



Barnstable embraces bright side of the charter school model

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By Julia Steiny

Barnstable—This is the second of three stories about how the pressures of Proposition 21/2 combined with creative management to improve schools in Barnstable, Mass.

In 1993, the hostilities between Barnstable's municipal government and the school community were heating up. Proposition 21/2 in Massachusetts had put all town and school budgets on a serious fiscal diet, and many towns were hosting shrill debates similar to Barnstable's.

In 1993, Massachusetts passed its landmark Education Reform Act. Some of its provisions were designed to help financially distressed districts and school communities cut through a wastefully expensive tangle of rules, regulations, laws, contracts and policies. Bureaucratic procedures and constraints prevented school professionals from responding directly and quickly to children's needs.

The Reform Act tried to help school communities take back decision-making powers from overbearing bureaucracies, by promoting "site-based management." So, for example, school-site councils got more authority to manage their work, and principals were responsible for hiring the staff. But even these provisions were so slow and imperfect that Massachusetts later passed charter-school laws to increase school autonomy further.

(Just recently, Rhode Island's new law S3050 put its municipalities and school committees on a diet similar to that of Prop 21/2, also generating animosities and finger-pointing.)

In 1993, Jack McLeod, a new vice president of the Barnstable Teachers Association, returned from his first statewide union Leadership Conference all excited about the then-proposed legislation for Horace Mann Charter Schools. Unlike "commonwealth" charters, which are more typical of charters nationally, Horace Mann schools can operate only with approval from both the school committee and the teachers union. McLeod, who later became the union's president, says, "Site-based management gives the school more autonomy in exchange for more accountability. It's a way to improve the quality of public education and place our profession in a far more positive light."

McLeod took the charter concept to his friend Tom McDonald, a high-energy principal who was also immediately smitten. Since McDonald already had the full support of the teachers union, he knew that the Horace Mann route would be the fastest way to reduce his chronic frustrations with trying to manage his school.

McDonald says, "Legally, the principal and a board of trustees run Horace Mann schools, so in effect, the school is its own LEA [Local Education Authority]. The school and I were answerable to the School Committee and the Department of Education on outcomes only. How we got the outcomes was our business. The trouble with the Ed Reform Act of 1993 is that if you don't have control of the money, you don't have control of the school. [So becoming a charter] allowed us to be an incubator, to try nontraditional strategies. Frankly, some things worked, and some didn't. But for once I didn't have to wait for the bureaucracy [Central Office] to get things done."

Teacher Sue Soares, who worked with McDonald writing the Horace Mann application, concurs: "We wanted to be more innovative, and we were. We could work with students however we felt fit, within the standards. It was wonderful to have the power to change things we weren't happy about."

With enthusiasm wafting from McDonald's school, the School Committee began to wonder if the whole district could somehow be "chartered." Kevin Harrington, an eight-year School Committee member and Boston financial expert, says, "The principals weren't being allowed to manage anything. They couldn't adjust their spending to run their programs. Increasingly I felt we should move from a traditional model to local control, at the school site. Charters let us do that." He chaired a group of 25 local stakeholders, representing a spectrum of charter supporters and haters, to examine the issue.

Totally sold on the idea, the two principals on the committee immediately applied for Horace Mann charters. In time, one was granted but the other was not. But with two such schools, the little town of Barnstable already had as many charters as much larger districts, except Boston.

Like most superintendents, Barnstable's then-super wasn't interested in handing over his power to principals and teachers. Supers tend to like being the ones who think up the big ideas that others are supposed to implement. However, Barnstable's Horace Mann schools happened to be two of its largest, so about 20 percent of the district's staff already knew the joys of having a hand on their school's rudder.

In the course of the angry debates over central office-versus-school site control, the School Committee split between those for and those against the district going "all-charter." And once again, the poor, embattled parents and taxpayers were forced to take sides.

In 2004, the School Committee's pro-charter majority asked the superintendent to step down. He did.

Immediately, the School Committee asked Tom McDonald to be the interim superintendent.

Delighted, McDonald assembled a new management team which set to work writing a "Memorandum of Understanding," between Central Office and the remaining non-charter schools. These now-called 'contract' schools got charter powers and responsibilities, without — a blissful bonus — the added layer of bureaucratic state oversight. Beyond the relatively brief "Understanding," each school writes its own bylaws. In effect, principals become school CEOs, and the site councils the board of directors. Together, they must meet state and local achievement targets. Indeed, to get a raise, principals must meet or exceed agreed-upon goals.

Changes began immediately.

McDonald says, "We couldn't issue more charters, but we had the legal authority to create site-base-managed schools. We had no money, but we did have great people. So we gave some people more responsibility and reorganized the district."

After years of fighting, Barnstable's school-community morale was soaring.

Next week we'll see how the schools finally made peace with the town, by joining "back office" functions with Barnstable's City Hall.