

# Think Forward New England: Profiles of Innovation

## Margarita Muñiz Academy



Image courtesy of Margarita Muñiz Academy

### Key Lessons

- A coherent school mission that's understood by all members of the community can help a school maintain continuity even amid upheaval.
- High-quality dual language education is not only about building proficiency in two languages, it is about helping students use both languages to make sense of the world, celebrating students' cultures, and deepening the curriculum.
- Investing in relationships, modeling self-care, and slowing down to listen to students' perspectives and needs are critical for supporting students equitably.
- Connecting students to their communities through authentic experiences allows students to see themselves as part of a vibrant community they can both contribute to and benefit from.

### Key Questions

- How can high schools create coherence and community wide understanding about the core approaches they prioritize?
- What staffing and advisory models can ensure that every student has a strong relationship with at least one caring adult to whom they can talk about their real lives?
- What instructional approaches allow students to see their languages and cultures reflected in their learning and contributing to their identities?

## A dual-language school deeply connected to its community

Margarita Muñiz Academy was founded in 2012 as an [Innovation School](#) in Boston, MA. Innovation schools were developed according to criteria established in 2010 by the state and are in-district and autonomous. Muñiz Academy has its own governance structure, and is an open-enrollment school welcoming all students who are interested in studying in two languages. The school's mission:

*The Margarita Muñiz Academy is dedicated to full cultural and linguistic fluency in Spanish and English for all our students. Through deep partnerships with our families and community, we prepare students for higher education, careers, and civic leadership.*

Shortly before school buildings were closed in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Muñiz Academy's leadership team had begun a process of reflection through a 2019 Barr

Foundation project, [Portrait of a Graduate](#), which is intended to “articulate the vision of what all high school students will know and be able to do in order to succeed in college, career, and the community.” During this process, the Muñoz Academy renamed the project “Portrait of a Scholar” to reflect the inclusion of all students, not just graduates.

The school’s development of its Portrait of a Scholar led to a number of changes focused on providing greater opportunities for student voice and participation. The pandemic paused that work, but the experiences of remote learning ultimately reaffirmed the school’s vision. This innovation profile focuses on the pause and what came after: how the Muñoz Academy community came together at the beginning of the pandemic, how it evolved during remote learning, and what it is moving forward into the future.

### Margarita Muñoz at a glance

- Boston, MA
- Innovation school, open enrollment
- Grades 9–12
- 320 students
- 71% ever-English learners (both students currently designated as English learners and those reclassified out of English learner status), of those 48% are current English learners

## Responding to multiple pandemics

As Muñoz Academy staff and students reflected on their experiences over the past eighteen months, it quickly became clear that the pandemic was only one among an interconnected set of crises that the school has navigated. Ruth Senise, a family coordinator with eight years experience at Muñoz Academy, noted, “It wasn’t even the pandemic. It was so much that was going on with racism. It was so much that it didn’t only impact the kids, it also impacted us as a community. It was a rough couple of months.”

The Muñoz Academy community was deeply affected by the multiple pandemics of COVID, racism, and socioeconomic crisis. Looking back a year later, teachers, staff, and students shared stories of how the school’s existing relationships with students and families and its commitment to bilingualism and biculturalism provided the foundations to pivot from an in-person school

to a remote community focused on multiple needs in addition to academic and social-emotional needs. The two family coordinators became crucial connectors, building on deep relationships they already had with students and families.

Those first months of the pandemic, from March through June 2020, continue to be vivid in the minds of staff, teachers and students at Muñoz Academy. In those months the focus was on meeting immediate needs. Senise remembered, “It was very hard to juggle with so many of our families that they had

COVID, and we had kids that were isolated by themselves, and the families couldn’t get to the stores. It was really hard at the beginning.” The staff identified families with food insecurity or housing challenges, they worked to make sure that students had their technology needs met, and they focused on providing emotional support. Everyone jumped in to identify needs and find solutions.

### Core principles

- Dual-Language Preparation
- Expeditionary Learning
- Anti-Racist for Equity Practices
- College and Career Focused
- Family and Community Engagement
- Civic Leadership

A focus on relationships was threaded throughout the school's response to the multiple pandemics. One of the assistant heads of school, Antonio Arvelo, reflected, "We had a lot of food insecurity, but also social-emotional needs that needed to be met. Housing sometimes. And I think one of the key ways that we were able to keep a pulse on all of our kids was that our students had someone in the school that they had already previously built an authentic relationship with."

That focus on quality connections, as well as a prioritization of self-care for both students and adults, led Muñiz Academy to modify the daily schedule (and adjust it throughout the year to adapt to changes). The adjustments focused on slowing down: each class was fifteen minutes shorter so students could have a break between Zoom meetings. One day per week was dedicated to office hours for individual teacher-student check-ins. Small-group meetings were held three times per week, with one dedicated to one-on-one meetings. Each of these ended up being spaces for students to connect with teachers. Even the fifteen-minute break evolved into instances when some students stayed online and chatted with teachers.

The school's focus on relationships was critical, in part because of widespread mental-health challenges and isolation throughout the school community. The school nurse, Georgianna Marks, who has been at Muñiz Academy since it opened in 2012, noted that between checking in with those students who normally would have visited her office, and the ongoing support meetings teachers held with students, "That social isolation was a big red flag because our kids were not even seeing their friends. They were staying in the house. The depression and the anxiety was sky high, so one of the things we did was we did a six-week support group that we started looking at social and emotional needs."

Staff and teachers used multiple modalities to stay in touch with students. The two family coordinators built on their existing relationships with students, visited the students at their homes, and continued to focus on helping students become advocates for themselves and their families. But it wasn't only the students with needs. Senise reflected on her own experience of those first months: "Even we as staff members, we didn't realize that we were even going through some type of depression as well. When I noticed it in myself, I was like, 'Wait a minute, what's going on?'. . . This is not what I'm accustomed to. I'm accustomed to going up and down the stairs, helping people, not computer and stuff like that. That sense of community, that sense of family has always been here."

The school leadership explicitly supported all staff in both their own self-care and in building skills to connect with students and continue with academics. Almost every person interviewed mentioned support from at least one of the school leaders or pointed out ways in which the leadership had made adjustments that helped them in their teaching or learning.

Throughout the summer and fall teachers were provided with professional development on remote learning and had time to share with each other strategies that were working. Assistant head of school Dan Abramoski commented, "At the beginning of this year [we made] space for staff to lead their own professional development, and to share practices that they were using to engage students and connect with students. And so we devoted a lot of PD in August and September and October, to staff-requested and staff-run professional development about remote learning best practices. And I think that really helped to create some norms and expectations about what good remote teaching looks like."

Keeping in mind the ongoing challenges students and teachers were facing with the multiple pandemics, Muñiz Academy has spent the last year adjusting to limitations presented by remote learning while at the same time using its core mission to guide key decisions. For example, one specific aspect of remote learning at Muñiz Academy was incorporating dual-language practices into remote learning. A number of lessons emerged over the year, particularly the importance of “translanguaging”—the affirmation of students using both languages to make sense of the world rather than focusing on academic achievement in one language or the other. Teachers increased their flexibility in how they use language to teach content and in how students use language to communicate their learning.

## Innovation spotlight

Although the initial reaction of Muñiz Academy’s educators to the pandemics of COVID, racism, and economic inequities was to find new ways to “do school,” together they discovered a counterintuitive insight: they made it through the disrupted school year by doubling down on the school’s existing core mission and design principles. In other words, Muñiz Academy steadied itself during all the upheaval by reaffirming the essential elements of what they’d always done, even in new circumstances. In particular the school focused on three pillars: dual-language instruction, expeditionary learning, and anti-racist education.

Students identified similar pillars, though they sometimes used different terms. They highlighted the opportunity for bilingualism, the community of caring, and the multiple opportunities for experiences outside the classroom. In particular they described developing a sense of identity, academic purpose, and career goals. Muñiz Academy student Francelli noted, “I feel like I wouldn’t have wanted to be a teacher, probably, if I would’ve went to a different school. I want to be a teacher, a math teacher. So I think that Muñiz Academy really influenced that for me.”

### A dual-language approach that affirms cultural identities and experiences

Muñiz Academy weaves the dual-language approach to learning and teaching across content areas and grades. Their approach explicitly calls out developing cultural proficiency and identity, building community, scaffolding language development, and embedding language learning across school experiences.

Students described this approach as a key reason they had chosen to attend Muñiz Academy. Eleventh-grader Karla explained, “My first language is Spanish and it feels good to be in a community where you can express yourself by speaking your language.” This connection between language, self-expression, and identity emerged in multiple conversations. Francelli added that her experience with Muñiz Academy deepened her cultural proficiency: “Bilingual learning is so important and it’s not just about learning a second language, [it] is about learning in a second language . . . and it’s so important to be able to communicate with others.”

The students we spoke with described the power of learning two languages, of learning in two languages, and of learning content that was relevant to them: “I learned a lot of things that I don’t think I would’ve learned at other schools. For example, here, since we’re a bilingual school, we don’t only just focus on . . . the history of the United States. We also learned about a lot of countries in Latin America, and I really liked that.”

Not surprisingly, figuring out how to implement the dual-language process through remote learning brought challenges—but also resulted in valuable lessons learned. Before the pandemic, teachers tended to be more explicit about when learning and teaching happened in Spanish, and when in English. With remote learning, they revisited their teaching practices. Dania Vazquez, the head of school, described conversations among teachers during the fall about how to approach dual-language instruction during the pandemic. They talked more about translanguaging, the idea that students can use both languages together to communicate and understand the world around them. Teachers affirmed the practice of going back and forth between languages, allowing students to respond in the language they are most comfortable in, and using multiple languages to access academic content. Muñiz Academy is focusing more on deepening students’ abilities to use language to communicate and make sense of the world than on a more limited view of English language acquisition.

### **Expeditionary learning: strong relationships, competency-based evaluation, and community connections**

As the year progressed, the school leadership renewed its commitment to expeditionary learning as it saw the importance of its values in pandemic schooling.

One key element of Muñiz Academy’s expeditionary learning model is “Crew”—the term it uses to describe small groups of students who meet regularly with one teacher. It provides an opportunity for teachers to build relationships with students in order to guide them in making connections between each of their experiences throughout their years at Muñiz Academy. Crew is not unique to Muñiz Academy, but teachers who have used it at other schools noted that its use of Crew had some unique characteristics and was different from other schools where they have worked. Noted Stephanie Diaz, an eleventh-grade English teacher who has been with Muñiz Academy for seven years, “We have this focus on communication, and being able to talk to students about what’s going on in their lives, like that, led it to a space where they could speak with their teachers about what was happening at home.”

The school also used a Crew model with teachers, creating “a real space for teachers to be able to connect with each other and do some self-care, and to model what it looks like to do self-care with students.” Arvelo noted that the depth of personal relationships between teachers and students is explicitly connected to student identity development, as well as helping students build a path for themselves. He envisions students who develop their self-understanding and goals through their different experiences beginning in ninth grade: “We’re using [Crew] as a springboard to help them create that vision and that path for themselves that then leads to those experiences that feel authentic to them. . . . If things go well, it’s a program that they’ve been envisioning for themselves, perhaps shifting it along the way, but doing so in a knowledgeable way so that they’re invested in a plan that’s relevant, and with a vision that’s theirs.”

Competency-based grading, another key component of Muñiz Academy’s expeditionary learning, turned out to be a critical lever for supporting student learning in a year when student attendance was often spotty. Diaz, the English teacher, noted that by asking students to provide evidence of learning rather than completing a list of homework assignments, she has more flexibility to “focus on the important skills. . . . It takes some of the anxiety away of checking

the grade book like, ‘What’s my average at today? Let me do a couple of random pieces of homework that were assigned three months ago. Let’s see if my grade goes up a little bit.’”

The commitment to competency-based learning lends itself to being responsive to student experiences, by maintaining consistently high expectations for all students but not seeking a one-size-fits-all demonstration of their learning. Students noted that, this year in particular, teachers demonstrated an understanding of the complexity of their experiences, whether it was depression, or time management, or just general difficulties.

A third key feature of expeditionary learning is a deliberate and explicit connection between learning in the classroom and being out in the community. Arvelo noted that as part of the Portrait of a Scholar work, Muñiz Academy’s staff and teachers have deepened their commitment to helping students make explicit connections between their classroom experiences, their out-of-school experiences, and their career aspirations and vision.

For example, Arvelo described a partnership with Hale Intrepid Academy in which students needing help to meet their learning targets will spend the summer learning in the city: “While they’ll be learning math, science, writing and reading, the focus will be around Boston housing and inequities of Boston housing. . . . So they’re going to be traveling the city interviewing different organizations to learn more about that.” Arvelo emphasized that these kinds of learning opportunities aren’t reserved for students who are already excelling. Especially for students who need more support, he said, “We still want to make sure that what we do is relevant and is tied to what’s happening in their communities.”

## **An ongoing commitment to anti-racist education**

Teachers, staff, and school leaders all commented on the pandemics of COVID and racism, including how the murder of George Floyd impacted them and pushed them to recommit to anti-racism. Muñiz Academy’s leaders had always seen the school as anti-racist, but they were compelled to take action on that value and wanted to expand and articulate what anti-racism looks like in practice.

During the 2020–21 school year, all teachers participated in professional development focused on anti-racism and examined each component of their school through an anti-racist lens. They began with carefully reflecting on competency-based learning, a core component of expeditionary learning. They determined that the focus on students’ demonstrating competency rather than requiring a certain amount of seat time aligns with their commitment to anti-racism by providing students multiple modalities to access high academic standards. Similarly, the humanities teacher described reviewing her curriculum through the lens of anti-racism—from the texts she uses to her pedagogical practices.

In addition to academics, they looked at school policies, such as the requirement for school uniforms. Students were involved in the process as well, and the majority opted to keep uniforms but to increase opportunities for self-expression through more flexibility. Finally, they looked at the school as a community. The school leadership asked each teacher and staff member to build deep relationships with two students, positing that knowing others better contributes to anti-racism. And the school continues to examine what it means to center student voices.

This process of examining all aspects of Muñiz Academy through the lens of anti-racism is not a one-time event at the school. When asked about the school’s vision, every teacher and leader included anti-racism as one of their core values. The commitment is seen in their Portrait of a Scholar, which outlines plans for the near future that include Equity Roundtables with multiple stakeholders, continued professional development for staff to further develop their anti-racist definition, and the establishment of “a process to create an authentic anti-racist education framework that guides curriculum, instruction, and school policies.”

## Looking ahead

The Muñiz Academy community is clear-eyed about the work still to be done to achieve the vision set out in the school’s Portrait of a Scholar. “We are imagining renewed relationships among all of us; a renewal of how we do curriculum to really bring community into our space and to go out into the community,” Vazquez reflected. “And we want to focus our ongoing professional development on affirming the work we are doing—renewing and deepening our practices.”

Staff described their desire to retain their deepened relationships with students, their connections to families, and the ongoing support of all school staff through support from leadership and relevant professional development. Priscilla Aponte, one of the family coordinators, noted that she wants to “[make] sure that our students and our families have the resources that they need, empower them to be leaders, and to initiate, and to move forward in their lives and help others as well, and just celebrating our culture. Celebrating who we are, our community, our students, our families, and so it just comes all in a full circle for me.”

Staff and teachers also described identifying areas in which they can make more explicit the school’s values. This includes building connections to the community that include student connections to work and to seeing the explicit connection between classroom learning and their future, as well as more effectively communicating the school vision to students, and listening to them and the disconnect they continue to describe between what happens in the classroom and what they see for their own future.

## Conclusion

Abramoski summarized what we heard from staff, teachers, students and parents about Muñiz Academy’s journey since the onset of the pandemic:

“We will always say that our goal is students graduate college and career-ready, and that there are three things that are unique about our school that we think help students get there. It’s expeditionary learning, it’s dual language, and it’s anti-racist education for equity. . . . And I don’t think we’re changing that in the post-pandemic world, I think we’re doubling down on what we know works. We know that dual-language education works for our students, and that it supports their identity development and their academic development. We know that expeditionary learning supports students in deeper learning and developing the relationships they need in . . . a post-pandemic world. And we know that anti-racist practices

are important for our staff and for our students to fully engage with school and be prepared for life after school. So I don't think we're altering what we know works—we're emphasizing and reinvesting in it.”

As high schools across New England enter into another school year—one in which the pandemic appears far from over—Muñiz Academy's lesson is worth considering. The moment is ripe for schools to take a close look at the commitments they hold most dearly, and consider the following questions:

- Leaders, staff, and students at Muñiz Academy all articulated a similar set of practices that the school uses to help students graduate college- and career-ready. How can high schools create coherence and community wide understanding about the core approaches they prioritize?
- Students at Muñiz Academy said they felt that adults in their school really understand where they're coming from. What staffing and advisory models can ensure that every student has a strong relationship with at least one caring adult to whom they can talk about their real lives?
- Muñiz Academy's approach to dual-language education and their affirmation of translanguaging promotes students' integration of two languages and two cultures into their learning and their identities. What instructional approaches will set students up to see their language and cultures reflected in their learning and contributing to their identities?



## About the Authors

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## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

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