

Beacon Charter High School for the Arts

Evaluation of PBGR Implementation

Abstract

Independent reviewer Ron Millican (Brown University Education Alliance, ret.) met with students, faculty, and administrators of the Beacon Charter High School for the Arts during its spring 2008 session. Mr. Millican identified seven key areas of the Rhode Island Performance-Based Graduation Requirements (PBGR) for evaluation. His report gives an overview of the school's progress and examines the seven selected areas of implementation. The reviewer also commends the research-based administrative practices and the leadership capacity of all staff and faculty for the success of Beacon's implementation of PBGR and makes recommendations for continued progress and success.

Methodology

The reviewer's methodology includes three components: planning and data gathering; data analysis; and a summative analysis, as follows:

Evaluation planning & data gathering

- Interview staff and faculty; interview students (early 2008)
- Conduct three student focus groups (3 sessions during early 2008)
- Observe and visit classrooms

Data analysis

- Align analysis to elements of Beacon's PBGR implementation plan
- Identify strengths and needs based on the data analysis

Summative analysis

- Evaluate overall implementation of Beacon's PBGR plan (progress to date)
- Make recommendations and comments

Data Analysis

The following seven tables align key components of the Beacon PBGR implementation plan with evidence of implementation and/or progress in teaching and learning. Each table also includes related comments/recommendations by the reviewer.

1. Advisory

Beacon PBGR

implementation plan

Students need to be known well by at least one adult in secondary school. Advisors are a very effective way for an adult to build a relationship with a student.

Advisories serve as key support for Individual Graduation Plans: Upon admission, the student and their advisor determine a student's interests and passions and jointly map a plan that will help them succeed in meeting the goals that lead to graduating on time.

Progress in teaching and learning/Evidence of implementation

Advisors serve as mentors with the same students for four years. Advisory meets daily and a student can meet more often with their advisor if needed. Once a month the advisor, student and individual teachers have an opportunity to meet together.

Early in the freshman year, advisors help students develop their Individual Graduation Plan. The IGP charts a student's courses, activities and achievements while at Beacon. It serves as a map for the student, parents, advisor and administrators over the course of the student's enrollment.

Ninth Grade focus group: "...Like smallness, friendly atmosphere, nice teachers who go the extra mile and connect with students, freedom, real community, better than expected, for some of us the only place we could fit in, no one is considered an outsider, look forward to coming to school in the morning." (Eight students replied they would have dropped out of school if not for Beacon; no one planned to transfer next year; all planned to go to college).

Reviewer's recommendations and comments

Beacon students are fortunate to have advisors who care for them and who are there to help them when the road becomes a little bumpy. The Beacon objective of working toward a student feeling confident that they can confide in a teacher is an excellent goal. When accomplished, the advisor then becomes the early warning system for a student with issues they need to discuss with an adult other than their parent. The Beacon advisory system is an excellent personalization tool that should pay substantial benefits for students during each school year. Advisors become a critical link to all the student's teachers and source of information for parents. Ideally, parents should feel comfortable in having the advisor as a primary contact person if and when day to day issues arise. Advisors become the messenger of positive news as well as alerting parents to issues with which the student needs extra assistance.

2. Curriculum, Instruction, & Rubrics

Beacon PBGR implementation plan

Progress in teaching and learning/Evidence of implementation

Block scheduling

Three-block courses per semester

Students complete most work during block or finish at home with extra credit available

Interdisciplinary instruction with multi curriculum interdisciplinary assignments, and subject relevance to real word experience

Interdisciplinary instruction with team teaching and interdisciplinary curriculum is evident in all subject areas

Teachers use Essential Questions in classroom instruction

See Table 6, Visual, Theatre and Culinary Arts, for additional real world connections

Emphasis on classroom projects

An emphasis to hands-on projects and skill based assignments is evident throughout the faculty.

MLA format requirements

Use of MLA format for all written work

Multiple forms of instruction

Text books are used as one of many possible resources. Primary source documents are incorporated when possible in order to give a variety of different perspectives to the material covered. As many text books are not always current, use of other readily available media is evident in many classes. Students are given the advantage of reviewing different and current points of view on subjects relevant to their lives and discussing openly their ideas with classmates and faculty. Outside speakers are invited to the school from the surrounding community to give students exposure to role models from whom they can learn and benefit.

In depth projects leading to teaching of thinking, connections to student's past and present life

Wide availability and use of graphic organizers

Teachers working one-on-one with students

Numerous observations of teachers working individually with students, including literacy coach

Personal learning plans

PLPs for all students requiring more academic assistance

Research required in all courses	Emphasis on writing, in depth research, and oral and visual communication from the ninth grade forward Art history courses require a research paper
Small classes	Classes normally small and never more than 15
Students working in small groups	Most classes have students working in small groups
Peer editing	Peer editing of all written assignments
Teacher Common Planning Time	Teachers and administrators at Beacon currently meet for Common Planning Time once a week after school
Team Teaching	Team teaching occurs when possible and takes advantage of the artists in residence

Every student needs to know what is expected of them in class, how they will be assessed for their work and time tables of assignment delivery.

The extensive rubrics produced by the Beacon faculty use easily understandable detail and guide students, parents and administrators as to what is expected during a course

Multiple forms of assessment encouraged by administration and senior teachers. Assessments are varied in order to give all students the opportunity to display their understanding of the material

Multiple forms of assessment

A variety of assessment techniques are used from traditional testing to research based projects to oral assessments that culminate in the senior Capstone Project

With tests counting 30% of final course grade, students who do not do well on written assessments can still succeed

Realistic homework assignments that encourage rather than discourage students

Ninth Grade focus group suggestions: "Redesign the academic rubrics, offer night classes, no more than one major test or project due on the same day (7 reported three or more on the same day) amount of homework is fine and manageable, improve quality of food".

Tenth Grade focus group: "Like one on one with teachers, family oriented, feel loved by one another, smallness, can just be yourself without being judged, understanding teachers, friendly and not stressful, block scheduling helps us get work done at school, helps me succeed, teachers tie curriculum together".

Tenth Grade focus group suggestions: "Make it harder to get into Beacon and have to show a portfolio of previous work, a little more homework, hire a certified guidance counselor, more after school

activities, be able to choose all your classes, more involved with the community, have a library, no multiple tests on the same day, add music courses, improve the food”.

Eleventh Grade focus group: “Encourages students to do better, smaller classes, closeness like a family, easy to interact with faculty, close bonding between students and teachers, support from other students, teachers are fair and help you succeed, no fighting, students get to know each other well, art across the curriculum makes learning more interesting and fun, seven students would have dropped out of school if not at Beacon, no one wants to transfer, less stress about applying to college”.

Eleventh Grade focus group suggestions: “. . .more intense research papers, lower class size, too many ninth graders accepted.”

Reviewer’s recommendations and comments

The Block Scheduling at Beacon is designed to allow students to take fewer courses at a time. By seeking depth over breadth, students of all abilities have a greater opportunity to grasp information in a more meaningful and sustainable way and to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. Blocks when used properly prove the educational philosophy of “Only tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember the idea, involve me and I will have a lasting understanding of the material and concepts involved”.

The Academic Dean successfully carries out the task of insuring the curriculum is challenging for all learning styles and engaging in a way that all students will become motivated to succeed. His role with new and seasoned teachers is to make sure that instruction is fresh and meeting the philosophy of the school. If not, he pairs a teacher with a mentor who will guide them in the most constructive and least intimidating way possible. Within this environment, students during focus groups readily point out these qualities of both administrators and teachers.

The instruction techniques of the faculty as a whole are aligned with the PBGR guidelines. Teachers demonstrate the ability to vary instruction to meet the learning styles of all students. Subject matter is focused on developing life-long skills in research and writing that will help students to become problem solvers and critical thinkers. For the teachers who arrive at Beacon with an emphasis of covering content versus developing life-long skills, there is exposure to more creative teaching techniques practiced by their fellow teachers.

Common planning time for teachers is one of the most critical structures in successful schools. Generally it is the only time teachers have in the school day to discuss with each other a myriad of ideas, teaching strategies that work or not, individual students who need extra care and attention etc. These discussions highlight what motivates a student to do well. If possible, Beacon administrators and advisors need to find a way to increase common planning time for all faculty members.

In some classrooms, a greater emphasis is needed during each class on the practical and long term relevance of the day’s curriculum.

