

## ***Focus on Children: Chris Coxon*** ***Boston Public Schools***

*By Robert H. Leos*

**F**ocus on Children is the unifying theme of the Boston Public Schools, serving over 57,000 students in 146 schools. Christopher Coxon, as Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, plays a prominent role in keeping the Boston Public Schools' school reform plan moving in the right direction. Mr. Coxon oversees a number of critical programs including professional development; special education; early childhood; language and support services; career and technical education; and curriculum and instructional practices. In addition to his full-time duties as Deputy Superintendent, Mr. Coxon is a doctoral candidate at Harvard's prestigious Urban Superintendents Program, a program that prepares educational leaders for the challenges facing many of America's largest school districts.

*Mr. Coxon took some time to discuss the successes of the Boston Public Schools, the factors contributing to the successes, and some of the leadership skills he feels are needed to move a school district such as the Boston Public Schools into the future.*

**RHL:** Boston Public Schools has a reputation for achieving success in student performance, integrating technology into the classroom, providing excellent after-school opportunities, and decreasing the drop-out rate. What are some of the factors that have contributed to this success?

**Chris Coxon:** At Boston Public Schools, we have been fortunate to have had a congruence of several factors. Dr. Tom Payzant, who just retired in 2006, had a very clear focus and understanding of how to move the district forward. He had, as a guiding principle, the need to impact all schools in the district, not just a few schools. He maintained a strong focus on instruction throughout his tenure as superintendent of the Boston Public Schools. This has been one of the keys to our successes.



*J. Christopher Coxon*

Another very important key to our success thus far has been the support of the mayor. Boston Public Schools actually operates as an arm of the city government. Mayor Menino has always said that he wants to be judged by the success of the Boston schools. He is committed to the schools and is in the schools every week, checking on progress. He's a very strong supporter of the district.

**RHL:** You mentioned that Boston Public Schools operates as an arm of the city government. What are some of the benefits of this arrangement?

**Chris Coxon:** The school district is a department within the Boston city government. This is helpful because we have the support of the city government structure. For example, our after-school program is successful because we can coordinate efforts with the parks department as well as the Youth and Family Services Department. In addition, we can coordinate efforts with other city departments, including the police department. All departments are represented at a common table, and with the leadership of the mayor and superintendent, we can put children first, during the day as well as after school.

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**RHL:** Student performance and general academic success of students are tightly associated with the quality of instruction that schools provide. What are some of the key ingredients of teaching and learning that you feel can keep a school district moving in the right direction?

**Chris Coxon:** With regard to quality instruction, several key factors have helped us continue to move forward. It began with a clear mandate to focus on literacy. In carrying out this mandate, we agreed to a common pedagogical approach called “Workshop Instruction.” It's called “Workshop Instruction” because this approach combines direct instruction with a constructivist approach. This type of instruction requires students to engage and talk about what they've learned and reflect on it in writing or orally. This is essential because there are so many English language learners in our schools. Even if students speak English as their native language many of them lack the appropriate English vocabulary to be successful in the classroom.

You can pick any one of the 146 schools in our district, walk into it, and see that the classroom lessons are set up in the same manner across the entire district. This approach assists us with our program evaluations as well as with our professional development program for new teachers. By following the same instructional model we can concentrate on content rather than delivery.

**RHL:** Professional development is another of your responsibilities in Boston. What are some of the major characteristics of Boston Public Schools' professional development model?

**Chris Coxon:** The professional development model we've adopted in Boston Public Schools is called Collaborative Coaching and Learning—CCL. We've found that it's the best way for teachers to learn their work. We felt that a one-on-one model wasn't bringing us the improvements we were looking for. CCL brings teachers together to discuss their work. Teams of teachers get together for six to eight weeks to learn how best to

engage students. Whatever the topic might be, CCL calls for in-depth research into the methodologies for teaching, followed by the teachers going into each other's classrooms—modeling lessons; discussing strategies; getting feedback; using examples of students' work so the students' work can serve as evidence of the success or lack thereof of the specific instructional approaches teachers learn and use. CCL is the process of bringing people together to review what works and what doesn't work—implementing new methodologies together and coming together to discuss how they work in the classroom. This has been the main professional development strategy in the district.

The Boston Public Schools have invested from seven to nine million dollars a year in the Collaborative Coaching and Learning model for professional development. We see the value in this approach and are committed to it.

**RHL:** Boston Public Schools' website cites "Whole School Improvement" as a major part of the comprehensive reform plan for the district. Tell us more about this reform plan.

**Chris Coxon:** The Boston Public Schools have been guided by the Focus on Children framework. Within the framework are the Six Essentials of Whole School Improvement. If schools are to improve, they must have these six essentials in order to do so. In our training we ask what these six essentials would look like in the schools; what they would look like in a classroom. We give examples of how the six essentials would look in a school and in a classroom. We ask how central administration can help with their implementation. The six essentials have become a key component of the principal evaluation process. These six essentials have served as a guide for whole school improvement which is a key component of Focus on Children, our framework for school reform.

**Boston Public Schools  
Six Essentials of Whole School Improvement**

1. Focus on literacy and mathematics.
2. Use student work and data to identify student needs, improve instruction and assess progress.
3. Focus professional development to offer teachers and principals the skills they need to improve instruction.
4. Identify and replicate best practices for instruction.
5. Align all resources with the instructional focus.
6. Engage families, community and partners to support Whole School Improvement.

<http://www.boston.k12.ma.us/>

**RHL:** As you complete your doctoral training at Harvard, you have the opportunity to apply your academic training in a real-life setting through your work with Boston Public Schools.

What are the some of the specific skills you feel are needed to manage and lead urban school districts in the United States today?

**Chris Coxon:** Personally, I have always had a strong vision and avocation for working with children, especially children who are underrepresented. I feel that successful leaders have learned how to execute their vision. Execution really means getting down to the nuts and bolts of the program; looking at barriers to success and developing plans to overcome each of them.

As a participant in Harvard University's Urban Superintendents Program, I've had the opportunity to meet many superintendents from school districts across the country. I've learned from many of the successful leaders that the key to success is to keep people moving forward and being clear on what you feel works in your district.

Learning from others is also important as is the need to be grounded in good instruction—what it looks like, what it takes to create it, and what will lead to the performance and outcomes we're looking for in our districts. Thinking outside of the box is always important as is the willingness to take risks on your initiatives.

**J. Chris Coxon  
Deputy Superintendent for  
Teaching and Learning  
Boston Public Schools**

Chris Coxon is the Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning in the Boston Public Schools. Prior to that he served as Instructional Leader in the district. Chris joined BPS in 2001 when he served as Superintendent Payzant's intern from the Urban Superintendents Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Before coming to Boston, Chris worked in Puerto Rico as an elementary school principal at the Antilles Consolidated School System (ACSS), a Department of Defense Education Activity school system. He has also served as the Director for School Improvement for the same district. Chris has served in a variety of elementary teaching positions within ACSS and the Dallas ISD, where he started his teaching career. Chris serves on the Technical Working Group of the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, is on the Board of Overseers of the Boston Children's Museum, and is the Chair of the Academic Division Advisory Council of the College Board's New England Region. Chris is supported by his wife, Virna and his three sons, Jonathan, Christian, and J. Emmanuel.

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