

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF  
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS**

**Press Release 1026**

**Good News from America in Dark Times:  
How a Struggling Boston School Found Success  
in the Roots of its Haitian American Community.**

In America an Organisation known as [Our Schools](https://independentmediainstitute.org/our-schools/?pi_content=8d7e6f70e6b4b5e7fe6528b9e3f76ceb65db63a8f61a26fe3027d4c2bca5e5b4) goes to the front lines of the nationwide effort to privatize and undermine the public education system. It exposes the false promises of charter schools, voucher programs, and corporate-style reforms and spotlights how communities are fighting back and often succeeding against the school privatization agenda. The DOGS found this inspiring article by Jeff Bryant, which given the Trumpian attack on the Haitian immigrant community we found appropriate on the eve of the election. It can be found at : [https://independentmediainstitute.org/our-schools/?pi\\_content=8d7e6f70e6b4b5e7fe6528b9e3f76ceb65db63a8f61a26fe3027d4c2bca5e5b4](https://independentmediainstitute.org/our-schools/?pi_content=8d7e6f70e6b4b5e7fe6528b9e3f76ceb65db63a8f61a26fe3027d4c2bca5e5b4).

Here it is:

***How a Struggling Boston School Found Success in the Roots of its  
Haitian American Community***

The school's success is a counterpoint to Donald Trump's anti-immigrant campaign and a testament to the resiliency of public schools when they embrace their local communities.

by [Jeff Bryant](#)

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[https://independentmediainstitute.org/ourschools/?pi\\_content=8d7e6f70e6b4b5e7fe6528b9e3f76ceb65db63a8f61a26fe3027d4c2bca5e5b4](https://independentmediainstitute.org/ourschools/?pi_content=8d7e6f70e6b4b5e7fe6528b9e3f76ceb65db63a8f61a26fe3027d4c2bca5e5b4)

In 2016, Boston's Mattahunt Elementary was a school on the brink. A letter from the Massachusetts state education commissioner sent to Boston superintendent Tommy Chang [threatened](#) to use "state receivership"—essentially, a takeover of the school—unless the district could present "an effective plan" to "move the [school] out of underperforming status."

As WBUR, Boston's public radio station, [reported](#) that year, Mattahunt had scored in the [bottom 1 percent](#) of public schools in Massachusetts for at least three years in a row. And [since 2012](#), Mattahunt had been classified as a "turnaround school," a [designation](#) given to schools and districts that have to be monitored by the state because of chronic underperformance.

Flash forward to 2024, and Mattahunt is one of only three [finalists](#) for a School on the Move prize, an [annual award](#) given by local nonprofit [Edvestors](#) that "spotlights the most notable school-wide improvement efforts happening across Boston Public Schools."

Being considered for the prize, which includes a \$100,000 cash award, is "like the Super Bowl of Boston Public Schools," Alphonso Campbell tells The Progressive. Campbell is Mattahunt's community hub school coordinator, a position he has held for the past three years after previously working as a paraprofessional in the school. Mattahunt is no longer designated as a turnaround school, he says.

How did Mattahunt go from being a school on the verge of a state takeover to being considered a district champion?

Although a number of factors have contributed to Mattahunt's improvement, one overriding variable has been the school's determination to search for solutions within the surrounding community—the largely Haitian American neighborhoods in Boston's [Mattapan](#) district—rather than bring in an outside management firm or adopt a reform model drawn up by a policy think tank.

At a time when Haitian Americans are being [targeted](#) by an anti-immigrant campaign, driven largely by presidential candidate Donald

Trump and his running mate, J.D. Vance, Mattahunt's success story is a positive counterpoint and a testament to the remarkable resiliency of public schools when they embrace the local communities they serve.

In the improvement plan Chang had presented to the state in 2016, Mattahunt was to undergo a name change and be reorganized as an early learning center, closed to all but its pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students—the only grades in which the school's students outperformed district peers on early literacy testing, [according to The Boston Globe](#).

But by 2017, still in its first year of reorganization, the school was already feeling pressure from the local community to restore the closed grade levels, [according to the Dorchester Reporter](#), and retain the Mattahunt name that honors the Native American tribe that [originally lived](#) in the Mattapan area.

Also in 2017, Mattahunt became the site of the new Toussaint L'Ouverture Dual-Language Academy, the nation's first and, to this day, only Haitian Creole-English dual-language school program in the United States.

Since then, Mattahunt's improved performance has allowed it to add new grade levels and once again serve pre-kindergarten through grade six students. "Out of the 512 students, 132 learn in the dual-language program," according to a 2024 [article](#) in Black Enterprise.

Boston has the [third-largest concentration](#) of Haitian Americans in the nation. Toussaint L'Ouverture was a [key leader](#) of the Haitian independence movement in the 1790s when Haiti was a colony of France.

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Mattahunt's embrace of its local community is also reflected in the school's adoption of the community schools approach. Community schools, called [hub schools](#) in Boston, follow a [strategy](#) that centers

community needs and interests in its decisions about school programs, policies, curricula, and governance.

Under the community hub school strategy, according to Campbell, the traditional way of governing school policy and programs in which a central authority makes decisions was replaced by a more concerted effort to engage the school community in decision-making. For instance, surveys and other outreach efforts Campbell and his colleagues conducted among parents and students found there was a greater need for high-quality learning opportunities outside of normal school hours, especially for families with working parents.

As a result of that input, the school created an extensive array of after-school programs that provide enrichment opportunities and extended learning time, all free of cost to families. Program offerings change annually, depending on student preferences, but Campbell says that some of the most popular options include Taekwondo, flag football, and other team sports, as well as violin classes that culminate in live performances.

Another change in philosophy was to reject the traditional way of seeing students as solely responsible for their academic performance. Instead of blaming students for low performance, teachers in hub schools are required to look for obstacles to learning both inside and outside of the school, including health issues, family circumstances, and access to technology and transportation.

"Instead of saying that a student 'just doesn't want to learn,' " Campbell says, "we look for what's blocking students from learning, and we work to remove those obstacles."

For instance, to address students' vision needs, the school brings in a visiting clinic that conducts eye exams and gives out glasses. To address problems students and families have with food insecurity, the school created a pantry that provides free food. As demand for the pantry grew, it expanded to include personal hygiene items, school supplies, and winter clothing.

One of the biggest obstacles to learning at Mattahunt has been its high rates of chronic absenteeism. To address this, the school works to make its curriculum offerings and extra-curricular programs more attractive to students.

“We interview students, send them surveys, and conduct information sessions to get their input,” Campbell said. “We ask, ‘What would make school more valuable to you?’ ”

As a result of these efforts, Mattahunt’s chronic absenteeism rate in the 2022-2023 school year was 8 percent lower than the previous school year and 16 percent lower than what it had been in the 2020-2021 school year. The school has also been recognized by Boston Public Schools as best in the district for celebrating community cultures and promoting different languages and cultures, according to Campbell.

The school regularly considers and supports parents’ needs and feedback. An early effort to increase family engagement involved asking parents about traffic issues at the school, including parking configurations and the placement of crosswalks and bus lanes. In addition, the school offers technology classes to parents. When parents complete the course, they receive a free iPad or a Chromebook.

Another feature of the hub schools approach is to seek greater collaboration with local businesses and nonprofits to bring their resources and services into the school rather than outsourcing services to distant vendors.

For instance, the school’s food pantry is the result of a collaboration with a local grocery store chain. The school partnered with a local business to provide T-shirts for school staff. This partnership proved to be so successful that it eventually branched out to offer a whole line of clothing, including caps and hoodies. Partnerships with local restaurants bring in food for school staff on special occasions, such as school year openings and closings and holiday events.

“[Boston Public Schools] is still in the beginning phase of explaining to the community what the hub schools concept is all about,” Lea Serena,

an elementary field representative for the Boston Teachers Union, tells The Progressive. "Getting buy-in for hub schools is sometimes difficult because people often see it as just another program in a district that has had a lot of broken promises," she said.

Altogether, Boston Public Schools has rolled out the community schools strategy in [fourteen schools](#), including Mattahunt. "But each school tailored its rollout to what turned up in the school's surveys and assessments," says Serena, "so each school has different results it likes to highlight."

Future improvements Campbell would like to see at Mattahunt include washers and dryers for families needing laundry services. He also wants to acquire a van to transport students during field trips and sports competitions. Additionally, he is searching for a partner to provide a financial literacy program for parents.

But the positive result Campbell most wants to highlight has been a change in attitude toward the school that he sees in the community. "The hub school approach has helped to restore the positive relationship between Mattahunt and the families it serves. It's restored a sense of pride in the community," he says.

"Mattahunt is no longer the school we were [in 2016]," Campbell says. "Our students can go home and tell their parents this is not the school they remember."

Update: On October 22, 2024, Mattahunt Elementary [was awarded](#) the School on the Move prize for its improved academic performance and its progress on reducing chronic absenteeism.

Editor's note: Due to the bomb threats that schools in Springfield, Ohio, received after Trump and Vance attacked the Haitian American community in that city, The Progressive consulted with Mattahunt leadership for this story and was given permission to report it.

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