

Recommendations

Introduction

The Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter Public School was founded in 1995 with the mission to assist parents in their essential role as the primary educators of their children. As a charter school and an independent school district solely accountable to the DOE, the BFCCPS set high goals and was afforded the autonomy from the local school district to attain these goals. Some of the expectations the Mission was created to address have been fulfilled, but others remain elusive. It is the task force's hope that our recommendations create a permanent structure from which the school is able to reach its aspirations and one that provides the school community with a clear focus.

The positive attributes that we want our teachers to instill in our children are the very same attributes that our teachers need in their environment. ***Our vision is to create a teacher-centered environment that is collaborative by design with positive and respectful communication and exemplifies the practice of shared leadership.*** Educational professionals need to be part of a work atmosphere which allows them to develop their potential and create a nurturing environment for our children to learn. This type of leadership can be described as follows:

The best leaders focus on providing a climate where teachers are encouraged to take risks and act as coaches – guiding students through journeys of success. Effective leaders ask, guide, delegate, communicate, encourage, and take risks. They make it abundantly clear that the people in the building are important, and they'll do whatever it takes to say thank you for winning efforts.

We have all chosen a school with an inspiring and uplifting mission, which by design possesses the characteristics necessary for the teacher-centered environment described above. The mission of Core Knowledge, Character Education, Community Service, and recognizing the fact that parents are the natural, first teachers of their children are the strategies that have already created a successful learning environment. There are families who would say that the BFCCPS has worked with them to help reach a more elusive goal: raising life-long learners who are community-centered, virtuous, hopeful, and involved future citizens of our society. In our world today, this is no small achievement for individuals, families, or a school. The mission has served the BFCCPS well, but it needs to be revitalized and sustained if it is to guide us on our journey forward from this point.

We urge all members of this community to reflect upon their reasons for joining the BFCCPS as you consider our recommendations. In our pursuit of best practices to present to the community important themes emerged. Themes involving the critical nature of a strong and clear mission, and a collaborative and teacher centered environment have emerged as key elements of a successful school.

Specific Recommendations

It is the belief of this task force that the vision of a vibrant, mission-driven, teacher-centered school in which our children love to learn and are taught successfully is a worthwhile, desirable, and achievable goal.

Not since the founding of the BFCCPS in 1995 has such a focused amount of energy been employed to collect data describing best practices for school organizations as well as data depicting the current state of the BFCCPS. The assimilation and analysis of the combined data accentuate the gaps between “what is” and “what could be”. It is with strong conviction that we share our findings with the entire community in the form of specific recommendations that we hope will motivate action in a positive direction.

1. Create and staff a position responsible for maintaining the integrity and embodiment of the mission.

An organization utilizes its mission as inspiration to direct its focus and allocate its resources towards its goals. As a mission-oriented school, the BFCCPS derives its uniqueness from the mission, which in turn fuels the organization so that it can attain its goals. When considering an organization such as a charter school, the importance of weaving its unique mission into the fabric of its organizational structure and operating environment is of paramount importance.

Just as a human resource professional ensures that an organization’s most vital resources are well treated, a keeper of the flame ensures that those valuable resources are being well utilized in a manner that embodies the spirit of the mission. This senior level position will provide the resources and support needed to ensure that the mission is evidenced in the daily operations of the school.

Our recommendation for this position is consistent with the best practices we uncovered from our research. As demonstrated in Section 4, a guardian for an organization’s mission is an effective method by which the purpose is safeguarded and actualized through policy and practice. In addition, the survey results and comments demonstrate the depth of passion the BFCCPS community has for the mission. This guardian role will improve the communication, deepen the training, and formalize the mentoring of the mission. Filling this position will satisfy the desire from the community for specific knowledge of the mission’s original intent and how to weave it into the daily life of our children.

2. Streamline the Management Structure

The vision that we described for the BFCCPS provides a focus on the school’s service of education as well as a focus on the faculty that are most directly involved with creating and providing that service. This vision is at once teacher-centric and collaborative in

nature with open lines of communication between all of the school's stakeholders. By definition, the organizational structure that supports such an evolving, learning environment is not hierarchical in nature. Instead, a collaborative environment is more fluid than rigid and more communicative and collaborative than authoritarian. This type of operational environment is achieved in best practice schools by faculty consultation on decision-making rather than relying upon a reporting structure as a way to manage them.

We recommend eliminating the role of the Dean and strengthening the voice of the faculty by allowing them to be directly supervised by the Head of School. Please recognize that our view of this reporting structure is in no way a reflection upon the individuals that currently hold this title. The current Dean system is an incarnation of a reporting structure that was only recently instituted at BFCCPS and was accomplished without the involvement or input of the faculty. The use of Deans as an intermediary layer would actually preclude the achievement of the type of environment that we described above by creating a barrier between the educational leader of the school and the faculty. The staff/faculty survey results provide ample evidence for this viewpoint and depict numerous instances where the Dean structure itself is a source of discord.

The Dean structure, as implemented at BFCCPS, was not found among any of the schools that we visited and is not among any of the best practices that we uncovered during our research. A tight bond between the faculty and the educational leader of the school is depicted among the best practices we've found in our research and this bond fosters a collaborative environment. It is through collaboration that the transition to a best-practice learning organization, continually evolving its teaching practices through shared, professional development, is achieved.

3. Create Opportunities for Collaboration and Shared Decision Making

Section 4 reports on the most current research in educational leadership and includes examples of organizational structures in place at a variety of charter and non-charter public schools. The theme of shared leadership and collaborative decision making is stunning in its pervasiveness throughout the research as the critical element necessary to creating a school that will successfully meet the challenges of educating our children in today's society. Research and observed best practices also strongly emphasize the need to focus on creating a teacher-centric environment that will support the development of a professional learning community. Only by giving teachers the support, opportunities, and responsibility to work together to improve their teaching skills and continually develop improved strategies for student learning will the best learning environment for our children be possible.

The task force offers two actions that will begin the movement of BFCCPS towards shared leadership that focuses on building empowered teachers and encourages the development of a professional learning community:

1. Create a Leadership Council where elected representatives of classroom teachers join with the HOS and other key members of the school to discuss and collaborate on the issues confronting the school and develop strategies for improving the instruction at BFCCPS.
2. Form Pillar Councils, one for each pillar of our mission, where teachers, staff, and parents work together throughout the school year to jointly define programs, projects, and activities that would make the mission come alive in each classroom. The Pillar Councils, coordinated and overseen by the new Director of Mission , would provide a consistent platform for the sharing of ideas among teachers and would allow parents to contribute to the school in a truly valuable role.

The faculty, in consultation with the HOS, should collaborate and identify the most effective approach for selecting representatives for the Leadership Council and the Pillar Councils. We hope that participation will be from a broad cross section of faculty and the process will encourage the rotation of faculty in these roles each year. .

Appendix A lists additional ideas that would provide opportunities for collaboration and shared decision making.

4. Professionalize the Human Resource (HR) role for the school.

In order to perform effectively and in accordance with its mission, the BFCCPS, like the vast majority of organizations, is heavily dependent upon the human resources that it employs. By extension, the vitality and general health of the BFCCPS is directly linked to the overall well being of all of its stakeholders. Among all of its stakeholders, an organization's employees are arguably the most important determinant of an organization's performance. The correlation between the treatment of employees and the performance of the organization that employs them is unmistakable and is the topic of vast amounts of research. In order for the BFCCPS to aspire to higher levels of excellence as described above in the beginning of this section, the overall well being and performance of its employees requires expert assistance in the form of professional human resource services, reporting to the Director of Business Affairs (see Recommendation 6).

The service provided by the BFCCPS is the education of our children. In order to provide a great education within a virtuous environment, as described in our school's mission, a highly trained professional staff is a requirement. However, qualifications alone will not suffice. In addition to having the requisite resources necessary to educate our children, the staff must also be provided with a safe, respectful, and harmonious environment. This requires expertise provided by a human resource professional, which may be a new employee, an existing employee that has undergone the necessary training, or an external, contracted service.

The utilization of a human resource professional is a best practice employed by virtually all organizations and is vital to an organization's ability to thrive. In addition to being a best practice and a pre-requisite to achieving the type of school described above, a human resource professional will address many issues and concerns that were expressed in the survey results. The human resource professional would be responsible for all aspects of the human resource element of the school. All of the school's policies and procedures should be reviewed and modified, as necessary, to reflect a professional, teacher-centric environment that is both fair and balanced and is recognized as an embodiment of the school's mission. Please see Appendix A for more details about the responsibilities of this human resource professional.

5. Foster a communication-rich environment at BFCCPS.

If success can be defined as achieving the goals a school has set for itself while also meeting the unforeseen challenges that inevitably arise, then the chances for success are greater when all organization members are able to work together effectively. A school that facilitates and requires open, honest and respectful communication from all its members is a school of inner strength that truly enables collaboration. Good communication is a necessary ingredient for any school, and this fact is clearly supported by best practices and demonstrated by the schools we researched.

Working together effectively is facilitated when there is a free flow of information within the organization and information is shared openly and honestly. It becomes an organizational imperative that everyone always has the information they need to do their jobs and everyone in the organization also has the necessary information to see how their job integrates into the bigger picture of what the organization is trying to accomplish.

Besides the flow of information itself, it is crucial that opinions of all organization members are respected and sought, so that all members are encouraged to share their ideas freely.

In the General Section of the Task Force Survey, parents were asked to respond to the following fill-in-the-blank statement "*The Head of School and the Board of Trustees have a responsibility to the parent community to _____.*" Of the 63 responses received, an incredible 32 responses (51%), more than anything else, stated that parents thought the school had a responsibility to communicate with parents better. This priority for better communication needs to be recognized and addressed.

The Task Force recommends instituting new communication avenues, such as quarterly board-parent forums to improve communication between the Board of Trustees and the parent community. Another communication avenue recommended is to institute a periodic board presence at faculty meetings, at the invitation of the teachers. Creating a comprehensive communication plan that includes internal and external communication reporting requirements, codified into the school's policies is a recommended important

step to insuring consistent communication practices. Finally, using technology solutions more effectively is another step the task force recommends.

It is with the goal of achieving the benefits of fostering a communication-rich environment at BFCCPS that the Task Force offers these best practices to create and sustain information sharing and an open and respectful communication environment within the school community. These recommendations are listed with more detail in Appendix A of this report.

6. Create and staff a position responsible for managing the business affairs of the school.

Among the best practices of organizations, and also seen in other schools the Task Force researched, is keeping direct management of the business functions of the organization separate from the management of the functions that constitute the primary focus of the organization. The case to be made for this separation is that the educational leader is then free to spend his/her time in the areas that maximize educational results. The educational leader retains authority over, and final accountability for, administrative support functions, but does not manage these functions on a day-to-day basis. There is a single individual delegated to direct the management of numerous diverse administrative functions such as accounting, purchasing, facilities, information technology, human resources, and regulatory compliance.

Education research supports the belief of many that the Head of School position, or any single educational leader, is required to “wear too many hats.” As currently configured, the Head of School manages not only the education component of the BFCCPS organization, but also the business functions handled by the central office staff. It is also the case that some of the administrative or support functions that would normally be handled by experienced professionals within the business structure of a school are being performed by Board committees, e.g., facilities and human resources, further taxing a Board that already has many other responsibilities. In addition to helping the HOS, having centralized accountability for business affairs will allow the Board the time to focus on strategic issues.

In addition to managing business functions along with the primary educational functions, the Head of School has to be accessible. Of all the survey results compiled by the Task Force, this was an area of notable agreement. Both staff and parents stated time and again that in a school the size of BFCCPS, they wanted and expected to have direct access to the educational leader of the school. This person is expected to have an open door policy. One clearly sees that this position needs to delegate some functions in order to have sufficient time remaining to be accessible.

In accordance with the best practice and needs analysis summarized above the Task Force recommends that a senior management position be created and staffed at BFCCPS to manage the business and support functions currently being managed by the Head of

School and certain Board committees. The details of this recommendation are described in Appendix A of this report.

7. Modify the method by which new members are elected to the Board of Trustees.

As specified on the BFCCPS web site, “The Board of Trustees is the custodian of the mission of the school. The members safeguard the mission by guaranteeing the school operates in accordance with the principles on which it was founded.” From an operational perspective, the Board represents the apex of leadership for the school. As such, the Board itself must set the operational standard that the entire school community is expected to embrace. Consequently, all aspects of Board operations should necessarily reflect a set of principles exemplifying best practices in accordance with a teacher-centric, shared-leadership environment. This vision for the school encourages open and honest communication among all stakeholders, who become participants in the very creation and functioning of the Board itself.

The Board would be best aligned with the recommended shared-leadership school framework by modifying its election procedures to instantiate democratic best practices and enable the community at large to have more direct control over its composition. An election process, in addition to stimulating real involvement in the school governance process, would be an avenue for engendering additional levels of trust between the Board and the community. Envisioning a more democratic process for electing new Board members evokes the image of the U.S. election process as a model. These election procedures provide a framework in which the stakeholders themselves are direct electors of the individuals who govern their community.

Such a democratic process requires open communication from the candidates who seek to govern the school as trustees, by participating in processes that convey their thoughts and viewpoints to the community at large. Candidates should be called upon to communicate their reasons for wanting the position and to affirm their commitment to uphold the BFCCPS mission.

Modifying the Board election process to utilize best practices for community-centric, democratic elections will be consistent with shared-leadership that we have described above. The aforementioned process changes will also address many concerns and issues that were revealed about the Board election process in the survey results. We have provided some specific implementation models of Board election procedures in Appendix A.

Thoughts on Implementation

The BFCCPS Organizational Task Force was charged with the assignment of examining best practices, researching other schools that would be relevant comparisons to BFCCPS, and developing recommendations specific to BFCCPS. It was not part of the task force's charge to provide an implementation analysis. However, it would be shortsighted of us if we were silent on the topic of implementation, as we had to give some thought to this area in order to develop realistic recommendations that were capable of being implemented.

Our recommendations vary from small changes to the school's organization and its operation, to larger changes. The recommendations vary in the authority needed to enable them, the amount of time required to implement them, and the amount of communication needed to make the changes work.

The most comprehensive organizational recommendations create two new positions as part of the school's leadership structure: a Director of Mission and a Director of Business Affairs. We believe both new positions will bring substantial benefit to the leadership team of the school. Both these positions report to the HOS, and the existing HOS will be instrumental in hiring for these positions and establishing the cooperative and collaborative ground rules for how these positions will work together. It is our belief that these new positions create an organization that will be ready to put shared leadership and distributed decision-making into effect, while providing a rational division of responsibilities that enables all three positions of the school's leadership team to maximize results in each of their areas of responsibility.

The task force has not conducted a financial analysis as part of its preliminary implementation thinking. The task force understood that this part of the implementation analysis was beyond the scope of its charge. Such an analysis should be fairly straightforward and needs to be done. We recognized that some recommendations involve hiring and an associated increase to operating expenses. We also expect there to be lower operating expenses for consulting fees and recruiting costs that BFCCPS has been incurring as a result of organizational difficulties. Lastly, it needs to be clear that the charge of our task force was not to devise a plan to cut spending with the goal of saving money; our goal was to recommend an appropriate organizational structure for the school, and such an organization may require an investment.

The task force is not making an implementation recommendation about a specific leadership model nor about the timing of any such implementation. The group agreed that many types of leadership models could work for the BFCCPS with appropriate preparation and attention to timing.

All research and best practice shows that structural changes in an organization are not possible without an initial cultural change. Therefore, the Board of Trustees is strongly encouraged to develop a cultural transition strategy to help the school implement our recommendations.

We respectfully suggest that the Trustees avail themselves of all strategies and tools to build not only the organization that reflects our recommendations, but the culture that can sustain it.

Communication will be key, communication that is frequent and honest. The Board is encouraged to recognize that the success of structural arrangements, put in place to facilitate improved learning, is dependent on the primacy of cultural change. Collaborative decision-making and collaborative learning together will make it possible to create a positive culture, dedicated to learning that not only allows the school to reach its potential, but envision new heights beyond.

Future Thoughts

In the future, after the above leadership team is installed, experienced and operating smoothly and successfully, a second step toward a fully-realized shared leadership structure should be considered by the Board of Trustees. As part of our recommendations, we would like to leave you with the following recommendation for future consideration: Upon the departure of the existing HOS, a further change to the reporting structure of the school should be contemplated. There are many different organizational structures that could be considered that exhibit shared leadership and eliminate the traditional hierarchy. One potential model would have the Director of Mission and the Director of Business Affairs positions begin reporting directly to the Board of Trustees. The responsibilities of the HOS position would be changed to encompass only the educational component of the school, and as such, would be renamed Director of Education.

This obviously will change the nature of the hiring specifications and search process when the HOS departs, so it needs to be thought about and discussed in advance if it is to be accomplished when the time comes. The resulting three-member school shared leadership structure would be in stronger conformance with structures seen in the latest best practice research.

In Closing

Our recommendations represent our efforts to craft the future of the BFCCPS as an outstanding school, parent resource, and community of character. The task force came together made up of a diverse group of parents, teachers, trustees, with various backgrounds, beliefs, interests, and history with the school. After many hours of discussions, reviewing the literature on school structures, exploring alternative school structures in existence, assessing the present organizational structure and thoughtfully considering the opinions and observations of our community as a whole represented in

the survey, the members of the task force collectively propose these recommendations. We firmly believe that the recommendations and suggestions for structural change made are valid since they are rooted in solid empirical research, investigation of best practices and the results of a comprehensive survey of our school community. We are confident that these recommendations offer important and practical benefits for our school.

Infusing our discussions have been expressions of mutual respect; respect for our different perspectives and opinions. There have been principled differences of opinion but the task force members unanimously support these recommendations. We expect that the community will consider our recommendations by engaging in thoughtful discussion. It is our hope, as we review these recommendations as one community that we will work together, accepting that while we may differ on the best way to support BFCCPS, we can agree to demonstrate virtue while our discussions take place.