

A Tale of Two City Schools

Worcester Tech and Putnam Academy become models for recovery

By William Donovan



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Executive Summary

Worcester Technical High School and the Roger L. Putnam Technical Academy in Springfield were two of the poorest performing vocational-technical schools in Massachusetts early in the first decade of the new century. Compared to all the state's voc-tech schools, both schools—which have a vital role to play in bolstering the economic prospects of the communities they serve—had high percentages of students who failed to graduate or left school early.

Yet both schools also had the advantage of abundant voc-tech success models in communities and districts across the Commonwealth. Following passage of the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act, the voc-tech community as a whole had risen to the challenge of meeting higher academic standards while remaining true to their core mission of preparing young people to meet the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly technologically sophisticated workplace.

In both Worcester and Springfield, turnaround efforts involved new leadership, gaining fresh perspective, changing perceptions, and building support in the business community.

New principals were instrumental in moving beyond outdate and inaccurate public perceptions of urban voc-tech schools as “dumping grounds” for students who were thought to be less capable than their peers in so-called comprehensive high schools.

School staff sharpened their focus on the key relationship between academics and vocational skills. Each school implemented new programs that focused on improving test scores, empowering staff, and increasing pride in the school.

Problems unique to the schools were also addressed, including an audit that led to the discovery of improper activities in several shop programs at the Roger L. Putnam Technical Academy.

And business leaders stepped forward with the support to remake institutions that have long played an essential role in both the educational and economic fabric of the state's second-largest and third-largest cities.

By 2012, both Putnam Academy and Worcester Tech had achieved dramatic improvements in test scores, dropout rates, and graduation levels. They were once more schools of choice, attractive to incoming high school freshmen eager for the unique blend of academic and vocational instruction that has made Massachusetts a national leader.

In two communities where negativity and neglect had for too long been allowed to erode the voc-tech success story, these schools had once more been set upon a firm foundation for success in a new century.

Introduction

There was a time when vocational-technical high schools were considered by many people to be dumping grounds for kids who lacked the intelligence or ambition to attend a college-prep school. Their future was in their hands, not their heads.

That misperception has dramatically changed. Massachusetts's voc-tech schools today are as much about academics as they are about vocational skills. In fact, the two are intricately connected.

The Massachusetts voc-tech system has earned applause across the country for its unique model in which students alternate weeks in the classroom with weeks in a shop lab.

Far from reflecting low expectations and any lack of ambition, that format challenges voc-tech students to achieve more. They're still required to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam, just like students at college-prep high schools. Yet, because they split their schedule between trade shops and academics, they have only half the amount of time to prepare for those exams as do college-preparatory students.

Two Urban Voc-Tech Schools Showing the Way

Over the past 15 years, the reputation of the Massachusetts system has been enhanced by a remarkable turnaround by two of its members: Worcester Technical High School and the Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy in Springfield. These two urban high schools, once known for the low percentage of students who graduated and their high rates of dropouts, are examples of what can happen with new leadership, community investment, and committed teachers.

There were similarities between the two before their revivals. Both had and still have high numbers of low-income and special needs students. Both were housed in aging buildings, with insufficient shop labs and a degree of neglect that sent a message to teachers and students that the community didn't care. Each displayed a lack of urgency to improve academics and had students who did not perform well on the MCAS exams.

Their turnarounds have also been similar. Each was led by a new administration. Each moved into new, state-of-the-art facilities.

Each had a change in its school culture and placed new emphasis on academics, adding Advanced Placement (AP) courses and undertaking other efforts that helped improve MCAS scores.

The outcomes have been equally impressive. Graduation rates soared. Dropout levels plummeted. And both schools have joined the long list of voc-tech schools across Massachusetts

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that have more applicants than available seats.

This paper looks at the two schools and how they were able to go from the bottom of the rankings among the state's voc-tech schools, to among the leaders, not only in the voc-tech system, but among all high schools in their cities. It includes interviews with administrators involved in the recoveries and research including news articles and academic studies. Together, the histories of Worcester Tech and Putnam Academy can be instructive to other schools in need of radical change.

Worcester Technical High School

Background

Worcester Technical High School had 1,476 students enrolled for the 2021–2022 school year. About 57 percent of students are Hispanic or African American, 31 percent are white, and nearly 8 percent are Asian.¹ The school features 23 vocational-technical programs, ranging from robotics to animal science to carpentry to culinary arts. Unlike large regional voc-tech schools that are independent of a single city or town, Worcester Tech is under the umbrella of the City of Worcester.

The school opened in 1908 as the Worcester Boys' Trade School, backed by the support of local industrialists who believed Worcester's growing economy needed more skilled workers. More than a decade later, the school merged with the all-girls David Hale Fanning Trade School and was renamed Worcester Vocational High School, a name it kept until 2006.

Two significant changes occurred that year. The first was the opening of a new \$90 million building in the Belmont Hill section of Worcester. Instead of attending classes in the severely aged original structure, students moved into a state-of-the-art facility. The vocational shops were equipped with machines that enabled them to graduate with skills for immediate employment.

The second change was the appointment of Sheila Harrity as the school's principal. Harrity had been the principal at Wachusett Regional High School in nearby Holden. She arrived with a passion for voc-tech education and determination to increase the academic rigors that she was sure would help support students in their vocational areas.

The sparkling new school was the talk of Worcester. But there was skepticism about Harrity's appointment and whether she was up to the task. She had no experience running a voc-tech school.

"The vocational instructors were cautious, and they weren't sure about me," said Harrity. "I was greeted with articles in the paper saying, 'She's not a true vocational person' and didn't think I was capable of doing the job."²

The job was challenging because the students were generally underperforming. In 2000, 97 percent of Worcester

Tech students scored in the Needs Improvement or Warning/Failing categories of the MCAS exams. Eighty-five percent of those students were in the Warning/Failing category. The English Language Arts (ELA) exam was barely better—97 percent of the students tested in the Needs Improvement or Warning/Failing categories, with 76 percent in the Warning/Failing group.³

Not much had changed in the scores by the time Harrity arrived in 2006. Of the 252 students who took the ELA that year, no one scored in the Advanced or Proficient category. About 86 percent finished in the Needs Improvement or Warning/Failing categories. In the mathematics exam, about 66 percent scored in the Needs Improvement or Warning/Failing categories. Slightly more than 10 percent achieved Advanced or Proficient.

Fortunately, the prospects for the school had started to improve before 2006. In 1998, Worcester Vocational High School merged with the Worcester Public Schools. Initially, the purpose of the merger was to make the cost for a new vocational school building project eligible for a 90 percent reimbursement from the state.⁴

But the merger was about more than simply gaining additional state funding. City and school officials, joined by business leaders and the community, understood that the time had come to put more focus on academics. They supported a sharp increase in resources for textbooks and professional development.

Throughout the 1990s, a consensus had been building in Worcester that the city's voc-tech school needed a new building if it was going to realize the promises of education reform and continue to supply skilled workers to a regional employment market that was continuing to grow in size and sophistication.

In 1997, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) determined that the school's original building, then nearly 90 years old, had deteriorated to such a condition that Worcester Tech should be placed on "warning" status. NEASC notified the city that the school's accreditation could be revoked unless the facilities were brought up to date.

Despite a controversial proposal and an arduous process selecting a location,⁵ ground was broken in 2002 and the doors to the new school were opened in 2006.

A New Era Begins

Numerous changes were happening with the school that year. The new building was in a different part of town—Belmont Hill. The name changed from Worcester Vocational High School to Worcester Technical High School. Even the school's mascot was changed. The traditional bulldog, an apt symbol for a determined, traditionally blue-collar city such as Worcester, was replaced by an eagle, suggesting an institution ready to soar to new heights.

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Inside the school, Worcester Tech was reorganized into four learning academies that offered 25 career paths. Each was housed in its own building, with its own classrooms, conference centers, service areas, and industrial workspace.

Each academy replicated real-world conditions, both on the manufacturing and customer service levels.⁶ They included Alden Design and Engineering, Information Technology & Business Services, Allied Health & Human Services, and Coghlin Construction Technology.

The community had high expectations there would be a transformation at the school. Business and industry had raised \$3 million to help finance the new building and had donated new equipment and materials. City officials and political leaders had negotiated for state and local funds. Parents and education officials assumed the quality of education at the school would improve. Pressure was on the new administration and the teachers to deliver.

Seeing an ‘Educator’s Dream’

Harrity looked at the new school with its cutting-edge technology and the fresh enthusiasm and saw “an educator’s dream.” She wanted to show that she had a passion for vocational education. Her mission was to increase the rigors in the academic areas to help support the students in their vocational areas.

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That was a change of attitude for Worcester Tech, where it had long been assumed graduates would simply find a job in the trades. Academics had for years taken a backseat to vocational training. The new vision for the school was that all students would graduate ready for college *and* a career. Academics and technical studies became more

aligned to support student learning.

“They needed to be competent in their math and sciences to be a strong vocational person excelling in their field,” Harrity said.⁷

A Focus on Excellence and Standards

A three-year plan was created. There were weekly administrative and instructional leadership team meetings. Each month, progress reports were given on steps to achieve the teams’ goals and benchmarks.

“(Harrity) focused on data and test scores, academics. She focused on excellence and standards. She brought a positive feeling, encouragement, everyone can achieve,” said Frances Meringolo, the head of the Social Studies Department, in a 2014 interview about Harrity’s impact on the school.⁸

Advanced Placement courses were added to make academics more rigorous. AP Biology was the first course offered because none of the graduates from the Allied Health &

Human Services Academy were getting admitted into premed undergraduate degree programs. Their course work was not considered strong enough. Seven AP courses were eventually offered, including in languages and environmental science.

Worcester Tech also began partnering with local community colleges to improve students’ prospects for higher education. Instructors from Quinsigamond Community College taught Spanish I and II at Worcester Tech, helping students earn six college credits and satisfying a requirement of many four-year colleges.

Importance of Outside Financing

Fundraising and outside contributions from businesses were critical to Worcester Tech’s turnaround. Of the \$90 million price tag for the school, the city was able to secure \$60 million in state financing. The other \$30 million was raised by the Worcester Vocational Schools Advisory Board, made up of business leaders in the Worcester area. The board devised a program to attract contributions from local and national firms.

The effort was led by Edwin “Ted” Coghlin, owner of Coghlin Electrical Contractors, whom Harrity calls “the godfather of Worcester Tech.” In an interview with Worcester Business Journal in 2006, Coghlin explained the approach.

“We started a program called Entrustments in which we would partner with a business, a manufacturer or a major supplier and that supplier would provide his equipment, his expertise, his knowledge, into the school,” Coghlin said. “In return, we would give that particular supplier exclusivity as far as use of the products and the rest of it.”⁹

Corporate Support and a Technical Fund

Local companies jumped at the proposal, but so did high-tech giants such as Dell, which provided computers, and Cisco Systems, which provided network support. Each corporation’s investments allowed them to advise on the equipment’s instructions and have access to a facility where they could train their employees, sales staff, and prospective clients.

Another innovation was the Skyline Technical Fund, a 501(c)(3) account, created for the purpose of acquiring state-of-the-art computers and peripheral equipment. The goal was to ensure that the equipment at the school would never fall behind industry standards.

“In most school districts, when you’re working on a transformational model, there are additional dollars that come with it,” said Harrity. “We did not receive any. There was not an additional pot of money to create additional initiatives. We only received \$200,000 per year in supplies, equipment, and for professional development from the city. So, we made use of the resources we had and the Skyline Technical Fund.”

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Annual Progress in Academics

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Beginning in 2006, Worcester Tech showed improvement in MCAS scores and other measures. The percentage of students scoring Advanced in English Language Arts (ELA) rose from zero in 2006 to 21 percent in 2009 and has not dropped below double figures since, reaching 54.4 percent in 2018. The percentage scoring Advanced in Math rose from 10.4 percent in 2006 to 33 percent in 2009 and has remained above that level, reaching 53.4 percent in 2018.

The MCAS scores showed significant improvement among minority subgroups.

According to data from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), from 2006 through 2012, there was a 61 percent gain in the passing rate in ELA and a 43 percent gain in math for the overall student population. Hispanic students posted a 61 percent gain in ELA and 35 percent increase in math. Students from low-income families or backgrounds showed a 58 percent gain in ELA and a 43 percent increase in math. And Black students achieved a 48 percent improvement in ELA and a 23 percent increase in math.

Driven by higher scores, dedicated administrators and staff, and a supportive business community, the graduation rate at Worcester Tech climbed dramatically, moving from 79.3 percent in 2006 to 99.1 percent in 2017. From 2018 through 2020, the average was 97.5 percent. The graduation rate for all voc-tech schools in Massachusetts during those three years was 95.5 percent.

Meanwhile, the dropout rate fell as sharply as test scores and graduate rates had soared. In 2007, 8.5 percent of Worcester Tech students were classified as dropouts. By 2011, that figure had been slashed to just 1.1 percent. At a time when the overall dropout rate for all voc-tech schools in Massachusetts averaged 2.4 percent, Worcester Tech averaged 1 percent. And today, Worcester is among the leaders among voc-tech schools—and all high schools—with an enviable 0.1 percent dropout rate in 2020–2021.

Blue Ribbon Award and President Obama's Visit

In the years following 2006, Worcester Tech received numerous national awards, including a National Breakthrough School Award in 2013 from the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

The award is given to five middle schools and five high schools each year “that serve large numbers of students living

in poverty and are high achieving or dramatically improving student achievement.”¹⁰ One year later, the same organization named Harrity its National High School Principal of the Year.¹¹

Worcester Tech also was given a Blue Ribbon Award from the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program, a coveted honor given by the U.S. Department of Education, which “affirms the hard work of students, educators, families, and communities in creating safe and welcoming schools where students master challenging and engaging content.”¹²

The school was cited for its academic improvement and for making a difference in the community: “Student projects include construction of LEED certified low-income housing, land maintenance and water testing of public parks, and the design/fabrication of over 250 holiday wreaths that adorn downtown during the holidays—bringing great pride to students and citizens alike.”¹³

The crescendo of the comeback came in 2014, when President Barack Obama gave the commencement address to the graduating class. After citing the positive changes in the school, Obama said “The thing I really want to do is make sure that what we’ve learned here, at this high school, we can lift up for the entire nation. I want the nation to learn from Worcester Tech.”

Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy Background

Putnam Academy is a public high school within the Springfield school system. Enrollment during the 2021–2022 school year was 1,396, with 65 percent of the students Hispanic, 20 percent African American and 10 percent white.¹⁴ Twenty-two shop programs are offered, including Automotive Technology, Cosmetology, Information Support Services, and Robotics and Automation.¹⁵

The school opened in 1938 as Springfield Trade School. The name was changed to Springfield Trade High School, and later to Roger L. Putnam Technical High School in honor of a former city mayor. In 2012, it became known as Roger L. Putnam Technical Vocational Academy.

By the early years of the twenty-first century, Putnam Academy was clearly in need of new leadership and new investment.

In the 2002–2003 academic year, the school’s dropout rate was a dismal 17.6 percent, far higher than most other voc-tech schools in Massachusetts. The 2006 graduate rate of 49.2 percent was second lowest in the state and far behind the 80.7 percent average for the state’s voc-tech schools. In

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fact, Putnam Academy's graduate rate was higher than only one other school, Madison Park Technical Vocational High School in Boston.

But those years represented the low point in Putnam Academy's recent history. Improvement came slowly at first, then with a rush. Like Worcester Tech, the changes were ushered in by new administrators working with city officials, complemented by a modern school building with state-of-the-art shop facilities.

The State Focuses on Springfield

In the early 2000s, state officials were concerned about the high schools in the Springfield school district, according to Kevin McCaskill, a former principal at Putnam Academy. McCaskill became principal in 2004, after spending 18 years in middle school and elementary school administration. At the time of his transfer, Putnam Academy had been labeled "chronically underperforming."¹⁶

In addition to the abysmal graduation and dropout rates, Putnam Academy's MCAS scores were low, and the school was under-enrolled. It had a capacity for more than 1,000 students but was well under that level. McCaskill understood why enrollment was down.

"(Putnam) was considered almost like a dumping ground," said McCaskill, an experienced middle school teacher and administrator. "It didn't have a good reputation, and you tried to steer kids and families away from Putnam. But there was a lack of understanding about the power of vocational schools."

Identifying the Need for a Turnaround

Putnam Academy was important to Springfield's future because of the skilled workers it could provide to local employers. A failed voc-tech school would be a lost opportunity for the city. Momentum began to build by promoting Putnam Academy at the middle schools and by strengthening connections with area businesses.

McCaskill said the biggest factor was upgrading the supplemental portion of the school. There was additional emphasis put on after-school programming such as tutorials, clubs, and other extracurricular activities.

"We also made a big effort to get partners," he said. "Between Springfield College, Amherst College, Mount Holyoke College, we had so many people with their hands on that school to provide holistic support to our students. It was tremendous."

By the 2005–2006 academic year, the dropout rate at Putnam Academy had improved dramatically to 5.8 percent.¹⁷ The graduation rate had risen to almost 70 percent, up from 49.2 percent in 2006. Although that improvement lagged behind

the 88 percent average graduation rate for all voc-tech schools in the state that year, the school was clearly making progress, as evidenced also by its growing popularity.

Enrollment climbed from 982 students in the 2003–2004 school year to 1,632 in the 2008–2009 school year.¹⁸ More families were viewing Putnam Academy as an option. Enrollment has remained above 1,400 students throughout the last 15 years.

Audit Problems Discovered

McCaskill left Putnam Academy in 2010 for a position with the Hartford Public Schools. He was replaced by Gilbert Traverso, who had spent the previous 14 years as assistant principal of the Connecticut Technical High School system. Traverso conducted a deep review of each vocational department and found problems with many of the shops.

The school's accounting of income from the shops was in disarray. A subsequent audit by Springfield's Office of Internal Audit found "dismal bookkeeping and rampant skimming among a group of employees who used school funds, equipment and student labor for personal home makeovers and sideline businesses."¹⁹

The abuse was most apparent in Putnam's Automotive Technology and Carpentry programs.

"Educators in both departments pocketed cash and skimmed materials and services for their own use," according to the report.

"There was no effective process for collecting funds for money that the kids made on jobs for the school," said Traverso. "There was a person skimming money from those jobs. There was no evaluation system."²⁰

"We didn't have proper structures in place," said McCaskill. "As a practice in all the vocational schools, there's a business manager. We didn't have one at the school. As someone coming to a high school from an elementary school, where you don't deal with those types of funds, I should have had more insight. We didn't have the accountable

structures in place."

Massachusetts General Law Chapter 74, which governs the state's voc-tech program, requires schools to have advisory committees for each vocational program. But Traverso found that most programs had no committee or, at best, one that was barely functioning.²¹

Traverso Leads Turnaround Effort

When Traverso called a first meeting of all advisory committees and vocational chairs, very few showed up. He threatened to stop funding any trade program that did not have an active advisory committee. After that, his meetings had "nothing but perfect attendance with active advisory committees."²²

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As the financial corruption was being addressed, Traverso turned to what he calls “academic corruption” for an underappreciation of how vocational education could change lives. As a Latino youth, he lacked direction until he was admitted into an electrical apprenticeship program.

“That training changed my trajectory, changed my life, and influenced who I am today,” he said. “I felt that we needed to go back to the drawing board and start fresh with our teachers. We had some great teachers working in the midst of chaos, controlling their class, building rapport with their students, really taking a wholehearted look at the kids’ needs, with little direction. Those are the teachers I started leaning on academically and vocationally for leadership in the building. I had them running meetings, trying to get them to be department chairs. Some were promoted to administration levels as we rebuilt the entire organizational structure.”²³

Building a Culture of Sustainable Change

Traverso implemented a series of programs to strengthen academics. One was called the “Implementation of Sustainable Change.” It was made up of four phases: inception, incubation, inclusiveness, and interdependence. Through a

flowchart, he showed his staff where the school was in the program in 2010 and where he wanted them all to take it. As they moved through the phases, Traverso and his team made data-driven decisions and analyzed what was working and corrected what was not.

“If we put the systems and structures in place and we all

meet and understand the part we play in that, then we all hold each other accountable,” he said.

Team meetings were held for each vocational group to determine the school’s strengths and weaknesses in critical measurables such as MCAS, attendance, graduation, and internships—and how the problems could be fixed.

To address the school’s chronic dropout problem, an early warning system was created, including an array of remediation steps, such as assigning students a dropout coach and a counselor.

New Building, New Attitude

The time spent creating the new advisory boards was valuable, Traverso said, because the industry representatives on each board helped to design the shops for a new building opening in 2012.

Upgrades in technology were occurring so fast that many departments were revised between the initial blueprint and the start of construction. In Graphics, for example, a darkroom was no longer necessary. Additionally, the connections with

the advisory boards made possible donations of money, services, and equipment from the business community.

“We had to build those connections to show that we respected their input and their support, and that helped us gain credibility in terms of selling the school,” Traverso said.

2012: A New Putnam Academy Opens

The opening of the new \$114 million school in 2012 provided a powerful boost to the turnaround. It replaced the school’s original facility, a New Deal-era Works Project Administration structure built in 1938. The design of the facility was created with input from the advisory boards of each of the 22 shop programs.

Ninety percent of the cost was reimbursed to the city by the Massachusetts School Building Authority. A portion of the new building was similar to a shopping mall in which many of the vocational programs could maintain a storefront to sell their products. It instilled a sense of pride among the staff and students, according to George Johnson, current principal at Putnam Academy and assistant principal in 2012.²⁴ The momentum that had been building behind Putnam Academy grew.

“We had an admissions policy enacted then on how to get into Putnam, based on certain scores and academics, attendance, recommendations from counselors at the middle school,” said Johnson. “Now the high-achieving kids wanted to come to Putnam.

“There were still counselors directing kids somewhere else because in the beginning they were still leery of what Putnam had to offer,” he added. “But once we started to do well academically with our MCAS scores and our graduation rate climbing tremendously, people started to take Putnam seriously.”

Figures for the 2010–2011 academic year, just after McCaskill’s departure, show the impact that he and his team had on Putnam Academy. The dropout rate that year stood at 6.7 percent and continued to go down, reaching 2.1 percent by 2020 and just 0.9 percent for the 2020–2021 academic year.²⁵ The graduation rate peaked at 99.1 percent in 2017, exceeding the statewide voc-tech average.

MCAS scores also rose sharply beginning in 2012. The percentage of students scoring in the Advanced category reached 7.1 percent, up from 0.3 percent in 2006. From 2013 through 2018, the school averaged 20.9 percent of students in the Advanced category, peaking at 29.5 percent in 2018. During the same period, 64 percent of students taking the MCAS exam reached the Proficient level, compared to 22.6 percent in 2006.

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A ‘Miraculous’ Time

Traverso said that to prep for the MCAS exams, five assessment teams were created, each including a math teacher and an ELA teacher. They would work with 22 students per MCAS class and assess their progress on six-week cycles. The data would tell the team leaders where the students needed to be retaught, and they would then share that information with academic teachers.

In 2014, Traverso left Putnam Academy to become the principal at Martha’s Vineyard Regional High School. A year later, he took a job with the New Haven, Connecticut school district. In 2020, he became the director of the Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School in Chicopee. He calls his time at Putnam Academy “miraculous.”

“Given the extent of the problems, I would have to say it took a heck of a lot out of me,” he said. “I didn’t know the depth of the problems. I had to change belief, and that was hard. All of those gains made the teachers believers, as well as the administrators. The staff contributed to making it what it was.”

NEASC Commendations

In December 2014, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges published its Decennial Report on Putnam Academy. It observed that “the atmosphere at PVTVA conveys a positive and exciting buzz. Students appear happy to be here and teachers are clearly devoted to their mission.”²⁶

The review also commended the administration for “the reorganization of administrative structures and the adoption of new policies and practices that assure transparency and honesty in financial administration and expenditure of taxpayer dollars.”²⁷

Summary

Prior to their turnarounds, Worcester Technical High School and the Roger L. Putnam Technical Academy ranked near or at the bottom of voc-tech schools in Massachusetts. They were outliers in a system that is highly regarded across the U.S.

The willingness of numerous parties to collaborate in their revivals, including business leaders, city and state officials, parents, and community organizations, indicates how valued these voc-tech schools are to their areas. Companies need a supply of skilled laborers to operate in a community. If that pool of workers is unavailable, employers move elsewhere, and the local economy suffers.

Putnam Academy and Worcester Tech have demonstrated how struggling urban voc-tech districts can simultaneously address and overcome multiple challenges, including aging facilities, outdated perceptions, high rates of poverty, and stubborn beliefs that some voc-tech schools and communities simply cannot succeed.

As the Springfield and Worcester models demonstrate, such districts can not only succeed but thrive and become national models for voc-tech excellence. We close this paper with four key recommendations for how voc-tech districts—in Massachusetts or elsewhere—can think and act in positive ways to replicate and advance one of the nation’s most successful educational models.

Recommendations

Recruit a business leader to spearhead fundraising

In order to thrive, voc-tech schools need close ties with their business communities. A dynamic business leader who can act as an advocate for the school in the private sector is invaluable for raising money and equipment donations. For Worcester Tech, that man was the late Edwin “Ted” Coghlin, a respected businessman with deep roots in the community.

Don’t expect principals to know everything

Upon being named National High School Principal of the Year, Sheila Harrity counseled other principals, especially those new to the job, to recruit people who can help them. Include those who are masters of their trade and teachers who can be empowered to take calculated risks to the benefit of their students and their school.

Highlight the importance of academics to vocational skills

Both Harrity and Traverso believe that the link between academics and vocational skills should be more emphasized. Traverso talks about how closer attention to algebra lessons in high school would have helped him years later as an electrical contractor when trying to figure the circumference of a swimming pool.

Establish a dedicated fund

Unlike regional voc-tech schools that serve a group of communities and are governed by a district school committee made up of representatives from the member communities, Worcester Tech and Putnam Academy are part of their city’s school system. To afford a major transformation, additional funds are needed, typically in the form of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

In Worcester, the Skyline Technical Fund helped finance the purchase of computers and related equipment. Putnam Academy has the Putnam Technical Fund, which supports “current and future training courses” at the school and can be used to solicit contributions for the benefit of students, faculty, and programs.²⁸

Endnotes

- 1 School and District Profiles, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, see <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/general/general.aspx?topNavID=1&leftNavId=100&orgcode=03480605&orgtypecode=6>.
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