

A Most Informative Visit to Achievement First Bridgeport Academy

Operating dozens of charter schools in the northeast, the mission of Achievement First Public Charter Schools is to "prepare every student to excel in college and career, deepen their knowledge of self and community, and lead lives of purpose. In partnership with our families and communities, we work to disrupt the legacy of inequity in education."

That mission is no better exemplified than in the Achievement First Bridgeport Academy Middle School, ("First Bridgeport"), which a group of Y's Men, led by Dick Kalt and Frank Wood, was privileged to visit on May 8. Led by dynamic Principal Stephanie Fox, First Bridgeport is effectively, and with empathy, disrupting the inequity of education in Bridgeport, albeit quietly.

Principal Fox and Development Director Connor McGann first presented a Powerpoint detailing First Bridgeport's high standards and expectations for their students, families and staff. First Bridgeport, like all charters, is a public school, whose students are admitted based upon a blind lottery, and for which there is now a wait list. Its class day is longer than a traditional public-school day. However, the school week ends at noon on Friday, to allow for teacher development in the afternoon. There is robust and proactive leadership, with four Deans and an assistant principal for a student body of approximately 300. There is special emphasis on STEM, as well as special services for those from multi language families, and English as a second language.

One can see the results of these efforts in statistics including test results showing First Bridgeport doubling proficiency rates in English and math for grades 5 to 8. However, to get a real time sense of the success of its programs, you have to walk through the school, observe classes, listen and absorb the spirited interaction between teacher and students, and how learning can be exciting, even in middle school. The first thing we noticed is that the 5th grade math class was filled with some 30 students. This was significant for two reasons: First Bridgeport works with families to reduce absenteeism and truancy which plagues many schools; and, while a class of 30 in any middle school can be, shall we say, "exuberant," these students were working and then waiting patiently for their teacher to check their assignments, in an overall quiet setting, conducive to learning.

First Bridgeport is continuing to expand and develop its programs, dedicated to its vision and belief "in the unlimited potential within our students and their power to shape a more just society." It has a competitive sports program - we watched an exciting volleyball game! - and would like to bring back a theatre program. Perhaps Y's Men can build upon and strengthen the relationship already established by Andy Boas, Network Chairman, Dick Kalt and Dewey Loselle who are on the First Bridgeport Board. We have so many with talents, skills, and life experiences which would complement the education these kids are receiving.