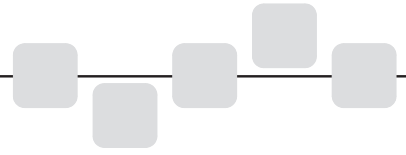


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CHAPTER ONE



# The Schools

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This book began out of our desire to document successful inclusive education in urban schools. We therefore sought to look deeply at practices within highly successful inclusive schools. We chose three Boston schools that fit our criteria: the Patrick O’Hearn Elementary School (O’Hearn; later renamed the William T. Henderson Elementary Inclusion School), the Samuel Mason Elementary School, and the Boston Arts Academy (BAA), a high school. After we began this study and began presenting our findings to various groups, we were informed by many suburban and rural educators that the lessons learned from these urban schools have applicability to their schools, so we augmented our studies with two suburban schools that appeared very similar in practice to the urban schools. In this chapter we give the reader a detailed picture of the three urban schools studied. We also encourage readers to enhance their understanding of these schools by viewing the YouTube video links provided.

## **PATRICK O’HEARN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

A “magical mix of teachers, parents, the students, and Bill Henderson” was how one parent described the William T. Henderson Elementary Inclusion School. The O’Hearn was a school known for educating students so effectively that parents who were eligible to enroll their children in the city’s elite exam schools chose rather to stay at the O’Hearn. It was a school known for its inclusive practices. Its principal, Dr. William Henderson, was so well respected that when he retired in 2009, the mayor of Boston proclaimed June 23 William Henderson Day and renamed the school the William T. Henderson Elementary Inclusion School.

We introduce this school by describing its 2007 annual African American history student performance, *Dare to Dream: Sharing African American History Through Storytelling*. The performers and the audience were a racially diverse mix of Black (likely some African American, Caribbean, and South American), Asian, and White. Among students, there was also diversity in disability; some students used wheelchairs, some had visible intellectual disabilities, some had Down syndrome, and there were many students with disabilities that were not visible. Disability at the O’Hearn was as typical an aspect of diversity as racial diversity. A parent of a student without a disability

explained, “The children there really end up learning about and caring for others, just the diversity of the world.”



The show included students reciting a twenty-minute Langston Hughes poem, students in a traditional African drumming circle, some dancing to the drums, tap dancers, and a performance of a play based on the African folk tale *Why Anansi Has Eight Thin Legs*, complete with the spider, the rabbit, and the monkey. Perhaps the loudest applause came when a student with a significant intellectual disability and limited verbal skills walked across stage, and in a low guttural voice sounding like the real Cab Calloway, belted out the words “Well, hello Dolly!” that Calloway was famous for. Those in the audience knew what an accomplishment this was for the child, and the already enthusiastic applause intensified for him.

The celebration culminated with all students on stage singing two gospel songs, and the audience clapping along with them. In the group, there was a White student with autism, eyes half-closed, shaking her hands in the air as if she were at a traditional Black church service, surrounded by her peers, many of whom are Black. She was belting out the songs, utterly out of tune. Also on stage was another girl with autism who had her fingers in her ears, and although she was not singing, she was standing next to her peers and swaying to the music with her classmates. These children did not stand out in this environment, because students with visible disabilities participate in all

school performances. This is a community that appears to know one another and is clearly comfortable across racial, class, and disability lines.

At the end of the show Dr. Henderson spoke to parents about how wonderful their children were and how proud he was of each of them, as well as his talented teachers and staff, calling them out by name. Mary, a teacher at the school, said that “one of the best things about Bill is that he knows the kids that need to be known. . . . On the first day of school, when he was naming specific kids in the school that everybody on the staff has to know and has to be able to help out and be aware of, for me, as a special ed teacher who has worked in a school where the principal doesn’t ever come to my classroom because I’m the special ed classroom, to have our principal talk about the kids that I will be teaching and caring about them that much, that’s one of my favorite things about him and about being at this school.”

To learn more about the Henderson, view the videos on YouTube, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), by entering William Henderson Inclusion School.

### **Looking Back with Pride**

Dr. Henderson has reason to be proud of his students and teachers. Since 1989, when he became the school’s principal, the O’Hearn had grown from an underperforming school with student vacancies to a school with a higher percentage of students with and without disabilities passing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in the fourth grade than the overall percentage of the Boston public schools.<sup>1</sup> Instead of vacancies, the school now has a waiting list of parents who want their children, those with and those without disabilities, to attend. Since 1989, the school has evolved from providing special education services in segregated settings, such as special education classes and resources rooms, to providing the overwhelming majority of their special education services in the general education classroom.

Mary, a parent of one child with a disability and one without a disability who both attended the O’Hearn, explained her appreciation for the school: “The children there really end up learning about [and] caring for others, just the diversity of the world. Not everybody’s on the same page and same level. And there’s been times when . . . my so-called typical [daughter] has gone

places and . . . people are really surprised [about] how she doesn't stare when she meets somebody. She can talk to any child, is not afraid. And they go, 'Wow.' And I'm like, 'She goes to the O'Hearn.'”

The O'Hearn is located in Dorchester, a section of Boston with a mix of African American, Irish, and Vietnamese residents. Most students were enrolled at the O'Hearn through a lottery process. Boston has a rather elaborate student assignment process in which parents were given a number of schools they could choose from, and each school is then subject to a lottery. The choice system gave preference to children with siblings who attended the school and whether the school was designated as the child's “walk” school preference.

During the 2004–2005 school year, the O'Hearn enrolled 221 students. Approximately 47 percent were African American, 28 percent White, 8 percent Asian, 6 percent multi-race, and 5 percent were Hispanic or Native American. (See Table B.5 in Appendix B.) Of this population of students, 34 percent received special education services, a percentage high above the national average of approximately 12 percent. The range of student disabilities was vast. The majority of students had milder and high-incidence disabilities, such as learning disabilities. There was also a population of students with more significant and low-incidence disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities, autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and students who were medically fragile.

Each classroom at the O'Hearn had two teachers, one certified in elementary education and the other in special education. With such a high percentage of students with disabilities in the school, Henderson was able to garner enough resources to make possible this staffing. Though there was also a paraprofessional assigned to each classroom, only one paraprofessional was assigned to work with one student, a boy who had brittle bone syndrome and required individual adult supervision to ensure his physical safety.

The only special education classroom at the O'Hearn was called the Baking Café, a room used collaboratively by the speech and language therapist and occupational therapist to work with students with significant intellectual disabilities to organize and run the school store, to deliver school supplies to classrooms, and to work on functional skills such as cooking. Aside from these activities, speech and language and occupational therapies occurred in the general education classroom.

The classrooms at the O’Hearn were brimming with activity. Teachers were in and out of each other’s classes, bringing suggestions, working with students, problem-solving students’ needs together. Similarly, students worked collaboratively with their teachers and their peers in the classroom. In one first grade class, students were preparing for a publishing party to which they invited family members and others in the school to show and read from the books they had created. Students were asked to choose one of their stories from the stack that they had written, go through the story to see if they could add more sentences, make sure that each sentence had a period, and make sure that their illustrations matched their words. Conversations between students about their books were serious. These first graders were asking each other detailed questions about their illustrations and how what they drew was in their story. They listened to each other read and asked specific questions about their stories. These six-year-olds took great pride in their work.

In another first grade class, students were read part of a story and were asked to turn to their partners to talk about how one of the characters was feeling. The teacher called this activity “accountable talk” because students were working to explain or to be accountable for their ideas. Once the story was completed, students broke into small groups to work on their reader’s workshop activities. “Letter Blocks” was an activity in which students were asked to use four letters on blocks to “mix it, fix it, check it.” Another activity was to work on a computer program that supplemented phonetic instruction. The third activity was to work in their guided reading groups run by each of the two teachers. In one of these groups, students were asked to write their names on a piece of paper. For the student in the group who could not write his name, there was a name stamp ready for his use. Accommodations like this were typical at the O’Hearn, and the school was a pilot school for the use of Kurzweil technology, a text-to-speech hardware, as an accommodation eligible for use with the MCAS.

### **A Parent Influences Federal Policy**

In 1994 I (Tom Hehir) visited the O’Hearn with then-Secretary of Education Richard Riley and Assistant Secretary Judy Heumann. Secretary Riley wanted

to see an inclusive school because inclusion was such a controversial issue. I told him about the O'Hearn and to my astonishment he said, "Let's go visit it."

After visiting classrooms we met with several parents of children with disabilities, who spoke about how their children had thrived in inclusive classrooms, developing communication skills, making friends, and achieving academically. One mother whose three non-disabled children attended the O'Hearn told us her oldest daughter had "tested for advanced classes" (referring to Boston's gifted program). When she and her husband visited the program that was housed in another school, they found that the students in the gifted program were doing lower-level work than her daughter was doing in her inclusive class. They decided to keep her at the O'Hearn, where "every child has an individualized program." She went on to say that even more important to her and husband was their kindergartner's experience: the little girl had asked for a wheelchair for Christmas because "some of her friends had them and she thought they were cool." Mom concluded, "That's exactly the kind of values we want our children to have!" Given that Secretary Riley mentioned this visit many times in subsequent years, I believe the experience contributed to his becoming such a powerful supporter of inclusive education.

We spoke to a parent at O'Hearn who had chosen the school for his children after learning that he and his wife were expecting a child with Down syndrome. He had transferred his older children without disabilities from a local Catholic school to the O'Hearn so that all his children would attend the same school. This anecdote not only illustrates how the assignment process works but also demonstrates the desire of many parents in Boston to have their children attend an effective inclusive school. One parent explained that she wanted her daughter there because she "wanted the fact that she had Down syndrome not to be such a big deal." The school was so highly regarded by parents that Bill Henderson has received the annual Martha Ziegler Founder's Award from the Federation for Children with Special Needs, the largest parent organization in the state. The demand for placement at the O'Hearn is so great that the central special education office assigns students to the school as a means of avoiding due process hearings. For instance, there



are children at the Henderson whose parents have not been able to obtain satisfactory inclusive placements in other schools and have exercised their rights under federal law to challenge the school district's proposed placement. In these instances the Boston Public Schools have offered the Henderson as a means to settle the dispute. Anthony, the child portrayed in the Preface, is an example of such a child.

The O'Hearn began changing from an underperforming school to what it is now in the spring of 1989, when, according to Bill Henderson, "there was a group of parents, led by the special needs parent advisory council, who demanded that there be an inclusive option for the system. And the system did develop a taskforce with central office folks, existing teachers, and parents." Henderson was a member of this group. As he explained, he was "involved in a lot of parent groups." He was also becoming blind, and he had been "promoting disability awareness in Boston." Henderson was hired August 19, "a few days after school had started for principals," to take over this school and develop inclusive practices for its September opening.

That first year, the O'Hearn enrolled eight students with significant disabilities in its two kindergarten classes, with four new teachers: two special education and two general education. The remaining teachers had the choice to stay or transfer out. Three people left. One who left was a special education resource room teacher. When asked by Henderson why he was leaving he said, "Well, you know, all the handicapped are coming." Henderson remembers saying to himself that he was glad he was leaving and explained that it went to "my premise that sometimes the biggest resistance for inclusion is not necessarily the general education educators. It's the special ed teachers who have been used to doing things in their own way, in their own room, not having to worry about the curriculum, not having to worry about, you know, following the same kind of schedule, and doing their own thing." The O'Hearn is now a school where teachers do not leave unless they are retiring, and getting a job there is close to impossible.

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*The O'Hearn is a school where teachers do not leave unless they are retiring, and getting a job there is close to impossible.*

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## **SAMUEL W. MASON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

The Samuel W. Mason Elementary School was, in the truest sense, a laboratory for learning. Evidence of student learning was everywhere. There was student work sitting on the table outside of the main office; it covered the walls that went up the stairs from the basement to the third floor. Teachers displayed student work on the walls in every classroom. Improving instructional practices was the theme at staff meetings. The Mason, named in 1990 by the *Boston Herald* as “the least chosen school in the city,” was, in 2005, a school that *Boston* magazine called one of the top elementary schools in Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup>

One way to introduce the Mason is to describe an observation in a classroom and another at a teachers’ instructional leadership team (ILT) meeting. In a fourth grade classroom, the walls were packed with student work, handwritten posters explaining many different academic and behavioral processes, a carpet, a beanbag chair, and many, many books. Students in the class were quietly working on personal letters. When students talked, they whispered. This quiet whispering did not appear tense or unusual, but rather evidence of intense work. Their teacher Karen walked around the class helping students, as did the full-time intern from the Boston Teacher Residency (BTR) program. At one point, a boy walked to the sample personal letter on the white board. He was obviously frustrated and was crying quietly. Karen walked to him and stood with him looking over his paper. She said, “I don’t think that you’ve

followed directions.” They moved closer to the example, looked at it together, and then looked back at his paper. She said to him kindly, but firmly, “This isn’t worth crying over.” She stayed with him and they began to work at the whiteboard. Together, they sat, and she stayed with him until he was able to continue independently. When she left his side, he was deep in the work.

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*The walls were packed with student work, handwritten posters explaining many different academic and behavioral processes, a carpet, a beanbag chair, and many, many books.*

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Moving and looking over the shoulders of students working, Karen again walked around the room until she noticed a girl in need of support. She took a stool, put it down next to the girl, and worked with her for a full ten minutes while all but one student in the class appeared to be on task. After some time, the BTR resident clapped his hands to gain students’ attention. Most students clapped after him, but not all. Seriously, but with a bit of a smile, he said, “Let’s do it again.” All students followed this time. “Let’s clean up and get ready for reading.” Several kids moaned, but these students were moaning at being asked to stop doing their work. The observation was a full period, and students were steeped completely in their work.

Teachers at the Mason, in fact at all three schools, spent a great deal of time developing their craft together. Weekly, teachers at the Mason met for two hours after school in meetings focused on literacy, the achievement gap, and assistive technology, and once a month, the ILT worked with staff on a variety of topics. This week, the agenda listed the meeting’s “desired outcomes” as “discuss[ing] concrete dilemmas we face in raising the level of accountable talk in our classrooms, following the Consultancy Protocol,” and “review[ing] math end-of-year assessment and MCAS data.”

What was most impressive about this staff meeting was the professionalism of the presenters, the sophistication of their activities, and the relevance of the work to the teachers and to the students. A fifth grade teacher facilitated one section with a review of math end-of-year assessments and MCAS data for the third through fifth grades. Bear in mind, in all three grades, the Mason outscored the district, and in the third and fourth grades, they outscored the state. Although there was acknowledgment of a job done well, this presentation

focused on improving their practice. Their analysis of the school's data revealed issues with their use of mathematical language. The facilitator builds this argument by providing example test items and an analysis that shows that the language on the assessment is different from the language in the mathematics program the district has adopted. This conclusion draws sighs of acknowledgment from the audience, but what draws sighs of relief is that the facilitator has developed a solution to address the issue. There are materials that have been developed at the district that help teachers align the language of the curriculum with the language of the state assessment. They decided that all math teachers will use these for ten minutes every day. This section of the meeting concluded with a discussion about setting up a workshop for parents on mathematics to better help them help their children at home. Teresa explained, "It's not even [just] holding high standards for the students, but we hold high standards for ourselves. . . . Most teachers are doing something, whether they're leading workshops or attending workshops, some are in other certification programs." Said one parent, "You can see the amount of work they do with their students. Hopefully there's an award or something out there for them."

### **A Gem Among the Warehouses**

The Mason is located in a desolate industrial area bordering Boston's hospital areas and the more residential but poor section of Roxbury. During the 2004–2005 school year, the Mason enrolled 208 students. As shown in Table B.5, more than 63 percent were African American, more than 25 percent Hispanic, nearly 8 percent White, and approximately 2 percent were classified as multi-race. Of this population of students, 20 percent received special education services, a percentage high above the national average of approximately 12 percent. The range of student disabilities was expansive. The majority had milder and high-incidence disabilities, such as learning disabilities. There was also a population of students with more significant and low-incidence disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities, autism, and developmental delays.

Student achievement, as measured by the MCAS, was impressive. The students at the Mason as a whole and the subgroup of students with disabilities who passed<sup>3</sup> the MCAS in English language arts and mathematics in the fourth grade was higher at the Mason than for the Boston public school district as a whole<sup>4</sup> and for the state of Massachusetts. (See Tables B.3 and B.4.)

Meera, a parent of a student without a disability, explained to us that she wanted her son at the Mason because it was inclusive, or what she called “integrated.” She explained, “Of the good schools that he would be eligible for, it was one that had integrated ed. . . . I heard [a] parent, actually the one I was telling you about, whose daughter goes to the O’Hearn, gave a very compelling argument for why integrated ed is . . . really great for a kid in a more holistic way. . . . Not just their learning, but . . . their humanity.” Each classroom teacher at the Mason carried both elementary and special education certifications. Each student at the Mason was enrolled in a general education classroom. There were certain special education services, such as speech and language and occupational therapy; however, the dually certified teacher in the general education class provided the bulk of special education services.

## **BOSTON ARTS ACADEMY**

The Boston Arts Academy is a public high school for the visual and performing arts. BAA opened in 1998 as a partnership between the Boston public schools and the ProArts Consortium, a collaboration of six Boston area higher learning institutions.<sup>5</sup> Students at BAA must audition in dance, visual arts, theatre, or music, and they are enrolled based on their proficiency or



their potential in one of these areas. Students' academic records are not taken into consideration during the auditions. As Linda Nathan explained, academically, "we don't know anything about the kids before they come." BAA consults academic records only after the school accepts the student. Given this, their 97 percent graduation record is even more impressive.

In addition to what is offered at the school by teachers fully immersed in the arts in all areas, opportunities from the art world at large find their way into BAA. Students have studied dance with highly acclaimed choreographer Bill T. Jones and members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, and they have hosted guest artists such as Yo-Yo Ma, Hugh Masekela, and Quincy Jones.

From 2004 to 2005, BAA enrolled 389 students. As shown in Table B.5, more than 40 percent were African American, approximately 30 percent were Hispanic, 20 percent White, and approximately 3 percent were classified as Asian or multi-race. BAA enrolled 12 percent students with disabilities, close to the national percentage. The range of students' disabilities was vast. There were students with high-incidence disabilities, such as learning disabilities. There were students who were deaf, students with emotional disturbance, and some with intellectual disabilities. As Tables B.1 and B.2 show, at BAA, the percentage of students with and without disabilities who passed the MCAS in English language arts and mathematics in the tenth grade was higher than they were for the Boston Public School District. Their scores, with the exception of students without disabilities' math scores, were also higher than those of the state of Massachusetts.

At BAA, there was a mixture of staffing configurations; in some classes there were two teachers, one special and one general education certified; in

To learn more about BAA, go to [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and search Boston Arts Academy for numerous videos of the school.

some classes there were general education teachers who co-taught; in some classes there was a teacher certified in both a general education subject and special education. The majority of general education staff at BAA were working toward special education certification in addition to their general education licenses in special education.

They were so committed to this that they offered the classes on-site. BAA had two co-headmasters, Linda Nathan and Carmen Torres, who shared the responsibilities for the school.

A walk through the hallways of BAA is a good place to begin to understand this school. BAA and Fenway High School share the same building that sits directly across the street from Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox. (Linda Nathan and Carmen Torres, the founders of BAA, also founded Fenway High School.) Students were talking, they were hugging, and their laughter was loud and infectious. The two security guards at the entrance were on a first-name basis with students and were equally as boisterous. Also in this mix was Linda Nathan. She greeted students, addressed them by name, asked them personal questions.

During the day and in between classes, the hallways continued to be places where students talked, hugged, and laughed. Students were not out of control, but rather extremely engaged. The hallways were a powerful indicator for many. One parent who had sent his child to a private school for elementary and high school and was willing to do so for high school explained that his experience with students in the hallway at BAA convinced him to send his son there: “What impressed me the most is the fact that kids, when you talk to them in the hallway . . . for a few moments, [they] say, ‘I’d really love to continue talking to you, but I really, really need to get to my next class.’ And it was their commitment, not that they were afraid, like, of being late, but that they wanted to get there to learn something. They were afraid to miss anything. It really convinced me that, hey, you know, this is a place that kids are dedicated. It’s not like most high schools I’d seen. So that for me was the deciding factor.”

Christa, a teacher in the music department, explains, “The energy . . . the loud [noise] in the hallway is about people wanting to get to each other, to share with each other, to be in each other’s space. . . . The dominant thing is, ‘I haven’t seen that person in fifteen minutes, and I want to give them a hug.’”

Students are required to pass vocal juries each year in order to be promoted and remain at BAA. In these juries, students must perform and be evaluated in front of their teachers. The first semester jury counts for 10 percent of the final technique grade, and the final jury counts for 40 percent. Outside the room of the final jury, there was a schedule, each student receiving fifteen minutes. Three students were waiting outside the door. One was reading, one explained to us that she was nervous, and one other talked excitedly but in a hushed tone to those walking by. All three young women were dressed in formal attire. Inside the jury room, students were rated as novice, competent,



proficient, or artist in areas of tone quality, intonation, rhythm, technique, interpretation, diction, stage habits, and sight reading. Each student was assessed singing two songs, one memorized and one piece that was read.

A young woman, Sonia, walked into the jury room wearing a very fancy dress with very high-heeled shoes that had fur around the ankles. Her memorized piece was “Amazing Grace”; her piece to read, a song in Italian. Sonia exuded confidence. Her voice was deep and strong, but she did have a difficult time in some places. During the Italian song, her voice cracked in places. Christa, her teacher, says to her, “You know it’s because you’re not breathing.” And next, “What are your plans this summer?” Sonia tells her that she’s going to be doing some work and she is looking to take classes to improve her singing. Christa says without question or hesitation, “You’re going to study with me this summer. It’s \$25 for the summer and \$5 every time you don’t come.” The girl at first looks perplexed and then understatedly excited. Christa goes on, “You’re fearless with your shoes; you need to be fearless with your singing. You had the best rhythm of anybody today.” Sonia leaves, looking a bit proud, with her summer planned differently than it had been ten minutes ago when she walked into the room.

The teachers at BAA worked in-depth with their students. Heather, a humanities teacher, explained how she had individual check-ins with each of her fifty students twice a week, for 10–15 minutes each. She explains, “It’s my job to learn how to teach all of my students.” Her check-ins ranged from working with students on comprehension to fluency to word attack skills. She credited her ability to understand these skills to the professional development at the school.

The teachers and administration at BAA are committed to working with all students, as their high graduation rate indicates. As Noel expressed, there is a tone in the school that “all kids can learn, and that if they’re not doing well we have to ask why.” Heather explained that they work hard to meet all of their students’ needs. “I think every year we get closer and closer at coming to the kind of services and the ways that we want to provide education to all of our kids. We get closer to that every year.”

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*“It’s my job to learn how to teach all of my students.”*

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## **INCLUSION AS A CENTRAL MISSION**

These schools were committed to a mission of educating all students to high academic standards in inclusive settings. They were deeply driven by this mission. While each school's statement was unique in its wording, each contained an inclusive message. O'Hearn stated, "Our students are from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and ability backgrounds. We are inclusive. . . . Our goal is to help students work at or above grade level or to achieve the objectives stipulated in individual education programs." Mason's written statement said that their school was a place where "students are taught in fully inclusive classrooms" with teachers "determined to present rigorous academics." BAA stated that they were "proud to be the first Boston Public School that has been named an inclusion high school," and "while all BAA students must pass the MCAS exam in language arts and mathematics, the staff sees their performance on this exam as only one very narrow measure of their academic achievement and growth." We wanted to understand their successes more deeply and understand whether these statements were merely text or were reflective of the schools' cultures and practices.

### **Teachers Support Inclusive Mission**

Teacher interviews quickly led us to understand the significant depth of commitment to the mission of teaching all students to high academic standards in inclusive settings. Teresa from the Mason explained, "Teachers as well as the administration hold really high standards for the kids, and understand that even though we do have special needs kids, standards shouldn't be lowered for them." At the O'Hearn, Samantha said that the "mantra" at her school "that's been inspired by [our principal was] . . . everyone accessing the curriculum at grade level. . . . So, everybody [is] participating in grade-level activities . . . to the best of their ability."

In addition to holding high academic standards, teachers deeply embraced the concept of an inclusive environment, welcoming students with disabilities in their classes but further understanding inclusive education in a broader sense than the traditional definition of students simply placed in a general education class. Participants described the inclusion of students with disabilities in their schools in the same terms that they described the inclusion of students from various racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Students

with disabilities were valued as an important and positive aspect of a diverse “democratic” institution. Karen explained, “We, the collective we, value diversity in everything; not just cultural diversity or racial diversity, but diversity in how we learn and diversity in economic factors.” Heather, inspired by critical pedagogy theorist Paulo Freire, described working to create a microcosm of the world that she wanted her students to experience. She said that within such a microcosm, students needed to find ways to embrace the differences in each other. She said, “It’s one of the Paulo Freire things. . . . Your classrooms are these microcosms of the world. . . . So . . . the point is what kind of world are we trying to create and that’s what you are going to create in your classroom. . . . If you somehow are creating a classroom

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*Students with disabilities were valued as an important and positive aspect of a diverse “democratic” institution.*

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where you said well, some people don’t belong in our classroom because they don’t have this kind of skill, or they’re not quote unquote normal in this way, then you’re saying . . . that’s how we should treat them . . . and

that’s not the message you want to say. What I want to say is that we are a society that . . . fully embraces . . . everyone.”

### **Mission Driven Leaders**

To the administration, their schools’ missions were a driving force that evolved as the schools matured. For Dr. William Henderson at the O’Hearn, the early focus on the mission had been on staff selection and developing school culture. He explained, “[We] fought very hard, select[ed] our teachers and our paras, and [made] sure we had people who bought into that commitment to inclusion, that vision. [We had] not totally defined what it was, because we [were] still evolving, but at least people were excited and enthusiastic and hopefully with some experience, too, and some ideas about wanting to be in a place where kids with disabilities [were] throughout the school. That was very important.” Henderson said that currently he believed that his school had successfully “committed to helping all kids,” but that no matter how far you have come, “you never arrive. You’re on the journey.”

Dr. Linda Nathan, co-headmaster of BAA, explained how her school had always embraced the concept of teaching high academic standards to all students in inclusive settings. In the beginning, their focus was “about moving from my kids, [to] your kids, to our kids.” Teachers worked to erase the separation between special and general educators’ responsibility for students with and without disabilities. Michelle, a school-level special education leader, explained that as BAA developed, the focus of their mission deepened to examining questions of a “common vision of teaching and learning” that included students with disabilities. She explained that they had evolved to focusing on how to “direct skill support well within every content area,” what she now thought of as “the real struggle of inclusion.” In fact, all the administrators understood that their missions required continual fine-tuning as their schools developed. Michelle explained, “Part of doing inclusion well is constantly asking, ‘What could we be doing better? Is this kid really being served? Is this structure really working? How could we take our resources and use them?’”

The missions focused clearly on providing an education for all students based on high academic standards in inclusive settings. In these schools, disability was considered a strength, a difference that served to benefit the school. Further, these educators thought of the students with disabilities as the “backbone of the school,” because if they attended to their needs effectively, “just think of how well everybody else is going to do who don’t need quite that much.”

The leaders, teachers, and parents in these schools moved toward this vision in a number of ways, one of which was through symbolic changes. For example, at the O’Hearn, there was a clay sculpture attached to the outside of the building that shows three students, one of whom used a wheelchair. Under this was written, “We Are All Special.” Publicly, the Mason announced that they only hired teachers who held dual certification in both elementary and special education. At BAA, virtually all written documents we read and many interviews we heard called attention to the fact that they were the “first inclusive high school in Boston.” One parent was exposed to this when she visited the school. “When I got there, I did see a girl in a wheelchair participating in dance classes. So yeah, [it] became very obvious to me very quickly that this was a school that if the kid has a passion for dance and they [could]

somehow perform in it, let them perform.” These symbols were important to creating the schools’ cultures. They said to those in and outside of the school that all students were included.

## TO SUM UP

- The schools highlighted in this study are all schools that serve highly diverse, primarily low-income students of color.
- The schools enroll students with a broad array of disabilities and educate them in mainstream environments.
- The schools are mission-driven environments in which the inclusion of students with disabilities is central.
- Students with disabilities are not only included but educators have created cultures in which meeting their needs has a broader impact on all students’ learning.

However, a focus on culture, no matter how essential, does not translate into an effective school where students learn and exhibit positive behaviors. The factors undergirding the success of these schools were much more complex than this. First among these was the extraordinary leadership provided by principals and teacher leaders in these buildings. These individuals were not only central to establishing the vision for these schools but also provided the conditions under which all children and families were welcomed and in which teachers could be successful providing challenging instruction to highly diverse groups of students. Chapter Two gives a profile of each of these leaders and details the actions they engaged in that appear most important to the schools’ success.