

Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove Baltimore, MD



Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove in Baltimore moved from one of the city’s lowest performing high schools to one of Baltimore’s top choice high schools between 2011 and 2015. From an early childhood education program for parenting teens to workforce development for community members, a network of over 75 partners customize responses to needs presented by students and families. Additionally, students clocked more than 17,000 service learning hours last school year and are credited with stopping the building of a waste incinerator near their campus through community organizing.

Demographics	Results
<p>Location: Baltimore, MD Grade Levels: 9-12 Number of Students: 437 Race/Ethnicity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American 51% • Asian American 1% • Caucasian 25% • Hispanic 23% <p>ELL Students: 15% Special Education: 27% Free/Reduced Lunch: 85%</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From 2011 to 2015 BFHS moved from one of Baltimore’s lowest performing high schools to one of Baltimore’s top choice high schools • Students posted approximately 17,000 service learning hours in school year 2013-14 • Students organized to stop the building a waste incinerator to be built less than a mile from the school • 60 families have been prevented from becoming homeless • 89% of students indicated they learned a lot at school • 95% of parents would recommend the school to others

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A Welcoming School with a Vision for Revitalizing the Community

When he was hired as the community school coordinator at Benjamin Franklin High School in Baltimore, Dante de Tablan was still learning what it meant to be a community school.

But one thing he was certain about was that the front of the building—a former middle school—needed a facelift. The original entrance had been sealed up and another door was being used as the main one.

“You don’t want to miss that opportunity to really make a statement and create a welcoming environment,” de Tablan says, adding that he saw a refurbished entrance as a step toward addressing other needs within the school and community.

The \$5 million project, supported by the Baltimore City Public Schools, the state of Maryland and the federal government, was one of the first opportunities for the residents of the Brooklyn and Curtis Bay neighborhoods in Baltimore to be involved in improving a school—the first high school ever in the community.

Not only was the entrance renovated, the project also involved building out 3,000 square feet of space for community school programs, including mental health services, an early-childhood program serving children of teen parents and workforce development programs. “You should have seen their faces on the first day of school when they walked in,” de Tablan says about students’ reaction to the redesign. He says some were even calling friends that had dropped out and urging them to come back to school. “There is now this good will and sort of a re-branding.”

Since 2011, Ben Franklin has been transformed from one of the city’s lowest-performing high schools into a top-choice school, and enrollment has increased from 226 to 437 students. When it was a middle school, only 26 percent of the 8th graders were scoring in the proficient range in math on the Maryland School Assessment. In the 2013-14 school year, 71 percent of 12th graders scored at the proficient level in algebra, and similar performances are being seen in English, government and biology.

Creating a Model Community School

Building on the capacity building principles he learned while at the Social Work Community Outreach Service (SWCOS)—one of two lead community school agencies based at the University of Maryland, Baltimore School of Social Work — de Tablan now

leads the Ben Franklin Center for Community Schools, which he envisions as a think tank and proof of concept for community school work so others can see and learn the concept in action. The Greater Homewood Community Corporation, which hires coordinators and additional staff members for other community schools in Baltimore, is currently the fiscal agent for the new center.

Ben Franklin's School Site Leadership Team includes administrators, de Tablan, partners, staff, parents, local residents and students. The team assesses the needs of the school and determines how partners can be helpful and which evidence-based or evidence-informed programs and practices would meet the expressed community needs. For example, the school currently has no athletic fields. Football games are played a few miles away and track and field events are held on city streets. CSX, an international transportation company and a partner of the school, asked how it could help. The company has put up \$1 million toward the development of the school's athletic fields and is working with the Cal Ripken Foundation, Baltimore City and other Baltimore businesses on the project.

The good will that de Tablan refers to is also showing up on school climate surveys. 89 percent of students report that they learn a lot at school, 95 percent of parents say they would recommend the school to other parents and 100 percent of staff members say they feel safe at work.

Principal Chris Battaglia, who worked as an administrator in other schools, says the biggest difference between those sites and Ben Franklin is having de Tablan and others in the building and "being able to rely on them to do what they do best."

He sometimes refers to de Tablan as "the principal of everything that is not the school. That allows me to focus on everything that is the school."

Partnering to Implement the Common Core

Ben Franklin's many partners are seen as an integral part of giving students the opportunity to learn and practice skills related to the Common Core standards. For example, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) provides *Earn Your Future* financial literacy workshops for students, and in collaboration with teachers, PwC provided transportation for students to participate in Chesapeake Bay restoration efforts. In the 2013-14 school year, students racked up over 17,000 service-learning hours with the help of multiple community partners. The projects included volunteering in a church soup kitchen on Fridays and beginning an urban agriculture program.

With their school located in an industrial area, Ben Franklin students have been particularly engaged in an effort to stop the construction of a waste incinerator planned about a mile from the school. *Free Your Voice*, a student-led organization working in partnership with United Workers, an anti-poverty grassroots organization and partner at

Ben Franklin, has organized the opposition to the project. The students' efforts have received national media attention and have given students a real-world situation in which to apply their learning.

"Free Your Voice students have worked with teachers at Ben Franklin and in schools across the city to build a bridge between the campaign to stop the incinerator and the classroom," says Greg Sawtell, a United Workers organizer and former social work intern under de Tablan, who works with the students. Their involvement in the issue has led to classroom presentations and new curriculum ideas. "Not only are students informed about a current neighborhood issue, but they have also learned how to "engage complex civic issues with integrity and purpose," Sawtell says.

Some have also had the opportunity to speak before local residents and officials. In one such forum, student Charles Graham said, "When I started I honestly thought we couldn't do very much. Now I am kind of shocked at how much we can do. I am terrified just being up here speaking, but I have learned that stepping outside of your comfort zone is a big part of becoming a leader and being part of a group has allowed us to stick with an issue like this that is not so quick to solve."

Bringing Stability to the Community

One of de Tablan's first priorities when he became coordinator, was to make sure students were actually getting fed. As in many high schools serving students in low-income families, participation in the free- and reduced-price meal program was extremely low. But he has since been able to reach nearly 100 percent participation in the program. "I didn't know this was unusual," he says. "I just knew people had to eat."

The work at Ben Franklin is a good example of how the needs of students and the needs of the community are intertwined. To address the high mobility rate, the school partnered with the United Way of Central Maryland to bring in its Family Stability Program, administered by SWCOS at the University of Maryland and Pathway Church of God. The Family Stability Program so far has been able to keep 60 families in their homes—15 from Ben Franklin and at each of the feeder schools in the community. The student mobility rate has since declined from 61 percent to 41 percent.

To address the needs of students aging out of foster care, Ben Franklin partnered with the Safe and Sound Campaign, the Open Society Institute and the Fund for Educational Excellence. This new collaboration effectively expands the Ben Franklin campus by repurposing a historic church social hall and parsonage in Brooklyn. Students that had previously dropped out will be involved in project-based learning and developing construction skills so they could renovate the site and then have a place to study and live when it is completed. The proposed project is an example of Ben Franklin's efforts to help residents develop skills and find employment in a community where many

manufacturing jobs have left the area. Employee-owned cooperatives are one of the models de Tablan is pursuing.

“We are finding out new ways that we can help our people have living wage jobs,” he says. “What are the newest trends, and what needs to be dusted off that actually works?” Next, de Tablan envisions an “academical village” by expanding the Community Schools Strategy to all the elementary and middle schools in Brooklyn and Curtis Bay. “As early as possible,” de Tablan said, “we all need to be warmly welcomed and cared for; and a community school can be just the place where it all happens.”