
Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School aims to form unique bond with Roxbury

Posted by Matt Rocheleau

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(Jocelyn Gabriel)

An event was held in Hibernian Hall in Dudley Square on Monday evening to celebrate the launch of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School, which will open in the fall. At the reception, from left to right: Chris Jones, vice president of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative's board; Chad Gifford, chairman of BPE's board and former Bank of America chairman; Bob Gallery, BPE board member and president of Bank of America Massachusetts; and Clint Lawrence, chairman of the board for Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

When it opens in the fall, Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School is optimistic that it can fuel improvement at nearby schools by partnering with a longstanding neighborhood organization.

"This neighborhood is going to demand success. They're going to demand that we work with them," said Chad Gifford, board chairman of the Boston Plan for Excellence, an education nonprofit. "And we're going to demand to the neighborhood that they work with us."

BPE partnered with the community-based nonprofit Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative to develop the charter school.

The school will move into the former Emerson Elementary building in Roxbury. It will serve as BPE's first "teaching hospital," drawing staff from the highly regarded Boston Teacher Residency program to bring to the school a mix of new teachers and experienced ones who can learn from one another.

Jesse Solomon directs BPE, which co-founded and manages the decade-old Boston Teacher Residency program that recruits and trains college graduates to become teachers.

He believes the key to student success is quality teaching. Solomon equated the academic teaching hospital idea to how some of Boston's top medical hospitals are run, like Massachusetts General Hospital, which trains Harvard Medical School students.

"If you have to go to the hospital, you want to go to somewhere like MGH," he said. "We want to embed the teaching of adults, [new teachers], in a place that's great at teaching kids."

The competition for families to secure a seat in the school for this coming fall was tough. Around 300 students entered a citywide lottery for 132 available seats, which are divided equally among K1, K2, and first grade, Solomon said.

The competition for teachers to secure a desk at the Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School was even tougher. More than 400 applied for 18 positions – one teacher for each of the six classrooms, which will also be staffed with two resident teachers per room, he said.

The school plans to maintain an average ratio of three teachers for every 22 students.

"Great teachers are crucial, but they alone are not enough," Solomon said.

There will be high expectations for teachers and students alike, officials said. In an effort to establish a “strong, coherent” school, administrators plan to schedule longer school days and a longer school year. Those added in-school hours will give teachers flexibility to teach students on an individual or small group basis in order to reinforce concepts some may need more time with.

Charter schools operate with greater flexibility than traditional public schools and are meant to develop innovative ways of educating. In 2010, the state passed legislation that allowed Boston to open at least four “in-district” charter schools, without teachers’ union approval.

Approved by the state’s education board in late February, the Roxbury school will be the third in-district charter to open in Boston and the first elementary in-district charter. It will add one grade each year, eventually becoming a full K-5 school for about 300 students.

“The new school is part of a strategy to catalyze improvement of all schools in the Dudley area and ensure all children in the neighborhood have access to the supports they need and a seamless, high-quality education,” said a statement from John Barros, director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and a board member of BPE.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative has been working to revitalize a section of Roxbury and North Dorchester since it was founded 28 years ago. BPE has been working in the city’s school district since its founding, which also happened in 1984.

Solomon said the two partnering organizations have formed ties with about 40 other community groups to talk about and help with aspects of the new school. He said a series of meetings were held to ask the neighborhood: “What do you want in the school?”

“You don’t want to just plop down a school somewhere,” he said.

Boston Schools Superintendent Carol R. Johnson said the school features one of the more cohesive neighborhood partnerships in the city.

“Whenever there is a strong partnership with an anchor community organization it increases the likelihood of a long-term relationship that will benefit students and families,” she said in an interview Monday evening.

Looking across a packed room on the third floor of Hibernian Hall, where more than 150 people gathered to celebrate the school’s launch, the superintendent said: “This speaks volumes about how much commitment there is to this school in the community.”

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