



JD Fergus (left), restorative justice coach at Phoenix Charter Academy, meets with students in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Students at Phoenix schools have persevered through many challenges and transitions.

GET CONNECTED

TRUST AND IDENTITY RE-ENGAGE STUDENTS IN MASSACHUSETTS CHARTER SCHOOLS

BY LIZ MURRAY

Transitions are a part of life for all students, but particularly for students at Phoenix Charter Academy in Massachusetts. Phoenix students have persevered and shown resilience through challenges in school and in their personal lives that many of us cannot imagine.

Founded on the unwavering belief that all students can succeed at high levels, Phoenix exists to serve high school students who are the most disconnected in their communities.

The schools focus on reaching a growing number on the margins of the traditional public district education system: students who have dropped out of high school, who are parenting children of their own, who are or have been involved with the juvenile justice system, who are under-credited relative to the number of years they have spent enrolled in high school, or who are older and new to the country and cannot gain access to public schooling.

We believe that these young people, like all students, are completely capable of developing the skills necessary to set themselves up for lifetimes of economic prosperity and success.

Our students have experienced a diversity of life transitions, but when they come to Phoenix, we nurture them through a shared transition: developing the identity of successful students.

Students come to Phoenix with a wealth of strengths and assets, from strong work ethics to curious minds to strong interpersonal skills. Yet many of them hold erroneous beliefs, such as “I don’t belong in college” or “I’m not meant for these career pathways,” in large part because society and their previous experiences have bombarded them with negative messages about their potential and abilities.

At the heart of our work is an identity transition through which they come to see themselves as people who can and will succeed in school, career, and life. In this way, Phoenix Charter Academy aims to show students — and the rest of the world — what all young people can do and to defy the limitations of societal assumptions, classism, and racism.

At each of Phoenix’s three open-enrollment alternative public charter schools — in the urban Massachusetts communities of Chelsea, Lawrence, and Springfield — students engage in relevant, rigorous, and engaging education that prepares them for

college or the career pathways of their choice. We pair rigorous academics — including honors, AP, and dual-enrollment college courses — with relentless socioemotional supports.

These supports and opportunities are not always the norm for students who struggle in school, and having access to them is a positive but major shift for our students. It can be a shift for our staff, too.

Professional learning is a backbone of our work, and a key component is helping staff develop the skills and mindsets to support identity transformation as part of the process of academic growth. Staff also engage in regular professional learning around curriculum, performance tasks, and competency-based learning, but without the identity transformation, nothing else matters for students — no internship, college application, test score, or well-designed class assignment.

A FOUNDATION OF TRUST

Our work with both staff and students begins with building trust. When caring for students who have experienced deep and sustained trauma and the deleterious effects of racism and classism, staff must be prepared to work through hard moments with students to

earn their trust.

Teachers must understand that they do not command automatic positional authority or respect because of the degrees after their names or because of their titles. Adults must demonstrate care for every student and be ready to do the relentless and unwavering hard work to earn trust.

Through our hiring process, Phoenix leaders intentionally select staff who see student strengths, have strong empathy and perspective-taking skills, and are willing to help students do the hard work of building new layers of identity. Not only do we talk extensively with candidates about our mission, but we engage them in scenarios to assess how they might respond to the kinds of challenges we encounter in our schools.

The hiring process is only a small part of building a dedicated teacher workforce. Professional learning is essential for scaffolding teachers' skills in navigating acute classroom challenges and fostering their resilience in the face of high levels of student trauma, stress, and conflict.

The school year opens with a two-week staff institute, during which we focus on both curriculum planning and engaging with students. For example, we provide extensive practice in de-escalating situations of conflict, tension, or disrespect. Simply telling teachers what to do during a student outburst or refusal to work doesn't prepare teachers to respond effectively in the moment. Role-playing and practice do.

We use a practice protocol, incorporating difficult scenarios that sometimes occur in our schools and representing the kinds of diversity and identities among our students. Staff role-play a teacher-student scenario, debrief with their peers, and then do the scenario again, incorporating strategies and insights suggested by their peers.

This process not only gives teachers

practice, but also fosters growth mindset, conveying the message that working effectively with student challenges is an ongoing process that takes time and requires growth. This is important for teachers who work with our population because the teaching profession can attract people who did well in school and don't have firsthand experience with struggling academically.

Perspective-taking is essential for our teachers if they are to understand students' needs and communicate to students that they are capable of succeeding.

INSTITUTES AND COMMON PLANNING TIME

We also host staff institutes during the school year. As a charter school network, we have the flexibility to schedule professional learning as needed, including early release for students every Friday so that teachers can work together. Recently, a Competency Institute in Chelsea focused on developing competency-based curriculum and performance tasks.

We are strategic about the curricula that we select and develop to ensure they meet the needs of our students. For example, most materials for English language learners are geared toward elementary-aged children and would therefore be condescending or inappropriate for young adults.

Even with strong curricular materials, teachers need to supplement with great performance tasks. The tasks must be motivating and relevant for this population. If they aren't, students might tune out or simply won't be motivated to attend and engage in learning more consistently.

The tasks also must be rigorous and require original, provocative thinking, and staff identified this as an area in need of improvement. To address this, teachers meet weekly for common planning focused on selecting

and designing performance tasks and aligning them with assessment rubrics, the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, and our newly developed Phoenix Competencies, which emphasize the social-emotional skills most needed for success in 21st-century college and careers.

For example, we are working on incorporating more extended talk in performance tasks because students need to be able to defend their ideas and English language learner students need to practice vocabulary and fluency. When these tasks are well-designed, they provide opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate their skills. Students gradually come to see themselves as capable of school success.

Through the Competency Institute, teachers are constantly revising and improving their practice and finding creative ways to engage students.

FOCUSED SUPPORT THROUGH COACHING

Just as students need ongoing support, so, too, do staff. Phoenix teachers participate in regular, predictable coaching from senior staff and leaders-in-residence who are participating in a school-based residency training program. We also make sure that the leadership team is open and accessible and that teachers know where they can get support on a Tuesday afternoon when an unexpected challenge occurs in the classroom.

In addition to regular instructional coaching, this year teachers in Chelsea are receiving focused support on being restorative practitioners who can build relationships and navigate conflict. Conflict is a healthy and predictable part of collaboration, team building, and being part of a community with diverse identities and perspectives.

Phoenix leaders and staff work to acknowledge that and develop the mindsets and skills to transform



Phoenix Charter Academy pairs rigorous academics with socioemotional supports. Above, Phoenix Charter Academy Chelsea students with teacher Monica Soares Sousa (left) and restorative justice coach JD Fergus (back row, in hat).

conflicts so that community members feel respected and heard and can work together toward achieving their shared goals. We refer to “transformation” rather than “resolution” because we recognize that productive conversations do not always solve or end conflict per se but should help people get to a new place where they can move forward and continue working together.

We are invested in using restorative practices to address conflict. In contrast to traditional discipline methods, restorative practices focus on conversation and collaborative problem-solving among the parties involved in the conflict.

They provide an opportunity for those harmed to express their perspective and for the parties to work together to find a solution to repair the harm that has been caused. In restorative circles, all parties impacted sit together with a facilitator and follow a structured process of speaking, listening, and determining reparative actions.

This process is valuable for our

community because it provides crucial opportunities for building relationships and trust; demonstrates to students that staff will not give up on them or let them off the hook even when they make choices that interfere with their goals or our community norms; and gives students the chance to take responsibility, make different choices, be heard, and see the positive things they have to contribute.

This is an important part of the identity transformation process because it provides the opportunity and support for students to improve themselves and, through doing so, see themselves in a different light.

Restorative circles are powerful, but not easy. They require skilled facilitation. To build that capacity among teachers and leaders, we created a staff position for a skilled and experienced restorative practices coach who helps adults develop the knowledge and skills to facilitate restorative practices effectively.

Rather than delegating the

facilitator role to one person who is expected to solve and address student issues, we wanted the teaching and leadership staff to develop the capacity to facilitate because this work is fundamental to trust building, identity development, and conflict transformation — all of which are essential to their work with students.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

While teachers are supporting students’ identity transformation and academic growth, many of them, especially those new to our schools, are engaged in identity development as well. As leaders, we must be clear with teachers that this is appropriate and expected and that their growth is a process.

For example, we must normalize the experience of not excelling immediately, an experience that may be new for many teachers, particularly if they performed well in school themselves. Educators who are new to teaching or

to a specific population of students are learning how to play a new sport.

We need to help them understand that they are not immediately going to be the highest performers when they start. In fact, they are likely to struggle cognitively and emotionally in ways that will challenge their hearts, minds, and physical energy.

This is particularly important for educators from economically and racially privileged backgrounds who may not recognize that their own success in school was aided by systems that validated their cultural experiences and norms, often to the exclusion of others’.

This kind of reflection can help teachers take their students’ perspectives and develop empathy, if leaders are explicit about helping them make that transfer. It can also pave the way for teachers to understand the importance of practice and trying again and again.

and again.

Teachers often need encouragement to seek feedback from peers and help feeling comfortable with that process. We provide that support to teachers, as we do with students. Through this process, they experience the kind of learning we expect them to facilitate with students.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Building staff capacity to provide rigorous academic and socioemotional supports that are culturally responsive and tailored to student needs has real academic benefits. At Phoenix Chelsea in 2017-18, 100% of students who took the 10th-grade state tests for English language arts and math were rated Advanced or Proficient.

But these numbers are far from the only way we measure success and the positive changes our people are

achieving. We see students who have dropped out of traditional schools twice before arriving at Phoenix showing up every morning and doing the work, even when it’s frustrating.

We see the faces of graduates who never thought they’d make it through school walking across an auditorium stage proud and prepared. We hear the stories of alumni now enrolled in college who have come back to share inspiration with current Phoenix students.

Yet we have more work to do. As leaders, teachers, and students, we are always growing, and that is how it should be.

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