

EDITORIAL

Boston schools notch a quiet victory



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AMID TALKS about a budget shortfall and an ongoing search for a new superintendent, Boston Public Schools has quietly carried out a major achievement: Last year, the four-year graduation rate was the highest ever for the district. The dropout rate, on the other hand, was the lowest recorded, the second year in a row the schools have broken their own record.

Over the last several years, BPS has become a nationwide leader in preventing dropouts and getting students to graduate. It's a reputation earned through the creation of a web of programs that allows educators to customize learning plans for individual students. And, despite severe financial concerns, this is one effort the city should focus on expanding to target more students.

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The four-year graduation rate last year was 66.7 percent, nearly a 1 percent bump from the previous year. There was also encouraging news on another front: The percentage of students in the class of 2014 who didn't graduate in four years but remained in school rose to 18.5 percent from 16.9 percent the previous year. Education experts see this as a particularly telling statistic because it points to a district's ability to retain students who often are at an increased risk of dropping out. The dropout rate itself decreased to 3.8 percent, from 4.5 percent the previous year.

Increasing the graduation rate is a separate challenge from decreasing the dropout rate, but the two ambitions are intimately connected. A student who is stopped from dropping out of school is all the more likely to matriculate, improving the graduation rate. Furthermore, both strategies require a school district to use student data to identify those who are struggling early and to determine the right mix of academic help and life coaching for that child.

One effective method? Online learning. The district's online credit makeup scheme offers students 52 courses, from basic algebra to AP Spanish. The courses require working independently and with teachers. Unlike more traditional classes, students can test out of courses that they have already mastered, allowing credits to add up more quickly than in traditional brick-and-mortar high schools. The program has been

remarkably successful since it was first implemented in 2008, and is credited with a 4.8 percent bump in the graduation rate in 2012, according to BPS data. Last year, 3,700 students took advantage of online courses.

Bringing down the dropout rate isn't just about helping current students, however. Getting people who have already dropped out to re-enroll is just as important. Students leave school for a variety of reasons, many of which have nothing to do with academics — 58 percent of 12th-grade students who dropped out last year had already met at least some of their MCAS graduation requirements. Finding ways to reach people who'd like to come back to their education requires individual attention and coaching.

To this end, the BPS set up the Re-Engagement Center in 2009, as a joint venture between the district and the Boston Private Industry Council, a business nonprofit. The center does targeted outreach to dropouts and offers them access to online courses and guidance counselors as they work to place them into a school. This individual attention is crucial for many students. More than 1,500 dropouts have re-enrolled through the center. As of 2013, more than 450 students from the Re-Engagement Center have earned high school diplomas.

All of these programs are small — only the alternative schools have more than 100 students enrolled at a time — and focus on distinct populations. The College Bound Bridge Program, for example, targets students transitioning from 8th to 9th grade. Others focus on expectant mothers or students recovering from addiction.

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Another argument in their favor: These efforts aren't particularly expensive. This alternative programming is budgeted to cost BPS a little less than \$2.9 million this academic year, only a small piece of the system's nearly \$1 billion budget. And nonprofits further defray some of these costs — for example, Action for Boston Community Development helps run a program for older, at-risk students.

Other districts across the country have taken notice of Boston’s efforts. More than 25 cities are replicating the Re-Enrollment Center in their own school systems, and other major urban districts have started to emulate the way Boston tracks student data, looking for signs that an individual might be on the verge of leaving.

Starting almost a decade ago, BPS took a chance on the idea that a network of small, nimble programs designed to meet the needs of a specific subset of at-risk students could cut the dropout rate and raise the graduation rate. The improvements seen in the Hub, not to mention the interest shown by other districts, more than validates that hunch. The programs probably aren’t at risk of major cuts as BPS looks to close a dramatic budget shortfall — they don’t cost enough to really make a dent in the system’s deficit.

Yet BPS needs to look beyond preserving this unique initiative — and expand access to it. This programming deserves additional funding on the merits alone. If that proves impossible, it warrants an effort at obtaining federal or state grants. Boston’s business community should also provide additional financial support. High school dropouts are a pull on the economy, increasing public welfare costs and crime.

BPS’s inroads to dropout prevention and reenrollment are impressive and they’ve set the bar nationally. That’s an accolade the city can’t afford to lose.

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