



Community-Based Learning through Community Partnerships

Creating learning experiences that are relevant and meaningful to students is a core part of one Boston community school. Young Achievers Math and Science Pilot School (YA) is dedicated to creating a learning environment where students are empowered around social justice issues in their community. Originally founded by local African American and Latino community activists, YA has long embedded social justice and project-based learning in the fabric of its school culture. Recently, YA's leaders have focused on environmental themes. According to Lisa Rios, a YA science teacher, this project-based approach has been critical in teaching her students how to be both environmentally conscious and civically engaged. Rios says:

We're teaching our students to be agents of change. We're using these civic projects, sponsored by our partners, to bridge social justice and environmentalism. It's not just about teaching students how to learn. It's about teaching them how to be citizens, both in their local community and beyond.

Partnerships with community organizations are essential to YA's learning approach. Under a grant from the [Experiential Education Demonstration Project](#), an initiative to increase the school day and project-based learning in Massachusetts schools, YA and its partners provide their K-8 students with environmental curricula, investigations of the local community, and multi-disciplinary study units, including yearlong retreats, field trips, and research projects. These learning partnerships involve over fifty local organizations, including: Outward Bound, Boston Harbor National Park, Boston Nature Center, and the University of Massachusetts-Boston.

Project planning and implementation is run collaboratively between each grade level's teaching team and community partners. YA funds three staff members to facilitate this process. The Community Partner Coordinator works closely with two Experiential Education Coordinators in securing partnerships designated for YA's experiential education approach. According to Bo Hoppin, one of the Experiential Education Coordinators and the executive director of *Friends of Young Achievers* – a nonprofit that supports YA in bringing additional community resources to the school – using partnerships for learning perfectly aligns with the community school's mission. Hoppin says:

Young Achievers has over fifty different partner organizations that support the academic achievement of our students. Not only does this leverage vital community resources to achieve our school mission, but it also exposes our students to the broad array of people and organizations who are working to make their local community a better place.

At YA, each grade level's theme involves a field-based learning experience, and students are able to participate in a wide array of community-building activities. For example, seventh graders recently participated in a year-long science investigation at Thompson Island, in nearby Boston Harbor Islands National Park. Formed under the partnership between Friends of Young Achievers and the National Park Service, this student-led field research aimed to enrich their understanding of biodiversity in urban and rural environments. Throughout the year, seventh graders returned to Thompson Island to conduct comparative ecological studies, which concluded with a research symposium.

According to Rios, these research projects are enabling students to both study sophisticated science concepts and to think more critically about their environment. Rios explained:

When my students were researching biodiversity on Thompson Island and comparing urban ecosystems, they asked themselves, 'Who is affected by this problem? What does this mean at a community scale? And what does this mean at a global scale?' Then they start making the connection.

Rios also believes the values she's teaching her students go beyond measurable outcomes or indicators of success. "How do you measure something like social justice?" Rios asks. "You measure it by seeing that they're engaged. You see that they're being invested in their learning." Community-based, problem-solving learning through partnerships has made education come alive at YA; it connects students to their community and immerses them in the process of considering what makes a just society.