

MASSACHUSETTS CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BEST PRACTICES FROM THE PHOENIX CHARTER ACADEMIES

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PREFACE

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There are several reasons why I have a particular interest in the Phoenix Academies. One is that two of the three schools in the network are charter schools, which then-Gov. Bill Weld and I advocated for including in the Commonwealth's 1993 Education Reform Act.

The second reason is their focus on at-risk students. They are teen parents, the chronically truant, court-involved students, those with special needs, English language learners, and young men and women who have already dropped out. Like all charters, Phoenix's schools can't choose their students; rather they can make it known that they are alternative institutions whose mission is to serve disconnected youth. The students who need Phoenix's services are attracted to the organization.

The third reason for my interest is a bit more parochial: This first Phoenix Charter Academy is located just a block from my home in Chelsea. I see the students going to school nearly every day.

When that school opened in 2006, a number of Massachusetts charters were already achieving great success with educational models that hold students to very high standards and expectations. Phoenix founder Beth Anderson knew that the at-risk students she sought to serve deserved the kinds of opportunities found in these great charters. She recognized, however, that such students would need a different set of services to achieve high standards and rise to high expectations. So, she set out to create a new model.

Phoenix Academies are unusual in a number of ways. Most programs designed to serve at-risk students are embedded in school districts. Each Phoenix Academy is, however, a stand-alone school. And unlike most alternative programs, Phoenix stresses academic rigor and preparing students for college, not just helping them

graduate from high school.

Demanding academic rigor from students facing a wide range of serious challenges requires a great deal of patience and the flexibility to adapt to the needs of individual students. The model is a work in progress, but the key is what Anderson calls "relentless support."

An Attendance Transformation Team identifies cohorts of students who struggle with the motivation to come to school on a regular basis, crafting and implementing individualized plans for each one. A specialized Student Support Team builds scholarly habits in students, even if doing so requires showing up at their homes. Little Scholars Centers that provide daycare and preschool that is free for students who are also parents can mean the difference between staying in school and dropping out.

Another part of the relentless support is eschewing traditional grade levels that are based on seat time in favor of a system that allows students to progress at their own pace. The challenges these students – many of whom are older than traditional high schoolers – face can cause some to miss chunks of time or have inconsistent attendance records.

Partnerships are a critical ingredient in Phoenix Academies' success. In addition to national programs like AmeriCorps, the network operates with community groups such as mental health organizations and school districts.

Phoenix's work with districts is particularly interesting. Unlike other Massachusetts charter schools that are viewed with hostility by their traditional counterparts, Phoenix has a very different relationship with surrounding school districts. A major reason is because its academies fulfill the late American Federation of Teachers' President Albert Shanker's vision of charters as schools that serve those for whom traditional public schools haven't succeeded. The Chelsea and Springfield charter academies have unusually collaborative relationships with their surrounding districts.

Chelsea Superintendent Mary Bourque notes that Phoenix offers different resources, such as the on-site daycare, (sometimes) smaller class sizes, and the opportunity for students to progress at their own pace. When appropriate, she will refer at-risk students who can benefit from these resources, or who are looking for a different option, to Phoenix.

Somehow, Phoenix has marshalled a range of resources to successfully walk the tightrope between providing lots of second chances and insisting on academic rigor. The network considers their students' record of getting into and graduating from college to be a very important measure of the students' and the organization's success. Nationwide, only 4 percent of alternative programs offer college-level work; Phoenix has had several years in which every graduate went on to post-secondary education.

Whether the goal is to compete successfully in a hyper-competitive global economy, develop citizens who will be active participants in a vibrant democracy, or avoid the substance abuse, incarceration and other ills that so often befall dropouts, Phoenix Academies offer an important model. It merits close attention from policy makers and school leaders seeking to turn high school dropouts into college graduates.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Phoenix Charter Academies are unique in Massachusetts, a state with high standards for charter schools but where a cap on the number of charters has limited growth and innovation within the sector. Phoenix has an explicit mission to serve the Commonwealth's most disconnected youth—the chronically truant, court- and/or gang-involved students, those with special needs, English language learners, and young men and women who have already dropped out. The model is one of high standards, high expectations, and academic rigor coupled with “relentless supports” that help students who are alienated from school reconnect to their education.

Some of the relentless supports found in Phoenix's schools are a quarter system that allows chronically absent students to re-engage with school at multiple points throughout the year and staff members dedicated to helping students get to and stay in school. Additionally, students can earn credit by showing mastery of state standards, regardless of “seat time,” and all Phoenix campuses offer daycare and/or preschool for the children of teenage parents enrolled in the schools.

These supports exist in an environment where Advanced Placement classes are offered and where all the adults in a building and the larger organization possess a very specific mindset about their students' capabilities. It is a mindset that assumes that all students, regardless of life experience or academic record, can graduate high school and college. This organizational belief is part of what sets Phoenix Charter Academies apart.

In recent years the Phoenix network has grown to include three campuses, one of which is not a Commonwealth charter but a district school that enjoys some additional autonomies through a unique partnership with the Lawrence Public Schools. While this growth has occurred, Phoenix has continually enabled its students to achieve excellent academic outcomes. The

vast majority of Phoenix graduates to date have applied and been accepted to college. A great number of those who the organization has been able to track are currently on a path to college completion.

The Phoenix model presents a compelling case study for a number of reasons. First, it is an example of innovation in a place and a sector where innovation is becoming less and less common, mainly due to policy constraints. Second, the network has forged strong and symbiotic relationships with the traditional public school districts its students would otherwise attend—something relatively uncommon in Massachusetts. Third, and most importantly, Phoenix is challenging conventional notions of what alternative education can be and of what at-risk youth can achieve. In doing so, it offers a model for all schools—charter, district, alternative, or traditional—to consider.

This case study examines the Phoenix approach and describes what it looks like in practice. It also describes how the Phoenix model has evolved and some of the challenges and opportunities it has encountered through expansion. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy makers and practitioners interested in advancing the opportunities and experiences that Phoenix offers to students. Recommendations include increasing the current cap on charter schools and eliminating the provision that requires many new schools to be run by “proven providers,” and fostering more district/charter management organization relationships like the one between the Phoenix Charter Network and Lawrence Public Schools.

INTRODUCTION

In a small classroom in Chelsea, Massachusetts, a teacher previews the vocabulary words that her students, all newcomers to the U.S. and English language learners, will need to know to read the text before them. She moves quickly around the room, making few statements but asking many questions, engaging every single student as she does. “How can the rest of the sentence help us with this word?” she asks. “Who wants to use ‘amend’ in another sentence?”

Many of the students in the room come from Spanish-speaking countries; some are 19 and 20 years old. Every student is simultaneously watching the teacher and writing furiously. They know they need this content to complete the reading assignment in front of them. Later, they will be asked to write about it. Some are working so furiously that it feels as if they have no time to waste.

In another classroom, eight students discuss a writing assignment they are working on for biology class. As they discuss different strategies for science writing, the teacher “checks” students who are slouching, or seem otherwise disengaged. She asks them pointed questions that require a thoughtful answer. Student work peppers the walls, as do signs outlining expectations for student behavior. A bin containing lessons the class has completed and a list of students who “owe” the teacher coursework sits next to the door. Some of the students in this class have a lot of work to make up before they can prove they have mastered enough content to move to the next level. Some struggle to come to school and complete homework because they are teenage parents, trying to make it work both at home and school. Others struggle because they’ve always struggled with school; they’ve rarely been held to the kinds of high expectations for academics and behavior that this teacher has for them.

These classrooms are typical for Phoenix Academies, but they aren’t necessarily typical high school classrooms. The students enrolled

here are often called “highly disconnected” or “at risk.” The vast majority have found school difficult since they were very young, and many have dropped out of high school or were on the verge of dropping out before they decided (or were convinced) to try Phoenix.

Phoenix knows that its students succeed with a different approach than that commonly found in high school settings. The schools purposefully recruit students who are teen parents, court-involved, highly truant, or who have dropped out of school all together. It allows “over-age” students to enroll when other schools might discourage them from doing so. It also seeks English language learners and students with disabilities who are not thriving in traditional high schools.

When they arrive at Phoenix, the school surrounds these students with what it refers to as “relentless support,” an approach to education that is just as much a mindset as it is a system of wrap-around services. By providing relentless support, Phoenix aims not only to help students graduate high school but go to college as well.

Phoenix Academies are unique in Massachusetts and maybe even in the nation, not because of who they recruit but because of their approach. This paper examines that approach and describes what it looks like in practice. It also describes how the model has evolved and some of the challenges and opportunities it has encountered through expansion. Drawing from the research literature, more than 20 interviews with Phoenix faculty, staff, and students, and observations of all three Phoenix Academy campuses, this paper highlights some of the innovative practices found across the network and discusses whether and how these practices might influence other schools and districts, charter and non-charter alike.

PHOENIX ACADEMIES: BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

At the turn of the century, less than a decade after the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA), the charter movement in

Massachusetts was already thriving. Boston charters and those outside the city were garnering national recognition, and the Commonwealth was becoming known for its effective approach to charter school authorizing, one that couples real autonomy with strict accountability.¹

The growing charter movement made an impression on Beth Anderson; she was struck by the potential for innovation in charter schools, as well as the opportunity many charter schools were providing for students. “I noticed that charter middle schools, especially,” says Anderson, “were providing environments with high expectations for both achievement and life skills. And there was an attitude among adults that ‘we don’t give up on kids,’ no matter the challenge of that.”²

Through non-profit work in both California and Massachusetts, Anderson had seen far too many students on whom adults (and school systems) had given up. Considering the uphill battle that many at-risk youth face in graduating high school, she wondered “what happens to students who have promise but no opportunity to fulfill it?” She began to think about how to create a better school environment specifically for those students, and she looked, in part, to the many high-performing Massachusetts charters that were already equipping students with the full suite of skills that would help them gain entrance to and persist in college.

Anderson began to put her idea into practice when she earned a *Building Excellent Schools* fellowship, and with it the opportunity to learn how to establish and run a charter school. In 2006, she founded the first Phoenix Academy, in Chelsea, MA.³

From the beginning, Phoenix has recruited the highest risk students—those most likely to leave high school without a diploma—with the promise of holding them to high academic expectations and getting them to and through college. Since its inception, Phoenix has had ample students to target for recruitment.

Although Massachusetts’s graduation rate compares favorably with the national average (87.3 percent in MA versus 82 percent nationally),⁴ in 2006 nearly 11,000 students in the Commonwealth dropped out of school between ninth and twelfth grade. That number has dramatically decreased in the last decade, but in 2015 over 5,000 students still left high school prior to graduation.⁵ Furthermore, graduation rates remain lower and dropout rates higher in some areas of the Commonwealth. In cities such as Boston, Lawrence, and Springfield, graduation rates did not exceed 72 percent in 2015. In Chelsea, a city with a large immigrant population and high mobility, the graduation rate was 63 percent.⁶

TABLE 1. FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL

Demographic Characteristics	Performance Characteristics
Low-income family	Lack of credits earned
Male	Poor attendance
Racial or ethnic minority	Poor grades
Older than average student in grade	
Student with disability	
Teen parent	
Court-involved	
Gang-involved	

Source: adapted from: “Dropout risk factors and exemplary programs: a technical report,” National Dropout Prevention Center and Communities in Schools, May, 2007, downloaded <http://dropoutprevention.org/wp> and Burrus, Jeremy and Roberts, Richard D. (2012) “Dropping out of high school: prevalence, risk factors, and remediation strategies” *R & D Connections*, 18, ETS.

When Phoenix opened in 2006, its model was nearly unheard of in Massachusetts.⁷ In fact, to date, the Commonwealth lists only four charter school alternative education programs, including Phoenix.⁸ Across Massachusetts, “there are far more alternative education programs (attached to districts) than stand-alone alternative schools.” And alternative programs within schools and districts aren’t necessarily common. One study finds that “only 61 of the state’s 400 public school districts report hosting one or more alternative education option.”⁹

Furthermore, while other options for at-risk students existed in 2006 and exist today, it is not clear that they are focused on academic rigor and getting students to and through college, as Phoenix is. Because most alternative schools are programs within other entities, it can be difficult to separate their outcomes from the larger school or district. Moreover, the scanty literature on best practices in these programs is heavily weighted toward descriptions of personalized learning and non-academic support, with few mentions of college preparedness.¹⁰ This is not to say that these programs don’t help at-risk students, but rather to point out that schools and districts have traditionally focused on getting at-risk students through high school, not college.

The characteristics of alternative schools in Massachusetts are similar to what researchers see in other states. Nationally, most alternative education programs focus on “intervention and prevention of high school dropout,” mainly leveraging non-academic strategies to support at-risk children, some as early as elementary school. In a comprehensive study of exemplary programs published by the *National Dropout Prevention Center*, only 26 percent of the exemplary programs cited used academic support as a key factor in dropout prevention.¹¹ Another study finds that only 4 percent of alternative schools nationwide offer college-level coursework.¹²

The Phoenix model is different because of its emphasis on academic rigor. From the beginning, there has been evidence that it works. When

Phoenix, Chelsea opened in 2006, “it had only 75 students and six teachers.” Between 2008 and 2011, Phoenix graduated 61 students. In all but one of those years, 100 percent of graduates applied and were accepted to a post secondary institution. Forty-nine students, or 80 percent of all graduates between 2008 and 2011, enrolled in some form of college.¹³ There is also evidence that Phoenix students can persist in college: of the 20 students who graduated Phoenix Chelsea in 2013 and went on to college, 80 percent completed their first year.¹⁴

These data are even more impressive when put in context: Phoenix has consistently managed to serve students who are most at-risk of dropping out of high school. In the 2014-15 school year, more than 86 percent of Phoenix students fell into one of the following sub-groups: teen parents, court-involved youth, English Language Learners, former dropouts/highly truant youth, and students receiving special education services.¹⁵ These numbers point to the effectiveness of Phoenix’s recruitment strategies; as a charter school, Phoenix can’t pick and choose who it would like to admit. Instead, students choose Phoenix and the organization enrolls them. In the event of over-subscription, which has thus far been rare, Phoenix admits students via a lottery, like any charter public school.

Based on the strength of its Chelsea program, the Commonwealth has allowed Phoenix to expand. When in 2010 the legislature lifted the cap on Commonwealth charter schools in districts that performed in lowest 10 percent on MCAS, Phoenix stakeholders saw the opportunity to take the model to other communities.

Phoenix Charter Academy’s Lawrence campus opened in 2012. The school is unique in that it represents a rare partnership between a charter management organization and a school district. The Lawrence Public Schools wanted to leverage the Phoenix model as part of its effort to turnaround its poor academic performance. It asked Phoenix to run its program in a district setting, and the Lawrence campus operates as a

TABLE 2. SNAPSHOT: PHOENIX CHELSEA

	Phoenix Academy	Chelsea Public Schools
FIRST LANGUAGE NOT ENGLISH	66.5%	79.6%
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER	48.4%	26.6%
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	22.6%	13%
ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED/ HIGH NEEDS	100%	100%
ATTENDANCE RATE	62.4%	93.8%
CHRONICALLY ABSENT	85.8%	19%
GRADUATION RATE (2015) ¹⁶	86%	62.9%
GRADUATES ATTENDING COLLEGE (2013-14) ¹⁷	58.6%	69.4%
GRADE 10 ELA, PROFICIENT OR HIGHER	68%	78%
GRADE 10 MATH, PROFICIENT OR HIGHER ¹⁸	52%	49%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, School and District Profiles, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>

district school, without many of the autonomies enjoyed by its other two schools, which are Commonwealth charters.

In 2014, Phoenix opened its third campus in Springfield, MA. Much like Phoenix, Chelsea, the Springfield school operates with the autonomies and accountability of a Commonwealth charter school.¹⁹

The different circumstances under which the schools operate present both risks and opportunities for the network. They also provide important lessons for the Commonwealth as it once again considers lifting the cap on charter public schools and what the future of the charter school movement might look like. These circumstances will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

First, however, it is important to understand how Phoenix Charter Academies work. Academic rigor and an approach that Phoenix refers to as “relentless support” differentiates Phoenix from most alternative high schools. These are at the heart of how Phoenix engages students and how each academy functions.

RELENTLESS SUPPORT: WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT WORKS

The Phoenix philosophy of relentless support isn’t easily captured in a pithy mission statement. On one level, relentless support is provided to students through the systems and structures at work in each Phoenix school. On another level, it is tactical, evident in the strategies that individuals and groups of teachers employ on each campus. On yet another level, relentless support is a philosophy or mindset, something that is embedded in the culture—a set of shared values and assumptions²⁰ about students that permeate the entire organization, from school and central office staff, to students, and even parents. Defining Phoenix’s culture is the shared assumption that all Phoenix students can go to college and that exposure to a rigorous academic experience, coupled with supports tailored to each student’s needs, will get them there.

To an outside observer, Phoenix is easily differentiated from other schools because of the systems and structures it has in place to serve its particular population. Unlike most charter high schools, Phoenix recruits and enrolls students on a quarterly basis, up to five times a

year. This not only allows the schools to capture more students at risk of leaving school, it also provides presently enrolled students additional opportunities to “reset” their school experience each year. The need that many students share for multiple resets is one reason why Phoenix does not have traditional grade levels. Students identify as a Category I, II, or III. Once a student has “mastered the frameworks aligned to each category,” he or she is ready to move on to the next. For Phoenix students, mastery does not equate with “seat time,” a student graduates when he or she has mastered the material, based on state standards, needed to graduate from high school and succeed in college.²¹

Because so many Phoenix students struggle with coming to school in the first place, the network has a policy referred to as “absenting out.” Students who are absent more than eight times each quarter cannot receive credit for that quarter, though they are welcome to continue coming to school. The quarter system allows students who have “absented out” in a given quarter more opportunities to re-engage with school.²² As Janet Hicks, director of curriculum and instruction at Phoenix Springfield, points out: “many of our students are practicing school. They need time to figure out that they want to be here and how to be here. We give them the space to practice school until they are ready to do the real work that will get them into college.”²³

To help students, especially those who are new to Phoenix, figure out how to get through the “practicing school” phase, each campus has an “Attendance Transformation Team,” staffed by AmeriCorps fellows, which “identifies and serves cohorts of students who struggle with motivation to come to school regularly.” This team helps students find motivation by crafting and implementing individualized plans and then supporting students to follow through. Closely related to the Attendance Transformation Team is the Student Support Team, which is dedicated to “building scholarly habits (in students)—by whatever means necessary. The student support team can be a touchstone for students: they make

phone calls, send text messages, and even go to students’ homes, all in an effort to make sure students get to school, no matter the obstacles.²⁴

Members of the Student Support Team might be in touch with students or their families multiple times a day, especially if a student has decided not to come to school. They seek to understand the circumstances surrounding an absence and put plans in place to circumvent issues in the future. According to one student: “when I couldn’t get to school, they sent someone over to pick me up.”²⁵ According to another, “it’s like they are always on your back. After a while you start to realize it’s because they have your back.”²⁶

One of Phoenix’s most unique supports is an on-site “Little Scholars Center” for each campus. The centers serve as day-care and/or pre-school, and are free for teen parents. Even if a parent has to stay after the regular school day for help with work or to serve a detention, the Little Scholars Center is available to provide help. For many parents, especially young mothers, the Little Scholars Center makes the difference between persisting in school and dropping out after becoming a parent. According to one young parent, daycare was her primary reason for coming to Phoenix in the first place.

I don’t have family and couldn’t afford daycare while I work, so I might as well come to school . . . and then you see it’s more than that. It’s about making you responsible, learning how to work hard from 9 to 5, even if you don’t want to.. The worst part is still figuring out how to study at night and take care of my kids, and now I am a Category III. But I need to do it. And they are good people, too. I was struggling with food for my kids and they helped out with that.”²⁷

As this student notes, the structures and supports at Phoenix aren’t meant to make life easy. Hard work is part of the bargain. Instead, they are part of an overall philosophy designed to re-engage students with school and give them as many second chances as it takes to re-establish a positive relationship with their education.

TABLE 3. RELENTLESS SUPPORT STRUCTURES, PHOENIX ACADEMIES

Structure	Descriptions
Student Support Team	Student and family outreach; works 1:1 with students to “build scholarly habits”
Little Scholars Center	On-site daycare for teenage parents
Attendance Transformation Team	Identify and serve students who struggle with motivation to attend school—create individualized plans to positively impact attendance
Multi-Quarter Enrollment	Recruit students four times a year
Individualized College Planning	Prioritize classes that individuals will need to be successful in college
“Phoenix Feathers”	“Merit” system to recognize students who uphold Phoenix’s “seven attributes of scholarship” ³⁰
Literacy Support	Sustained silent reading, four days a week, to support reading practice and engage students with reading
1:1 or 1:2 Tutoring	Individualized tutoring aligned to student needs and state frameworks
Heterogeneous Classes	Students learn together regardless of age, skill-level, or learning accommodations, ELL students included
Categorized Classes	Instead of traditional grade levels, categories align to student mastery of curriculum frameworks

Source: Phoenix Charter Academies, *Annual Report*, 2015-16

Consequences for bad decisions and the willingness to earn a second chance are also part of the bargain. Phoenix employs a strict merit/demerit system. Being late to class, loitering in the hallways – even chewing gum – is not tolerated, and detention is a frequent occurrence for many students. If a student arrives to school after 9 AM, he or she will be turned away, though they can re-enter again, on time, at lunch to complete the second half of the day. A student who accumulates enough demerits to earn a detention serves that time in a quiet space, doing homework or engaged in conversation with faculty about his or her path to graduation.²⁸

During one school observation, a student earned a detention for yelling at a teacher in class. The teacher sent the student to the Student Support Center to discuss the infraction. At the time, the school’s principal was the only staff member working in the support center. She interacted directly with the student, trying to understand

her side of the story. The student felt injured by the teacher, upset that she wasn’t being called upon when her hand was up, and admitted to “exploding” and using profanities. After allowing her time to calm down, the principal asked the student to reflect on how she might have handled the situation differently. She also told the student she would have to serve a detention for her behavior.

This occurrence is indicative of the Phoenix approach in part because, as Principal Sarah Caney explains, it speaks to

the distance between students and administrators at Phoenix—it is less than you would see in most schools, especially district schools . . . of course we maintain high expectations, but we see each mistake as another learning opportunity, and some of our kids need to practice again and again. They have to learn to walk in the world, and they are all doing it in different ways.²⁹

The shorter distance between the adults and students in the building is also evident at Phoenix community meetings, which are held every Monday and Friday. During one observation of a community meeting, Phoenix faculty and administrators held the children of Phoenix students on their laps as the students rose to accept a “Phoenix feather,” (a “merit,” or reward for a good deed or accomplishment) or to make an announcement or statement to the school community. At another observation a teacher used the forum to acknowledge, in public, his own fallibility. He issued an apology to a student that he had “misunderstood in class.” In doing so, the teacher was not just making amends; he was also modeling for the student one way of “walking in the world.”

These and other examples point to the idea that relentless support is made possible because of school structures and systems. But relentless support it is much more than the structures and systems themselves. It is also the tactics and strategies that individuals within each school employ to help students realize their full potential, academic and otherwise.

Many of those tactics and strategies are employed in the classroom and represent what any good teacher might do, though they are tailored to the Phoenix student population. Phoenix teachers describe “having lots of language around the classroom,” to facilitate language acquisition for large populations of English language learners; “constantly making work available, whether or not it is from days or weeks past,”³¹ so students who are frequently absent have the opportunity to access the class at any point in the curriculum; “consistently using trackers so that all students know where they stand in meeting the frameworks;”³² and “always providing an option for students to make-up work or advance in their work.”³³

Phoenix teachers also approach teaching in very personalized ways. “I have to design each lesson with high expectations but also with the most recalcitrant student in mind,” says one teacher.³⁴

“I have to view my job as a combination of education and outreach,”³⁵ says another, “I have to know each student, his or her background, and needs and challenges—being a human being with the scholars is encouraged—and there has to be a consistency of approach.”³⁶

Phoenix administrators have learned to support strong teaching practices by keeping class sizes low (an average of 10 students) and creating a clear curriculum, aligned to state frameworks, but with connections to students’ real-life experiences in mind. They have also paid close attention to individual teaching strategies that work well and sought to help teachers institute those practices network-wide. Examples of this are establishing clear, shared grading practices and helping more teachers use small group work as a tool for peer accountability.³⁷

These tactics and strategies, along with the schools’ structures and systems for providing relentless support, are what enable Phoenix to provide a rigorous academic experience for students. Recognizing that students need to be known, for example, and that non-academic issues can often impede academic success, are necessary first steps in getting students on track. Once they feel safe and integrated into the environment, and once they are done “practicing school,” students, teachers and staff can get down to the real work of learning and mastering the state’s curriculum frameworks and beyond.

But providing a rigorous academic experience in a setting where many students have trouble even coming to school can be a challenge. Phoenix attempts to rise to the challenge in different ways. According to one administrator, ensuring that all teachers across the network have a shared understanding of what constitutes academic rigor is part of the battle.³⁸ From there, it is necessary to rely upon a shared, college preparatory curriculum that provides teachers with a touchstone for understanding the gap between where students are in their learning and where they need to be for college. A centralized system for tracking what students have mastered at each

level, and support staff dedicated exclusively to supporting teachers in their practice also help in this regard.³⁹ Teacher evaluations and “checks for rigor” in each classroom are commonplace at Phoenix.⁴⁰

Beyond these strategies, the mere fact that the Phoenix network persistently promises college entrance to its students makes a difference. One student explained that before enrolling at Phoenix, Lawrence she had all but dropped out of her district school. The student had been in foster care, felt disconnected from her teachers and classmates, and simply didn’t feel that “school was for me.” Noting that Phoenix was a “last chance,” and one that she didn’t really believe would work, she explained:

Once I came to Phoenix, I learned for the first time that for every action there is a consequence, but I can control my actions. And before I never felt challenged by school, now I know that pre-calculus is hard but fun, and I even learned how to make an annotated bibliography in my AP class. While I was here I even got to take a college course. So I know what it would be like.⁴¹

The student graduated from Phoenix in 2016 after having been accepted to a prestigious Boston-area university.

This student’s story demonstrates some of the opportunities Phoenix provides that aren’t typically available to students in alternative education settings. Phoenix campuses offer and encourage Advanced Placement (AP) classes “for anyone.” They also offer dual enrollment college courses, and classes on preparing for the SATs and for college. These offerings are undergirded by other supports that are more commonly found in alternative school settings, such as 1:2 or 1:1 tutoring and explicit literacy support, especially for newly enrolled students.⁴² By providing students with opportunities more commonly found in high-performing schools, including those in wealthy, suburban communities, Phoenix is reframing societal ideas of what disconnected youth can accomplish. Phoenix educators know what their students can achieve

and they hold themselves accountable for helping students reach a high bar. In many ways, this is a new conception of “alternative education.”

Of course, by all measures, Phoenix adheres to best practices found in the available literature on alternative schools. For example, a longitudinal study of “Effective Alternative Education Programs” published by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) finds that, among other things, effective alternative schools have small class sizes, flexibility and choice for students, specialized teacher training, and effective classroom management. (See Table IV for additional information.) But Phoenix goes beyond these practices because of its emphasis on higher education. While the AIR research did not focus on curriculum content or student outcomes (and it is very difficult to find studies that do), it makes clear that the focus of most alternative education programs, even the most effective, is either on transitioning a student back to the regular school setting or preparing them for the workforce.⁴³

Phoenix’s emphasis on college requires buy-in from all who work in the organization—from the very top down. This need for buy-in speaks to the third and, perhaps, most important facet of relentless support: a mindset that all students can succeed and that college entrance and persistence is a very important measure of individual and organizational success.

At first blush, to characterize a school’s approach to students as a mindset might seem trite or easy. One expects that all teachers and administrators who are committed to their profession believe in their students and in their ability to succeed. But at Phoenix, mindset matters all the more because of the challenges that students face. As one teacher describes:

to do this job, you have to understand each student’s socio-emotional bucket. Most of our students have experienced some major trauma, interrupted learning, or a loss of connection to their family or community. More than other students, they have low expectations for their own academic success

and lack confidence in their ability to graduate and go to college.⁴⁴

Because buy-in matters, the hiring and teacher training process is integral to the success of each Phoenix campus. According to one principal, trying to assess whether a teaching candidate really believes that Phoenix students can and will achieve is more important than hiring an experienced subject matter expert. “The mindset piece,” she notes, is most important. People need to have the right mindset and be reflective enough practitioners to allow us to help them develop their practice.”⁴⁵

And once a faculty or staff member is bought in and willing to be developed, they then have to implement the student support systems and structures Phoenix has in place while personalizing their own approach to each student. Teachers come to Phoenix from conventional teaching backgrounds, but the network also develops some teachers over time, first as AmeriCorps volunteers and then as novice teachers. Others come to Phoenix from community organizations or social work backgrounds, but most have a reason for wanting to work with this particular student population.

And it’s not easy work. Says teacher Christopher Montero:

I’ve learned over time that first it’s about getting the kid in the door, then It’s about gaining and sharing her perspective, and then it’s about helping them recommit. If you do it again and again and again, eventually it will click. Every time a student walks in the door, it is a chance to start over.⁴⁶

CHALLENGES OF THE PHOENIX MODEL

The Phoenix model has thus far been successful in many ways, but that doesn’t mean that it is easy to execute. From hiring the right people to weighing larger organizational questions such as how to fund its various programs, Phoenix faces many of the challenges traditional schools do and some that they don’t.

Balancing high absenteeism and Academic Rigor

One of the greatest challenges that Phoenix teachers and administrators face is balancing the needs of individual students with the academic rigor and college preparatory curriculum that Phoenix promises. Many students who enroll at Phoenix have struggled with coming to school for a long time. That can be a hard habit to break. Phoenix has made a decision to maintain high

TABLE 4. BEST PRACTICES IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION, AND BEYOND

Research-Based Best Practices	Phoenix
MAXIMUM STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO 1:10	✓
STUDENT BASE NOT TO EXCEED 250	✓
CLEAR MISSION AND DISCIPLINE CODE	✓
CONTINUAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT	✓
CULTURE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS	✓
INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PLANS	✓
COMMUNITY SUPPORT	✓
FLEXIBILITY AND CHOICE FOR STUDENTS	✓
	COLLEGE PREP CURRICULUM
	ADVANCED PLACEMENT CLASSES
	INDIVIDUALIZED COLLEGE PLANNING
	ON-SITE DAY CARE FOR PARENTING STUDENTS

Source: National Dropout Prevention Center, “Alternative schooling: key elements of successful programs,” <http://dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/alternative-schooling/>; Quinn, Mary McGee, Poirier, Jeffery M. (2006) “Study of effective alternative education programs: final grant report,” American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC.

expectations for all students, even if it means the organization will have low attendance rates. Eventually, administrators and teachers know, students will start coming to school consistently, and they will do it of their own volition.

But high absenteeism can be a challenge in the classroom. Students have to be present to learn, and teachers can't teach only to those students who have missed content. Many of the structures described above are in place to ensure that chronically absent students are able to catch up and be exposed to curricula and content that will land them in college. But ensuring that the structures work for all students and that rigor is present in all classrooms at all times is a challenge the organization acknowledges. "We know that if they come, they learn," says Beth Anderson:

But the students we serve, by definition, struggle with coming to school. We have had to make a decision to focus not on the absentee rate but on getting each student to school, one at a time. That said, only half of our Category 1 students (newcomers) are completing that level in one year's time. We are working to get that rate up.⁴⁷

Community Support

Because of its goals and the students it aims to serve, the Phoenix model is also heavily dependent upon community partners and support. Getting students to school and getting them to return to school means forging relationships with family or other community members that have a stake in each student's welfare. It takes school resources, not the least of which is time, to forge and maintain these connections.

Moreover, having community partners that will refer the right students to Phoenix is integral to the network's recruitment plan. Partners can include but are not limited to local school districts, local mental health organizations, and other non-profit organizations in the community.⁴⁸ Phoenix's relationship with the Chelsea Public Schools is one example of a successful community partnership.

From the beginning, Beth Anderson and her staff have worked closely with the district and Chelsea non-profit child and family welfare organizations to carefully target recruitment efforts. Chelsea Public Schools Superintendent Mary Bourque describes how and why the relationship with Phoenix works:

Phoenix serves the students that we have trouble serving well in large high school of 1500 students. Though we are successful with many at-risk students, when we aren't having success—when families and students want a different option—I can refer them to Phoenix, knowing that they have different resources for these students, such as on-site day-care for teenage parents. Phoenix complements our work, and we both want to do what is in the best interest of students.⁴⁹

Bourque also notes that there are challenges inherent in the partnership. As a charter school open to anyone who wants to apply, Phoenix can't discriminate as to whom it accepts. Because of this, if Bourque identifies a student who might benefit from Phoenix, there is no guarantee that he or she will get in right away unless enrollment is low.

And there is a flipside to school choice for students who do enter the lottery but decide that the Phoenix model isn't what they want. "Students can make the choice to leave Phoenix, even if it isn't in their best interest," Bourque says:

Teenagers get frustrated. If they don't like the culture of the school or anything else, they always have a fallback at Chelsea high. It's not that we don't want these students, or that we haven't tried to meet their individual learning needs, it's that Phoenix might have more to offer them.

The things that a place like Phoenix can offer that a traditional public school may not be able to, according to Bourque, are an ungraded/learn at your own pace approach to the curriculum and, sometimes, smaller class sizes.⁵⁰

Resources

Operating any school takes ample resources, and the Phoenix approach requires more than

most public schools. Staffing teams dedicated to supporting students to come to school and working with them on non-academic issues is important to the model. It is also important that teachers are dedicated to quality teaching and don't have to shoulder the entire responsibility of getting students in the door. Incredibly, Phoenix provides 90 percent of its services on the public dollar, but working with organizations such as AmeriCorps has been a key to its success.⁵¹ AmeriCorps funds fellows who work as members of the Attendance Transformation and Student Support Teams at each campus. Fellows also serve as student tutors.⁵²

To fund many of its other programs, like on-site daycare at each campus, Phoenix uses state and federal money and leverages private fundraising efforts. Additionally, like any other charter public school, Phoenix is responsible for raising facility funds. Because Phoenix, Lawrence is an in-district partnership, Phoenix is able to use space provided by the Lawrence Public Schools. Its Springfield and Chelsea campuses, however, are funded through capital campaigns that the network undertakes.⁵³

Autonomy/Flexibility

The autonomy charter schools enjoy was one thing that drew Beth Anderson to the movement in the first place. She knew that to serve this economically challenged but resilient population of students, the ability to extend the school day and year, have ungraded classrooms, and reduce class sizes would be critical. When Phoenix partnered with the Lawrence Public School District as an external charter operator in 2012, Anderson and her colleagues agreed to give up some of the flexibility that other schools in the Phoenix network enjoy. "While the decision to come to Lawrence has been a good and important one, running a charter school without a charter has been much harder than I think it needs to be," says Anderson.⁵⁴

When Lawrence asked Phoenix to help, the district was in receivership (having been taken over by the state for poor performance), which

means it was able to grant Phoenix autonomies that district schools don't traditionally enjoy. Phoenix would be able to maintain its extended school day, ungraded approach, and many of the resources, such as the Little Scholars Center, that it has on other campuses. Instead of entering into a charter contract with the state, Phoenix signed a memorandum of understanding with the receiver. For Phoenix and other charter operators agreeing to partner with the district, this was a "somewhat undefined, or gray policy area."⁵⁵

Despite the autonomies that the receiver provided Phoenix, there were differences both large and small between operating in Lawrence versus in the charter context. First and foremost, although Phoenix fought for and was able to retain the ability to hire its own staff, Phoenix teachers were to become a part of the local teachers' union.⁵⁶ This can present a challenge to organizations like Phoenix not only because they are not accustomed to bargaining with teachers' unions and adhering to some of the constraints they may impose on schools, but also because many charter school teachers choose to teach there because they do not want to be part of a union.

But the biggest difference in Lawrence is how students arrive at Phoenix. Unlike with its charter schools, Phoenix does not recruit students in Lawrence. Instead, the district identifies students and does the "selling." According to Phoenix, creating the appropriate student pipeline has taken time. Moreover, because Lawrence is Phoenix's only non-regional campus, the school has a more homogenous population than its other sites. Having a diverse student body, both in terms of background and academic needs, has been "critical to the success" of other Phoenix schools.

One of the smaller but not unimportant challenges that Phoenix faced in becoming an in-district partner was in purchasing supplies for the school. In the charter context, schools make their own purchases, sometimes but not always under the watch of a central network office.⁵⁷

Purchasing supplies in a school district is an entirely different exercise. In Lawrence, the lead time to order and receive supplies was much longer than a charter school is used to, not because of obstacles set up by the receiver or even the district, but because purchases need to be approved by the city. This seemingly small inconvenience can in fact be a great frustration for schools not accustomed to needing extensive lead time to acquire goods.⁵⁸

PROMISE OF THE PHOENIX MODEL

The Phoenix model holds promise for at-risk students who have the potential to step back from the verge of dropping out of high school and go to college. But this isn't the only aspect of the model that policy makers, school administrators, and teachers should consider. What Phoenix has been able to help students do raises a question: Could more districts benefit from a Phoenix school or something like it, or should schools and districts look to Phoenix to learn to implement the best practices that it employs?

Beth Anderson and her senior team and school heads aren't yet sure where they land on this question. They realize that they are "building the ship as we are flying it," and that there is a lot to learn, both from their experiences with the Commonwealth charter and district partnership model. In an ideal world, Anderson, muses, Phoenix would do something that would eventually put itself out of business—perhaps by targeting "off-track" student populations earlier and/or working to identify the issues and even policies that enable students to get off-track in the first place.⁵⁹

Assuming that the world remains less than ideal, the Phoenix Academies have to consider both the risks and opportunities of bringing its model to scale and/or sharing its practices with partners who may or may not be fully equipped to implement them effectively. At each campus, there are things Phoenix wants to do better: At all schools, they are constantly working to cultivate school leaders, to cultivate rigor in the classroom, and to hone their approach to teacher

professional development. At the Springfield campus, specifically, they are working to increase the number of enrolled students who "stick to" or attend school regularly. In Chelsea, administrators and teachers are constantly working to identify best practices for a large and sometimes "over-aged" population of English language learners. The network does not want to sacrifice the quality of its program in each locale just for the sake of scale, nor would it be wise to implement the Phoenix approach in a policy environment unable to support it well.⁶⁰

On the other hand, however, the network realizes that there are thousands of students across Massachusetts who could benefit from its services. Increasingly, districts and cities across the Commonwealth are realizing the same, especially as they look to the success Lawrence has had in turning around its schools and supporting all students, even those who are most at risk.⁶¹

Where Phoenix goes next may ultimately come down to the network's ability to find strong partners that will support its work, be it in a charter or district/partnership context. For whether it acts as an external service provider or a stand-alone option for students, Phoenix recognizes the importance of strong community partners to its success.

And there are policy questions to consider as well: Will the Commonwealth and, specifically, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education continue to support Phoenix as they have in the past? Is there a scenario in which Phoenix could maintain its autonomy as a Commonwealth charter but admit the students most in need of its services, even if they don't win a lottery?

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Phoenix story speaks to the success of one small charter network and to the potential of the charter school movement in Massachusetts. In a

sector where innovation has been relatively scarce in recent years—largely due to state policies that encourage the replication of “proven” models as opposed to innovation and the incubation of new ideas—Phoenix is a relative standout. It has taken best practices from some high-performing charter schools and refined and tailored them to serve students who, historically, have not been served particularly well in any school sector.

Schools and districts can look to Phoenix as a source for understanding what high quality alternative education can look like in a college preparatory setting. But districts and organizations looking to adopt any facet of the model need also understand that it requires a specific set of beliefs about what even our most disenfranchised students can achieve. It also requires that schools and providers have the autonomy to implement structures, systems, and supports that aren’t commonly available in most school settings.

Massachusetts policymakers should look to Phoenix and its expansion as a successful model for serving at-risk students and what can happen when districts, charters, and communities collaborate. They should also remember that Phoenix would not exist had the Commonwealth, at one time, not been willing to take a chance on a radical new approach to supporting all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commonwealth should support and hold accountable charter organizations and districts in implementing best practices for at-risk students.

Most programs for at-risk students exist in school districts across Massachusetts, not as stand-alone schools. It is unclear whether there are enough available programs to support students who could benefit, and it is also unclear whether the available programs are adequately resourced or effective. Since most programs operate within a larger school context, it can be difficult to ensure that the programs are

accountable for providing adequate services and/or supporting at-risk students in realizing their full potential. More support and accountability for the implementation of proven best practices could be a first step in better serving some of Massachusetts’ most disenfranchised youth. The Commonwealth can look to the Phoenix charter model as proof that accountability for outcomes works.

Charter organizations and districts should facilitate relationships between schools and community partners to better support at-risk students.

Much of the success of the Phoenix model depends upon strong relationships with community partners, whether that partner is a school district, a provider of mental health services, or a non-profit organization focused on at-risk youth. Schools often do not have the time, resources, or knowledge to seek community support or to understand how they can serve students in partnership with other community organizations. Outside organizations can act as partners in referring at-risk students to alternative settings before they drop out of high school. They can also act as advisors and partners to schools looking to understand the specific needs of an individual student.

DESE should continue to facilitate and support charter/district partnerships, with an eye to the school-level autonomies that have aided turnaround.

Phoenix Academy, Lawrence is one example of four successful charter/district partnerships in the City of Lawrence. DESE should look to Lawrence of an example of the potential such partnerships hold for turning schools around; it should replicate what worked and improve what didn’t. DESE should also pay very close attention to the autonomies that district and charter partners feel are integral to their success and consider whether and how all schools, district and charter alike, might operate with such autonomies.

The Commonwealth should lift the charter cap without limiting opportunities for innovation.

Phoenix Academies might not exist today had Massachusetts not taken a chance in authorizing an innovative new approach to educating at-risk students. The most recent legislation that raised the charter cap in the lowest-performing districts attached onerous strings. Those strings make it difficult for new and innovative providers to enter the charter space in communities that need them most. While the Commonwealth should continue to allow the expansion of “proven providers,” such as Phoenix, it must also make the space for the next Phoenix to rise. Doing so is in the best interest of students. Limiting innovation is only in the best interest of adults.

About the Author

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Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to change the intellectual climate in the Commonwealth by supporting scholarship that challenges the “conventional wisdom” on Massachusetts public policy issues.

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Massachusetts Charter Public Schools: Best Practices Using Data to Improve Student Achievement in Holyoke, White Paper, March 2016

Massachusetts Charter Public Schools: Best Practices Using Data to Improve Student Achievement in Springfield, White Paper, March 2016



Endnotes

1. See: Candal, Cara “Putting children first: the history of charter public schools in Massachusetts,” Pioneer Institute White Paper, No 48, November, 2009.
2. Interview with Beth Anderson, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Phoenix Charter Academies, March 3, 2016.
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5. This decrease in dropout rates in the Commonwealth can be attributed, in part, to schools like Phoenix and other alternative school settings, both charter and traditional. It can also be attributed to state initiatives, such as the solicitation of federal grants that have allowed localities to engage in dropout prevention and the implementation of an “early warning index” that can enable localities “to target at risk students as early as elementary school.” See: Kane, Michael, D. “Massachusetts high school dropout rates are down, graduation rates up,” The Republican, January 21, 2016, http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2016/01/massachusetts_high_school_drop.html; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “2014-15 dropout report for all students,” School and District Profiles, http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/dropout.aspx.
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13. Phoenix Charter Academy, Annual Report, 2010-2011.
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15. Ibid.
16. Graduation rates listed for this year do not necessarily reflect all of the students in the cohort who have graduated or will graduate. Because Phoenix does not have a traditional grade system and because students enter at different points and take different amounts of time to graduate, the rate provided here, which follows a cohort from 9-12 grade, may be deflated.
17. These data may not reflect the college-going rates cited on page 11 above, as college going rates are only captured for students included in the graduation rate for that year (see endnote 16 above).
18. Student growth percentiles, a more desirable statistic to capture a school’s value-add, were not available for both districts.
19. See: Phoenix Charter Academies website, “history,” <http://phoenixcharteracademy.org/about/history/>

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21. Phoenix Charter Academies, Annual Report, 2014-15.
22. Interview with Calvin Johnson, Director of Operations, Phoenix Springfield, May 3, 2016.
23. Interview with Janet Hicks, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Phoenix Springfield, May 3, 2016.
24. Phoenix Charter Academies, Annual Report, 2014-15.
25. Interview with student (name withheld) Phoenix Charter Academy, Springfield, May 3, 2016.
26. Interview with student (name withheld) Phoenix Charter Academy, Springfield, May 3, 2016.
27. Interview with student (name withheld) Phoenix Charter Academy, Chelsea, May 9, 2016.
28. Interview with Calvin Johnson.
29. Interview with Sarah Caney, Head of School, Phoenix Charter Academy, Lawrence, May 13, 2016.
30. The “seven attributes of scholarship” are: service, community, hope, optimism, learning, accountability, and respect.
31. Interview with Kyla Prior, Science Teacher, Phoenix Charter Academy, Springfield, May 3, 2016.
32. Interview with Janet Hicks.
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34. Interview with Kyla Prior.
35. Interview with Amanda Benson.
36. Interview with Blaine Yesselman, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Phoenix Charter Academy, Lawrence, May 13, 2016.
37. Interviews with Sarah Caney and Janet Hicks.
38. Interview with Sarah Caney.
39. Interview with Janet Hicks.
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41. Interview with student (name withheld) Phoenix Charter Academy, Lawrence, May 13, 2016.
42. Phoenix Charter Academies, Annual Report, 2014-15
43. Quinn, Mary McGee, Poirier, Jeffery M. (2006) “Study of effective alternative education programs: final grant report,” American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC.
44. Interview with Kyla Prior.
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