



**CHARTING THE COURSE:  
Four Years of the Thomas W. Payzant  
*School on the Move Prize***

## Research

Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy

Jill Norton, Executive Director

Michael Bennett, Policy Analyst

## Production

EdVestors

Laura Perille, Executive Director

Janet Anderson, Associate Director

Alison Stevens, Director of Evaluation

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- The hard-working members of the School on the Move Prize Panel who select the winning school each year.
- The teachers, staff, parents, principals and headmasters of all of the winning schools. We greatly appreciate their willingness to share the important work they do on behalf of the children in their schools.

## About EdVestors

EdVestors drives change in urban schools through smart, strategic private investment by identifying and shaping the most effective initiatives, partnering with donors to invest in these efforts, and supporting project leaders with hands-on expertise. Since its launch in 2002 by a group of philanthropists and business leaders, EdVestors has directed more than \$9 million to strategic improvement efforts primarily in Boston.

Each year, EdVestors hosts the innovative Urban Education Investment Showcase, where potential investors hear directly from school improvement leaders about projects and strategies in their schools. EdVestors also awards the Thomas W. Payzant *School on the Move* Prize, an annual \$100,000 citywide prize to one of the most improving Boston Public Schools. The Prize highlights the ongoing work of strengthening schools and advancing the academic achievement of all students over a four-year period. It also supports the sharing of best practices with other schools in and outside of Boston, with a portion of the award set aside for a case study documenting the successful strategies from the award-winning schools. EdVestors also coordinates the BPS Arts Expansion Fund, part of a multi-year strategic initiative to expand arts education across the Boston Public Schools.

For more information about EdVestors, contact [info@edvestors.org](mailto:info@edvestors.org) or (617) 585-5740.

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## **Table of Contents**

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<b>Letter from the Executive Director .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>SOM Prize Winners – 2006-2009: Case Studies in Brief .....</b>	<b>4</b>
▶ <b>2009 – Boston Community Leadership Academy .....</b>	<b>4</b>
▶ <b>2008 – Samuel W. Mason Elementary School .....</b>	<b>5</b>
▶ <b>2007 – Excel High School .....</b>	<b>6</b>
▶ <b>2006 – Sarah Greenwood K-8 School .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Common Practices across Four Winning Schools .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Sustaining Success: Opportunities and Barriers .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Lessons from the Leaders .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Endnotes .....</b>	<b>15</b>

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## Letter from the Executive Director

We are pleased to share with you this report – authored by the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy – which sheds light on the substance of the work in schools necessary to drive substantial improvement and better learning experiences and outcomes for children.

Since 2006, EdVestors has recognized individual Boston public schools that have made significant progress in improving student achievement with the \$100,000 Thomas W. Payzant *School on the Move* Prize, a rigorous quantitative and qualitative award honoring substantive school improvement. Each year as part of the Prize, case studies of the winning schools have been produced in partnership with the Rennie Center to document replicable strategies for other school leaders and educators serving urban students. This year, a four-year summative study was undertaken to identify common practices across all four winning schools between 2006 and 2009.

While much of the current dialogue around urban school improvement focuses on school structure and organization, this report goes a step further to illuminate the concrete practices that teachers and school leaders collectively and consistently implement to accelerate student learning and achievement regardless of school structure. The four Prize-winning schools featured in this report – the Sarah Greenwood K-8 School (2006), Excel High School (2007), Mason Elementary School (2008) and Boston Community Leadership Academy (2009) – are a diverse group: two “traditional” district schools, two pilot schools, one elementary, one K-8 school and two high schools. Yet, as the report outlines, all four schools utilized a strikingly similar set of core practices that were central to their remarkable improvement trajectories – and benefited the children learning and growing in their schools.

EdVestors’ mission is to drive change in urban schools through active engagement and strategic investment. The *School on the Move* Prize is a perfect example of this approach. We thank our sponsors for making the Prize and Best Practices Studies possible, and we salute all the members of the SOM Selection Panel who worked hard to select the winning schools each year. Above all, we congratulate the school communities whose stories are shared in this report – and the educators and school leaders who strive every day to become the next “School on the Move.”

Sincerely,



Laura Perille  
EdVestors

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## CHARTING THE COURSE: Four Years of the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize

*“The School on the Move Prize is a validation of the hard work that you do. Too often, especially in public education, it appears that we are not really doing a good job ... the Prize proves that students can get a good education in the city of Boston and there is good teaching and learning happening.”<sup>1</sup>*

**Harolyn Bowden, Principal, Samuel W. Mason Elementary School**

### Introduction

Since 2006, EdVestors has recognized individual Boston public schools that have made significant progress in improving student achievement with the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize (SOM). Named after the former Boston Public Schools (BPS) Superintendent, the \$100,000 SOM Prize provides winning schools with a cash award of \$80,000. The remainder is used to produce case studies of winning schools to document replicable strategies for school leaders and educators serving urban students. This year, a four-year summative study was undertaken to identify common practices across all four winning schools.

Every spring, EdVestors invites schools that have shown improvement on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests over a four-year period that are significantly (50%) greater than the district average to apply for the prize. Initial screening is based on the Composite Performance Index (CPI), a 100-point index that combines student scores on the MCAS with those of special needs students who take the MCAS-Alternate assessment.<sup>2</sup> Once invited, schools that apply are subjected to a rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis that focuses on the impact of broader school improvement strategies as well as other performance indicators, such as the achievement of certain groups of students (specifically, English language learners (ELLs), students with special needs and low-income students), graduation rates and dropout rates. To be eligible, a school's demographic profile must be representative of the district as a whole. An independent selection panel reviews applications and conducts interviews and school visits to recommend finalists and select winners.

In the first four years of the Prize, a diverse group of schools have emerged as winners, including two pilot schools – one a high school and the other an elementary school – a traditional K-8 school and a small high school occupying one floor of the South Boston Education Complex.<sup>3</sup> These schools also represent the diverse neighborhoods in Boston, including Dorchester, Roxbury, Brighton, and South Boston. Despite differences in structure, governance and grades served, all four winning schools do share some similar characteristics. First, they all experienced significant structural changes in the immediate years prior to winning the SOM Prize that provided an opportunity for reflection and strategic planning. Second, they are all relatively small schools with lower enrollments than most comparable schools with the same grade configurations in the district. Third, they are all led by experienced educators who are strong leaders with deep knowledge of the Boston Public School system. Finally, they all share common practices that have been critical to their success in improving student achievement, including:

- **Shared Leadership – Shared Learning:** Distributed leadership grounded in shared accountability between administrators and teachers toward a goal of instructional excellence and increased student achievement;
- **Data-driven Instruction:** Intentional systems to use data to drive decisions about curriculum, instruction and student supports;
- **Academic Rigor and Student Support:** A student-centered approach that balances high academic expectations with integrated academic and developmental supports targeted to student needs.

This study draws upon the previous SOM case studies produced by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, along with interviews with school leaders, staff and students.<sup>4</sup> The study identifies common themes across all four winning schools that describe the structures and strategies put in place to better serve students, as well as some of the opportunities and barriers the schools have faced in sustaining their success since winning the award. Finally, the study highlights some key lessons the leaders of these four schools view as critical to implementing the strategies and practices outlined to support students and improve outcomes.

## SOM Prize Winners – 2006-2009: Case Studies in Brief

Below are one-page overviews of the four winning schools from 2006-2009. For the first three winners of the SOM Prize, these briefs outline the themes identified in previously published case studies as well as provide current demographic data for each school and selected MCAS data over the last three years. The 2009 winner, Boston Community Leadership Academy, is also described here in a one-page overview that was developed primarily from interviews with school leadership, staff and students in the spring of 2010.<sup>5</sup>

### ► 2009 – Boston Community Leadership Academy

*(Prize Review Period: 2004-2008)*

2009 SOM Prize winner Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA) has the distinction of being the only school to have qualified all four years that the Prize has been in existence. This reflects an unparalleled consistency of performance among the most improving schools in Boston. For ten years, the school was led by Headmaster Nicole Bahnam who managed the school through its conversion from Boston High School to a small pilot high school in 2002. Through this process, Bahnam and her staff worked to establish clear standards of behavior, high expectations for student success and a mission driven by students' academic and social/emotional needs. BCLA has a strong focus on college preparation and student leadership and engagement in the community. Not only are students required to apply to five colleges as a prerequisite to graduate, but they must complete community service hours and a senior year capstone project based on their work in the community.

BCLA has been successful, in part, due to a strong collaborative culture among students, teachers and administrative staff, a high level of academic and social support for students, and instructional practices shaped by continual evaluation of student data. As Headmaster Bahnam notes, *"We always look at our data and say, how can we improve? We never say, 'we are there.'"*

BCLA English teacher Karl Sineath describes the school as *"learning centered."* Communication among staff constantly focuses on strategies to improve instruction based on student needs. All students are assessed multiple times a year to create an academic profile that can be used to target supports, such as the school's Aim High tutoring program provided through Boston Partners for Education. As one student observed, *"the adults in the school constantly push us to improve academically and keep us focused on our goals."*

One of the more unique strategies utilized by BCLA is their community model approach to student support. Students are grouped into grade-level learning communities coordinated by "community leaders." According to both teachers and students, the community model brings coherence to student support services by creating a single point person at each grade level to whom teachers, administrators, parents and students can go for resources.<sup>6</sup>

#### BCLA

##### Demographics: 2009-2010

	BCLA	District
Total enrollment:	431	55,371
African American:	46.2%	36.5%
Asian:	3.9%	8.6%
Hispanic:	39.9%	39.6%
White:	8.1%	13.1%
LEP*:	20.6%	20.4%
Low Income:	81.7%	75.6%
Special education:	14.6%	19.6%
Graduation Rate**:	77.6%	61.4%
Attendance Rate**:	93.7%	91.2%

*\*Limited English Proficient*

*\*\*2008-2009 school year*

##### MCAS Performance Data – % passing

10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	93%	100%	99%
Math	95%	95%	99%
Science	n/a	90%	92%

##### Composite Performance Index (CPI)

10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	80.7	88.8	90.2
Math	81.9	90.6	95.5
Science	n/a	64.1	72.0

## ► 2008 – Samuel W. Mason Elementary School

(Prize Review Period: 2003-2007)

Mason Elementary, a small elementary school in Roxbury, utilizes a full inclusion model for its students with special needs, a population that has grown in the two years since the school won the SOM Prize. To more effectively serve this population of students, most teachers are dual-certified in both general and special education. The Mason converted to pilot school status in 2003 and leveraged its autonomy over its budget and partnerships with community organizations and universities to ensure there are at least two adults in every classroom. The strategies utilized by the school that were critical in its success include:

- Shared leadership structure focused on teacher quality and empowerment
- Data-driven instructional practices
- Focus on students' social and emotional needs through an emphasis on relationship development
- Inclusion model structured around differentiated supports for special education students
- Strong commitment to families and community-building

Because of the school's pilot status, Principal Harolyn Bowden has flexibility in the curriculum and in the teacher selection process to identify and hire teachers who fit the mission and culture of the school. Bowden also provides teachers the opportunity to grow within their profession and take on additional roles and responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> The Pilot School Work Election Agreement between teachers and the Mason, moreover, provides for 80 hours of professional development annually, and 90 minutes of common planning time each week for teachers to collaborate, discuss curriculum and instructional strategies, and student work. Bowden, building upon efforts initiated by prior school leaders, has maintained a culture in the school where teachers are integral to the decision making process and lead professional development for all staff. *"When the teachers are leading [professional development], they see value in it. It also gives them a sense of empowerment. When they do work here they are tapped to do work at the district level and it helps them grow ... [having a leadership role in the school] can only enhance you as a teacher."*<sup>8</sup>

### Samuel W. Mason School

#### Demographics: 2009-2010

	Mason	District
Total enrollment:	208	55,371
African American:	51.4%	36.5%
Asian:	1.0%	8.6%
Hispanic:	31.3%	39.6%
White:	11.1%	13.1%
LEP*:	9.6%	20.4%
Low Income:	71.2%	75.6%
Special Education:	26.9%	19.6%
Attendance Rate**:	95.4%	91.2%

\*Limited English Proficient

\*\*2008-2009 school year

#### MCAS Performance Data – % passing

4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	97%	93%	100%
Math	94%	100%	84%
5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	100%	100%	96%
Math	92%	81%	91%
Science	96%	89%	94%

#### Composite Performance Index

4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	81.5	79.3	77.4
Math	85.5	88.8	71.8
5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	89.0	87.0	84.4
Math	90.0	70.4	81.5
Science	81.0	68.5	78.1

## ► 2007 – Excel High School

(Prize Review Period: 2002-2006)

Excel High School was established in 2001 as part of a high school restructuring initiative in the Boston Public Schools that created smaller, more personalized schools from under-performing comprehensive high schools. The school is one of three created from the former South Boston High School. In 2004, incoming Headmaster Ligia Noriega worked with the staff to shift the focus of the school from a technology theme to college preparation. The school was awarded the 2007 SOM Prize based on an impressive model of teacher collaboration, an approach grounded in high expectations and high student support, and a positive school climate that led to significant improvements in student achievement.

Teachers at Excel are organized into academic departments and are provided common planning time to ensure both vertical and horizontal alignment of the curriculum across all grades and subjects. Department chairs, moreover, serve on the instructional leadership team and provide significant opportunities for collaboration on issues of instruction and assessment.

Since coming to the school, Ms. Noriega has emphasized teacher quality and focused her energy on evaluating teachers and providing them with appropriate professional development and support. This effort allowed her to identify gaps in instructional competency and align the school's human resources in a way that better served students. This process left the staff with a high level of confidence in their ability to understand data and retool instructional strategies in a way that led to improved student performance. As Headmaster Noriega observed, *"We are a faculty that reflects on practice and takes action."*<sup>9</sup>

Excel's success in winning the SOM Prize was predicated in large part on maintaining consistent and high academic, civic and behavioral standards coupled with integrated supports that address students' academic and social/emotional needs. The school ensures consistent communication to all students, maintains the rigor and relevance of courses offered, and provides a number of credit recovery and after school programs to keep students on track, particularly in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Finally, the school has well-aligned support systems to coordinate services, communicate with parents, and keep students focused on their aspirations for college and career after high school.<sup>10</sup>

### Excel High School

#### Demographics: 2009-2010

	Excel	District
Total enrollment:	392	55,371
African American:	33.9%	36.5%
Asian:	31.4%	8.6%
Hispanic:	20.9%	39.6%
White:	12.8%	13.1%
LEP*:	24%	20.4%
Low Income:	73.5%	75.6%
Special Education:	17.9%	19.6%
Graduation Rate**:	53.6%	61.4%
Attendance Rate:**	89.3%	91.2%

\*Limited English Proficient

\*\*2008-2009 school year

#### MCAS Performance Data – % passing

10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	94%	95%	94%
Math	94%	89%	90%
Science	n/a	81%	88%

#### Composite Performance Index

10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	83.3	83.1	84.3
Math	84.5	82.1	82.5
Science	n/a	61.8	70.5



## ► 2006 – Sarah Greenwood K-8 School

(Prize Review Period: 2001-2005)

The Sarah Greenwood K-8 School has the distinction of being the inaugural SOM Prize winner, an honor that signaled a significant change in the school and validated the leadership of its principal of 22 years, Isabel Mendez. Improving student achievement has been an ongoing and at times difficult process that has seen the school maneuver through a transition from a K-5 to a K-8 school, the adoption of a “dual language” curriculum through which all students learn in both English and Spanish, and a movement toward an inclusion model for special education students.<sup>11</sup> With a population of Limited English Proficient students more than double the district average, the Sarah Greenwood has had remarkable success in moving students to higher levels of proficiency, particularly students in higher grades. Despite changes to the school’s structure, staff has maintained a clear focus on high expectations for student learning and, under the direction of Mendez, has supported this goal through a number of key strategies: shared instructional leadership; data-driven decision making; and, integrated academic and social/emotional supports for all students. Teachers, moreover, are encouraged to be innovative and take risks.

The Sarah Greenwood uses a number of leadership teams to address school-wide collaboration, curriculum alignment, and instructional practices. They include an instructional leadership team, content committees for literacy, math, science and social studies, and five grade level study groups. These teams ensure that everyone is involved in decision making. They provide the school flexibility to adjust quickly to a variety of data indicators. Staff is trained to analyze and discuss data in a way that improves student achievement. The outcomes of these discussions, moreover, shape professional development. This focus on instructional excellence is further supported by a range of supplemental programs:

- Before and after school programs on literacy, math and MCAS preparation
- Student Support Team (SST) composed of teachers, mental health specialists, nurses, counselors and administrators to serve the whole child
- Health services provided through a partnership with Franciscan Children’s Hospital

### Sarah Greenwood K-8 School

#### Demographics: 2009-2010

	Greenwood	District
Total enrollment:	374	55,371
African American:	27.3%	36.5%
Asian:	0.8%	8.6%
Hispanic:	67.6%	39.6%
White:	2.4%	13.1%
LEP*:	45.2%	20.4%
Low Income:	91.2%	75.6%
Special Education:	18.7%	19.6%
Attendance Rate**:	93.1%	91.2%

\*Limited English Proficient

\*\*2008-2009 school year

#### MCAS Performance Data - % passing

4th Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	97%	92%	86%
Math	90%	95%	89%
8th Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	100%	89%	100%
Math	74%	72%	62%
Science	79%	50%	58%

#### Composite Performance Index

4th Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	79.0	76.4	68.9
Math	79.0	86.5	75.0
8th Grade	2007	2008	2009
ELA	98.7	84.7	88.5
Math	67.1	63.9	58.7
Science	53.3	44.4	43.3

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## Common Practices across Four Winning Schools

Looking across all four SOM Prize winners, common themes emerge that have been integral to their success in addressing student academic performance and closing achievement gaps. These include an emphasis on shared leadership grounded in strong collaborative structures and teacher empowerment, a focus on data to drive decisions about instructional practices and supplementary services, and a balance of high expectations for student success with strong student support systems. Implementation of these strategies looks different from school to school, but their importance to overall school success is evident to students, staff and parents. Good structures and practices, however, are only part of the equation for school success. Perhaps most important is the quality of leadership and staff, and their commitment to continuous improvement.

All of these schools pay particular attention to teacher fit and development, and provide a variety of supports, including induction, coaching, and differentiated opportunities for staff to grow and take on additional responsibilities. Moreover, each school's success in implementing a shared leadership model that both supports and empowers teachers is directly linked to strong leadership and commitment at the top. As a result, faculty report a high level of job satisfaction, a commitment to the values and mission of each individual school, and a willingness to put in extra hours, take risks and innovate.<sup>12</sup> The smaller size of these schools also provides more opportunity for individualized, student-centered instruction and social support. Additionally, all of the schools benefited from going through significant change in structure prior to winning the Prize, providing an opportunity to reflect on their values and leverage additional resources.

### **1. Shared Leadership – Shared Learning**

SOM Prize winners share a commitment to distributed leadership, a commitment facilitated by strong leadership at each of these schools. Decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and student supports are made collectively among teachers and administrators, fostering a shared sense of accountability for the implementation of school-wide strategies to address overall learning goals. The literature on school reform has frequently mentioned the benefits of teacher collaboration and professional learning communities in overall school improvement strategies. Moreover, there is a growing body of empirical evidence that suggests a positive relationship between high levels of teacher collaboration in schools and student achievement.<sup>13</sup> These data suggest that organizational approaches to school improvement that build upon the interdependence of staff within a school to address shared goals creates a more coherent approach to meet student needs.

The two pilot schools that have won the award, BCLA and the Mason, have used their pilot autonomies and teacher work agreements to create more time for teacher collaboration. Schedules are structured to create opportunities everyday to meet in school-wide, departmental or grade-level teams. These learning communities provide a formal structure to discuss curriculum and instructional approaches, student work and behavior, and common assessments. Although they do not have the autonomies of pilot schools, both the Sarah Greenwood and Excel have found innovative ways to incorporate the use of instructional leadership teams and common planning time to ensure a high level of teacher collaboration. Excel, for instance, has used grant money and other funds to pay teachers stipends for extra time to engage in this work. Teacher teams also have input on budget decisions that have a direct impact on classroom instruction. These structures foster consistency across the curriculum and across grades, and empower teachers to reflect more critically on their practices and how they align with overall school goals.

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## 2. Data-Driven Instruction

Critical to the success of teacher leadership models in each of the winning schools is a stated commitment to teacher development. Each school leader focuses on teaching quality and provides opportunities for staff to analyze and use data in a way that leads to instructional or curricular changes designed to improve outcomes for students. A common theme among winning schools is the ability to remain flexible and nimble to adjust to student needs through continual analysis of student work and assessment data. There is a strong culture among the schools to continually improve their skills and processes to bring more clarity and consistency to how they use data to make decisions. While this can be difficult for many teachers who are focused on the day-to-day rigors of instruction, it provides more opportunities for reflection on the ultimate objective—student learning. As Ms. Noriega from Excel stated, *“We are always looking for that new perspective on student data that will get us to think about teaching and learning in a new way.”*

A good example of this is BCLA's recent shift to school-wide authentic assessments based on student portfolios and exhibitions. Determining how to analyze this rich information has been a challenge, but teachers see the value in exploring alternative ways to evaluate students' work and academic growth. Teachers have found portfolios and exhibitions particularly helpful in assessing special education students and improving strategies to support these students. Within grade level teams at the Mason and Sarah Greenwood, teachers use a wide range of formative assessments, including guided reading, writing assignments and math assessments given multiple times a year. Teachers spend a considerable amount of time and energy to ensure that their scoring rubrics are consistent and aligned to grade-level standards and expectations. It is not uncommon in these schools for 1st grade math teachers to be discussing 4th grade math to determine how to better align instruction to build the right foundation for successful grade-to-grade progression.

Excel developed a comprehensive data inventory that outlines the type of data the school collects and its purpose. The inventory includes ten different types of assessments, including school-based, district and state assessments, as well as data collected on fifteen different indicators from attendance to frequency of visits to the school nurse. According to Headmaster Noriega, analyzing all these data has expanded the school's perspective, not only on how individual students are doing, but also why students may or may not be achieving at a high level. Excel has been particularly effective at disaggregating data for certain subgroups of students to create instructional practices to help close achievement gaps. Specifically, Excel was able to successfully address two key issues in its school improvement plan—math proficiency among African-American males and ELA proficiency among the school's large population of Vietnamese students—through focused, data-driven instructional change. By focusing on both academic and non-academic indicators of student progress, Excel can better ensure that its academic support programs are responsive to students' unique needs.

## 3. Academic Rigor and Student Support

BCLA Headmaster Nicole Bahnam expressed a common sentiment in all winning schools when she said, *“You cannot have high standards just for the sake of having high standards, without high levels of support.”*<sup>15</sup> High academic expectations and effective support systems have long been seen by educators as essential to school success, particularly in urban areas. Research suggests that high academic expectations provide direction and motivation for students to attain goals and view themselves as intellectual learners. Social support also builds motivation by creating a sense of trust, confidence, and emotional connectedness, and can help students maneuver through the developmental changes of childhood. Increasingly, researchers focusing on education and youth development are seeing value in balancing these two elements as a strategy to improve student achievement and student engagement, particularly among high-need urban populations.<sup>16</sup>

As high schools, both Excel and BCLA reinforce high academic and social expectations through a mission and vision that emphasize achievement and college readiness. These expectations are communicated to students through multiple methods—through dialogue with teachers and other staff, through a rigorous college preparation curriculum that includes Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and strong counseling services to provide students information and support for post-secondary success. As one BCLA student put it, teachers *“begin to talk to you about college in 9th grade.”*<sup>17</sup> These messages are reinforced at all levels of the school. BCLA community leaders and Excel student development counselors play an active role in setting expectations as well as monitoring students' academic progress, engaging parents, and linking students to additional services that support academic success and college readiness. These expectations are supported by a wide range of initiatives, including before and after school enrichment, targeted tutoring, and counseling services. As a result, both schools are

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among the top selections of Boston students who aspire to go on to college after high school. As Headmaster Noriega notes, *“Even though we have students who are not well prepared even for high school, we have a vision here that is very high and we have come up with solutions to support students.”*

At the Sarah Greenwood and the Mason, high expectations for student achievement are balanced with a strong emphasis on students' social and emotional development. Both schools rely on what Principal Mendez calls the *“emotional part of the data,”* to get a deeper understanding of individual students' needs to better target supports and interventions.<sup>18</sup> Teachers constantly work to engage students on multiple levels and provide differentiated opportunities to learn. The Sarah Greenwood utilizes a student support team to provide counseling services, referrals and other supports to students with a wide range of social, behavioral and developmental issues. The Mason addresses these same issues through an ongoing partnership with Boston Connects, a Boston College initiative that works with schools to better coordinate in- and out-of-school supports for students.<sup>19</sup> By creating safety nets and other mechanisms to address the “whole child,” these schools provide students with a variety of individualized supports to move students to higher levels of achievement.

For all of the winning schools, strong leadership from principals ensures that the focus on high expectations is centered as much on the staff as it is on the students. At the Mason, this is expressed as the “Mason Way”—an understanding that all teachers and staff strive to provide all students with the opportunities to be successful in school and life.<sup>20</sup> It is a commitment and dedication to high expectations that shapes the culture of these schools and it attracts professionals who share that commitment. For Nicole Bahnam of BCLA, teacher commitment to students is integral to their commitment to each other and the school. As she observes, “unless all staff cares about the children, there will be no community among the staff.” High expectations and support also extends to families and communities. These schools work hard to provide parents and caregivers with information and other services that will help them support their children's academic success.

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## Sustaining Success: Opportunities and Barriers

*"It is a big challenge to keep growing [as a successful school]...  
You have to keep your eyes on [the drivers of continuous improvement]  
or you can slide back."*

**Isabel Mendez, Principal, Sarah Greenwood K-8 School**

**All four winning schools recognize that sustaining success often is as difficult as the work they put into attaining their success. In fact, several of the schools have struggled to maintain a consistent or improving level of academic achievement since being recognized as the "School on the Move." The Prize has afforded schools with the resources and recognition to support key improvement efforts and help address many of the challenges inherent in efforts to sustain school success.**

### Opportunities through Strategic Investment

The SOM Prize provided an opportunity for each of the schools outlined in this study both to reflect upon their practices and to position themselves for additional funds to maintain investments in key programs and people. As Headmaster Noriega noted, *"winning the award has changed our entire perspective,"* by increasing expectations across the school community and expanding the visibility and reputation of the school. Like Excel, winning schools used their prize money to make strategic investments in three key areas: 1) instructional resources and technology, 2) academic programs, and 3) staff development. These investments supported ongoing initiatives at each school and helped them sustain and build upon their success serving students in Boston.

### Instructional Resources and Technology

All of the winning schools described using their prize money to support important investments in technology infrastructure, which would have otherwise been unattainable. For Principal Mendez at the Sarah Greenwood, the award presented an opportunity to make investments in instructional technology to improve teaching and learning at the school. *"We were in motion developing supports to better serve students and knew we were going to continue that motion in terms of coaching, literacy, math and looking at student work. The Prize allowed us to dream a little bit beyond that. We could ask: where do we want to take our students in the future? How do we want to improve the lives of teachers and support them? That was our next step."* Soon after winning the award, a teacher at the school attended a workshop on SMART boards and began to engage other teachers about using instructional technology in the classroom to connect students with content in new and innovative ways. These discussions, combined with visits to schools that use the technology, led to a decision to purchase SMART boards for every classroom in the school. According to Mendez, the investment allowed the school to expose students from low income families to educational technologies to which they otherwise would not have access.

At the Mason, a portion of the prize money was used to purchase a mobile computer lab. With additional laptops, the school invested in various software packages and other resources to support struggling readers, math instruction and their emerging science curriculum. Excel also used SOM Prize money to invest in literacy media technology, including mobile computer labs and software packages for special education students and English language learners. One specific outcome of this investment in technology at Excel is that more students are completing science projects in a digital format rather than arranging findings on poster board – a skill that may serve students well in college and the workplace.

### Strengthening Academic Support and Enrichment

For all the winning schools, the \$80,000 award that comes with the SOM Prize created opportunities for strategic investments to continue to develop and expand upon programs to better serve their students. For some schools, like Excel, the investments were critical to sustaining their success over the past two years after private investments from the Bill & Melinda

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Gates Foundation ran out in 2007. Excel invested heavily in programs for 9<sup>th</sup> graders, including credit recovery, after school enrichment programs, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade orientation to improve students' transition to high school. The immediate result of these investments has been a reduction in the number of students held back and fewer students who require summer school.

The Mason used a portion of their prize money to support a tutoring program at the school through stipends for teachers and paraprofessionals to work with students after school. This program was targeted primarily to special education students and others who had more challenging academic needs. The Sarah Greenwood's investments in technology stimulated the staff's thinking about science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programs at the school. Building upon this interest, the school purchased design kits, books and other curriculum materials to support engineering projects. It now has an active robotics program that builds students' collaboration and problem-solving skills, and, as Principal Mendez notes, students are beginning to see themselves as "engineers."

### **Staff Development**

All of the prizewinning schools used award money to invest in their most important resource – people. Looking to build its capacity to improve its assessment protocols and use data more effectively to shape instructional practices, the Mason invested in the services of the Achievement Network (ANet), a non-profit based in Boston that provides assessment tools, training, and coaching to urban schools.<sup>21</sup> As Bowden observed, teachers "had to start with themselves first, look at their classroom data and decide what standards needed more focus and then develop action plans to address learning gaps. It had a lot of credibility." The partnership with ANet strengthened the school's emphasis on data-driven instruction and had two key benefits for the school: They improved their ability to identify gaps in students' understanding of the standards; and, exposed students much earlier to the rigors of MCAS testing, leading to fewer emotional issues with taking the tests. Additional funds were used to provide teachers with professional development for science education.

To leverage their investment in SMART boards, the Sarah Greenwood provided teachers with extensive professional development on using the technology in their everyday instruction. The impact was immediate, according to Mendez. Teachers became savvier about instructional technology and collaborated more closely on the development and sharing of lesson plans. This fostered innovative ways to prepare students for math and provide more effective reading and writing assistance. To strengthen the rigor of their classes across all grade levels and subjects, Excel used additional prize money to send a group of teachers to Summer Advanced Placement College Board Seminars. Additionally, Excel sent four of its teachers to National Board of Education workshops, of which two eventually attained National Board Certification.

Across all prizewinning schools, leaders felt that prize money allowed them to maintain and expand upon initiatives and programs that support their school improvement plans. In some cases, investments in technology and professional development continue to pay dividends. In others, investments to support academic enrichment, additional staffing and supplemental services ended when the prize money was exhausted. The temporary boost that comes from winning an award like this cannot sustain schools through more systemic declines in public and private investments. Smaller schools are particularly vulnerable to both internal and external forces that affect sustainability because budgets are linked to total enrollment. Without economies of scale, these schools have less fiscal flexibility to maintain funding for various programs or to address staffing needs.

### **Barriers to Sustainability**

Harolyn Bowden at the Mason describes the struggle of sustaining success, "It is a challenge when you are a high achieving school to keep those levels. To keep that progress up is not such an easy task . . . You have to keep on making gains and at some point that becomes harder to do . . . you have kids at proficient but how do you get them to the next level?"

As with many public schools, particularly in a time of constrained fiscal resources, the winning schools identified challenges to sustaining the student growth trajectories that led them to win the Prize. The three key challenges that leaders identified were: 1) changes in staff, 2) increased enrollment of high-need students and, 3) resource constraints that necessitated reductions in certain services and programs. These challenges are described in detail below to convey that Prize winning schools must overcome the same challenges that many schools face. What has set these schools apart in the past, and holds promise for their future success, is school leaders' ability to find innovative ways to overcome obstacles and to relentlessly focus on the core mission of effective teaching and learning.

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### **Staff Changes**

While staffing at the Mason has been relatively stable over the past few years, in 2009-2010, five teachers – 25% of their teaching staff – were out on extended leave, forcing Bowden to rely heavily on long-term substitutes for much of the year. Because of this, the school could not ensure that each classroom was staffed by two adults, a practice integral to its success in prior years. The reliance on long-term substitutes also limited the school's ability to take on teaching candidates from the Boston Teachers' Residency program, a program that Principal Bowden used very effectively in past years to supplement her staff. Budget cuts also forced the school to hire fewer student interns and eliminate a reading recovery program. Moreover, this is the final year of a three-year grant that supported the school's partnership with Boston Connects and will leave the school without a full-time health coordinator for the 2010-2011 school year.<sup>22</sup>

The Sarah Greenwood lost about 25% of its teachers in school year 2009-2010 when these teachers moved to newly designated turnaround schools, which offer teachers an annual stipend to supplement their salary. The Sarah Greenwood's assistant principal is also leaving to lead a turnaround school in the 2010-2011 school year. For Mendez, *"[the turnaround schools] are taking a lot of my teachers that I have used a lot of money, energy, and time to develop . . . I have to start at step one to train new teachers to teach and build the school community."* Such unintended consequences of broader district-wide initiatives present another challenge to schools working to sustain high levels of student achievement.

### **Increased Enrollment of High Need Student Populations**

Due in part to the school's reputation for effectively serving students with special needs, the Mason's population of special education students has consistently risen over the past three years, as more parents select the Mason for their special needs children. Moreover, as Principal Bowden observes, special education students are coming to the school with a higher level of need and teachers are not always well-equipped to address a wide range of learners with diverse learning styles. Teachers are finding it more difficult to differentiate instruction and accommodate for the wide range of abilities and needs. And, there are too few funds to provide teachers with the support and training they need to improve instruction for these special education students, or to build the comprehensive system of safety nets that staff believe is necessary to address the needs of all students.

### **Declining Budgets**

Declining resources are limiting the ability of these four schools to provide students with additional academic support through supplementary programs. Excel will not be able to support stipends for teachers to put in extra time for after school tutoring. They have also decided not to run its 9<sup>th</sup> grade orientation, a program that has been effective in the past in helping students transition to high school. Due to limited professional development opportunities, BCLA shifted away from its successful advisory program, which linked each student with an advisor for their entire high school career. Both Excel and BCLA are also struggling with how to continue to push the academic rigor of their curriculum to better prepare students for college readiness. While both would like to increase their graduation requirements to include four years of math and three years of foreign language, they find that too many 9<sup>th</sup> graders are entering high school without the proper skills to take advanced math and language.<sup>23</sup>

The Sarah Greenwood has also been forced to cut afterschool and summer programming due to declines in budget and changes in BPS policies. For years the school has been able to offer all its students access to academic enrichment both after school and during the summer. This summer is the first time the school will not operate a summer school because of the district's move to centralized summer schools. Mendez believes this will prove to be less effective in serving Sarah Greenwood's students, because they do not have a social or emotional connection to the summer school. As Mendez argues, *"When students go to their own schools in the summer, they already have that emotional piece in place. That is the part that falls through the cracks."*

Despite these external pressures, Principal Mendez, like her peers at the other SOM prizewinning schools, is already thinking about how to address the next challenges. With data showing that they have moved more students to the Proficient level in school year 2009-2010, she is now focused intently on those students who are borderline Proficient and is working to determine what it will take to move them to the next level. She is asking, *"What is the next lens we need to use to do that?"* To be sure, flexibility to adapt to various external and internal forces is a characteristic of all of the effective SOM leaders.

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## Lessons from the Leaders

The Prize created an opportunity for winning schools to reflect upon their practices and make investments to help them grow as a community and build upon their successes. For Headmaster Noriega, the process was also a valuable learning experience: *"It brought a different sense that this is a success. Teachers began to see that they had something to do with the success."* The Prize also *"brings a lot of reflection of practice. Winning the award made us look at the data more critically. What does it mean to improve continuously and how do you sustain that level of achievement."* Through this reflection, school leaders identified a number of key lessons that they view as critical to implementing the strategies and practices outlined in this study that have improved student outcomes:

- Open and honest communication is critical. School leaders must be transparent with everyone about where they are and where they want to go as a school community.
- School leaders must create clear expectations for all members of the school community—students, teachers, staff, and parents. Without buy-in from all levels, success will be elusive.
- Fostering balanced leadership is key. It is essential to provide everyone with an opportunity to contribute and have a real stake in school leadership. But school leaders must also know when to step up and make a decision.
- School leaders must be in classrooms as often as possible and talk to students about what they are doing. School leaders must see firsthand that their students understand the objectives of the work.
- Teachers are the key and they need to be supported in comprehensive ways.
- School climate and culture are the most effective pathways to student engagement.
- School leaders should challenge assumptions and not jump to conclusions, particularly in regard to special education students and students who are English language learners. Knowing the research is vital.
- Schools must keep moving forward.

Winning the SOM Prize has also provided the four schools described here with a unique opportunity to celebrate their success within the broader Boston school community. *"It was amazing,"* observed Ligia Noriega, *"It recognized the hard work of the teachers and the students. It brought some pride to the community, saying we are really working and the work is being displayed outside the Excel walls. It was beautiful."* For the Sarah Greenwood, the reaction was similar. As Principal Mendez notes, *"Students felt that they were doing well and that we are doing well in Boston. We may have to walk the streets, but when we get to school we are learning. It felt like that for the parents too. It felt like uplift for the entire community."*

## Conclusion

Amidst the constant challenges of urban public education, the School on the Move Prize rewards and brings well-earned attention to schools that are improving outcomes for urban students. The three common strategies employed by all of the winning schools: 1) shared leadership and meaningful collaboration, 2) data-driven decision making, and 3) high expectations for academic success supported by intense and student-centered academic and social/emotional supports are validated by a growing body of research on school reform. The winning schools are clearly unique places of learning where a confluence of strong leadership, skilled teachers and high expectations led to impressive gains in student achievement. Yet, the strategies employed by these schools are not dependent upon special circumstances. These are strategies that other school leaders and educators can incorporate into their own schools to improve the opportunities for all students to be successful learners and well-prepared for college, career and life.

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*After leading a successful school turnaround at Boston Community Leadership Academy, Nicole Bahnam left the school in 2010 to take on another challenging role as Headmaster for Boston International High School and the Newcomers Academy, co-located in Dorchester and serving English language learners and students who arrive in the U.S. during the school year. Ligia Noriega also left as Headmaster of Excel High School in 2010 to take on a new role as Assistant Academic Superintendent for High Schools in the Office of High School Support. Both of these educators are staying in leadership roles within the Boston Public School system.*

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Interview with Harolyn Bowden, June 14, 2010.
- <sup>2</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education. (2006) *School Leaders' Guide to the 2006 Cycle IV Accountability and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Reports*.
- <sup>3</sup> Pilot schools, allowable under a 1994 provision in the Boston Teachers' Union contract, are district public schools with autonomy over five key areas: staffing; budget; curriculum & assessment; governance & policies; and, school calendar.
- <sup>4</sup> Interviews were conducted with BCLA staff and students in May, 2010. Follow-up interviews with the headmasters and principals of the prior SOM winning schools were conducted in June, 2010.
- <sup>5</sup> Since the inception of the SOM prize in 2006, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy has partnered with EdVestors to produce individual case studies of the winning schools. Due to the structure and purpose of this report, a full case study of BCLA has not been produced.
- <sup>6</sup> Information for this section on BCLA was gathered during interviews at the school on May 3 and 4, 2010 with administrators, teachers, support staff and students.
- <sup>7</sup> Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (2009) *Samuel W. Mason Elementary School Case Study*.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with Samuel W. Mason School Principal Harolyn Bowden, June 14, 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with Excel High School Headmaster Ligia Noriega, June 15, 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (2008) *A Focus on Achievement at Excel High School: A Best Practices Case Study*.
- <sup>11</sup> Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy (2007) *Continuous Effort, Continuous Improvement: Student Achievement at the Sarah Greenwood School*.
- <sup>12</sup> These insights were drawn from the previously published case studies of the SOM prizewinners and interviews conducted with administrators, teachers and students at BCLA in May, 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> Goddard, Y.L., Goddard, R.D., Tschannen-Moran, M. (2007). "A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation of Teacher Collaboration for School Improvement and Student Achievement in Public Elementary Schools." *Teachers College Record* 109(4): 877-896; Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., & Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A Practical Guide*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. (2010) *Team Up for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Teaching and Learning: What Research and Practice Reveal about Professional Learning*; Louis, Karen S., Leithwood, Kenneth, Wahlstrom, Kyla L., and Anderson, Stephen E. (2010). *Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*. Final Report of the Learning from Leadership Project, University of Minnesota.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with the upper school math team, BCLA, May 4, 2010.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with BCLA Headmaster Nicole Bahnam, May 3, 2010.
- <sup>16</sup> Lee, V., Smith, J.B., Perry, T.E., Smylie, M.A. (1999) *Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement: A View from the Middle Grades in Chicago*. Consortium on Chicago School Research. Blum, Robert. (2005) *School Connectedness: Improving the Lives of Students*. John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview with BCLA Student Advisory Council, May 4, 2010.
- <sup>18</sup> Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy (2007) *Continuous Effort, Continuous Improvement: Student Achievement at the Sarah Greenwood School*.
- <sup>19</sup> The Boston Connects program is run through Boston College's Lynch School of Education and was recently renamed "City Connects."
- <sup>20</sup> Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (2009) *Samuel W. Mason Elementary School Case Study*.
- <sup>21</sup> For more information on the Achievement Network, see <http://achievementnetwork.org/services/overview.html>
- <sup>22</sup> Principal Bowden credits the partnership with Boston Connects for the schools success in addressing students' social and emotional development. While the school will lose its Health Coordinator through Boston Connects it will continue to support its Student Support Coordinator.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Ligia Noriega, June 15, 2010; and, Interview with Nicole Bahnam, May 3, 2010.

