



CHELSEA AT TWENTY

TWO DECADES, SEVEN NEW SCHOOLS, AND MORE THAN 3,000 GRADUATES — DID BU'S BOLD EXPERIMENT IN URBAN SCHOOL REFORM SUCCEED?

DANIELLE CRUZ IS LIKE A LOT OF PEOPLE FROM CHELSEA, MASSACHUSETTS, a city of about 35,000 people packed into two square miles across the Mystic River from Boston. She's proud of her hometown's history and diversity, but she's aware of the stigma that poverty and low achievement have created.

Cruz is embarrassed to admit it, but during her undergraduate years at Brown University, she sometimes told new acquaintances that she was from Boston, rather than acknowledging her Chelsea roots.

"People make assumptions," says Cruz, who graduated from Chelsea High School in 1999 and is now a graduate student in film at Boston University's College of Communication.

By the time Cruz entered the public school system in the 1980s, Chelsea was in crisis. Fiscal mismanagement and corruption had brought local government to a standstill, and schools were underfunded, ill-equipped, and crumbling. Nearly half of all high school students failed to graduate in four years, and few aspired to college, let alone the Ivy League. The stereotypes that students like Cruz wanted to defy seemed more real every day.

But a bold decision in 1988 began to turn things around for this city. At the request of beleaguered Chelsea officials, Boston University agreed to manage the failing schools for ten years, an unprecedented — and as yet unduplicated — move by a private university. The management plan, known officially as the Boston University/Chelsea Partnership, called for sweeping changes in curricula, teacher training, school policies, and facilities. The goal: to make Chelsea schools "a model for excellence in urban education."

The partnership weathered early trouble, including hostility from some residents who felt BU was too heavy-handed, rampant corruption among Chelsea officials, and a citywide fiscal meltdown. As the years passed, however, residents developed a trust in BU's commitment, and the University stepped up its efforts to work collaboratively with school and community groups. Major reforms took hold, and the ten-year agreement was extended to twenty years.

Now, as the partnership is set to expire this June, the question of whether it created a model for educational excellence is a loaded one. The challenges of public education in a poor urban district with a transient population have proven harder to overcome than

the reformers anticipated. Still, Chelsea schools are much more effective and hopeful places today than they were twenty years ago. And it's fair to say that along the way, the students weren't the only ones to learn something.

A CITY IN CRISIS

The hillside above Chelsea's central business district is strung with dense blocks of row houses and washed-out triple-deckers. The city's busy main street is a commercial melting pot, with chains like Dunkin' Donuts and Payless Shoes next to a Vietnamese restaurant and karaoke club, a Caribbean grocer, and stores offering Spanish-language movies and music. Overhead looms the green steel expanse of the Tobin Bridge, connecting Boston and its northern suburbs.

Immigrant families get their start in Chelsea. The Europeans who arrived in previous centuries have given way to waves of Hispanic and Asian newcomers. After World War II, as the city's industrial economy began to crumble, crime and unemployment increased, and a massive fire in 1973 destroyed eighteen city blocks, accelerating the downturn.

By the late 1980s, more than a fifth of residents lived below the poverty line. Starved of tax revenue, the city's once-proud schools rapidly declined. Students scored far below their counterparts in other urban districts on standardized tests of basic reading and math skills. Only a quarter of the high school students took the SAT, and still fewer had plans to attend a four-year college.

When Chelsea officials came to BU seeking help, it was just the sort of challenge President John Silber (Hon.'95) was looking for. "We thought we could do it and we would do it," he says.

BY CHRIS BERDIK AND CALEB DANILOFF
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHLEEN DOOHER

“WE HAD TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING ON THE GROUND.”

—Douglas Sears, BU associate provost, former Chelsea school superintendent

EARLY ACHIEVEMENTS, VOCAL OPPOSITION

The Chelsea school committee approved a management contract in the summer of 1989, and the Massachusetts legislature passed a bill allowing BU to assume the duties of an elected school committee. Meanwhile, the city's school committee was relegated to an advisory role, but it could overturn any BU decision, with the exception of personnel matters, with a two-thirds vote and could dissolve the partnership outright with a simple majority.

As the partnership began, retroactively dated to 1988, it confronted problems that went well beyond poor test scores. Several of the city's turn-of-the-century school buildings were falling apart. Teachers lacked textbooks, supplies, and a standardized curriculum. Schools and administrators had no computers, and the superintendent managed the district's multimillion-dollar budget using a ledger he kept by hand.

Some improvements began almost immediately. In the first three years, the partnership secured computers for the schools and pay raises for teachers and created scholarships so that they could take professional development courses at BU. And School of Education faculty began helping to rewrite and standardize curricula at all grade levels, a long-term reform that BU spokesman Kevin Carleton (COM'82) says is overdue.

“Before the partnership, one fourth grade teacher might teach kids about Mesopotamia and another might teach them about Greece,” he says, “and then those children would end up together in fifth grade, and their new teacher could never be sure what they knew.”

In addition, BU staff, students, and alumni volunteered as tutors in Chelsea. The University also funded programs aimed at reducing the dropout rate and teaching parents and children to read together, as well as adult education and GED courses. The School of Public Health helped open a clinic in Chelsea High School, and the School of Dental Medicine provided free screenings.

CHELSEA'S OWN ASSESSMENT TEST

Between 1998 and 2007, passing scores for Chelsea's tenth graders on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test climbed from 19 percent to 42 percent in English and from 10 percent to 37 percent in math. Statewide, in 2007, 71 percent of tenth graders passed the English exam and 69 percent passed math. Among Chelsea's eighth graders in that same period, passing English scores jumped from 27 percent to 43 percent, and passing math scores rose from 11 percent to 17 percent. But statewide in 2007, 75 percent of eighth graders passed the English assessment and 45 percent passed math.

And while Chelsea does better compared with the state's twenty-three other urban districts, with some grades breaking into the top five on certain subject tests, the city more often ranks in the bottom five of these urban districts.

Still, Chelsea educators have many reasons to be optimistic about student achievement. For instance, in 2007, 81 percent of high school seniors planned to pursue postsecondary education, up from just 53 percent in 1989. The number of students taking Advanced Placement tests has risen from 42 in 1997 to 172 in 2007. There have also been significant gains in the lower grades. For example, the scores of third graders on the Iowa Literacy Tests have shot up about 75 percent in the past decade, besting national averages in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and spelling.

From the beginning, the arrangement had broad support in Chelsea, but also vocal opposition. The teachers union and a group of Hispanic residents each filed lawsuits over the partnership's legality, which the courts ultimately decided in the partnership's favor. Much of the initial discontent stemmed from a perception that the University had little patience for ideas and critiques from the community it had come to save. For instance, BU lobbied to exempt its management team from the state's open records and meetings laws. And some community activists, such as Gladys Vega, executive director of the nonprofit Chelsea Collaborative, believed that BU and the all-white school committee hadn't involved the Hispanic community as the management contract was being negotiated. “In the beginning there wasn't any reaching out,” she says. “The reaching out was ‘do it my way.’”

The hard feelings didn't stop there. Although an early BU study had praised “the diligence and commitment of the school staff,” many teachers felt that the management team held them in low esteem. “A lot of us felt blamed for the neglect of Chelsea schoolchildren, even though we did our solid best and were among the lowest paid teachers in the commonwealth,” recalls Michael Caulfield, a former head of the teachers union, who currently chairs the Chelsea School Committee.

Carleton, like many on the management team, believes that much of the local opposition was the media-magnified work of a few union leaders and activists. But he admits that the enormity of the challenges confronting the young partnership may have fueled BU's impatience.

“It was a system that was greatly in need of guidance, hand-holding, and leadership,” says Carleton. “There was so much that needed to be done so quickly that we threw a lot of firepower into the mix.”

As it turned out, the real explosion, one that almost killed the partnership, was still to come.

THE DARK DAYS

In the summer of 1991, facing a cash shortfall of more than 20 percent of its total budget, Chelsea declared bankruptcy. The state placed the city in receivership and removed the mayor. The school budget was slashed by 27 percent, a move that violated the partnership agreement, in which the city had promised to keep schools funded at or above 1989 levels.

BU could have walked away. Instead, the



Chelsea assistant superintendent Mary Bourque is a doctoral candidate at SED, studying one of the district's intractable problems: its highly mobile student population.

University pledged to continue the partnership. The decision was a turning point in its relationship with the city.

"Those were dark days, and they didn't have to stay here," says Guy Santagate (HON.'00), a former Chelsea city manager, who was then on the city's board of assessors. "But they stuck it out."

In the end, 50 of about 300 teaching positions were eliminated, along with school sports and physical education. BU established A Different September Foundation, which to date has raised more than \$12 million for Chelsea schools.

Meanwhile, the new scrutiny of Chelsea's finances uncovered a web of illegal activity — bribes in exchange for city contracts and gambling operations — that led to the conviction of three former mayors and

indictments of several other city officials. "As horrible as it all was," Carleton says, "there was significant housecleaning and a new ethic of conducting business." The city's old power structure had essentially collapsed.

THE CRITICAL WORK OF REFORM

Chelsea emerged from receivership in 1994 with a new charter that replaced the mayor with a city manager. Next came a move to stabilize the school district, which had had four superintendents since the start of the

partnership, slowing reform's momentum. In 1995, the management team appointed its chairman as superintendent: Douglas Sears, who later became dean of SED and is now an associate provost at the University.

Sears says his five-year tenure was all about the "unglamorous but critical work" of reviving a school system — improving special education, refining curriculum, and streamlining day-to-day operations, personnel, and record-keeping policies.

"We had to learn more about what was happening on the ground," says Sears, who often pedaled around Chelsea on his bike to check on the schools.

His tenure came on the heels of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, which upended school funding and accountability. The curriculum overhaul, teacher training, and standardized student assessments that BU had been pushing in Chelsea were now mandated statewide. Chelsea native Margo DiBiasio, assistant principal at the Early Learning Center, which was later named in Silber's honor, says the mandates dramatically altered the dynamic between the University and the district.

"There was no accountability and no high-stakes testing back in 1989," DiBiasio says. "So it did feel very top-down then, like BU was telling us we have to do this. But after education reform, it felt a lot different. Now, BU was coming in and saying, listen, we want to help you achieve these things."

But the biggest change was \$116 million in mostly state-funded school construction. When seven new schools opened in 1996 and 1997, it "gave people a sense of hope, a real sense that something was happening," says Cruz, the Chelsea High alum. The district grew from 3,400 students in 1989 to more than 5,500 students by the late 1990s as more families gained confidence in the city's schools. As the original ten-year contract drew to a close, city leaders lobbied BU to extend the partnership for five more years, and another five after that.

A MODEL OF URBAN SCHOOL REFORM?

Strollers are parked beside the front entrance of the four-story John Silber Early Learning Center, and inside, children's voices echo in hallways decorated with watercolor pumpkins and construction-paper snowmen. The center houses forty prekindergarten and kindergarten classes, and its administrators are on guard against parents from other towns faking a Chelsea address to get their kids on the waiting list.

A plaque by the front door pays tribute to the center's namesake, a sentiment echoed by DiBiasio and the center's principal, Jacqueline Bevere-Maloney, another Chelsea native and long-time educator.

"He had this vision of getting us all into



New schools gave students like Danielle Cruz, Chelsea High Class of 1999, a sense that reform was working. Cruz is now a graduate student at COM.

one building," says DiBiasio, "supporting each other, working together as a team to improve our programs, having common professional development tailored to best meet the needs of this age group."

Well before the center opened in 1997, Silber had pushed for the consolidation of Chelsea's early childhood programs, then spread throughout the district, and at a time when most communities offered only half-day programs, had insisted that some of them run all day. The investment in early education was a radical idea in a time of fiscal drought, but it has proven to be one of the partnership's most significant legacies.

"This city has an absolutely exemplary program of early education," says Chelsea's current school superintendent, Thomas Kingston, as he considers the question of whether the partnership has achieved its goal of creating a model for excellence in urban education.

Kingston also points to the new school buildings and to strong ties between the school district and the community in areas such as literacy interventions, tutoring, and services for students at risk of dropping out. "I'd also say," he continues, "that we are at a far different level of achievement than we were even ten years ago. Of course, we still have our challenges as an urban district."

Indeed, while students have made gains on state and national tests, Chelsea confronts the same achievement gaps faced by many other urban districts. For instance, progress on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test, required of all public school students since 1998, has been mixed. While the percentage of Chelsea students who score "proficient" or "advanced" on MCAS has

“WE’RE OUT IN THE FOREFRONT, WHERE PEOPLE ARE PAYING ATTENTION TO WHAT WE’RE DOING.” —Mary Bourque, Chelsea assistant superintendent

increased substantially, it often remains significantly below state averages.

“Chelsea has some achievements to celebrate,” says Paul Reville, chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education and the commonwealth’s newly appointed secretary of education. “But it seems clear that simply having a private university engaged with a district, however bold and well-intentioned that university is, can’t totally offset the challenges posed by poverty in a community.”

The majority of Chelsea students come from low-income families, and for about 80 percent, English is a second language. And perhaps the most intractable challenge is the city’s highly mobile population. According to Mary Bourque, a Chelsea native and the district’s assistant superintendent, about 30 percent of the city’s students enter or leave the district in an average year. All this coming and going, says Bourque, who has been studying student transience for her doctoral dissertation at SED, dilutes the effects of a Chelsea education on the district’s test scores. Every student must take the MCAS, she points out, even if the family moved to Chelsea from Guatemala or Vietnam in the middle of the school year. Given that kind of influx, she says, “we are exceeding our demography.”

Bourque adds that other districts have emulated Chelsea’s curricular improvements in areas such as science and English as a second language. “We’re out in the forefront, where people are paying attention to what we’re doing,” she says. “We’re viewed as the Little Engine That Could.”

Chelsea native Joseph Mullaney, who has been at Chelsea High for the past eleven years and is now interim principal, praises the district’s arts curriculum. “Some of our kids are very talented,” he says. “When we speak about what BU has done well, one of the things is retaining and expanding visual and performing arts. They really made that a focus. Where a lot of other systems are eliminating the arts, we’ve really tried to hang onto them, and I think it’s paid dividends.”

And Corey Viafore, a Chelsea High special needs teacher, says that although teacher salaries are still relatively low in the district, the partnership has ensured that both teachers and classrooms are well equipped.

“I know a lot of teachers in other districts who have to pay out of pocket for basic supplies, and I haven’t had to do that,” she says. “And we also have great technological resources for our kids.”

In the hallway outside Kingston’s office hangs a photograph of the newly elected school committee, inaugurated in January 2008. The committee is preparing to assume independent authority in June, although a loose relationship with BU will remain, including some scholarships and the dental clinic, tutors and student teachers from SED, and BU’s curriculum-driven enrichment programs.

The photograph includes some older members, among them Morrie Seigal, who began a thirty-five-year teaching career in Chelsea in 1947, and some younger ones, such as nineteen-year-old Melinda Alvarado-Vega, Gladys Vega’s daughter, serving her first term.

Looking forward to June, Alvarado-Vega is both nervous and confident. “There’s a lot of pressure,” she says. “Everybody has their eyes on Chelsea, and I think they’re expecting us to fail. But we won’t. Chelsea is going through a major transition, and I think the school system is the beginning.” ■

For more information on the BU/Chelsea Partnership, including a legislative report and performance indices, visit www.bu.edu/chelsea.

