

Franklin Towne Charter High School

A Clear Vision and Concrete Plans

Franklin Towne Charter High School opened in 2000 and is one of 71 public charter schools in Philadelphia. It sits within the aging, historic Frankford Arsenal grounds, and one of its campus buildings dates back to the War of 1812. The school's transformation from one of the lowest-performing schools in the city to one of the highest-achieving schools in the state began in 2006 when a new team of administrators, parents, staff members, and community members led a change using *Breaking Ranks* reform practices.

Franklin Towne prides itself on meeting the needs of its nearly 1,000 students through three strands: providing a rigorous college preparatory program; integrating performance, applied, and service learning into the regular school day; and maintaining choice and variety as real student options. From the spring of students' eighth-grade year to well beyond graduation, Franklin Towne's goal is to provide information, assistance, and support to ensure that each student will be successful. Academic supports are plentiful: the attendance recovery program; dual enrollment; a Kaplan prep program, the Personal Academic Career Excellence (PACE) program, a ninth-grade skills clinic; before- and after-school individual tutoring; and Prep Zone, an after-school 21st century community learning center. In addition, ongoing recognition is given for outstanding performance through honor roll assemblies, perfect attendance acknowledgment, and recognition for outstanding performance on state and national tests.

With 76% of the student population economically disadvantaged and 14% of the students enrolled in special education, the school strives to ensure that all students have access to help, not just academically, but socially, emotionally, financially, and physically as well. Among the numerous programs that are designed to meet a variety of needs is the kick-off transition program, a comprehensive transition, orientation, and mentoring program that welcomes new students and their parents to high school. Enormously popular among the students are the Best Buddies program (which pairs students with intellectual disabilities with other high school students) and the Make-a-Wish program (whereby each student is granted one wish; usually they ask for something for their families). Other successful activities are the student-of-the-week and student-of-the-month recognitions, a daily advisory program, student incentive programs, and student council activities. In addition, clubs and athletics are offered on the basis of student interest.

Franklin Towne is a data-savvy school. Targeted research, systematic disaggregation, and data analysis drive the most important decisions at the school. Concrete examples of data-driven decision making are seen in all areas, including extensive curriculum redesign, weekly professional development planning, and ongoing instructional strategies review.

One of the most important outcomes of schoolwide data analysis has been Franklin



Students have many opportunities for enrichment, such as this visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Towne's five-year professional development plan. Each school year, the administrators and staff members have targeted specific areas to be addressed and stressed. Building on the first year, which emphasized curriculum alignment within departments and student achievement on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), the original goals were expanded and new goals were added, such as using data to design and develop assessments in the second year. Following this plan resulted in vastly improved academic achievement for students and provided a consistent and dependable roadmap for teachers.

The school has also implemented a comprehensive improvement plan that, coupled with the professional development plan and an all-school emphasis on academic rigor, resulted in a 48% increase in the scores on the mathematics portion of the PSSA, a 33% increase in reading scores, and adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years. Franklin Towne used data to drive a scope-

and-sequence focus on the PSSA. Using the three tiers and seven cornerstones found in *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* [NASSP, 2004] as a foundation, the school was able to make major changes in academic achievement through curriculum realignment, modified instructional strategies, and increased monitoring by content teachers. Power standards (essential content standards) were introduced in the areas of reading for comprehension and writing for purpose. Rubrics for writing at each grade level are now posted on classroom and hallway walls throughout the school and used in all subject areas.

Franklin Towne encourages staff members to use technology for both administrative and instructional purposes. Electronic whiteboards and digital projects are available in most of the classrooms, and teachers and students have access to three computer labs. Teachers use the eChalk Web site to communicate about classroom issues;

eSembler, a Web-based grade book system, provides real-time information on all students.

Staff development, guided by the professional development plan, includes a 10-day preservice experience for all staff members, plus a four-day orientation for new teachers and a two-hour period for planning and professional development on a weekly basis throughout the school year. The school focuses on structured classroom observations and feed-

back, support for the block scheduling instructional design, and a peer observation program. Administrators are adamant that teachers have all the resources they need in the classroom.

This school delivers what it promises in its mission statement: "Franklin Towne Charter High School is a college preparatory program willing to do whatever it takes to provide a warm and encouraging family-like atmosphere for all of our students."

Embracing Change

Patrick Field, chief academic officer and former principal, explains how being comfortable with change and using thoughtful and strategic planning leads to success.

Franklin Towne is proof that by challenging the status quo and embracing necessary changes, a school can perform miracles. Franklin Towne is on the road to achieving great things, but we are acutely aware of our inadequacies, and we view and seek these inadequacies out as opportunities for improvement. All too often, educators fight off change, rather than embrace it. Education is a change industry. Students'

needs change on a daily basis, and therefore a school's approach should change as well.

This is not to say, however, that a systematic and thoughtful approach is not essential to executing effective and meaningful change. The reforms and adjustments have been successful because we have gathered and analyzed specific data, we have interviewed and listened to seasoned experts and community stakeholders, we have watched and learned lessons from our student body, and we have allowed this information to drive data-savvy decisions and adjustments.

At Franklin Towne, we look for reasons why a child may be struggling. We examine current programs to find legitimate causes for roadblocks to excellence. We listen to our parents, our students, and our community partners, then we eliminate excuses that may hinder our efforts. Franklin Towne is an organization that continually looks to move good programs to become great opportunities.

By using effective and research-based programs (such as *Breaking Ranks*), Franklin Towne has been able to provide a clear vision as well as concrete plans for execution. If we could share advice with other schools that are starting down the same road that we have traveled in our pursuit for excellence, we would advise our fellow educators to remain vigilant and hungry but also thoughtful and calm. Passion and wisdom need to find a true balance to make meaningful progress.



Transforming a School



The Franklin Towne leadership team explains the comprehensive approach to improvement that enabled the school to transform itself academically and sustain a supportive culture of learning.

During the last four years, the staff at Franklin Towne has undertaken a quest for excellence, and in doing so, we have had to take time for critical reflections. Although our school's climate and culture was perceived as excellent, we were not achieving on an equal footing regarding our academics. Our standardized test scores were poor, our professional development lacked focus, and our curricular development lacked substance and rigor.

At the outset of this transformation, our school's CEO, Joseph Venditti, formed a new team of student representatives, administrators, parents, counselors, department heads, local community stakeholders, and subject matter experts to help transform Franklin Towne from one of the lowest performing schools in Philadelphia into one of the highest achieving schools in the state.

One of the first steps was to establish a common lens with which to analyze our school. Members of our executive team suggested taking a critical look at our programming using the seven cornerstone strategies from *Breaking Ranks II*: core knowledge, connections with students, personalized planning, different instructional strategies, flexible use of time, distributed leadership, and ongoing professional development.

Core knowledge. We established a three-tiered approach to learning. We began with a focus on academic and curricular alignment that would consistently increase our students' ability to perform well on high-stakes and state mandated exams, including the SAT, the ACT, and the PSSA.

During the first year of implementation of the curricular alignment and instructional approach, Franklin Towne's achievement on the PSSA went from a dismal 14% passing rate to a much improved 57% in math, and from

a passing rate of 25% to a respectable 62% in reading.

During the 2008–09 school year, a team of stakeholders established the following three power standards for schoolwide focus: writing for purpose, reading for content, and critical thinking.

Beyond those two academically focused reforms, we also established a comprehensive reform of the guidance and student support programming to better expose, encourage, and educate our students about how to have a successful postgraduate career.

Connections with students. During the 2007–08 school year, Franklin Towne launched a school-based mentoring program that pairs incoming freshmen (and new students) with established Franklin Towne upperclassmen. We have been able to support and successfully transition our new students while creating a greater sense of ownership among the older students. In addition, we have made a concerted effort to loop teachers and students.

Personalized planning. During the 2007–08 school year, we began using our advisory program to implement Personal Academic and Career Excellence (PACE), a college awareness and preparation program. Researched and designed from some of the best practices programs across the country, PACE engages students at all grade levels in focused teacher-led and self-paced activities to create an upward mind-set during students' formative years and finalize more concrete plans in their later years.

Different instructional strategies. To ensure a cohesive instructional approach in each classroom, the executive team readjusted the approach to classroom observation to focus less on teachers and more on instructional delivery. We now conduct instructional strategies inventories to discover whether teachers are using a variety of strategies.

In addition, we undertook a yearlong process to shift to a block design. We provided development opportunities so teachers could

Franklin Towne Charter High School

PHILADELPHIA, PA

Chief Academic Officer

Patrick Field



Grades
9–12

Enrollment
973

Community
Urban

Demographics
66% White, 17% Black, 14% Hispanic, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American; 76% free or reduced-price meals eligible





A block schedule allows time for hands-on instruction.

The expectations are high and clear for both students and teachers. Results are not relegated to the annual report card.



learn how to incorporate seminars, inquiry-based learning, cooperative learning, debates, field experiences, independent study, laboratories, reflection, and project-based learning into the traditional instructional repertoires that most of them were comfortable with.

Flexible use of time. During this reform period, we revamped our school's weekly schedule from a typical eight-period day that released students at 2:30 p.m. to one that dismissed students Monday through Thursday at 2:56 p.m. and at 1:20 p.m. each Friday. The Friday time is used by grade-level groups and curriculum departments for common planning time as well as to monitor and adjust any efforts put forth during our monthly professional development efforts.

A 45-minute after-school tutoring period gives struggling students small-group and one-on-one instruction. This extended period, coupled with Prep Zone, a comprehensive after-school support program made possible through a 21st Century grant, has nearly eliminated our internal failure rate.

Distributed leadership. Franklin Towne has implemented a site-based management model. The board of directors includes parents and local community stakeholders who sit on several committees. A home and school leadership team is made up of parents, guardians, execu-

tive team members, teacher and support staff members, alumni, and community stakeholders. An executive team is made up of administrative staff, and a Child Find team includes administrators, a special education coordinator, a school psychologist, a nurse, a speech and language therapist, and occupational and physical therapists. Students and stakeholders contribute to leadership through many other committees.

Ongoing professional development. The school culture couples the precept of principal as the principal teacher with a focus on mastery, not coverage. We traditionally pick one or two topics during the course of the instructional year and explore those topics on a variety of levels. For example, last year we launched a writing for purpose (writing across the curriculum) power standard initiative. During the course of the year, we aligned department scope-and-sequence documents with the essential learning outcomes, content and performance standards, and instructional strategies. Grade-specific and content-specific teams then developed grade-specific writing rubrics that were introduced to all students in all subjects so that student understood that effective writing is a standard that is expected not only in their English classes but beyond them as well.

Supporting Students

PACE Program

The Personal Academic and Career Excellence (PACE) program engages students in all four grades in focused teacher-led or self-paced activities that help create a “college-going” mind-set during the students’ first years at the school. The activities also enable students to make and carry out concrete plans as their high school graduation and postsecondary educations grow closer.

Mentoring Program

In the spring of their eighth-grade year, incoming ninth-grade students are assigned to upperclassmen who serve as student mentors. The mentors ease the incoming freshmen’s transition from middle school to high school and provide information and assistance throughout students’ freshman year and beyond.

Best Buddies

Students with intellectual disabilities are paired with high school students on the basis of common interests. The Buddy pairs make a commitment to contact each other at least once a week and to engage in a one-to-one activity together twice a month. Although the group’s student leaders plan group outings, special events, and fundraisers for all the chapter members to enjoy, the one-to-one friendships are the core of the program.

- Student-centered culture and climate
- Academic supports
- Recognition and incentive programs
- Strategic use of technology
- Echalk and Esembler
- Online textbooks, Study Island
- Systematic disaggregation and analysis of data
- Comprehensive improvement plan
- *BRII* foundation
- Extensive curriculum revisions
- Professional development for instruction
- Block schedule
- Power standards
- Preservice for all staff members
- Weekly two-hour period for planning and professional development

