

Madison Park II: Capitalizing on Employment Opportunities

By William Donovan



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Executive Summary

For many years the co-operative education program at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School in Boston has fallen short of supporters' hopes for it. The number of students it placed in paid jobs with local employers was often below that of co-op programs at other career vocational technical education (CVTE) schools and mostly focused on three or four of Madison Park's 20 industry disciplines.

Much of the reason for the disappointing performance has been attributed to struggles the school has endured during the last decade, by now a well-worn story. Frequent turnover among headmasters led to instability in leadership and a breakdown in culture. Graduation rates declined while absenteeism rose. Academic achievement suffered. Scores on Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exams rank at or near the bottom among the Commonwealth's vocational technical schools.

In 2016 Madison Park was designated a Level 4 school by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), earning an "underperforming" label. Accordingly, school officials created a turnaround plan that they began implementing in June of that year.

Since then there have been signs of improvement. The graduation rate, which was 57 percent in 2017, was above 68 percent in 2019. The dropout rate, which once exceeded 6 percent, is now below 5 percent. Enrollment, which tumbled by half from 2005 to 2017, has climbed more than 17 percent in the past three years.

The co-operative education program, in which students receive hands-on training while being paid, is also showing positive signs. A new program director has been contacting employers to secure more placements and rallying students to improve their academics to raise their eligibility to participate. A strong partnership has been started with an active employers networking group. The number of students working co-op jobs, though still well behind other regional voc-tech schools, has grown.

School officials recognized that the broader issues hindering Madison Park in recent years, which led to more dropouts, plunging enrollment and lower graduation rates, were depressing the school's co-op program. Conversely, they knew that a vibrant co-op program could help improve those poor indicators.

"When you have that type of impact, a lot times students need to see tangible outcomes," says LaTrelle Pinkney-Chase, who took over as director of Madison Park's co-operative education program in 2019. "They see one of their classmates go out and they realize it's a real thing. It motivates them to increase their GPA, to be sure to get to school every day, to be sure they're on time every day. Then it starts to become a win-win, not just for the co-op, but for the entire school."

But can Madison Park notch a win beyond its own walls? More specifically, can it play a larger role in creating educational and economic opportunity in Boston by supplying needed skilled labor for Boston-based businesses? State officials forecast thousands of job opportunities during the next eight years for workers who have the skills and education to do the job. Will the school created to train those workers fulfill its promise?

This is the second of two papers by Pioneer Institute about the recovery effort at Madison Park. The first report, published in September of this year, examined the turnaround plan and reported on its progress as judged by the 10-year review of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. This paper looks at the school's co-operative education program because of its important place within the curriculum and the potential it holds. The paper draws on interviews with school officials, state employment data and other CVTE educators and advocates.

Can Madison Park play a larger role in creating educational and economic opportunity in Boston... ?

Background: Madison Park High School and CVTE

Madison Park is the only school in Boston that exclusively prepares its students for technical careers *and* postsecondary education upon graduation. Located in the Roxbury neighborhood of the city, it had more than 1,000 students in grades 9–12 in the 2019–2020 school year. More than 90 percent of students enrolled are considered “high needs,” meaning students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as English language learners. About 97 percent of those enrolled are students of color.¹

In the 2018–2019 school year, 73.1 percent of Madison Park’s students were considered economically disadvantaged, the highest among vocational-technical schools in the state. Roughly 35 percent were English language learners, again the highest among voc-tech schools, and 30.6 percent had disabilities, according to DESE.

Thriving high school co-op programs help to address society’s income gap. In addition to teaching skills that students can use to find a good paying job upon graduation, the money they earn while in school on a co-op job often provides a boost to a low-income family struggling to pay its bills. When schools were closed in March because of the coronavirus, that income was missed in many homes.

“When COVID hit and the state shut down the program, we were at risk of kids dropping out who were providing for their families because they could no longer do a co-op,” says David DiBarri, superintendent-director at Northeast Metropolitan Regional Vocational High School in Wakefield, where half the students come from low-income families. Many of the students in their co-op program were earning more than \$20 per hour.

“It became real during that situation,” DiBarri says. “We kicked in with some support for our student families. We provided a lot of free meals to entire families, gift cards to students who were struggling. A big piece of that was because we were getting calls from students saying they needed their co-op job.”²

Though other high schools in the Boston Public Schools system offer “shop” electives, Madison Park is the secondary school created to produce skilled workers upon graduation. Students can major in one of 20 industry sectors within its vocational technical program.

They are:

- Automotive Collision Repair and Refinishing
- Automotive Technology, Building and Property Maintenance
- Carpentry
- Computer Programming
- Cosmetology
- Culinary Arts
- Dental Assisting
- Design & Visual Communications
- Electricity
- Graphic Communications
- HVAC
- Health Assisting
- Hospitality
- Information Support Service & Networking
- Marketing
- Medical Assisting
- Metal Fabrication
- Plumbing
- Radio & TV Broadcasting.

To select their shop major, freshmen spend at least one day in every discipline. Later they select six shops for deeper exploration, spend three days to a week at each and make a final selection by December of that first year. The process provides a thorough preview of what it would be like to work in a specific trade area.

Freshmen and sophomores have rotating schedules; one week of academic courses then one week in which they spend half of each day in their shop. Juniors and seniors alternate one week of academic courses with one week of full-time vocational education.

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About 80 percent of the shop teachers at Madison Park have their teaching certificate. When someone is hired from industry without a teaching license, he or she must be a high school graduate and typically have five years of work experience. They have three years to obtain their preliminary teaching license.

Recruiting vocational teachers is difficult. Private sector employees are generally paid much more than public school teachers. A plumber with 25 years of experience could earn more than \$100,000 annually, well above what a teacher would be paid. Kevin McCaskill, executive director of Madison Park, says Boston tries to match up what the market pays with years of service in the teaching profession. On the teachers' salary scale experienced industry professionals would start at master's degree level, not a bachelor's degree.³ According to the Boston Teachers Union, a teacher holding a master's degree and five years experience would earn \$83,200 in the 2020–2021 school year under the contract with the city.⁴

Despite the school's academic struggles, dropouts and low graduation rates, the vocational education program has received its share of accolades. During the past five years, students in the Culinary Arts program have won awards in state cooking competitions and competed in numerous national events in Texas and Washington, D.C. Students in Media Arts have earned first and second place finishes in the Regional SkillsUSA Competition, while Hospitality Management and Marketing majors have won awards in the DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America) District VI competition.

New investment is also being made in several of the shop facilities. The Culinary Arts, HVAC and Health and Dental Assisting programs have received Massachusetts Workforce Skills Capital Grants totaling nearly \$1.1 million.

The Boston Job Market

The brutal economic impact of COVID-19 has pushed economists around the world to redo their employment forecasts. The forced shutdown and gradual reopening of the economy has caused scores of business and lifestyle changes. Locally, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority announced significant cutbacks in bus, train and ferry services due to low ridership. Many retailers and other small businesses closed. Colleges sent students back home.

A hoped-for economic recovery is of particular interest to Madison Park students who plan to take their newly acquired skills into the workforce upon graduation. They have reason to be concerned. Fourteen students graduated from the school's Hospitality program in June, for example, at a time when hotels were experiencing a steep drop in demand. In November Unite Here Local 26, which represents hospitality workers, estimated that only 1,000 of 6,600 hotel members were back to work and the Boston Marriott Copley Place, Boston's second largest hotel, terminated about 260 workers.⁵

From 2018 to 2028, total employment in Massachusetts is expected to grow about 3 percent and Boston employment is projected to rise by 4 percent, according to the Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance. Broken down, that's not impressive. Statewide it amounts to 11,271 jobs per year and only 2,836 annually in Boston, according to the DUA. But when the state forecast is adjusted for current workers leaving their jobs for employment outside the city or the Commonwealth or leaving the workforce entirely, the picture brightens for graduates. The average annual number of job openings jumps to 439,851 statewide and 76,708 in Boston.⁶

All of which highlights the importance of a successful turnaround at Madison Park, because of the role the school could play in filling those thousands of new openings. Consider the construction trades. In the 2019–2020 school year there were 30 students in the school's Plumbing program. According to the state's forecast there will be a demand for more than 100 additional plumbers per year in Boston with average annual wages of nearly \$74,000. There were 29 students in the Carpentry program. The outlook anticipates a need for more

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than 200 carpenters per year, with average annual wages of about \$61,000. There were 48 students in the Electricity program. The forecast projects an annual average of 289 openings for electricians paying average wages of more than \$86,000.

Table 1 shows some of the CVTE courses offered at Madison Park, enrollment in those courses in the 2019–2020 school year and the projected annual job openings in related sectors.

Students in MP courses don't begin to meet the expected job demand

Industry	Students in MP Course 2019–2020	Expected Avg. Annual Boston Job Openings (2018–2028)	Expected Avg. Annual MA Job Openings (2018–2018)
Auto Service Technicians/Mechanics	55	116	1,596
Carpentry	29	209	2,574
Computer Programmers	20	39	150
Cosmetologists/Hair Stylists	40	183	2,543
Dental Asst.	34	120	975
Electricians	48	289	2,141
Graphic Designers	39	278	873
Medical Asst.	12	418	2,047
Plumbers	30	106	1,743
Restaurant Cooks (Culinary)	33	1,105	5,585

Source: Mass. Department of Unemployment Assistance

Many of the in-demand jobs, such as carpenters, cosmetologists and electricians, require only a high school degree and a Certificate of Occupational Proficiency, which Madison Park students earn within their program of studies. In November 2020 there were more than 25 Madison Park graduates working as members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers 103, for example. More broadly the school's Electricity program "averages about 30–40 percent placement directly into the electrical industry" each year.⁷ Half of the 2020 Electricity program graduates were hired within the industry, according to Pinkney-Chase.

For the 2018–2019 school year, 15 percent of Madison Park graduates went directly into the workforce, 19 percent went to a four-year public or private college and 31 percent enrolled in a two-year public or private college.⁸

The Co-op Program

Progress in the vocational technical education program is critical because it is the foundation of the school's co-op program. Employers want to be confident that students who are placed at their companies have basic training and an understanding of the work. Students become eligible for a co-op job in the third quarter of their junior year, after completing the required minimum number of course hours. They also need to have a "B" average in that discipline and a "C" average overall. Lastly, they need a recommendation from the shop instructor.

Like many other areas the 2016 turnaround plan is trying to improve, the co-op program does not compare well against other regional vocational technical schools. In the 2019–2020 school year there were 358 juniors and seniors in the CVTE program at Madison Park. Twenty-nine, or 8.1 percent, were placed in co-op jobs. By comparison, Shawsheen Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School in Billerica, annually one of the top three voc-tech schools in co-op placements, had 206 students, or 68 percent of the juniors and seniors in its CVTE program, in jobs. Last year all Shawsheen's co-op placements were seniors due to the COVID shutdown.

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Shawsheen is one of the largest CVTE schools in the state with 1,265 students enrolled last year, compared to 1,021 at Madison Park. It's understandable that the larger school would have more students participating, but the percentage of students being placed is another way to evaluate co-op programs. In 2018–2019 the 25 regional technical vocational schools that reported their co-op figures had an average placement rate of 28 percent, with the range extending from 13.3 percent to 53.6 percent, according to the most recent figures from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Madison Park's placement percentage that year was 4.2 percent.

During the past five years no more than 46 students have worked co-op jobs from Madison Park in a single year, with only 14 going out in 2018–2019.

The size of the gap between Madison Park and those schools, both in hard numbers and percent of students working co-op jobs, forced school officials to become more proactive. The 2016 turnaround plan focused on academics, professional development for teachers and changing the culture at the school. But the co-op program also needed attention. Many other voc-tech schools were sending out 50 to 100 students, but Madison Park was averaging only around 25 placements. McCaskill, who took over as executive director of Madison Park in 2015, asked "Why can't we have more than 100 kids in co-op?"

"We just had to do better than we were," he says. "Our sister regional vocational technical schools had larger numbers of students going out and the question was 'Why can't we?' A lot of times that was not the thought process."⁹

So what were the reasons? McCaskill points to two to partly account for the low numbers. The first was attendance. Students were falling short of the requirement of 90 percent attendance in school. It was a particularly frustrating problem because though students might be trained and skilled, attendance is about responsibility and dependability. Employers partnering in the co-op program expect production and the school couldn't send students out who weren't attending school.

"We average about 87 percent in attendance," says McCaskill. "We're working with students and families to get them to school more regularly. Attendance is directly related to achievement."

The second factor depressing co-op numbers was that many Madison Park students need extra academic support. Some start their freshman years performing below grade level and struggle in academic work. McCaskill says students must meet graduation requirements first, making additional, after-hours academic work a higher priority than the co-op program.

After the low mark of 14 students in 2019, a goal was set to increase the placement number to 75 during the 2019–2020 school year. When schools were shut down in March, 27 students were working co-op jobs. However, only five juniors had been deployed at that point. Pinkney-Chase says at least 30 more students would have been placed with employers if the school had remained open.

Marketing/Networking the Co-op Program

Madison Park has also had a marketing problem. Perhaps the bad publicity the school received during the leadership problems it once had was a distraction or maybe the outreach effort wasn't sufficient. Whatever the cause, the school wasn't well connected with employers. Richard Lavoie, co-op director at Shawsheen, says he works with about 150 to 180 employers per year.¹⁰ David DiBarri at Northeast Metro Tech, says his school works with 40 employers. In the current school year Pinkney-Chase says she is working with 20.¹¹

Table 2: Madison Park Students in Co-op Jobs

SY 2015	21
SY 2016	46
SY 2017	27
SY 2018	18
SY 2019	14
SY 2020	29

Source: Madison Park Technical Vocational High School

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A big boost to the program's networking effort has come from a group of more than 40 business and education leaders called the Career Champions Network. The group, which includes Barry Bluestone, founding dean of the Northeastern University School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs, started in 2019. McCaskill says the members have pledged to support the growth efforts of Madison Park's CVTE programs through their technical, financial and employment experience and connections, as well as active advocacy and engagement in Madison Park's school community.

McCaskill says that in past years the co-op program was centered on a couple of industry areas such as Electricity and Auto Technology and Auto Collision and Repair Service. More recently Health Assistance and Dental Assistance have been popular. Four years ago the school created the Computer Programming and Web Development category, which McCaskill calls a "no-brainer" because it was seen as a hot field with good entry level salaries. The job outlook for computer programmers calls for 39 new openings per year in Boston with an average annual salary of \$98,400, and 150 in Massachusetts, paying an average of more than \$95,300, according to the state Department of Unemployment Assistance.¹² The forecast for web developers is 325 annual openings statewide, paying average wages of \$84,300, and 118 per year in Boston with average annual wages slightly higher at \$88,100.

The new heating, ventilation and air conditioning program (HVAC) was in the co-op portfolio a decade ago, but was dropped. It was added back last year. The 10-year outlook for HVAC mechanics is 969 job openings per year in Massachusetts with average annual salary of \$59,900, and 90 annual openings in Boston, with an average salary of \$68,900.

"It made sense to bring that back because of all the construction going on and the need for qualified HVAC people," says McCaskill. "It's very popular. We've had about 20 kids in two grade levels since last year."

Pinkney-Chase says she has been working with the Career Champions Network to find more employers for students in facilities management, plumbing, ISSN, computer web design, culinary arts and hospitality management. In early November they created an action plan to increase the program's partnerships by 50 new employers before the end of the school year through concentrated public relations, networking, emails, phone calls and Zoom meetings.

She's also working with the advisory group attached to each CVTE program, which is a common way for co-ops to network. Advisory groups are made up of people in industry. The advisory board for Culinary Arts could include restaurateurs or local chefs. Hospitality would include hotel workers, among others.

In-House Marketing

Pinkney-Chase has also been promoting the co-op program aggressively within the school. In September and October, she held Zoom video conferencing calls with freshmen to get them thinking about their career plans sooner rather than later.

"At regional schools that have wildly successful programs, incoming students already know about it," she says. "I feel like we have to have a conversation with kids before they get to the 11th grade, when some of them might have already settled into bad habits that make them ineligible. By catching them in the 9th grade, repeating the message in the 10th grade and sending mailers home and getting the parents more involved, we make it a real tangible thing and not some pie-in-the-sky that's only reserved for a few students. I believe that will change the culture of co-op and the expectation of the student for themselves."

She receives lists from teachers of students who are eligible or close to being eligible and contacts them. She says this year students have been more responsive because of COVID-19. They think it would be better for them to be out at work than doing virtual shop classes. Many students in higher grades are interested in co-op, but don't qualify. She'll work with them to improve their attendance and reduce their tardiness. She contacts teachers of kids with poor grades, asking how the student can be helped.

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This year students have been more responsive because of COVID-19. They think it would be better for them to be out at work than doing virtual shop classes.

“For some students that’s worked,” she adds. “They’ll come in ineligible and then, two months later, they’re ready to go and able to be placed out.”

The school has begun to conduct a series of “spotlight” interviews with students about their co-op experience. A recently featured female student discussed her job working with welders and her hopes to make that her career upon graduation. She also spoke about challenges she had in the 10th grade and her fears that she’d be ineligible for co-op if she didn’t make needed changes. When the spotlight videos are posted on the school’s YouTube channel, students receive an email blast alerting them.

Pinkney-Chase says seeing the videos motivates other students. “Tapping into the peer experience will be a game changer for us,” she says.

Summary

Madison Park Technical Vocational High School can be an important player in the growth of the Greater Boston economy. It could also be a gateway for hundreds of students from low-income families to steady jobs paying middle class salaries and more.

A vital part of Madison Park’s career vocational technical education is the school’s cooperative education program, in which students can extend their education from the school shop class to a paid position with a local business. As the school is showing signs of improvement in critical areas such as attendance, tardiness, and academics, the lure of a co-op job that pays a salary, provides useful experience and gives students hands-on opportunities rather than virtual instruction can add to the momentum. Students can be motivated to attend classes, study hard and stay in school to qualify for a co-op job.

But school officials still have work to do. Co-op placements are well behind averages for regional vocational technical schools in Massachusetts. The number of employers connected to the program is below the portfolio of businesses that other voc-tech schools hold. Hopefully the promising new relationship with the Career Champions Network, an influential partner with contacts around the city, will create new opportunities with employers.

Recommendations

Recruit graduates to promote co-op in house. As LaTrelle Pinkney-Chase states “Tapping into the peer experience will be a game changer for us.” One way to do that would be to bring back recent graduates who held jobs and are now working in their chosen fields. Current students will connect with others only a few years older who are earning a living in the working world. By confirming the value of the co-op experience, returning grads can help motivate their younger peers and make the program more robust.

Engage the CVTE Marketing Students. One way to promote the co-op program would be to use the budding skills of the marketing students in CVTE. One approach would be to use the “spotlight” videos featuring co-op students at the job, which run on the school’s YouTube channel, as a way to demonstrate to prospective employers the quality of work being done by Madison Park students and the impact a co-op opportunity can have on a young life.

Develop a student-generated employer database. As a summer employment project, organize students to develop a database of potential co-op employers. By referring to public records with the Massachusetts’ Secretary of State and others filed with the City of Boston, students can identify and create a roster of businesses in the city that are potential co-op partners. Visits to those employers would allow students to introduce the co-op program, answer questions employers might have, learn from employers the needs they have for interns and create many new and exciting relationships for Madison Park with the Boston business community.

Allow more autonomy at Madison Park. There are 39 regional vocational-technical schools in the MAVA network. Madison Park needs to be independent district with its own superintendent and its own school committee. Allowing more autonomy would enable Madison

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Park to sharpen its profile as a standout vocational-technical high school. Arguments against the idea include the fact that the city would still need to fund the \$15 million to \$20 million budget (other regional voc-tech schools are funded by the communities that send students); if it became a regional school it could entice students from other communities who would take seats intended for inner-city kids; and a blatant bias that Madison Park hasn't earned the opportunity to be an independent school considering its history of underperforming. But more autonomy to Madison Park in some form could open the door to more entrepreneurial management and academic growth at the school.

Endnotes

- 1 Telephone interview with Kevin McCaskill, executive director of MPTVHS - June 10, 2020
- 2 Telephone interview with David DiBarri, Oct. 20, 2020
- 3 Telephone interview with Kevin McCaskill, June 10, 2020
- 4 2018–2021 Teacher Salary Grid, Boston Teachers Union, <https://btu.org/contracts/>
- 5 Johnston, Katie, “I am left with nothing’: Marriott Copley terminates half its staff, adding to the thousands of hotel workers unemployed around Boston,” The Boston Globe, Nov. 15, 2020, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/11/15/nation/marriott-copley-terminates-half-its-staff-thousands-hotel-workers-unemployed-around-boston/>
- 6 Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance, Long-Term Occupation Projections, 2018–2028, <https://lmi.dua.eol.mass.gov/lmi/LongTermOccupationProjections>
- 7 New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Inc., Visiting Team Report, Madison Park Technical Vocational High School, Oct., 25, 2018, pg. 150.
- 8 Source: Mass. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, School and District Profiles, <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00350537&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=307&>
- 9 Telephone interview with Kevin McCaskill, Sept. 16, 2020
- 10 Telephone interview with Richard Lavoie, Oct. 27, 2020
- 11 Telephone interview with Pinkney-Chase Nov. 12, 2020
- 12 Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance, Long-Term Occupation Projections, 2018–2028, <https://lmi.dua.eol.mass.gov/lmi/LongTermOccupationProjections>

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