

Julia Steiny: Woonsocket charter school turned adversity to opportunity

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When the Beacon Charter High School in Woonsocket opened for its fall semester in 2005, it was really broke. Regular Rhode Island school districts might whine about being cash-strapped — and with good reason — but district kids have buildings to go to and enough money in the bank to meet payroll. At Beacon such standard fare as a field trip was an insane extravagance.

Like a strong family weathering lean times with love and a diet of mac and cheese, Beacon got through that year making each adversity a learning-and-growing experience for students and teachers alike. The school is thriving now, but only after suffering a near-death experience.

The story begins when Beacon first opened, in the fall of 2003. The people who'd originally gotten the charter couldn't attract enough students to justify the size of their staff, so in only two years of operation, Beacon accumulated a \$437,000 debt.

Furthermore, that original group hadn't solved the problem of getting a permanent building, normally the largest financial challenge of charter schools. The school's prospects were grim.

At the end of that second year, the Rhode Island regents were forced to make a special appropriation to pay off part of Beacon's outstanding debt. Since the charter schools are generally urban Rhode Island's most successful schools, the regents were loath to rescind the charter. But at the end of the summer, they did. (In the foyer of Beacon's new home is a framed newspaper headline declaring: "Beacon Closed.")

Behind the scenes, however, Johnson & Wales University was considering becoming the school's new sponsor. Beacon had been and is still an arts-focused school with three divisions — visual, performing and culinary arts — so J&W's expertise in culinary arts made them an especially appropriate partner. Clifton Boyle, J&W's liaison to Beacon, explains that the university accepted the sponsorship of Beacon because J&W's mission and curriculum

expect participation in community service from students and faculty alike. But while their professionals would help with management, curriculum and finance, the university would invest zero dollars. Beacon was on its own to make ends meet.

Still, the charter is alive today thanks to Johnson & Wales.

The university's first act was to hire Robert Pilkington, arguably Rhode Island's most knowledgeable charter-school advocate. He coauthored the state's first charter application, for Textron/Chamber, and served as one of its administrators until taking on the Beacon rescue. Boyle credits Pilkington with turning Beacon around.

Various agencies, including the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts and the City of Woonsocket, helped to pay down Beacon's debt, but as his first year wore on, Pilkington continued to uncover more money problems.

So on Day One of the 2005 fall semester, Pilkington needed to close the remaining \$157,000 hole in the budget, find a new building for a permanent home, oversee its renovation, recruit students, fill vacant faculty positions, and lead a staff responsible for educating 115 students, with virtually no resources. Charters must survive on their home district's per-pupil expenditure — \$9,798 in low-income Woonsocket — without any extra for special-needs students. All charters have special-needs students.

To save money, the previous management decided that since the non-unionized faculty did not have to pay union dues, their salaries would be cut by the \$1,000 that would have gone to dues. Pilkington restored that money to his teachers — partly because it was only fair, and partly because he needed his faculty's whole-hearted help just to survive the year. He got it. For example, behind closed doors and without him, the teachers decided they could not function without weekly faculty meetings, for which there is no time available in Rhode Island's short, regular school day. The teachers agreed to meet on Wednesday afternoons, without additional compensation.

Pilkington chokes up just telling me the story.

So, what about the field trips?

Roughly 60 percent of Beacon's population comes from Woonsocket proper. The rest come from the northern Rhode Island districts, most of which are well-heeled — Lincoln, Cumberland, Smithfield. Those kids' friends were getting field trips; why couldn't they?

Pilkington says, "It was pretty hard for me to go out to the community and say, hey, we just emerged from bankruptcy and we're still broke, so how about giving us some money?" The faculty had the idea that they could turn the desire for field trips into a teachable moment — and postpone spending money — by having the kids apply for grants from the school's board, who cobbled together a little money for the purpose. Pilkington says, "We teach our kids how to manage income, do accounting, check-writing, etc., but in my life most artists I see survive on grants. We need to teach the kids how to write for grants."

They downloaded and modified a grant application from the state arts council. Each of the school's advisories filled out an application explaining the educational rationale, objectives and budget for the field trip they wanted. Pilkington crows, "That project crystalized teamwork, applied learning, communicating your goals to others, in short, skills essential to survival as an artist."

Board members judged the merits of the applications and awarded all the kids some sort of instructive trip. The regular advisory curriculum now includes grant-writing.

With just such inventively frugal measures, the school managed to retire the debt at the year's end. Now permanently housed in a newly renovated building, the school is classified by the state as "moderately performing," — an excellent result for that difficult year.

The right people, making their own collective decisions about every aspect of a school, can bring out the best and most creative in administrators, faculty and students. Regular district schools would be wise to operate more like autonomous — but well-sponsored — charter schools.

We'll have more on Beacon next week.

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