To Enrich Lives And Improve Society Through Education – One Student At A Time

A BLENDED PARTNERSHIP

Baltimore County Public Schools and AdvancePath Academics, Inc.
Reimagine Learning to Build Options for All Students

Authored by John Super – Education Industry Consultant

In 2003, Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) took on an unusual task. Despite achieving national recognition as a top performing school district, then-Superintendent Dr. Joe Hairston gathered together community and district stakeholders to critically assess the district’s performance, identify areas of under-performance, and determine how students could be more effectively served. What was learned surprised district leadership - if the district was to truly meet the needs of every student it would have to literally reinvent itself by expanding its vision to eliminate the inherent inequities found in the traditional public education setting and create an actionable and measurable plan for ensuring equitable access and support for every student across the board spectrum of its community.

From this work came a “Blueprint” for action forming a solid foundation for re-engineering the district. A decade later, the Blueprint is still relevant and guiding actions. It has survived succession of leadership, changes in the school board and turnover among staff. The Blueprint has embraced the changing educational landscape of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as well as the emergence of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) while steadily focusing on the importance of successful outcomes for every student. It speaks loudly to all stakeholders - community, teachers, administrators, staff, parents, students, and state and national leaders - and is articulated as an alignment of all aspects of the educational process to facilitate equity and adequacy of resources, linking resources to individual student needs. The goals set through the development of the Blueprint embraced the core values of public education and the role it plays in supporting every student by eliminating achievement gaps and accelerating student achievement. Students may graduate with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to reach their potential as responsible and productive citizens.

Today, BCPS continues to be nationally recognized for its achievements. It has seen all of its high schools achieve Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) targets and the District ranks in the top five nationwide in the 4-year cohort measurement of high school graduation. At the state level, it leads in both graduation rates and reduction in dropout rates and it has continuously maintained focus - even in times of challenging budget cuts – on matching learner needs with resources to assure every Baltimore County student has an equal opportunity for achieving their learning potential.
The Partnership: A Transformational Step

In commenting on the recognition BCPS has received for its outstanding performance and continuing success in serving the needs of every student, district leadership has frequently pointed to its partnership with AdvancePath Academics as one of the key initiatives supporting their efforts. As Dr. S. Dallas Dance, the current Superintendent of BCPS, observes, "To achieve the level of greatness Baltimore County Public Schools aspires to, every student must be successful. The public-private partnership between our school system and AdvancePath Academics offers a unique and powerful opportunity for at-risk students to get back on track and raise their level of achievement through individualized lesson plans, flexible scheduling, and socio-emotional and academic interventions.” Indeed, the partnership forged between the district and AdvancePath Academics has proven to be a powerful transformational step in bringing a high quality blended learning option to meet the needs of BCPS high school students struggling to achieve high school graduation.

BCPS and AdvancePath Academics launched the first of six AdvancePath Academies in 2007. The partnership was forged in the urgent need to intercept high school students likely to drop out of school as well as those who were lagging behind their classmates. The previous work in developing the district Blueprint guided the process. There was a clear understanding of the persistent student achievement gap based upon diversity factors, student groupings, and individual student academic achievement versus the student’s potential.

In establishing the first AdvancePath Academy, a mutual commitment to a “standards based approach to student, school and organizational performance” was set forth and the joint effort of the district leadership and AdvancePath embraced a shared vision based upon research, the integrity of the AdvancePath Model and the strengths, beliefs and values of the school district and community. Bringing together this shared vision with the clarity of the Blueprint’s goals defined the standards by which the Academies would work within the district and included:

- Collection, disaggregation, access and meaningful use of data to improve student achievement and systemic process to determine student, parent, and staff expectations and satisfaction to facilitate engagement and communications with stakeholders
- Improvement of curriculum to be more user friendly, to have more depth and less breadth, to include central measures of individual student progress, and to provide instructional strategies that go beyond the traditional teaching methodology and address multi-culturalism
- Greater focus, consistency, effectiveness, and alignment with system priorities of professional development for staff
- Adequate, modern facilities to support instructional programs and accommodate enrollment growth
Implementing the AdvancePath Blended Learning Model

The goals for the partnership, while substantial, nevertheless aligned with the AdvancePath Model. AdvancePath Academics describes the AdvancePath Model as a Blended Learning system that specifically addresses the needs of high school students experiencing academic and socio-emotional or behavioral challenges and in danger of dropping out of school. Its primary focus is on academic performance in a positive behavioral intervention and support setting, leveraging the advantages of technology-based learning resources. The AdvancePath Model implemented within BCPS incorporated several key components aligned with the district’s Blueprint and necessary to serve the unique needs of students.

- Creation of small, personalized, safe learning environments for students who have been unsuccessful in previous educational environments
- Relevant and rigorous curricula offerings that link academic learning to real world experiences and are aligned with state, district and national standards
- Establishment of positive relationships between students, family members, school staff, and community social service providers
- Incorporation of 21st century skills and the development of social skills
- Use of technology and the fostering of experiential learning
- Emphasis on civic competencies of tolerance and conflict resolution
- Intentional design features that address dropout prevention and recovery
- Career pathways with rigorous preparation for college

By design, the goal of AdvancePath Academics in partnering with BCPS was the introduction of the best features of classroom interaction and focused technology-based instruction to personalize learning for students and empower them to take ownership of their education so they can achieve lifelong academic success in high school and beyond. In fact, the partnership has taken the lead in pioneering what has come to be known as “Blended Learning.”

Learning to Blend Resources and Leadership in a Public-Private Partnership

Creating a new partnership within a successful organization can be a challenging endeavor. The district commitment to balance the needs of its building leadership, teachers and district staff required the new Academies be fully integrated within the existing structures. It was necessary for assigned staff to retain their positions within the district as building administrators were responsible for supervision. Simultaneously, however, it was essential for AdvancePath Academics to be fully responsible for introducing and supporting the introduction of the AdvancePath Model to ensure it was implemented and operated with fidelity. Facilities were to be isolated for each Academy and special consideration was necessary for internet connectivity and unique school hours to support two or three learning sessions daily. AdvancePath provided the technology, curriculum, furniture and related infrastructure while working directly with the district staff to align and correlate curriculum to assure compliance with district standards. Additionally, AdvancePath assumed direct responsibility for staff training and Professional Development in all facets of Academy operations.

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Lines would inevitably be crossed and there would always be the danger of conflict and misunderstanding that could upend the desired positive results for students. The potential for misunderstanding and conflict resulted in the creation of a special relationship embracing school principals, district human resources, teachers and AdvancePath regional staff. Rather than disrupting it energized the programs. Careful coordination was taken to ensure district agreements and obligations were met while simultaneously affording AdvancePath staff the opportunity to work in tandem with the district and Academy staffs. Essential introductory training, ongoing professional development and continuing support to ensure the Academies were meeting the standards set forth in the partnership agreement was coordinated at all levels.

Teachers were carefully selected based upon their desire to work in the Academy setting and qualifications including endorsements in their subject content areas and licensure by the state. In creating this hybrid relationship it was soon evident teachers were coming to the belief they had the best of two worlds – the security and benefit of working with a top tier school system coupled with an opportunity to engage in a Blended Learning model specifically designed to serve at-risk students. With access to specially aligned and correlated curriculum materials, instructional supplies, resources developed in partnership with similar AdvancePath Academy’s nationwide, tailored professional development and the support of their local school administration and district leadership the teaching staff in the Academies were fully prepared to implement the AdvancePath Model with fidelity and achieve positive outcomes for every student.

**The Critical Role of Teachers in the AdvancePath Academy**

Teacher interviews provide important insights into the important role AdvancePath Academies play in successfully supporting the district’s goal of serving every child. They acknowledge the wide variety of students participating in the Academies describing their typical enrollment as “multi-racial; many levels of academics from good to struggling; typically significantly behind in their work – often as much as 1 ½ to 2 years; coming back after dropping out; many with socio-emotional and behavior challenges; and some students not comfortable in the traditional classroom.”

Indeed the Academies disproportionately serve minority populations. While the district’s overall demographic is 44% white, 39% African-American, 7% Hispanic Latino and 6% Asian the Academies, on average, see a 55% African-American enrollment. The schools in which the Academies are located are described as serving the most educationally challenged high school students in the district and are characterized as “Tier 3” schools with poor graduation rates, high percentages of free and reduced lunch, highly mobile populations and feeder middle schools that are primarily identified as mostly Title I schools. Students transitioning into these high schools tend to arrive with both social and emotional challenges and many of the students are in foster care or living in teenage group homes.
Yet, despite these challenging circumstances, the Academy teachers take a decidedly positive view when describing what they see with students on a daily basis inside an AdvancePath Academy. One teacher refers to students “buying into the magic” as they begin to “take control of their learning”. She believes the students are willing to work hard and see graduation as their goal. Further, she notes when the new superintendent visited her Academy, he “saw kids who had dreams of a future with graduation.” It is the combination of the AdvancePath Model, infrastructure, training, on-site support and professional development provided by AdvancePath Academics and the perception of district leadership embracing the program that creates the “magic”. In the words of this teacher, “AdvancePath is a key to success. Resources are there for immediate response and intervention. More than the physical Academy structure - and that is impressive - students can get help whenever it is needed. We become interactive mentors with our students.”

Clear Expectations

Another teacher added her reflections based upon six years in alternative education. “This represents new opportunities for students who can’t cope in the classroom. Students learn success and the 80% pass rate is a big thing – it works. Kids who liked 60% now embrace 80% and have clear expectations for their learning.” Teachers are working differently; they can see where students get confused and can differentiate instruction and provide instant feedback. “Chunking allows quick diagnosis,” she added, “and we can meet the different needs of every student in the classroom. There is no giving away of credits and the interactive classroom leads to a next level of higher order thinking. It reflects Common Core – inch wide and a mile deep. Students must think and extrapolate from the notes they have taken.”

Another perspective shared by the teachers centered on the importance of students experiencing success. A key feature of the AdvancePath Model is students experiencing learning success quickly and being recognized for their first positive step. “First success drives interest because students want to be successful. Kids strive for success and want to be recognized.” This, they add, is important because the students entering the Academy have not known success in the classroom. It is a good setting for students easily distracted, pregnant and young mothers and any student who will benefit from a shortened school day in an environment where academic rigor is not sacrificed.
A final question to teachers asked if the partnership was still relevant after six years and, given their experience and knowledge, could they now proceed with a similar program on their own. All agreed the partnership was important and, as one teacher put it, “Why fix something that isn’t broken. It is a package that works – it is not a computer lab or software solution. If it were possible to use software to get these results then AdvancePath would not be necessary.” They see the AdvancePath Model and the AdvancePath support team as powerful enablers assuring proper implementation and operations.

Achieving Educational Equity, Positive Outcomes

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Ultimately, the value of the partnership is measured by the impact the AdvancePath Academies have on student outcomes. As outlined by the BCPS Blueprint the goal was to eliminate the achievement gap and ensure every student had equal access to a quality education resulting in high school graduation. The Academies were to introduce the meaningful use of data to improve student achievement, provide a more user friendly and deep curriculum addressing multi-culturism, provide greater focus and alignment with system priorities of professional development and ensure adequate, modern facilities to support instructional programs.

The AdvancePath Academies have been recognized by the district for the modern and businesslike feel that creates a warm and inviting environment for student learning. A new high school building in the district incorporated an AdvancePath Academy into its design. The full use of technology provided through the partnership ensures every student has the necessary workspace and technology to engage fully in their studies while in the Academy as well as the internet connectivity for on-demand access outside the building. Through the implementation of the AdvancePath Model the provided curriculum is fully aligned with the district’s high school course offerings and students can transition between the Academies and their home high school classrooms with ease. Additionally, students unable to secure sufficient credits through traditional credit recovery programs have access to Academy services identical to the services provided full-time enrolled students making it possible for many students at-risk of not graduating on-time to recover their shortfall in credits and graduate with their class.

Since inception of the partnership the district has grown to six Academies spread geographically across the district. During the 2012 – 2013 school year the 4 Academies then operating helped the associated high schools increase their graduation rates by 8-21%. In addition, the inaugural Academy in 2007 provided sufficient support to its high school partner to graduate 28 students and meet AYP requirements for the year, thus preventing the school from being forced to restructure.

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A report generated at the end of the 2012-2013 school year detailed how the Academies were supporting the district in meeting the goals set forth in the 2003 Blueprint. Across the spectrum the Academies are serving students ages 15-19 enrolled in grades 9-12. These students, from general and special education, were long-term academic deficient (1 ½ to 2 plus years behind), credit recovery (6 months or less behind) and those wishing to accelerate their credit attainment.

To facilitate Academy success, the district, host high schools and the AdvancePath support team have developed a placement policy to ensure maximum enrollment with the goal of increased graduation rates for each host high school. Key components of this strategy include: (1) all 5th year seniors and 4th year students who are long-term academic and credit deficient are given placement priority; (2) juniors and sophomores who are long-term academic and deficient are identified by school counselors and given placement priority; (3) school counselors work with identified students and their parents to ensure a proper understanding of the Academy options and value it offers for enhancing the student’s academic potential; and, (4) students are given the choice to attend morning, afternoon or evening sessions and Summer School with the potential for optional Saturday studies.

From a student prospective, 276 students graduated during the 2012-2013 school year after participating in an AdvancePath Academy. Since inception, 710 students have graduated and all students satisfied the requirements for a standard high school diploma. Further, in the 2012-2013 school year, attending students completed over 1,813 courses, earned 934 credits and demonstrated to the district what a powerful resource the Academies are for meeting the needs of every student.

Because of this success and the participation of students from other high schools in the district, the role of the Academies continue to evolve. Blended Learning has proven very effective and is important in providing flexible learning opportunities for all students. Reflecting on the future and next steps for the partnership with AdvancePath Academics, Dr. Dance sees, “Not every school needs an Academy, but every single school needs Blended Learning. So how do we exactly expand our partnership – looking at it from a different lens – to put it in all our high schools?”

The conversation is on-going and the future for the partnership is bright as the partners look to benefit from their experiences as they move forward together. The creation and ongoing success of the BCPS-AdvancePath partnership has been forged in meeting the clear expectations set forth in the district’s vision for eliminating the inherent inequities found in the traditional public education setting and creating an actionable and measurable plan for ensuring equitable access and support for every student across the board spectrum of its community. The partners are successfully closing the gap in ensuring equitable access and support for every student and have achieved four critical steps in the process:

(1) The team has provisioned a high quality curriculum that is user friendly, capable of measuring individual student need and progress, and provides flexible instructional strategies through effective use of data management that goes beyond traditional teaching methodologies.
(2) District Leadership has committed to seeing students succeed (graduate) through the delivery of services by the partnership and continuously provides feedback to all stakeholders to promote and support Academy operations.

(3) Enrolled students quickly embrace the Academies and see the district, high schools, and teachers had not given up on them. They have responded with a recommitment to their own education.

(4) The Academies have created, through focused implementation and on-going professional development tailored to the AdvancePath Model, a positive, supportive and rigorous learning environment where students can safely reengage in learning and rapidly progress to graduation.

The partnership continues to evolve, providing ever-greater opportunity for students and teachers. It has been built on the integrity of the AdvancePath Model, which places a clear focus on positive and meaningful student outcomes, and with the support and encouragement of BCPS leadership, school administrators, and the AdvancePath support team. Today, the teachers in the AdvancePath Academies – fully supported by the partnership and guided by the goals of the “Blueprint,” – are bringing equitable access to every student so they may graduate prepared for college, careers, life and productive citizenship.

About AdvancePath.

AdvancePath Academics serves young people at risk of dropping out of school and non-traditional students. With the goal of improving academic outcomes without draining District budgets, AdvancePath opened its first “in-school” Academy in 2006. In 2009, the California State Attendance Review Board (SARB) recommended AdvancePath as a “model program” that Districts in California should consider partnering with to establish programs for at-risk youth. In 2012, AdvancePath was awarded the National Dropout Prevention Network’s National Crystal Star Award. Today, AdvancePath operates Academies nationwide, serving more than 4,000 students annually. Having successfully worked with over 22,000 students to date, AdvancePath Academies demonstrate that all students can learn and succeed in the right environment. With an overall student success rate of over 90% - 20,000 students have become successful. Over 5,000 students have received their high school diplomas, more than half of whom have progressed to post-secondary education.

For more information contact AdvancePath at: (757) 208-0900 | info@advancepath.com

About the author: John Super has been a frequent lecturer and writer on topics in secondary education and learning innovations. John’s career has spanned various executive capacities with Pearson Education, PLATO and most recently, with AdvancePath Academics, Inc. He is now retired but remains actively engaged in discussions on educational research and, applications in e-learning and Blended Learning.