

MASSACHUSETTS CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS BEST PRACTICES USING DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN HOLYOKE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Holyoke Community Charter School (HCCS) provides high quality educational opportunities to students and families in a city where such opportunities are not widely available. A long waitlist, high lottery subscription, and low attrition rate are all evidence of community demand for the school. Student outcomes that surpass the district of Holyoke attract parents and help to put students on the path to college success.

Despite its success, HCCS has been the target of charter critics because of its association with the for-profit educational management organization SABIS. Most critics are focused on the organization's worldwide presence and for-profit status. They are unable to describe the SABIS approach or the extent to which it enables students to succeed. They also have limited or inaccurate information about why schools would choose SABIS.

The following paper shines a light on Holyoke Community Charter School and the SABIS-designed systems that the school uses; systems that relate to curriculum, assessments, and the gathering of school level data pertaining to both. Drawing upon school- and state-generated data and interviews with HCCS students and faculty, this cases study describes how SABIS's integrated approach to curriculum, assessment, and data-driven instruction engages students in a way that encourages them to take ownership of their own learning—something rarely seen in schools, especially at the K-8 level.

INTRODUCTION

Even in Massachusetts—regarded as having the best charter schools in the nation—not all of them succeed. When charters fail students, the Commonwealth’s sophisticated evaluation and accountability system ensures that they are closed. Ironically, low-performing charters rarely attract controversy. Charter opponents prefer to criticize the best charters, which pose the biggest threat to the status quo. In recent years charter critics have targeted schools operated by SABIS, a for-profit international educational management organization.¹

Critics see SABIS as a symbol of the privatization of public education; the idea of a for-profit business model for education, offends some “local sensibilities.” SABIS contends that four charter applications with which it was affiliated have been denied in part because of these sentiments.² Nonetheless, the Commonwealth has approved three charter schools that contract with the EMO—in Springfield, Holyoke, and Lowell—and those schools have quietly enabled students to achieve at high levels, even as the public debates the merits of their boards’ decisions to contract with SABIS.

Students in all three SABIS-operated Massachusetts charter schools outperform their district counterparts on MCAS and other standardized tests of student achievement.³ The methods these schools use to produce such results are clearly prescribed by SABIS, which provides them with everything from a detailed curriculum aligned to state and local needs to textbooks and financial management services.

This does not mean, however, that these schools are replicas of one another or ‘cookie cutter’ versions of any of the other 59 schools serving 70,000 students that SABIS operates around the world (15 of which are in the U.S.).⁴ They serve different student populations (though all are mainly low-income and minority)⁵ and have their own distinct missions and visions for their students and communities. Perhaps the most

important thing that these schools share is a set of best practices for education that SABIS helps them implement. Chief among those practices is the frequent and targeted use of student assessments and the data they yield; all three SABIS schools consistently and intentionally use data to inform how teachers instruct and how students learn.

This paper is a case study of one charter school that contracts with SABIS, the Holyoke Community Charter School (HCCS) in Holyoke, MA. It focuses on why the school chose the SABIS model and how a critical component of that model, data-driven instruction, enables students to achieve. Drawing upon school documents, observations, and interviews with faculty, staff, and students, the aim of this case study is to shine a light on an educational model that has proven effective for students time and again but remains largely unknown to and misunderstood by the general public.

HOLYOKE COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOL AND SABIS: BACKGROUND

In his 2012 book about and commissioned by SABIS, highly-regarded professor and author James Tooley describes the difficulties that SABIS-affiliated charter schools have encountered with the authorization process in Massachusetts. After detailing the weak arguments and scanty evidence upon which at least two SABIS charter applications were denied, Tooley describes what he calls the “mythology built up against charter schools in general, and those run by for-profit companies like SABIS in particular.” This mythology, as Tooley sees it, goes:

They get the glowing results they do not only because, first, they cream the crop of students, taking only the best. Secondly, they are ruthless, expelling students at the drop of a hat for any misdemeanor; with only the best students left, their results are a shoe-in. Furthermore, because a company like SABIS is a for-profit, it won't be concerned about individual children's welfare; the profit motive will make it uncaring.⁶

Studies refute the ‘creaming’ argument that critics continue to launch against high-performing charters.⁷ Lottery, enrollment and attrition data at the Holyoke Community Charter School (HCCS) in Holyoke, MA also disprove the idea that this school, in particular, ‘cherry-picks’ and/or pushes students out. As of March 2015, the school, which serves students in kindergarten through grade 8, had a wait list of 574 students.⁸ In this same school year, HCCS retained over 93 percent of its students, better than the statewide average in all public schools, both charter and traditional.⁹ Creaming is not a problem at HCCS. In fact, the problem is quite the opposite: although the school holds a lottery every year, few students enter after kindergarten because so few leave the school once they have secured a seat.

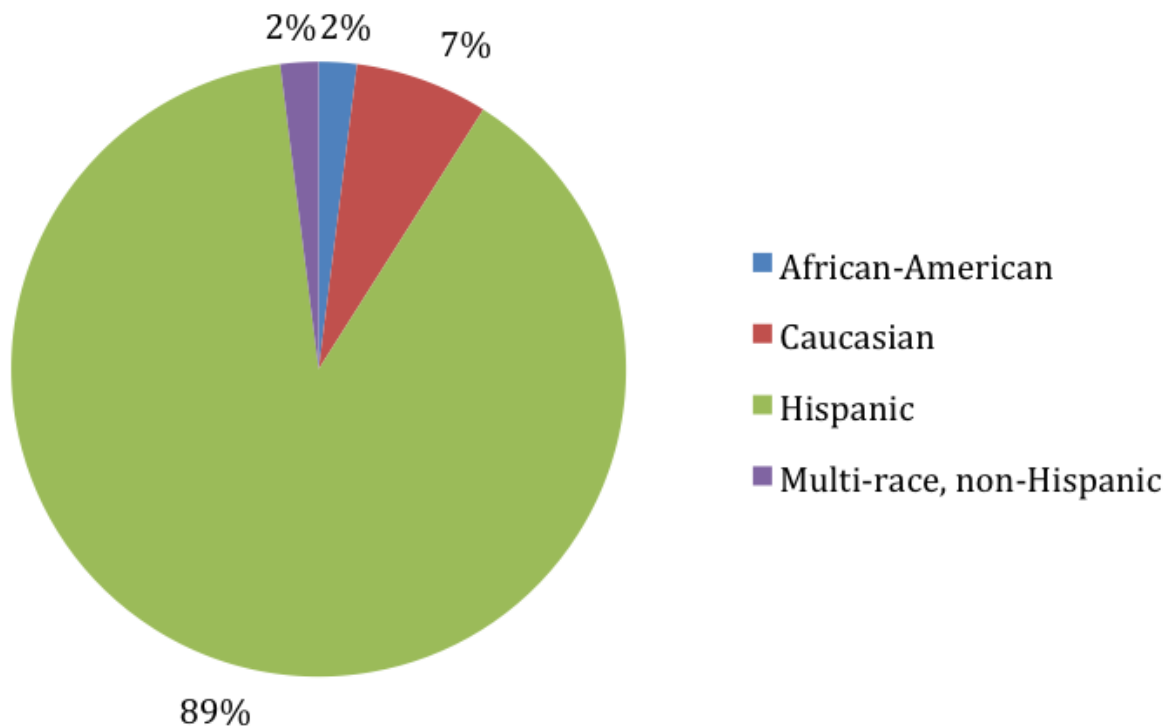
Another aspect of what Tooley has termed the SABIS/charter schools mythology is that these schools are uncaring. This charge, unlike ‘creaming,’ is difficult to disprove with

data. However, much has been written in recent decades about the importance of school culture and the extent to which an outsider can make valid assumptions about the nature of a school just by spending time there. According to researchers like Charles Glenn and Peter Mortimore, a lot can be gleaned from the “atmosphere” of a school. Glenn points out that how a school “feels” is one of the primary factors parents use when making decisions about where to enroll their children.¹¹

To this author, the feel of HCCS is anything but uncaring. From the outside, the HCCS school building doesn’t look like much. Like many charters, the facility is located in an old strip mall, just blocks away from a much newer looking traditional public school, William J. Dean Vocational Technical High School.¹²

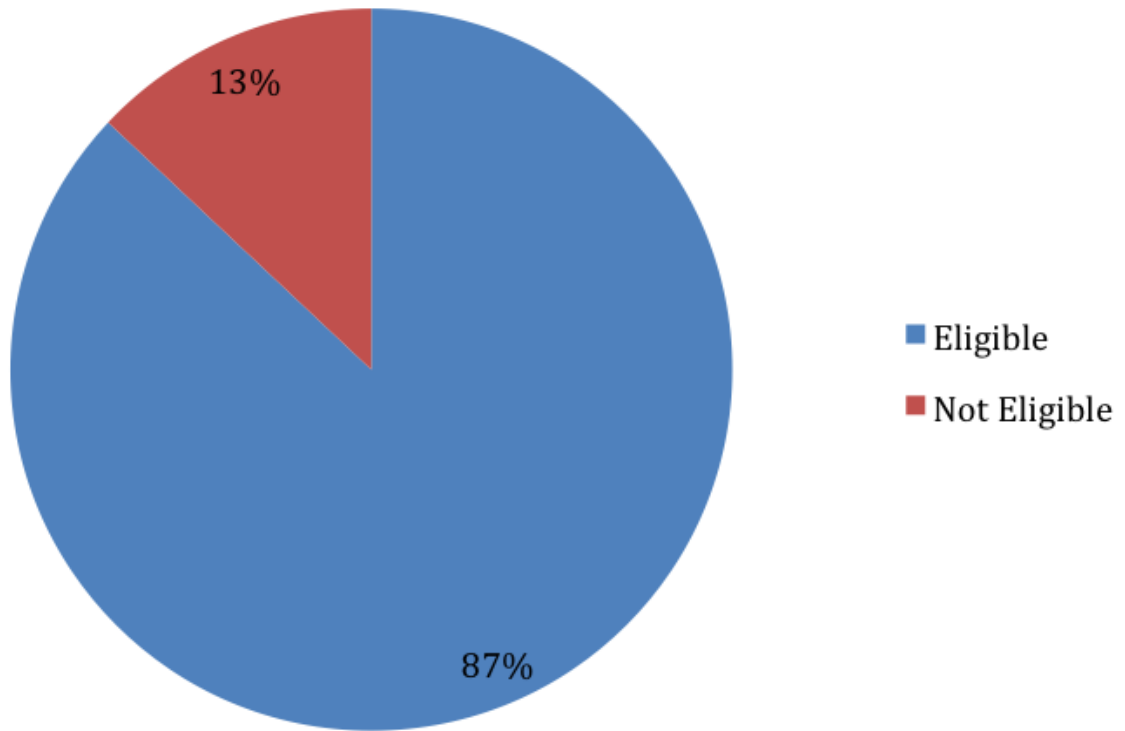
The feeling inside the school, however, belies the building’s exterior. The bright hallways are decorated with flags of the many different

FIGURE 1. HCCS DEMOGRAPHICS*¹⁰



*702 Students in Grades K-8

FIGURE 2. HCCS FREE AND REDUCED PRICE LUNCH ELIGIBILITY



countries from which HCCS students hail, and the calm but joyful buzz of young children transitioning from one room or activity to another suggests that this is a place where students want to be. One student (unprompted) describes her school as a “big family.” Another calls HCCS “welcoming,” and notes that “here there is always help, not like in the other school I was at. Here, someone is always there for you.”¹³

HCCS is also a place of structure. Students wear uniforms and administrators and faculty members take seriously the job of ensuring that students are always on task and on track. Classrooms are orderly; when students are engaged in small group work, they are quiet and on task. When the teacher is at the front of the room, students appear attentive and engaged. Though the culture of HCCS is defined by the school’s community, many of the assumptions underlying that culture are inextricably linked to the SABIS model, which is more pervasive in private school settings across the world than in public school settings.

As one student explains: “the public schools are much more loose; my friends aren’t tested nearly as often. Here, everything is more challenging, and we test weekly.” During one observation period, an entire hallway of elementary school classrooms was testing at the same time. This approach, typical of SABIS schools, reflects the sentiments of HCCS principal, Dr. Sonia Correa Pope, who emphasizes the importance of “orderly, on-task classrooms” and “safe learning environments.” These things are important, she says, because students “can’t get back even a minute that’s lost in those classrooms.”¹⁴

Faculty and administrators believe these moments matter more for HCCS students than for some of their counterparts in more affluent Massachusetts communities. Students at HCCS are overwhelmingly low income and minority. Many are first- or second-generation immigrants. Moreover, these students do not have many attractive educational options in Holyoke’s traditional public school system. Holyoke’s non-

charter public schools have been in receivership since May 2015, due to some of the lowest MCAS scores in the state, high dropout and low graduation rates.¹⁵

Students at HCCS achieve much stronger outcomes than their district counterparts on tests of achievement such as MCAS and, more recently (in 2015), the pilot exam for Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and

FIGURE 3. ELA MCAS/PARCC PROFICIENCY

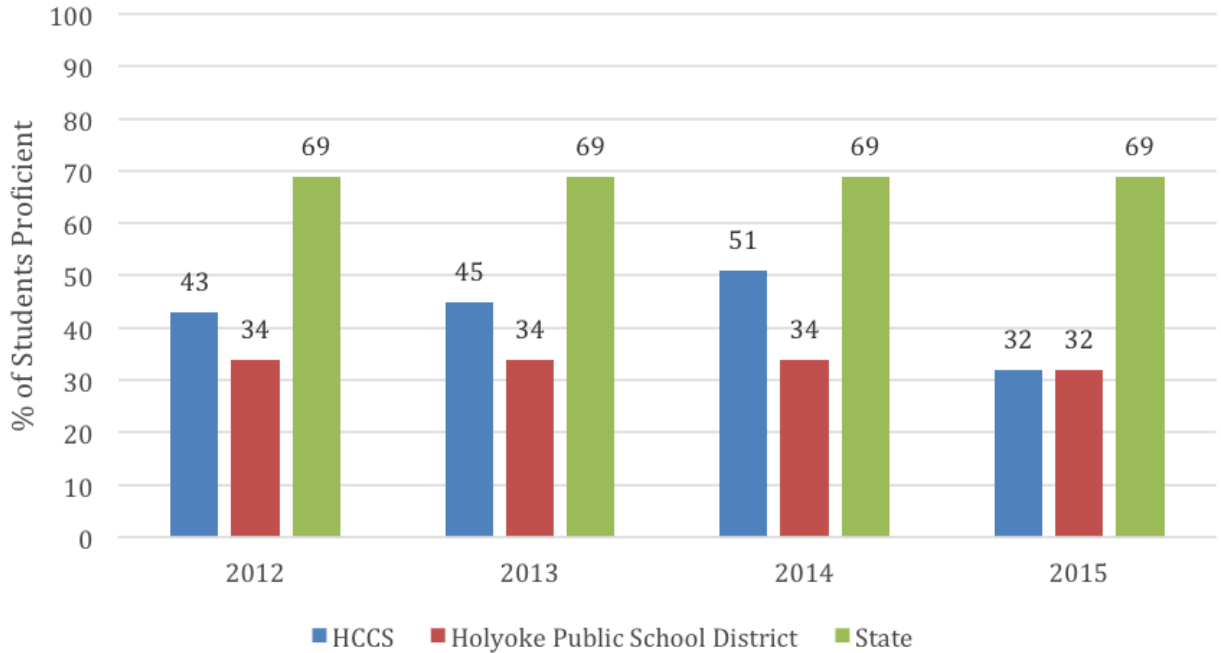


FIGURE 4. MATH MCAS/PARCC PROFICIENCY

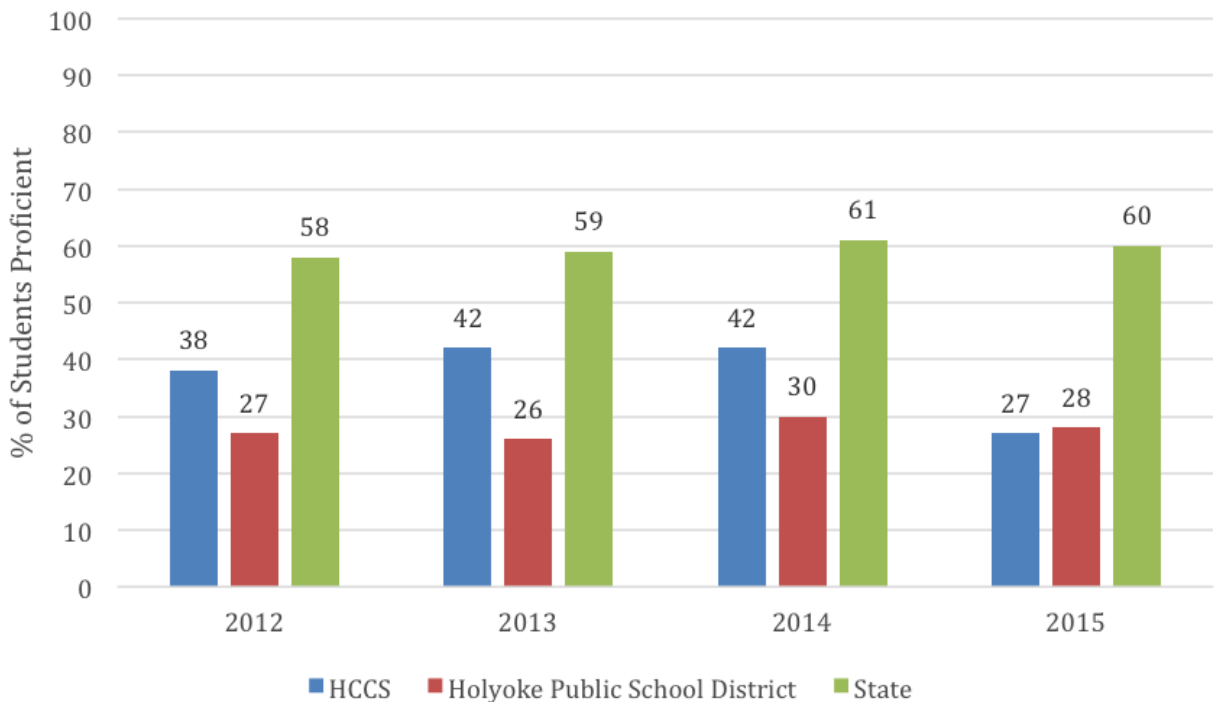
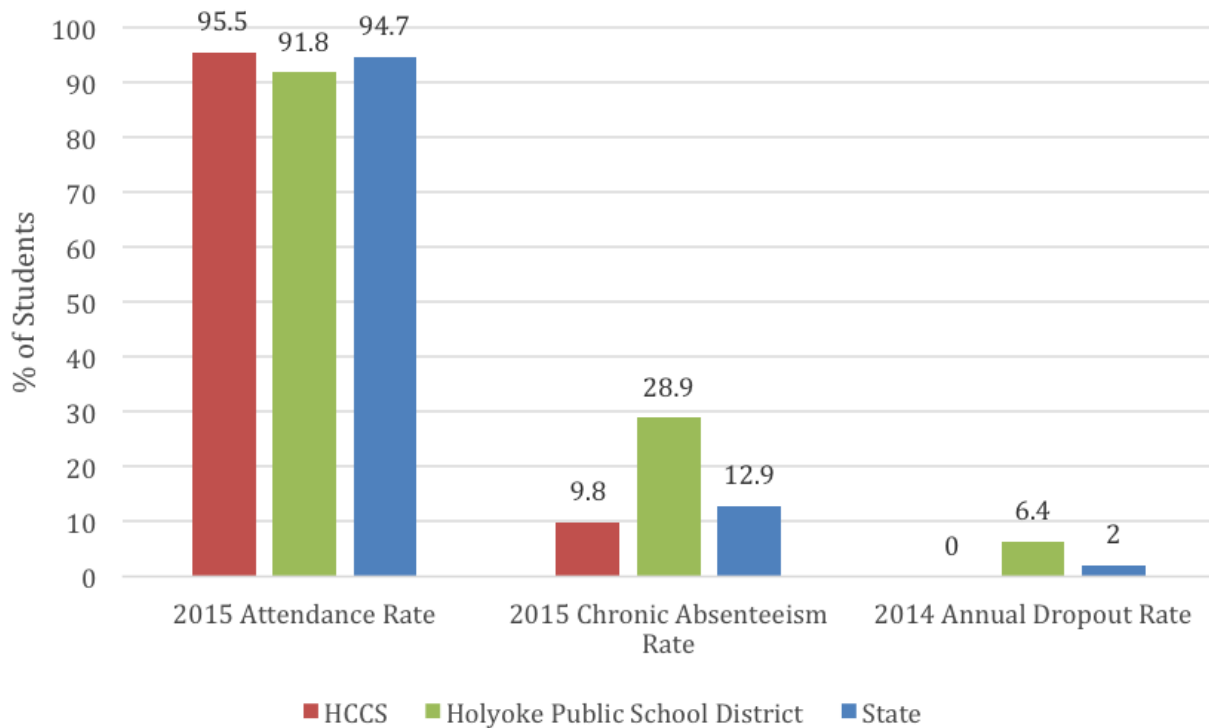


FIGURE 5. ATTENDANCE, ABSENTEEISM AND DROPOUT RATE



Careers (PARCC). The school is working, however, to improve student outcomes to the state average and beyond. Its efforts to improve student outcomes are defined by the SABIS approach.

In a nutshell, for a fee that amounts to roughly 8 percent of the school’s per pupil allotment, HCCS receives:¹⁶

- A highly detailed curriculum that is aligned to the Commonwealth’s frameworks and assessments. The curriculum includes pacing charts for teachers and detailed suggestions for delivering content
- SABIS-authored textbooks to support the curriculum
- A system of prescribed but locally tailored assessments designed to monitor student progress
- The use of proprietary software that allows students, teachers, and parents to access and understand student assessment results and progress from week to week

- Support from a SABIS-staffed office in Minnesota, where curriculum and assessments can be adjusted, as necessary
- A framework for staffing and managing the school that supports the SABIS approach; this includes administrative staff dedicated to things such “academic quality control” and hands-on technology support
- SABIS “management services,” which amount to help with school budgets, finances, auditing and compliance as well as support for everything from facilities to understanding best practices and regulations for students with special needs

Thus while HCCS leadership has full autonomy to manage the school, they have contracted with SABIS to systematize much of what happens in the school day-to-day. “These schools are site-based managed,” notes Jose Afonso of SABIS,

The school leader runs the show—SABIS inspects to ensure the system is implemented, and works closely with the schools on professional development, for example. The schools always

have the ability to call and receive immediate consulting services and support, but SABIS is not making day-to-day decisions for school leaders.¹⁷

The result of outsourcing these aspects of school life, according to HCCS leadership, is that faculty and staff can concentrate almost exclusively on academics. Moreover, says Correa Pope, “we do so much more with so much less. We have state-of-the-art technology that we have purchased without fundraising—our money is incredibly well managed and every aspect of the budget is designed to positively maximize impact on academics.” Indeed, the services that the school receives through SABIS would be inaccessible to a small charter school were the cost not spread out among SABIS’s large network, which serves about 8,000 students in the U.S. and 70,000 worldwide.¹⁸

Of all that SABIS offers HCCS, the backbone is curricular content and a highly sophisticated system of formative assessments and data-driven instruction. It is this aspect of the SABIS product that first attracted HCCS’s founders and that the school’s leadership cites it as integral to its ability to provide students with educational opportunities that they would not otherwise have.¹⁹

BEST PRACTICE: USING DATA TO INFORM CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

The SABIS approach to curriculum and instruction is what differentiates the company from other EMOs. The company started as one small school in Lebanon in 1886. But it was in the 1950s that the SABIS approach to teaching and learning began to evolve and the organization began to expand. For decades, finding the right marriage of curriculum, assessment, data gathering, and instruction was a process of trial and error. Though SABIS now has a refined system, the EMO continually adapts its approach to local circumstances and to the changing demands of the modern world.

James Tooley describes the SABIS system, conservative as it may seem in a world that values progressive educational ideals, as “revolutionary.” Underpinning the SABIS approach, he says

is an educational philosophy supporting a system of secular humanism, with knowledge as hierarchical, children as responsible individuals in a school constructed as a community, and where time and efficiency matter for educational reasons (as well as business reasons) . . . the richness of the SABIS model is that each of its key educational components has been crafted as part of a coherent system over a considerable length of time . . .²⁰

To serve a school like HCCS, SABIS adapts its college preparatory curriculum to local needs. In the case of Massachusetts schools, that means aligning curriculum to the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks, the Common Core academic standards, and state tests. It can also mean, for example, providing textbooks that are enriched with history lessons relevant to the student community at each school. At HCCS, for example, parents were interested in seeing students exposed to additional history lessons about Puerto Rico, where many families in the area come from. SABIS was able to provide that.²¹

Once the curriculum is designed and aligned, SABIS breaks it down into “points” or bite-sized chunks of a concept or skill linked to a specific outcome that a student can demonstrate on an assessment.²² These points, which are interrelated and build sequentially, are presented in SABIS curriculum documents and textbooks. SABIS provides teachers with guidance on how to present each “point” by using a “teach, practice, and check cycle.” Essentially, “after explaining or demonstrating a point in front of a class for a few minutes, the teachers give students exercises on which to practice the point in class.” The cycle is complete when an academic prefect (a student who has demonstrated content mastery to the teacher) checks the “work of each student assigned to him or her.”²³

This approach, known as the SABIS “point and prefect” system is clearly delineated and transparent. In essence, all actors in a classroom and in a school have a goal for each day, a road map for achieving it, and information about whether they have met the goal. Perhaps more importantly, when the system works, “gaps in student knowledge are often detected in the same period the concept is being taught.”²⁴

When gaps are detected on a larger scale, the SABIS central team can modify, in real time, aspects of the curriculum. They do so based on information they receive from teachers and administrators in each school. This is not to suggest that curricula or the expectations that they encompass change dramatically from case to case; instead, if groups of students are having difficulty with a particular concept, the central SABIS team can provide supplemental materials, suggest a different instructional approach, and/or adjust the curriculum to reflect an altered pace for teachers and students that will keep them on track to cover all “essential concepts.”

Indeed, differentiation between concepts that are high priority and those of less importance is another feature of the curriculum. SABIS names concepts either “essential” or “non-essential,” in effect giving teachers a guide as to where to concentrate time and ensure mastery. Essential concepts are those that are “essential to master before moving on to other concepts in hierarchical disciplines.” Non-essential concepts are still important, in that they provide for more extensive understanding,” but they may not be altogether necessary for understanding another concept.²⁵

To ensure that essential concepts are mastered, pacing guides act as an important complement to the SABIS curriculum. Faculty receive both weekly and yearly pacing charts so that they know how quickly they must help students to master each concept if they are to stay on track for the school year. Importantly, the system allows for flexibility of pace, when necessary. If an individual student is having

difficulty mastering a concept, instruction can be differentiated and extra time spent with him or her;²⁶ if an entire group of students is having difficulty, however, SABIS’s central office can revise pacing charts to accommodate student needs.²⁷

In this sense, a system that, on its face, seems inherently impersonal is in reality a very personalized form of learning. Whereas an effective teacher at any school should adjust instruction to meet the needs of individuals and groups, with the SABIS approach it becomes very difficult to “miss” a student or group who is failing to master a concept. Weekly assessments (which will be explained in greater detail below) reveal whether students are mastering material. If a teacher were inclined to let a student or group fall through the cracks for the sake of pace, for example, another member of the school’s administrative team could effectively “catch” students before they fall.

This “built in layer of accountability” is another feature of the SABIS system that HCCS has purchased. Administrators called academic quality controllers act as liaisons between teachers, students, and SABIS. They review assessment results, ensure that re-teaching is occurring as necessary, and work with the central office on behalf of teachers to, for example, readjust curriculum and pacing guides to suit student and school needs.²⁸

Thus almost every decision made at HCCS is based on data—some kind of reliable information—about students, their academic progress and needs. Before students even sit for an assessment, adults at several levels of the organization have made informal assessments of how students are faring. This knowledge represents a major facet of HCCS’s brand of data-driven instruction.

BEST PRACTICE: ASSESSMENT DATA FOR STUDENT ACADEMIC GROWTH AND ENGAGEMENT

Student assessment is a vital part of the larger accountability structure at HCCS, but it is far more than just that. As described by school personnel, the vast majority of assessments students take are formative in nature, designed not just as tools for understanding what students know but as learning experiences; opportunities for students to demonstrate conceptual knowledge by applying it in given contexts.²⁹

In addition to summative end-of-semester and state-required examinations, every student at HCCS is assessed weekly. Weekly assessments do a number of things. First, they confirm what classroom teachers are beginning to understand within a larger teaching cycle: the extent to which individuals and groups of students have mastered concepts. Assessments include both multiple choice and extended response items, depending upon the curricular components being assessed.

Each and every assessment is designed by SABIS and administered to students electronically. This format not only allows for the efficient delivery of results, but also enables SABIS and local schools to more easily adapt curricula and assessments to individuals, especially in the case of students with special educational needs.³⁰ In the case of extended response items, SABIS personnel develop appropriate rubrics for the scoring of written work and, in conjunction with other school administrators, ensure that the rubrics are deployed in valid ways across different samples of

student work.

The second thing that weekly assessments do is actively engage students in the process of learning. Contrary to many other school settings, where students might sit for an exam and wait a long time for results, teachers, students, and even parents receive almost immediate feedback on student performance on weekly student assessments.³¹

The school posts general results for all students (by ID number) the day after an assessment is administered. Students can see how they fared in relation to their peers, and once the results are in, individuals conference with teachers to parse their performance. Teachers and students ask questions such as “where did I do well? Where am I struggling? What do I need to do to better understand this and get it right?”³²

Teachers can use these conferences as opportunities to reteach a concept and to engage students in the process of learning again or learning differently.³³ A student must get a certain number of assessment items attached to each concept correct before he or she can move on to a new phase of the curriculum.³⁴ Failure to demonstrate sufficient knowledge and/or the ability to apply a skill results in an obligatory “reteach” for that student.

Thus assessment data drive instruction at HCCS, but the term “data-driven instruction,” as it is commonly used in schools, doesn’t adequately describe what students at this school experience. With such easy access to their own assessment data, along with sophistication around how to

FIGURE 6. WEEKLY ASSESSMENTS

Reveal Learning Gaps

Engage Students in Learning Process

Facilitate Student-Teacher Collaboration

Engage Parents in Academic Goal-Setting

Engage Parents in the Process of Learning

leverage it, HCCS students play a critical part in their own learning process. With their teachers, students can set goals for themselves, figure out how to reengage a concept after a failed attempt to demonstrate mastery, and actively track their own pace toward the larger learning goals on which they will be assessed at the end of each semester.

This type of approach has been cited in educational literature as “assessment for learning” as opposed to “assessment of learning.”³⁵ It is different from what occurs in most U.S. schools in that the teacher is not the center of the assessment process—he or she does not hold the sole power of understanding what students do and do not know, and he or she is not solely responsible for adjusting teaching practice to achieve a more desirable result. Instead, in this context, teachers and students are partners and collaborators in the learning process, each is enabled to understand “where a student is going,” “how a student is going,” and “what a student needs to do” to accomplish a larger learning goal.³⁶ A seventh grader at HCCS supports this notion that the SABIS system effectively engages students, saying “with these tests you always know where you are, you are always challenged to figure out how to do it better.”

The third thing weekly assessments do is engage parents in student academic life. With a tool called Webschool, parents can see what their children are learning and how they are faring on assessments. The portal works on a “24-hour” cycle, so parents can have “new and detailed information on a daily basis” about where in the academic curriculum their child is encountering success and where he or she is struggling. The same website allows for parents to support students at home. Based on assessment results, the system generates a list of concepts that students and parents can practice together.³⁷

Technology of this type is a great boon for the school community because it engages parents without requiring them to be present at school or to ask questions of a teacher or administrator.

Research³⁸ shows that in communities like Holyoke, where many parents are not native English speakers and many do not have experience with the American school system, this type of engagement can be beneficial. As long as parents can access technology at home, in the community, or even on their phones, they do not have to face the pressure of prioritizing a school visit over work or of encountering a teacher or administrator who, despite the school’s warm feel and best efforts, may seem intimidating to parents.

This emphasis on bringing parents into the academic life of the school in a way that is both comfortable and meaningful is not surprising in a place like HCCS, which highly values the community it serves. Like all SABIS-affiliated schools, HCCS has a full-time student life coordinator—an administrator who is responsible for guiding and empowering students to actively inform the life and culture of the school and to engage with one another and with teachers and administrators in a manner that impacts the school experience beyond academics. Members of the HCCS Student Life Organization told the author that at HCCS “students value academics” very highly; they also value “cultural diversity,” “learning about one another,” and “creating a school environment that is comfortable for all learners.”³⁹ Aspects of the SABIS approach like Student Life are just one more way that schools like HCCS turn commonly held notions about for-profit EMOs on their head.

BEYOND THE DATA: THE CULTURE OF TESTING AND TEACHING AT HCCS

Despite its success and the reported satisfaction of parents and students there remain some things about HCCS and its SABIS affiliation that offend local sensibilities. No matter how effective tests can be as tools for accountability and student engagement, “testing” is a tainted concept in the current education policy climate. From stories of parents (often wealthier parents) opting out of Common Core-related tests to the recent

move by Congress to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) only after devolving formerly strict test-based accountability requirements to the states, we live in a cultural moment where “teaching to the test” has a negative connotation and the use of frequent assessments is widely denounced.

Administrators at HCCS are open about the concerns that parents had, especially at the school’s founding, about the SABIS approach that relies so heavily on assessment. Sonia Correa Pope explains that some parents at first pushed back at the amount of testing their students were enduring at school. “They weren’t used to it,” she notes. “We explained to parents, ‘to you, this seems like just a lot of tests, but we don’t see it as such.’” Instead, Correa Pope would tell parents that the tests were tools for accountability and student engagement. “Once parents see” how their students fare at HCCS and, especially when they can “access student results and engage with their students at home” through the parent portal, Correa Pope says, the tests “become something natural—a method or a way of doing things.”

The way HCCS students speak about weekly assessments supports Correa Pope’s claim. During observations, students were keen to discuss assessment results posted by student ID. The practice seems to inculcate a culture of positive focus on the self and self-improvement at the school. And students point out, “I like to know where I stand. It helps me do better.”⁴⁰

Another criticism of schools like HCCS (coming more often from education professionals than from parents or the community), is that they don’t value the profession of teaching. Teachers, the critics posit, “read from a script” (in this case, critics are referring to the highly delineated, centrally prescribed curriculum). The SABIS method, this line of thinking goes, not only devalues the profession, it also robs students of experiencing teaching as an art.

Indeed, SABIS as an organization does not necessarily buy into the common notion that an

effective education hinges solely on an effective teacher. In fact, instead of pairing a small number of students with an exceptional educator, SABIS would rather find strong teaching candidates that it can put in front of 25 students and develop that candidate as part of its overall system, a system in which student outcomes are impacted by consistent, effective teaching and where a high-quality, prescribed curriculum with plenty of built-in accountability can mitigate the effects of a bad teaching day.

Some argue that the SABIS system makes teaching a sustainable profession for those who are capable. In contrast, for example, to schools that seek to hire young “super-star teachers” with top-notch credentials and then work them until they “burnout,” the SABIS system, say its supporters, makes teaching “a manageable job.”

As quoted in Tooley, Stephen Wilson, a long time expert, offers:

It becomes a job for career educators, who are more broadly available and who can work at a sustainable pace, can start a family, and can have a balanced life . . . instead of a system of heroes, the SABIS system fosters excellence without heroics.⁴¹

Sonia Correa Pope at HCCS looks to hire smart people, knowledgeable in the content areas, who she can train to work effectively within her school’s structures and systems. She also freely admits that to be a teacher at HCCS means less flexibility than a teacher might have in other schools.

Academic quality controllers (ACQs) “observe teachers to ensure not only that they are delivering content in a comprehensible and effective way but also that they are “adhering to the points system, checking for student mastery, and staying on pace.” ACQs are also available to support teachers if, for example, they are struggling to differentiate teaching for individuals or groups of students or having trouble implementing the right supports for students with different needs. On the other hand, ACQs and administrators rely on teachers and

their observations of teachers to relay important feedback to the central office about locally tailored curricula and pacing charts. If students need additional time with a concept, teachers will be the first to know.

Perhaps most important to Pope and her staff is hiring educators who “know the community” and are “willing to roll up their sleeves.” HCCS serves a high population of English language learners and meeting the needs of those students—language and otherwise—is always top of mind. “Not everybody can do this job” and “not everybody wants to—we can’t afford to pay as much as the district,” Correa Pope says. At the end of the day, “our best teachers are not just those who help students get results—they are those who know our community and try to serve them better.”

If the school’s data and waitlist are taken as evidence, teachers at HCCS are serving the community better, especially in comparison to other Holyoke public schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is little doubt, according to state test score data, student attrition data, waitlist data, and the qualitative data presented here that HCCS is successful. From helping students master a comparatively rigorous curriculum to moving students out of the “English language learner” category at a higher rate and more quickly than surrounding public schools,⁴² HCCS is delivering a high-quality academic experience. Perhaps more importantly, HCCS delivers that experience in a manner that is attractive to students, parents, and the community and important for providing students access to an education and academic culture they would otherwise be unable to afford.

HCCS values its status as a Commonwealth charter school greatly, and views the autonomy that comes with charter status as critical to its success. School leaders cite the ability to extend the school day, oversee budgets, hire and dismiss teachers without union restrictions, and to set

priorities for students without answering to a larger bureaucracy as foundations upon which the school is built. The school is also keen to share with its district counterparts how it leverages these and other autonomies to the advantage of students, families, and the Holyoke community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Provide Better Platforms for High-Performing Charters Like HCCS to Share Best Practices with Struggling Schools:

While the SABIS approach is not right for every student, school or community, there are aspects of the system, especially the approach to data-driven instruction, which many schools could adopt. At HCCS data-driven instruction is the practice of adults vigilantly gathering many different forms of data about students and sharing that information with students and parents to their advantage. If more schools could understand how HCCS leverages data in various forms to engage, enable, and encourage students, they might see outcomes similar to those achieved by HCCS.

Authorize Charter Schools with Various Approaches to Enhancing Student Achievement:

The SABIS approach, which HCCS and two other Massachusetts schools have chosen, would not be desirable or appropriate for every student, family, and community. That does not mean the option should be foreclosed to families for whom it is desirable. Massachusetts’s charter school authorization process should be open, fair, and encourage various approaches to enabling student achievement. If a school produces results and maintains a healthy learning environment that families desire, outside affiliations, such as EMO status, should not bias the authorization process.

Leverage Best Practices from High-Performing Charter Schools in “Turnaround” Districts:

As the Commonwealth has done in places like Lawrence, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should continue to seek to understand best practices across school sectors and encourage partnerships between traditional

public schools, charter schools, and districts. Such a practice would require principals of struggling schools to visit exemplary schools to see first hand what models are offered. This can take the form of shared school spaces and administrative structures or a formal relationship, brokered by the Commonwealth, established in the interest of helping all students succeed.

Lift the Cap on Charter Public Schools:

After more than 20 years of charter public schools in Massachusetts, it is clear that autonomy coupled with strict accountability for outcomes is an educational model that works. While we look to share best practices across sectors, additional charter schools, including new schools that have no basis for establishing “proven provider” status, should be able to apply for charters in all communities across the Commonwealth, even those that are close to or have surpassed the cap on charter enrollment.

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About Pioneer

Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to change the intellectual climate in the Commonwealth by supporting scholarship that challenges the “conventional wisdom” on Massachusetts public policy issues.

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Massachusetts Charter Public Schools: Best Practices Serving English Language Learners, White Paper, December 2015



Endnotes

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40. Interview with (2) HCCS students (names withheld).
41. In Tooley, p. 203
42. Interview with Dr. Sonia Correa Pope



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