
Case Study: Community Day Charter Public School—Prospect

Lawrence, MA | Grades PreK-8 | 90.6% Hispanic | 29.6% Limited English Proficient
74.3% Free and reduced lunch | Founded in 1995

Clarity of Mission: Stay on Target

The roots of Community Day Charter Public School—Prospect go back to a community organization that started working in Lawrence, MA, back in 1969 to help women joining the workforce obtain quality early childhood education for their children. Once its early childhood programs were established, Community Day continued growing with its mission to help the families of Lawrence.

But as the organization made significant investments into the young children of the city, staff members were disheartened to turn their graduates out into failing city schools. *"We felt they really weren't getting the quality education that would give them real opportunity in life,"* says executive director Sheila Balboni, who has been with Community Day since 1974.

In the early 1990s, Community Day decided to open a private school to try to address the lack of quality schools options, raising money so people in the Lawrence community could afford it. But financially, the school didn't work.

Families from the wealthier suburbs discovered the school and started enrolling their kids into the quality

programs. Eventually, Balboni and the rest of the leadership team realized, *"We were running a small private elementary school in a poor neighborhood that was populated with kids from wealthier suburbs."* They had swayed far from their mission of helping the children of Lawrence.



The answer was simple but not well taken: They had to close the school. *"It just wasn't fulfilling the mission,"* Balboni remembers. It was a difficult decision to make, as the parents were not happy, but the school leaders knew they had to stick to the original mission.



Photos courtesy of Community Day

When the state of Massachusetts announced in the mid-1990s that it would start authorizing charter schools, Community Day was ready to go, its mission and vision for the school having already been cemented.

"We could do the school we dreamed of and youngsters would be able to afford it."

Community Day was one of the first agencies to apply for a charter and was granted one for its Prospect charter school.

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Fit: Savivors Need Not Apply

Community Day has deep roots in Lawrence, Mass., helping working and immigrant families for more than three decades, but when it comes to teaching students at their schools, leaders don't want missionaries doing this work. While these candidates may care very much for the children and their families, that doesn't mean they're helping the cause, says Sheila Balboni, executive director of Community Day. For Balboni, the school's focus has always been clear: High standards to promote academic achievement. *"I wasn't willing to let youngsters off the hook at that time because they had a hard life,"*

she says. *"We have to give them support and be nurturing, but we can't say 'We're not going to hold them to high expectations for learning because mom is a prostitute or they're living out of a car.'" In some cases, that means cutting ties with the well-meaning staff member who is not holding the students up to the school's expectations. "We fire teachers. We terminate them," she says. "It's brutal, but it's about the children, and it's not about anybody's job."*

Balboni's vision was to create a new school that was very specific about the academic goals students would achieve. To find teachers who would help students reach those specific academic goals, Balboni says that very early in the process she tries to determine if the applicant truly wants to teach, and wants to have the kids ready to learn, *"or if there is that missionary—almost idealism—that goes with wanting to be a Peace Corps member. It's pretty easy to ferret that out,"* she says.

Kennedy Hilario, head of charter schools for Community Day, agreed. *"Sometimes people want*

to be a savior, they want to be a missionary. We don't hire those people. If you're coming here because you want to save our kids, we say go somewhere else. Our kids don't need saving, they need respect," he says. *"Our teachers respect them enough to keep those expectations high and push them."*

One sign of a great candidate: He or she has many questions about opportunities for professional development, wanting to know how often it's available, and to walk-through how colleagues will help the teacher improve. *"A good teacher won't*

come on if you can't convince them they're going to grow in this job," Balboni says.

Hilario says that in the interviews and even during the demo lesson, the leadership is clear that a teacher has to be the kind of individual who is hungry for feedback. *"We are a community where we have professional learning teams, and we're constantly giving*

each other feedback...We make sure there's a safety trust factor so that it's OK to be open for feedback," he says.

Don't Blame the Student

Before firing a teacher, Balboni emphasizes that the leadership first tries to work toward a solution. She describes an arduous process undertaken recently to give feedback to a teacher who wasn't cutting it in his classroom. *"His philosophy and the culture was not a match,"* recalls Hilario. *"He kept blaming the student. And we kept saying 'no, we have to figure out what to do better.'" The staff tried to work with him to figure out different approaches. "But if they don't sign on for the team and they keep blaming the*

" We could do the school we dreamed of and youngsters would be able to afford it. "

student, then you have to part ways," he says. After the teacher passed up many opportunities to change, the leadership terminated him in the middle of the school year. *"Kids weren't learning from him. He was so resistant to what we were trying to help him with,"* Balboni says.

While some might find firing a teacher in the middle of the year disruptive to the flow, Balboni looks at it another way. *"That instructional time in that year is so important to our children that we can't waste it with a learning situation where children aren't learning,"* she says. *"We give plenty of opportunity for improvement, plenty of coaching. But in some cases, a certain relationship within the team is just toxic, and cannot be improved, and in that case, the teacher has to leave."*

Teachers who don't fit may also be "counseled out" in a more positive way. *"We've had those people for whom it was not a good match because of a clash within the culture,"* Balboni says. *"If it turns acrimonious and totally negative, it's a distraction for everyone. We try to keep it as positive as possible, but at the same time, begin to work with people to say 'there's probably a better place for you.'" Firing isn't pleasant, she says, especially in cases where the person is working hard, just not in the way management needs them to be working. "It's always difficult, but at the point we ask them to leave, I think there's a general sense of frustration all around—even on their part—and sometimes it's almost a relief to say this just isn't working,"* Balboni says.

As for the rest of the staff, most of them have observed the problems too, so there isn't shock and dismay. Many times the other teachers have been brought in to help. *"By the time we actually pull the trigger, everybody knows the decision. They've been involved in terms of trying to help the person,"* Hilario says. In some cases, the termination can make other staff members feel a bit insecure that they could be next in line if they don't get it together. But, *"in other cases, I think it reassures people that when you work hard and can be a team member, and you can learn from your coaches, your mentors and people trying to help you, you are rewarded in our system,"* Balboni says.

Teammates

Erin Walsh, head of the lower school, is the instructional leader of the school, but teaches two subjects in 4th grade. When not teaching, she's in the other classrooms. The same is true for the other two heads of school, who each oversee fewer than 150 kids. *"What I love about it is it makes you a comrade, a peer of the teacher,"* Balboni says. *"You're all working on the same problem. It's never a hierarchical thing where you're coming in with your pad."* When problems arise, the heads of school become part of the solution, taking a piece of the action plan themselves. *"It's a clear message to teachers that we're holding them accountable for their scores, but we're also accountable for that,"* Walsh says.

That warmth and shared responsibility can also be seen in the way the staff shares best practices, says teacher Tiffany Goddard. *"It's not 'I did this. I made this. It's mine. You can't look at it.' It's 'I tried this in my class, it worked really well. Do you want to try it out?'"* When it comes to students, teachers' dedication to individual students is not limited by the four walls of their classroom. *"The 2nd grade teachers will email me about a student I had last year and say 'what worked? What can I do?' And I can do the same with the kindergarten teachers from last year—Do you have any suggestions for this student or activities I can try that might work better for this child?"* Goddard says. *"It's a very group effort. Our kids are our kids even after they leave us."* Goddard recently spent some time with a student she had in 1st grade who is now in 4th. *"He just needs someone to give him a little extra oomph,"* she says.

When on-boarding a new person to the team, Community Day pairs new teachers with veteran teachers to allow that person to absorb how consistent the culture is. Before a teacher is assigned his or her own classroom, there has been significant exposure to the school's teaching and classroom management philosophies.

Student-Set Goals

Throughout Community Day, laminated posters on the walls outline the rules for student behavior, with acronyms providing shortcuts for students to remember. HALLS is Hands at your side, All eyes forward, Lips zipped, Legs walking safely, Stick together. At every age level, students are involved in setting their own goals. Bright turkeys that have been colored with crayons hang on a bulletin board in a 1st-grade classroom. Each feather of the turkey details the students' goals for the standardized testing over the next three weeks. Even at this early age, student minds are also kept on the larger goals: Each class is known as "Class of 2026" or by whatever year they will be graduating college.

Jump to the crowded 8th grade classroom of Terry Costello, where students are involved in creating their own rubric to measure what an exceptional piece of memoir writing looks like at each level. Students have been working on writing memoirs and personal essays, which will help them fill out high school applications. The teens have brainstormed some ideas, which are projected at the front of the class: *"Say goodbye to unintended repetition—focus on the positive, strong last sentences."* The class will do another draft and then use this rubric to go over the mistakes they are making.

Standards-Based from the Get-Go

From the outset, Community Day based its model on using standards-based instruction and data to measure performance. *"When I started the school, I just went back to what I had learned about good management and applied it in a school setting. You have to have a goal that people are working toward in order to measure whether you're doing well,"* says Sheila Balboni, executive director. *"It worked, our kids responded to our high expectations,"* she says. The school has continued to build on that, and is currently implementing the new Common Core state standards.

The school also has moved to a standards-based report card. Professional development sessions were devoted to developing rubrics that show what each standard looks like at different performance levels. Teachers assessed what it looks like for a student to reach mastery on each standard at different points in the year, for every element of the Common Core standards. The report cards include comments from teachers on each subject, offering a narrative as well.

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School Leader

Sheila Balboni, founder & executive director

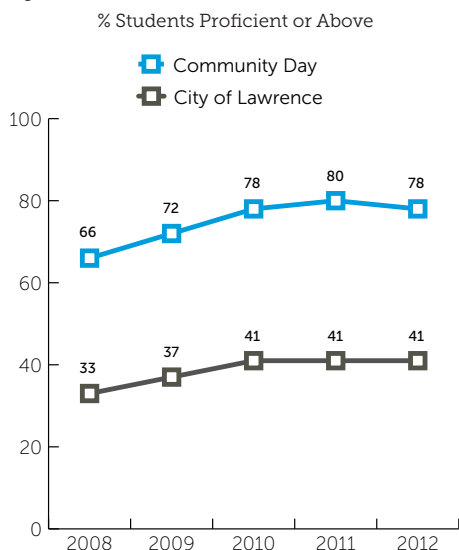
Community Day Charter Public School-Prospect was founded in 1995 by a community organization that started working decades earlier to help families in Lawrence, MA. It was one of the first charters authorized by the state of Massachusetts.

Executive Director Sheila Balboni organized the school into three smaller schools, each with 150 students maximum. Each small school has a head of school whose entire focus is on instruction and improving teacher practice, while the operations tasks are handled by the Community Group's administrative office.

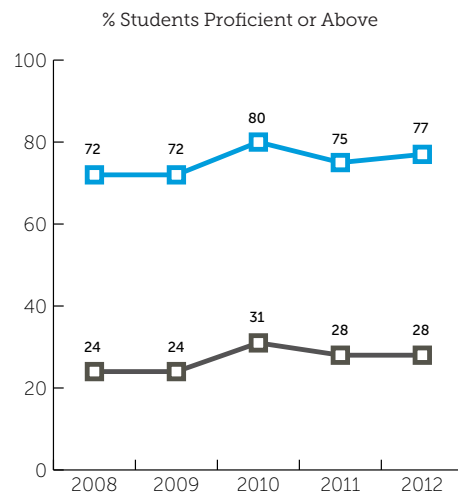
In 2011-2012, CDCPS-Prospect's Hispanic students closed the achievement gap by achieving proficiency scores that were 11.3 points higher than white students in Massachusetts. Community Day has since expanded to meet community demand, adding two new schools. The city of Lawrence also tapped Community Day to help with two turnaround schools.

Balboni, who has been with Community Day since 1974, graduated from Newton College and has a master's degree in education from Harvard University.

Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) ELA Results Over Time



MCAS Math Results Over Time



Source: Massachusetts Dept. of Education

A Look at the Class of 2011

Students started in 3rd grade below the state average on the MCAS. Roughly 41 percent of Community Day 3rd graders passed the state ELA exam, putting the class 17 points behind the state average of 58. By graduation in 2011, the class was outperforming the state average by 14 points in ELA and 36 points in Math.

	Grade 3 2006	Grade 4 2007	Grade 5 2008	Grade 6 2009	Grade 7 2010	Grade 8 2011
ELA	41	40	47	76	90	93
Math	55	49	53	90	81	88