



Community Schools: B.F.O. (A Brilliant Flash of the Obvious)

Interview with Tom Brady, Superintendent, and Rebecca Boxx, Full Service Community Schools Director of Providence Public School District

"Normally, what you'll find in cities is that the school system's the school system, and everybody else is everybody else and you don't see a true attempt at the coordination and communication at first. The full service community schools model has allowed us to get administrators and curriculum writers and teachers aware of what we're trying to do and they become active participants rather than spectators."

-Tom Brady, Superintendent, Providence Public School District

Providence Public School District (PPSD) is not an atypical urban school district. Like many, PPCSD has high levels of poverty, which include students of different races and ethnicities. The school district has a total student population of about 23,600 students, in which sixty percent are Latino, 22 percent are Black, and 12 percent are White. In the elementary and middle schools, 80 percent of the students are eligible for free lunch, while 70 percent of high school students are eligible. With this backdrop, the school district had a need for a strategy to help turn around its low performing schools.

After only two years on the job, and seeing the strength of the community school strategy through the success of Providence's first pilot community school, Robert Bailey Elementary, Superintendent Brady wanted to make community schools the norm district-wide. Brady coined community schools as the "B.F.O.", or *Brilliant Flash of the Obvious*, and believes that by utilizing the community schools approach, school districts across the nation will be able to make a positive impact on urban education.

Superintendent Brady recognized that if he was serious about expanding the community school strategy district-wide, he would need strong leadership in the Central Office dedicated to PPCSD's community school work. In summer 2010 he hired Rebecca Boxx as the Full Service Community School Director, to focus on scaling up community schools across the district and working towards a sustainability strategy; making her the FSCS anchor inside the District. Brady stresses the importance of why the community schools strategy is what PPCSD needs,

The normal day beginning at 8 o'clock and ending at 2:30 is not going to be sufficient for the community and student achievement for our students. We need a structure, a coalition of organizations, to assist what we're trying to do with the school district because it's a bigger issue than public education.

Why Community Schools?

Upon arriving to PPSD, Brady witnessed the community strategy in full swing at Bailey Elementary School. In 2008, [Dorcas Place](#), a nonprofit organization in Providence, Rhode Island, received a five-year [Full Service Community Schools \(FSCS\) grant](#) of \$2.3 million from the U.S. Department of Education.

Rebecca Boxx, who at the time was the Family Literacy Director and became the FSCS Program Director, led this initiative. One of the 5 schools in the FSCS grant, Bailey Elementary School was Providence's pilot community school and was supported mostly by funds from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In 2009 Bailey showed high academic improvement, specifically, in reading. Third-graders went from scoring 27 percent proficiency in 2007 to 41 percent in 2009; fourth-graders jumped from 28 percent proficiency to 59 percent during the same period and fifth-graders moved from 12 percent proficiency to 39 percent. Math scores have seen similar gains. ([Click here](#) to read the news article which highlights the achievements of Bailey Elementary School). Superintendent Brady touts,

Bailey is our poster child and that's the perfect example of what we're trying to do and extend it to the other schools and then ultimately district wide.

As a result of PPSD's work with Annie E. Casey Foundation's [Making Connections program](#), Providence had a solid foundation for using the community school strategy. Boxx and her team used these existing partnerships to jump start their 2008 FSCS grant. Boxx noted,

Those partnerships had begun to be cultivated and we had looked at how we streamlined and integrated our programs at one focal school and then at other schools in our poorest and lowest performing neighborhoods in Providence. We were well poised to take this to the next level. Our philosophy was to look at it both as an opportunity to expand and be more comprehensive in programming and to get more strategic about the way we work with the schools.

PPSD is gradually deepening their community schools work through the intentional alignment and coordination of resources. Before Superintendent Brady arrived, Providence had a strong history of great afterschool programming as a result of [Providence After School Association's](#) (PASA) work, which served as a building block. Now they have taken that work to the next level by integrating this work into the school day. Intentional alignment and coordination often means a shift in the way people think. Brady notes,

A sailboat lesson becomes not just a sailboat lesson, but an integration of what they've done in mathematics and science. And they're learning and they don't even know it. You need to make a conscious effort to break down those walls and make sure that the work reinforces one another so what happens during the day is reinforced at the beginning of the day and the end of the day.

This alignment and coordination is part of what contributed to Bailey's success and has piqued the interest of other schools in the district who want to begin using the community schools strategy. These schools are beginning to understand that with more supports for their students and families, they can produce positive outcomes.

Elements of Success in Providence Public School District

The success of Bailey Elementary Community School is grounded in three essential areas: leadership, culture, and engagement. Both Boxx and Brady explained that **leadership at the school level, district level, and throughout the city matters**. Superintendent Brady stresses that having key leaders engaged from the onset is critical to bringing the community school strategy to the forefront in Providence. He shared that a case needs to be made to business leaders, who are important stakeholders, that this strategy really works and that it is beneficial to everyone in a community because of the possible long-term consequences. Brady notes,

We need to continually be a sales person. You can do a cost benefit analysis and do a business model that shows the investment in a Pre-k program. For example, if we invest \$5000 we can achieve 3rd grade reading levels for 3rd graders, then we can avoid the \$125,000 it will inevitably take for the high school dropout to be incarcerated.

Along with strong leadership, you really need to assess the **culture of the community**. Is there a “communal” culture, or do folks work in silos? Boxx notes that a cultural shift can really only take hold when top leadership (i.e. Superintendents and other agency leaders) support the community school strategy. Boxx reflects,

You have to start out with your top level support and have the will to be able to call in the big guns when you need the fires put out. The culture within Providence Public School District has undergone a significant change in the past two years so that the will is now there to look at community relationships and how we maximize them to achieve results for kids and families. There is also an understanding that schools are not run in isolation [and that everyone needs to be involved and be a partner in educating children].

Essential to the community school strategy is the **engagement of school staff, families, and the community**. Superintendent Brady explained his vision of family engagement by sharing a story about attending a graduation ceremony for 124 parents who had completed a family literacy program during the summer. Touched by the ceremony, he shared the depth of that particular moment,

Seeing those parents, with their children, felt as if I were looking into the future. They were holding in their laps the next generation of high school and college graduates and what a better way to get involved and so that’s the type of impact that full-service community schools can bring as opposed to just the normal school district.

School staff must also be deeply involved in bringing the community school strategy to reality. At the inception of the community schools in Providence, school staff participated in brainstorming what their school would “look like” as a community school. Superintendent Brady further stressed that in engaging leadership, school staff, family, partners, and community – you must have trust. He said,

You have to build trust, and it's not overnight, and I think that the key issue is the constant explanation and trust building. And then, it's like a B.F.O. (*Brilliant Flash of the Obvious*). The light bulbs go on and everybody goes, 'Oh hey, look at that!' and they actually become a part of it.

Achieving the “B.F.O.”

It is clear that both Boxx and Brady are deeply committed to the community school strategy. PPSD realizes that educating our children goes beyond just academics – albeit central. Understanding the conditions that our students, families, and community members are surrounded by and that they experience on a daily basis, is part of the foundation for having a positive impact on their lives. The community school strategy provides a vehicle for not only helping our students succeed academically, but also strengthening the communities in which they live. Superintendent Brady reflected,

[If we] ignore the conditions that surround our students, it does no good. The only viable solution I can see now is partnering with the organizations in the community that will have an impact. This economy is horrible, so I can't guarantee success, but I know that if we get beyond rhetoric and we actually want to make a difference that this [community schools] is a very good way to begin that, making a difference.

Boxx will work to ensure that there is **accountability at all levels** in PPSD's community school expansion strategy. Also, central to Boxx's role is streamlining the sharing of data. She understands the need to collect data and effectively communicate it to all of the key stakeholders, if PPSD wants to truly make an impact on the lives of their students.

Two new accountability structures: Mayor's Children and Youth Cabinet and PPSD's Full Service Community School Advisory Board will help ground Boxx's work. The Mayor's Children and Youth Cabinet is comprised of the Providence's Promise Neighborhood initiative, the Mayor's office, core partners in the FSCS initiative, and PASA. Mayor's Children and Youth Cabinet is currently focusing on integrating data systems across institutions and agencies to ensure greater accountability and impact for Providence's children and families.

The Internal Advisory Board was created to bring together PPSD departments in an effort to better align their work with community partners. It also helps give everyone a common understanding of the operational piece within PPSD. Currently, board members include: Superintendent Brady, Chief Academic Officer - Dr. Sharon Contreras, and PPSD's Operational Directors (i.e., literary specialists, head of health, etc.). Internally, there is a coalescing around the differences amongst the partners, but the conversation is centered on schools and communities. Boxx sees both the Children and Youth Cabinet and Internal Advisory Board as critical components of ensuring accountability. In looking ahead to deepening the systems that support community schools, she noted,

Part of my aspiration is to get to the next level and look at how our Internal Advisory Board aligns with the boards of all of our partnering organizations, and how we create a stronger and tighter protocol that doesn't necessarily depend on people. We have seen massive transition and will continue to see massive transition in the coming year, so we need structures and systems in place to survive that.

Essential to the success of this initiative moving forward will be the leadership of Boxx's former agency, Dorcas Place, in the development and coordination of community-based services. Carol Holmquist was recently named the President of Dorcas Place and has already demonstrated clear vision and leadership as the lead community agency in this initiative. In addition to strong community leadership, PPSD is fortunate to have a passionate leader in Superintendent Tom Brady who understands what is needed to turn around a school and an entire community. The Coalition for Community Schools applauds PPSD and city of Providence, for taking the lead in the growing community schools' movement and looks forward to sharing the Brilliant Flash of the Obvious with school districts across the country.

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