions that the faculty had ever had and led directly to the development of a schoolwide literacy program. Teachers identified the essential skills that students needed to acquire to be prepared for the rigorous state exam and, ultimately, college. Based on their review of the state assessments, the school adopted a concerted focus on reading and writing in all classrooms with clear rubrics for teachers to use to evaluate and monitor student performance.
- **We are not likely to get any additional staffing or resources, so what resources do we have now that we can use more effectively?** The faculty committee recognized that time was the most important resource needed to propel their improvement efforts. They knew that a great deal of time during the school day was not dedicated to instruction; for example, many students had schedules that were filled with one or more study halls. The committee strategized to figure out how to convert this time into structured learning opportunities. They understood that to improve academic performance students would have to become more engaged in their classrooms and receive targeted support in the areas where their needs were greatest. To do this they recognized that they would have to increase the amount of class time spent on student learning, and this would force them to revise the schedule. The schedule change resulted in fewer preparation periods, which for the faculty was initially controversial. However, to compensate for the loss of time, traditional faculty meetings, which had in the past served as the setting where administrative announcements were made, were used to provide ongoing professional development in literacy.
- **What can we control, and what can't we control?** They knew that they could not control the challenges facing students: poverty, homelessness, violence, family turmoil, transience, language acquisition, etc. While recognizing that these obstacles were not insignificant, they decided that instead of using poverty as an excuse and feeling sorry for their students, they would take a hard look at how they utilized external resources (e.g., social services provided by community partners) to support students so that the staff could remain focused on teaching and learning. Shifting the focus of their conversations in this way proved to be the key to the changes that were implemented throughout the school.

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The central office in Brockton Public Schools was aware of the strategy that the faculty committee had devised. Initially, some in the central administration questioned whether an intensive focus on literacy would produce the increase in student test scores that the state demanded. They also questioned whether in a district with a strong union they could compel teachers to be trained in a manner such that they could help students to acquire the literacy skills they needed. However, after meeting with the BHS staff over the course of several months and recognizing the value of teacher

leadership at the school, the superintendent and central office staff embraced the strategy: Every teacher in the school—not just those in the English or mathematics departments (the subjects tested on the MCAS)—would be responsible for preparing students to take the rigorous state exam. In fact, the success of the strategy at the high school ultimately led the central office to adopt similar teacher-led initiatives at schools throughout the district.

Literacy Goals

In 2000, the school implemented the Literacy Initiative and clearly defined the literacy skills that every teacher would have to teach and develop: reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning. Within each area, there was a detailed series of objectives that every student at BHS was expected to master. These became the school’s academic expectations for every student, regardless of their background or some preconceived notion of their academic ability.

Drafts of the literacy goals were presented to faculty in small interdisciplinary discussion groups facilitated by members of the Restructuring Committee. Presentations about the initiative were made to the school board, parents, and even to the Chamber of Commerce to seek their input and to demonstrate that the school was not going to accept its dismal performance. From the outset, the committee understood that each of the skills they identified would have to be applied differently in each content area, and therefore, professional development would have to be adapted and personalized for each teacher. Regardless of the class or subject they taught, teachers needed to see the importance of getting their students to master essential literacy skills.

Teacher response

Initially, the teachers’ union objected to the literacy initiative and supported teachers who refused to participate. In response, the school devised a strategy to “work with the willing,” based on the hope that, as evidence of success was obtained, teachers could gradually be won over to support and implement the initiative throughout the school. The willingness of the site and district leadership to accept a gradual approach rather than to demand immediate, widespread adoption proved to be fortuitous. More often than not, school districts adopt a top-down approach toward school reform, and expect schools and staff to comply with orders from the central office rather than working for genuine “buy-in” around a particular strategy.



In Brockton, the literacy initiative was teacher led, and this was undoubtedly a key factor responsible for the success that was achieved. With the initiative’s emphasis on using deeper learning as its high-leverage improvement strategy, it was essential that the initiative not be driven by the administration but by strong leadership provided by teachers on the Restructuring Committee.

Teacher training

As time passed, teacher leaders won over their colleagues, and, rather than resisting change, many teachers admitted that they had never been trained in how to teach reading or writing. The Literacy Initiative provided differentiated training to every teacher at the school in how to teach literacy skills in their content areas using a

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common process, a common vocabulary, and a common assessment. Teachers also received training in how to utilize pedagogical strategies such as Socratic seminars, various forms of group work, and project-based learning in each subject area to support literacy development and higher order thinking on the part of students.

Using contractual faculty meeting time, the entire faculty was trained over several years in what became known as the “open response writing process.” The process, developed by the Restructuring Committee, called on teachers within all departments to collectively choose texts that were relevant to their content areas in order to provide the context for the writing. Those leading the effort understood that to be successful the school needed a coherent strategy, which could only be achieved if teachers implemented similar processes throughout the school. Consistency by teachers would ensure that students would be more likely to acquire the skills that were taught and applied in every classroom consistently.

Implementation

Once every teacher was trained in the open response writing process, the Restructuring Committee developed a calendar to set the dates for implementation. Teachers in specific departments were assigned a week during which they would teach the writing process to students using their subject area content. Though such an approach might seem highly regimented and at odds with the teacher-led approach, the school opted for two reasons to proceed and to create an implementation calendar to monitor the process and results. First, doing so ensured that every teacher was involved and accountable for teaching the literacy skills through a structured implementation process that left nothing to chance, which in turn ensured that the Literacy Initiative was not treated as yet another fad reform that would be cast aside as other goals became new priorities. Second, the implementation calendar allowed every student to have numerous opportunities for repeated practice of literacy skills. The staff believed that deliberate practice and reinforcement were essential ingredients for mastery, and the Restructuring Committee believed strongly that internal accountability was needed so that these practices were implemented with fidelity in the classroom.

As the literacy process was implemented over several years administrators continued to carefully monitor the training to make sure that each teacher received adequate guidance and support. They also conducted regular non-evaluative classroom observations to monitor how literacy strategies were implemented. Teachers continued to meet regularly in small groups to analyze the quality of work produced by students and to share both the challenges they experienced and the lessons they learned about which strategies were most effective. Utilizing professional learning communities in this way proved to be the most effective means to provide teachers with feedback. The professional learning communities created a nonthreatening setting where teachers’ impact on student learning could be assessed. Finally, a rubric was developed and utilized by every teacher to ensure that consistency was maintained in assessing student writing.

As faculty met in interdisciplinary groups to review the work of students, powerful discussions about teaching and learning ensued. By comparing and analyzing student work they were able to see where there were inconsistencies in expectations, and to debate what sort of evidence was needed to ensure that students had acquired the skills deemed most important. In a faculty of more than 300 teachers, and with the school’s long track record of failure, there were many who doubted that their students could meet the rigorous standards that were set. However, when teachers who expressed doubts saw the quality of writing that students were producing in other classes, they

began to understand that high-quality instruction and the utilization of deeper learning strategies could directly improve the quality of student work.

Outcomes of the Literacy Initiative

Ultimately, true buy-in from teachers came with results, and BHS experienced dramatic improvement quickly. In the first year of the Literacy Initiative the failure rate on the MCAS was reduced by half, and the proficiency rate doubled.²⁴ The second year showed similar results, and as it became clear that the progress could be sustained, the voices of dissent abated,

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and more teachers became committed to the effort.

The meticulous process used to monitor implementation revealed that some students needed more support through short periods of direct instruction. They also needed regular feedback. Teachers identified students who needed more assistance than the school day allowed. To address this need, opportunities were created to provide these students with one-on-one support during the day, when time was available (e.g., before and after school, during lunch periods, etc.). Students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) had them revised to include literacy goals and the supports they would need to reach the standards. A portfolio for every student with an IEP and every English language learner was created to ensure that their progress was monitored.

The Access Center was created to provide individualized tutoring to students and was available throughout the day and after school. Teachers who were willing to provide tutoring assistance to students were recruited to work in the Access Center. Juniors and seniors were also recruited to serve as peer tutors, and like their teachers, they received training on the writing process so that their tutoring was consistent with the schoolwide process. Initially, a teacher referral was required for a student to report to the Access Center, but over time, word spread among the students that help was available. Gradually perceived as a positive, safe, and supportive place to receive assistance, the Access Center became a place where students sought help voluntarily.

By 2006 the failure rate on the MCAS had been cut in half, and the school had dramatically improved the number of students who achieved proficiency in mathematics and literacy. Of the 2008 graduates, 97% went on to higher education, with 47% accepted at 4-year colleges. For the graduating class of 2009, 98% of Brockton's students passed the mathematics and English exam by graduation. Also in 2009, 78% of Brockton's 10th-grade students achieved either advanced or proficient levels in ELA (matching the state percentage), and 60% achieved similar levels in mathematics.

In 2005, 2006, and 2007, over 20% of Brockton's graduating seniors were awarded an Adams Scholarship that provided tuition support for 4 years at any state college. In 2008, 2009, and 2010, that number had risen to 25%, the maximum allowed under state program guidelines. In 2005, the Governor of Massachusetts and the Commissioner of Education came to Brockton to announce the John and Abigail Adams Scholarship program, recognizing the high number of Brockton students who achieved this distinction and especially noting that students of color received 35% of these awards. The percentage of minority recipients has been increasing annually, and for the BHS class of 2010, 49% of the recipients were minorities, compared with only 19.8% statewide.

Promoting Improvement

Evidence of progress enabled BHS to continue its focus on using literacy to promote improvement over the next decade. Teacher leaders continued to train their colleagues in how to teach literacy skills using the same differentiated approach to professional development that had been used in the past. Once the faculty felt confident and well trained, the same skills were taught to the students.

Workshops themes included: Using Active Reading Strategies; Analyzing Difficult Reading; Reading and Analyzing Visuals; Analyzing Graphs and Charts Across the Curriculum; Developing Speaking Skills; Checking for Understanding; Problem-Solving Strategies; Helping English Language Learners Achieve; and Teaching Vocabulary in Context. These are the skills and strategies that research has shown are essential for deeper learning.²⁵

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The success achieved at Brockton High School gradually resulted in similar strategies spreading to other schools throughout the district. The central administration invited teachers from other schools to visit BHS so that they could observe classrooms and talk with teachers and students about the literacy initiative. Though progress has been incremental, it has been steady:

- In 2013, the median Student Growth Percentile (SGP) for Grade 10 ELA increased to 73.0. The ELA proficiency rate increased from 67% in 2010 to 85% in 2013.
- BHS received four Bronze Medals (in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2013) in the Best High Schools Rankings by *U.S. News & World Report*. It has also been recognized as a National Model School by the International Center for Leadership in Education for 11 consecutive years (2004–2014).
- In response to student achievement data, the 2012–2013 Brockton Public Schools’ strategic goals for learning and teaching identified writing as a key instructional focus. The district provided professional development to all schools during the 2012–2013 school year to train teachers on how to use various modes of writing (narrative, expository, persuasive, and research).
- Teachers throughout the district have been provided writing resources in content areas. For example, the Science Writing Binder for grades 6–8 includes writing standards, templates, explanations of the 6 + 1 Traits, and writing resources for the four modes of writing, including rubrics and writing prompts.
- The district reaches out to parents through the Brockton Community Schools program, the Parents Academy (which offers workshops of all kinds), and Coordinated Community and Family Engagement of Brockton.
- The BPS website lists resources for homeless families in great detail, and includes a variety of community social services. In addition, businesses and organizations such as Wal-Mart, W.B. Mason, Good Samaritan Hospital, and Stonehill College provide materials, services, and clothing for these families.
- The school district has established partnerships with outside agencies and businesses to support the work of the schools.

It is important to reinforce the point that the turnaround at Brockton High School was not quick or easy. Rather, it was made possible by a steady focus on ensuring that teachers had the ability to teach a full range of literacy skills by using strategies that developed higher order thinking skills among students. Throughout the process, BHS teachers played a leading role in implementing the initiative. They also took the lead in supporting and guiding their colleagues, and in tailoring that support so that the individual needs of teachers could be met as they learned new practices that they found difficult. Finally, there is an ongoing willingness to analyze student work regularly to ensure that there is concrete evidence that students are acquiring critical skills and that the strategy is working.

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The improvement strategy has now been sustained for nearly two decades, and the Brockton strategy has been replicated in schools across many districts and states. Essentially, there were four steps in the development of the Brockton Literacy Initiative:

- 1. Empower a team.** The Restructuring Committee served as a think tank in which ideas and strategies could be developed and discussed. It provided a context for shared leadership of the work and created a setting where teachers could voice concerns about the process. Importantly, what started out as a mission to improve test scores evolved into a more comprehensive focus on using deeper learning to guide the school's improvement.
- 2. Focus on literacy.** Too often, school improvement efforts embrace too many goals that shift from year to year. The literacy work at BHS became the high-leverage intervention that the school relied upon to bring coherence and consistency to the work of teachers, and to guide student learning. Research on school improvement shows that such an approach has the greatest likelihood of success.²⁶
- 3. Implement with fidelity.** Faculty were trained and required to implement the literacy skills according to a calendar so that students received the deliberate practice needed for mastery. Implementation of the strategies at the classroom level was carefully monitored, and teachers and students who struggled received sustained support.
- 4. Monitor, monitor, monitor.** Administrators at BHS meticulously monitored every aspect of the process. They made it easy for faculty and students to obtain help and solicited feedback on how things were working. By establishing schoolwide standards, ensuring that students knew what excellence looked like, and designing mechanisms for regular feedback, the faculty was able to establish consistent standards for all students.

Teaching all students the literacy skills in reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning prepared them for success on state assessments and in their classes, for college, for work, and for their lives beyond school. Improving the quality of instruction was the driver of the school's improvement. As the faculty learned to teach differently, they maintained a focus on evidence that students were obtaining the literacy skills they needed.

As noted earlier, by 2010, 90% of students at BHS were passing the state exam, and one-third of the senior class earned proficiency in mathematics and literacy,²⁷ which meant that these students were eligible to receive the Adams Scholarship. These results have now been sustained for the past 7 years, and BHS has been transformed from a school labeled a failure to one recognized as a national turnaround model. Most importantly, as district leaders understood the factors that had produced the changes at the high school, they began implementing similar strategies at schools throughout the school district.

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Eleven years after the school had been labeled a cesspool, *Boston Globe* reporter James Vaznis began his article "Turnaround at Brockton High" with the following statement:

Brockton High School has every excuse for failure, serving a city plagued by crime, poverty, housing foreclosures, and homelessness ... But Brockton High, by far the state's largest public high school, with 4,200 students, has found a success in recent years that has eluded many of the state's urban schools: MCAS scores are soaring, earning the school state recognition as a symbol of urban hope.

The Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, Mitchell Chester, added:

To me, Brockton High is evidence that schools that serve diverse populations can be high-achieving schools. It's just very graphically ingrained in my mind after having walked through the building and gone into classes that there's a culture of respect among students and adults. You don't see that in every school.²⁸

In addition to the accomplishments mentioned earlier, Harvard University's Achievement Gap Institute also featured BHS as a model, and the school's accomplishments were highlighted by former Governor Deval Patrick in his State of the Commonwealth Address.