

A Look Inside Blackstone Valley Prep, Rhode Island's First Mayoral Academy - Cranston, RI Patch

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As Cranston residents and officials question whether they want a mayoral academy in their city, the first mayoral academy in the state is already in full swing.

On Friday afternoon, Cumberland Mayor Daniel McKee and Mike Magee, director of RI Mayoral Academies, took reporters on a tour of the school.

Blackstone Valley prep originally opened in 2009 as the state's first Mayoral Academy. At the time it, was called Democracy Prep Blackstone Valley, after the organization that helped to found the school, [Democracy Prep](#). Democracy Prep [was forced out](#) in December of 2010 by the board of directors after a financial dispute with the founder, Seth Andrew.

Currently the school operates under the guidance of Jeremy Chiappetta, a Penn State grad and a Yale MBA recipient who formerly served as the special assistant to the Providence superintendent of schools.

He oversees a school that emphasizes joyful instruction, college as the ultimate goal, collaboration between teachers, a longer school day, more time on task and diversity of the student population, as well as a rigorous focus on assessment and keeping up with standards.

Similar ideas are being proposed in [Achievement First's application](#) for its Cranston mayoral academy.

Currently, the school serves students in kindergarten, first grade and fifth grade. Next year it will add second and sixth grades.

Inside Blackstone Valley Prep, walls were painted blue, yellow and white, the classrooms and hallways were covered with fresh student work and young students, kindergarteners and first graders walked

back and forth between the bathroom and their classroom.

Each classroom was named after the college the teacher attended. There was Brown, Boston University and Michigan, among others. The first grade class was called the class of 2026, a reference to those students' eventual college graduation date. The kindergarteners were the class of 2027. Some teachers also wore shirts from their universities to continue the theme.

A [YouTube video](#) posted online shows BVP's emphasis on college at a young age as a teacher quizzes first graders on where they are going to college.

The school employs a number of young teachers. Coleen Colarusso, a BVP representative, said that the average age of the teachers at the school was in the mid-20s. She said a lead teacher who has a few years of experience, as well as certification, teaches each classroom. The lead teacher is accompanied by a teaching fellow, who is working toward certification. She said a teaching fellow's salary is comparable to a first year Providence teacher's salary. Teachers at the academy are not unionized and do not receive a pension. Instead the school offers a matching 401k program in which the school offers a five percent match.

Creative instruction and collaboration models are being used at the school.

[Another video](#) shows the "joyful instruction" model in which teachers conduct lessons in an almost cheer-like manner. This video shows the music teacher, Ms. Caruso, teaching students English with a musical twist.

Time spent on task is a key priority at the school. Students use hand signals to ask to go to the bathroom to avoid interrupting the class. The teacher signals back and the student leaves the room and returns quietly. One teacher also hurried his students from a group project back to their seats by offering "points" to the team that could return the quickest. The thought is that by keeping students on task and avoiding interruptions there will be more time for instruction, school officials said.

Collaboration is used by teachers to take the strain off the longer school day. Rather than have teachers make up their own individualized lesson plan for each class they teach, teachers share lesson plans across the grade. This allows teachers to really "in-depth investigate one or two subjects," Colarusso said. It also helps to take some burden off of teachers.

Also, every Wednesday students are dismissed at 1:30 p.m. so teachers and administrators can meet for planning and professional development. Educators use these two-and-a-half hours to go over data and lesson plans and visit some of the best schools in the area to discover "best practices," according to Colarusso.

One first grade teacher, Connie Giblin, noted that collaboration helps to ensure students receive consistent instruction across classrooms.

BVP pulls many teachers from well-known programs like Teach for America and AmeriCorps. Despite the transient nature of those programs, Giblin said that many young teachers will want to stay because the academy was a good place to work.

"I think what keeps the enthusiasm up [for teachers] is seeing what the kids can accomplish."

Other than Wednesday, all students are in school from 7:40 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. Daily instruction at the elementary level includes 3.5 hours of reading, 1.5 hours of math, 1.5 hours of art, music or physical education and 45 minutes of science or social studies. As students get to middle school

more time is dedicated to science, social studies and writing.

To gauge student progress, BVP uses student assessments to determine where students need to focus.

The school's fifth graders tested at 73 percent proficient in reading and 32 percent in math compared with state averages of 71 and 55 percent respectively on the [NECAP](#) during their first year at the school (2010-2011), which school officials have said reflects the diversity and academic needs of their new students.

The school's own in-house assessments note that only about half the fifth grade students came in to their first year at the academy reading at grade level (previously they attended other public schools), by December, three fourths of those students were reading at grade level.

School officials claim that with more time they will be able to show better results.

The school has put an emphasis on diversity. Fifty-five percent of students are black or Latino. Sixty-seven percent receive free or reduced lunch.

"We are deliberately trying to bring communities together," said Colarusso.

The RI Department of Education mandates that charters should focus on underserved communities and won't approve a charter unless they serve the poor. The proposed academy in Cranston would be no different, according to Magee.

At the end of every Friday, the students, teachers and some parents gather in the cafeteria for what they call their town hall meeting.

On this Friday, the town hall started around 3:00 p.m. with a boisterous "shout out" session in which teachers will praise students who have worked especially hard during the week.

"Boston University has a shoouuuutttt-ouuuuuutttt," screamed one of the teachers.

"Shout-out!" screamed the audience back.

The teacher asked for Liz to stand and be praised.

"Liz always answers in complete sentences and shows a great enthusiasm for reading," yelled the teacher, "Shout out!"

A student or two from each class was given a "shout out" and then the first graders put on a recital featuring songs they had learned over the past six weeks in music class.

The songs included "The Lion Sleeps Tonight", "La Bamba", and a "Somewhere over the Rainbow" mash up, as well as the Blackstone Valley Prep alma mater, which was set to the tune of "This land is your land."

"This land is your land, this land is my land," sang the students, "From California to the Blackstone Valley/ this school is made for you and me."