

## Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Year 5 Evaluation Report

### Boys' Latin Philadelphia Charter School June 2008

This report is part of a Year 5 evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) grant. As part of the overall evaluation, we are tracking progress of existing model schools (flagships) over four years and progress of new start-up schools (replications) as they develop. In this report, we highlight Boys' Latin Philadelphia (BLP) Charter School as a *replication* school and describe the progress and outcomes related to grant activities.

Evaluators obtained information during site visits conducted on November 20, 2007, and January 30, 2008, designed to determine the activities and plans of the school as a sub-grantee of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). The specific purpose of this evaluation was to determine grant progress during the 2007 - 2008 school year and to determine the extent to which the school has successfully developed in accordance with the BAEO school development goals.

Evaluation activities included interviews with administrators and focus groups with teachers and students. Evaluators obtained additional information from AHSI conferences, from quarterly progress reports, and from published and unpublished materials from the grantee and the school. The report provides a brief school overview and an update on grant progress. It also includes the school's incorporation of the AHSI Distinguishers, contextual factors helping or hindering grant progress, the role of the intermediary, progress on grant outcomes, and a summary.

### **SCHOOL OVERVIEW**

Boys' Latin Philadelphia Charter School opened in the fall of 2007 with assistance from the Black Alliance of Educational Options. In its first year, the school served approximately 140 9<sup>th</sup> grade boys. It will phase in one grade level annually to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The school is currently housed in a temporary facility and will move into a much larger permanent site prior to the fall of 2008. That building is undergoing a major renovation, which enables the staff to design the space according to the school's needs. Staff members anticipate an eventual 9-12 enrollment of 450, and they will have space to expand if they choose to do so.

The BLP staff sets high expectations for academic performance and behavior. Students attend school from 8:00 to 5:00 on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. These extended school days include one hour of mandatory tutoring and homework assistance and one hour of extracurricular activities such as sports or clubs. On Wednesdays, students leave at 12:00 and teachers meet in the afternoon. Fridays end at 3:00. The school day incorporates a 40-minute study hall. This structure provides students time to complete most of their homework prior to leaving the building. Twice a month, students can also attend "Saturday school" for additional assistance if they are behind.

Staff members make expectations for behavior clear to students with a strict rule policy and with concerted efforts to respond consistently to behavior. Students wear uniforms and must carry their rulebooks and their assignment books at all times. Teachers hold students accountable by checking these books daily in the morning and in the afternoon. Staff members make it explicit to students that expectations are high, that they believe students can meet these expectations, and that they will provide support for them to do so. A number of staff members noted that students with histories of problematic behavior or academic difficulties have flourished at BLP. One teacher said, “An environment can create excellence.”

According to staff members, the demographics of the young men attending BLP are similar to those attending the traditional Philadelphia district schools. “These are average Philly kids, and we are making them change their ways and their dreams for the future,” said one person. While over 50% of the students came from public schools, BLP has targeted recruitment at charter school students, believing those students and families understand the parameters of choosing a more structured environment. Parents interested in sending their sons to BLP must first attend an information session and sign a letter of interest. Following this, parents and their son attend a meeting together in which the nature of the program is made clear. “We want it to be a match. It’s all boys, hard work, a strict environment with high expectations, and that is not for everybody,” said one staff member. Another commented, “We only want people who want to be here.”

While the students vary widely in academic skills, staff members also believe there are limits to the academic needs they can meet. One acknowledged, “We can’t take kids who are far behind.” When enrolling, each student must have three adults sign up with him, which provides additional support and accountability. The school also requests the extended family network to participate by contributing skills, rides, safety, communications, educational support, and support for extra curricular activities. Students reported they respect their teachers and know they have their best interests in mind. “They are trying to help us become young men,” said one student.

## **GRANT PROGRESS**

The BLP leadership was very intentional in building the staff for the first year. Several teachers had experience in middle schools and in charter programs, which supported the students and other staff members in managing the transition to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. All staff members described the staff as hardworking, committed, and truly collaborative. They have a strong sense of responsibility and leadership, and the school administration empowers them to make decisions. They have designated a Director of Curriculum and Instruction to guide their work. Additional critical members of the team include a full-time social worker and a part-time nurse.

The BLP teachers built the standards for the program, working with a consultant and pulling from a wide range of state models including Texas, Maine, California, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Virginia. Staff members align curricula to these standards. They also collaborate on instruction and share curricula. For example, the

literature and composition teachers review their curricula together. Teachers who share curricula discuss successes and failures for strengthening their instruction. They have plans to incorporate technology to facilitate instruction and to build students' technology skills. In the new facility, staff members intend to use technology to support learning. They will put homework online, provide each student with a laptop, and assist families in setting up wireless at home so parents and students can monitor grades and work.

Staff members also discuss student progress on a regular basis. They review the roster of students, identifying those in need of assistance and discussing ways to address specific needs. "We work with the circumstances with each student. We are willing to make proper adjustments as needed," said one person. The personnel at BLP have prioritized creating an environment where students feel safe from harm and feel comfortable learning. One teacher said, "They are used to being in situations where they were expected to fail. They are willing to try here because it is safe." Another commented, "Students know no one will come in and harm them and that the teachers won't harm them." The management team also meets weekly, and the teaching staff collaborates by coming in early and during weekly meeting times. Staff development aligns with the needs of teachers and with program goals. For example, they have received training in classroom management and project-based learning. Over time, they plan to develop the staff's capacity, and therefore will do some staff development internally.

Reflecting on the progress of their first group of students, teachers reported seeing significant changes after only one term. They reported an initial period during which students fought the discipline standards. Staff members remained consistent in their efforts to create a disciplined learning environment, while ensuring students understood they were there to help them not to punish them. They have been careful to remain aware of the basis for discipline. One person observed, "We don't focus on discipline as a school, but on creating a disciplined learning environment." Now, staff members are seeing the benefits. Several people commented, "Students are self-correcting...they keep each other in check;" and "They have realized that they are their own unit." One teacher also explained that students see and appreciate the high level of collegiality of the staff members, which makes an impact on the students. "Students are starting to get it now," said one person. Another commented, "They get that we care about them and want them to succeed."

### **Incorporation of AHSI Distinguishers**

The goal of AHSI is to create a network of effective, student-centered small high schools where youth voice, project-based learning, and leadership development drive the learning process. AHSI schools provide an alternative route to high school graduation and prepare students for postsecondary opportunities. The AHSI Network adopted a set of universal Distinguishers that provide a common design framework for development and assessment of all AHSI schools. Schools support each Distinguisher with a range of alternative strategies that vary according to the unique school design prescribed by each of the six intermediaries.

*Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Performance Assessment.* Teachers pointed to a variety of strategies that enhance authentic teaching, learning, and performance assessment. Teachers collaborate, share curricula, and consult with each other about instruction and about students. They utilize project-based learning and school-wide essential questions to contextualize and integrate instruction. They also involve students in their own learning. For example, they hold Socratic seminars, which students lead and participate in discussions about the text, integrating their personal experiences. Students also contribute to the formation of essential questions. Every student is involved in a team project, and senior projects will ultimately be implemented. Current requirements for graduation include a research paper, visual and oral presentations to audiences beyond the classroom, and a culminating activity.

*Personalized School Culture.* Staff members focused on creating a personalized learning culture at BLP. One teacher said the goal is for students to “become independent learners, and bring their own interests to the classroom.” With the smaller setting and fewer numbers, staff members get to know each student, his background, and his learning style. To accommodate the levels of ability and experience, there are three “tracks” of students. All students have the same books and teachers, but the material is broken down and paced differently. Students were aware of the different levels of work, describing them as different “paces,” with each student knowing how much he has to work to meet the expectations. Students receive individualized attention, and staff members stay after school to help those who need support. Students are not scheduled into classes in cohorts but have individualized schedules to accommodate their areas of strength and weakness. “We try very hard to meet each individual student’s needs,” said one person. Teachers said the students have been surprised by these approaches to instruction, saying, “You want us to think and don’t just sit down behind your desk” and “Why do you guys care so much?”

Although the school is small, after-school programs give students opportunities they may not normally have, which can cultivate positive interests, such as climbing, crew, and debate club. Because of these efforts, students report that they feel like they are part of the school community.

*Shared Leadership and Responsibility.* Teachers described a collegial and professional environment characterized by shared leadership and decision-making. Several teachers commented, “It doesn’t feel like it is a hierarchy,” and “Dave (the principal) is always open to new suggestions.” Similarly, students feel they have a voice in decisions about their education and learning. “They let us know that what we have to say is important,” said one student. Another explained, “You can write a proposal and submit it.” Students also hold each other responsible for their achievement and behavior. According to teachers, students are “self-correcting and keeping each other in check.” Students concurred, saying they reach out to each other: “We say, if you need help, I happen to know that.”

*Supportive Partnerships.* School personnel have worked hard to form strong relationships and partnerships with the community. They are building an extended student family network. They also collaborate with community members to plan activities and with other charter schools for after-school programs such as mock trials, a model United Nations, chess club, and robotics. Students are required to complete 20 hours of mandatory community service, working in elder care, hospitals, homeless shelters, and neighborhood clean-up programs. They are building relationships with programs, such as Outward Bound, to promote leadership and self-reliance.

*Future Focus.* According to staff members, the mission of BLP is for students to become “productive citizens in society.” A major goal of BLP is to prepare each student for a college education. In fact, their goal is 100% college acceptance. “This is a college prep program,” said one staff member. Another added, “We have no other curriculum. If your son can’t do a college prep curriculum, he shouldn’t come here.” Several people commented, “We are trying to help students understand that they can go to college and that college is helpful in attaining success.” BLP has a college guide that lists things students should accomplish as early as 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Summer Search, a college-mentoring program, pairs each student with a college student to shadow. Additionally, each teacher works with 4-5 students to ensure each student is on track for application to college. There are plans to hire a guidance counselor to coordinate college fairs and to help students with college information and applications. They are also building relationships with colleges to support the focus on post-secondary education.

## **Contextual Factors**

As with all grants, it is important to consider contextual factors that may help or hinder progress. Key contextual factors included initial resistance to the school, the support base of the school, the local community.

The school’s founders were committed to establishing an all-boys high school, and there was buy-in among some members of the local education community. Those supporting the school believed in the value of single-sex education for creating a structured learning environment with high expectations for urban youth. However, there was also significant resistance from several groups, including the Women’s Law Project, the ACLU, the Public Interest Law Center, and the Educational Law Center, and the school confronted a legal battle prior to opening. In the long run, the school was able to open on schedule through the efforts of the staff and the work of their supporters outside the school. According to one person, “Of the top 40 schools in Delaware, 14 are single sex, and they all came to the school’s defense.”

The leadership and staff of BLP have developed a solid support base for the school. One person observed, “If you are going with work with low income people, you need allies.” The principal’s experience in building charter schools enabled this school to grow efficiently. He strategically recruited the school’s board, which ranges from entrepreneur members to individuals with previous board experience in strong schools. The board was instrumental in procurement of the new facility and in running the capital

campaign to support it. The principal credits the board for advocating for the school and procuring grant funds: “If we didn’t have the board we have, I don’t know how we would have done this.” The staff has cultivated other supporters as well, including the city council.

The local community emerged as both a strength and a barrier. The neighborhood has generally welcomed the school. One person commented, “This is working a lot better than I thought...people caught on and we’ve had amazing support.” The students’ presence in the community through service projects has also increased community support for BLP. On the other hand, staff members reported the neighborhood can be dangerous, and some students have had negative experiences with people who do not believe in them or who are envious of their opportunities. One teacher explained, “The neighbors welcomed us, but the kids get a lot of heat for walking around with blazers and ties.”

### **Role of the Intermediary**

Staff members reported that BAEO played a crucial role in the planning and development of BLP from the very beginning. “BAEO is credible, and their support was important to get the charter,” explained one person. Once BLP obtained the charter, they started working with BAEO staff to develop project-based curricula. Staff members attend BAEO meetings and report that BAEO frequently provided professional development around curricula, benchmarks, and management of disruptive classrooms. For the BLP staff, the connection with BAEO and the guidance they provided were, in many ways, more critical than the funding.

### **GRANT OUTCOMES**

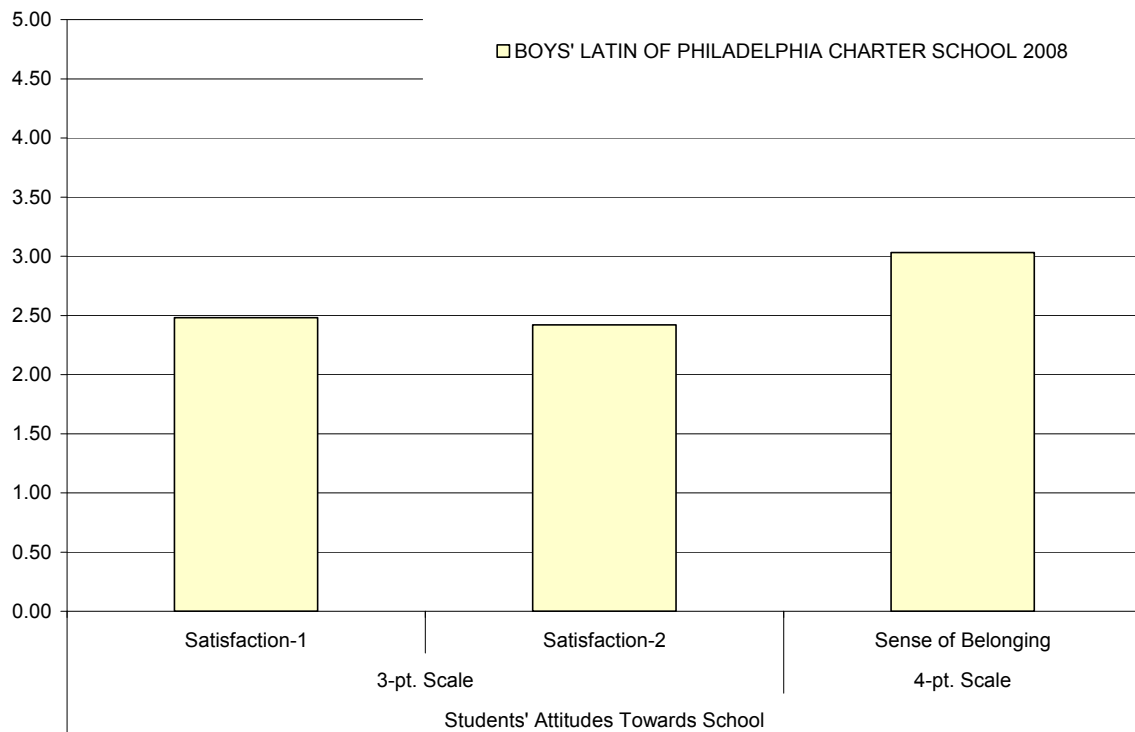
During Year 4, students completed the Gates Educational Initiative Survey (GEIS)<sup>1</sup>, a 57-item survey designed to assess students’ attitudes and perceptions about high school and college. The survey contains 10 factors reflecting both school and classroom attributes. The factors include Respect & Responsibility, Active Inquiry, In-Depth Learning, Performance Assessment, School Climate-Orderly, Satisfaction-1, Satisfaction-2, Sense of Belonging, High Expectations, and Personalized. The survey was administered to students in the winter of 2008 and the return rate was 89%.

Figures 1 through 3 display mean scores for the 10 factors in the areas of students’ attitudes towards school, classroom attributes, and school attributes. Students clearly feel positive about their experiences at BLP and believe their education is personalized (Figure 3). Figure 4 presents students’ plans for college attendance, their perceptions of the importance of a college degree, how much they believe their future career depends on going to college, and whether or not they believe their high school has prepared them to succeed in college. These results show that more than 80% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed with statements reflecting these areas. Figure 5

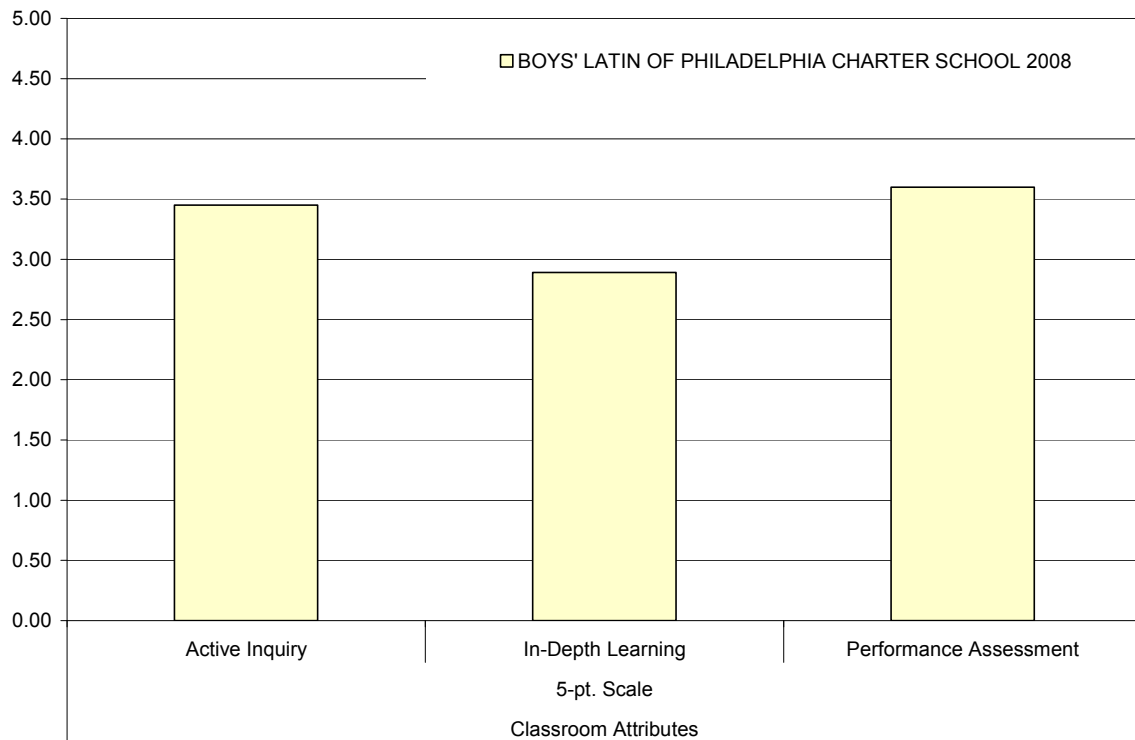
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<sup>1</sup> The GEIS combined the previously administered College Awareness Survey and the AIR/SRI Student Survey.

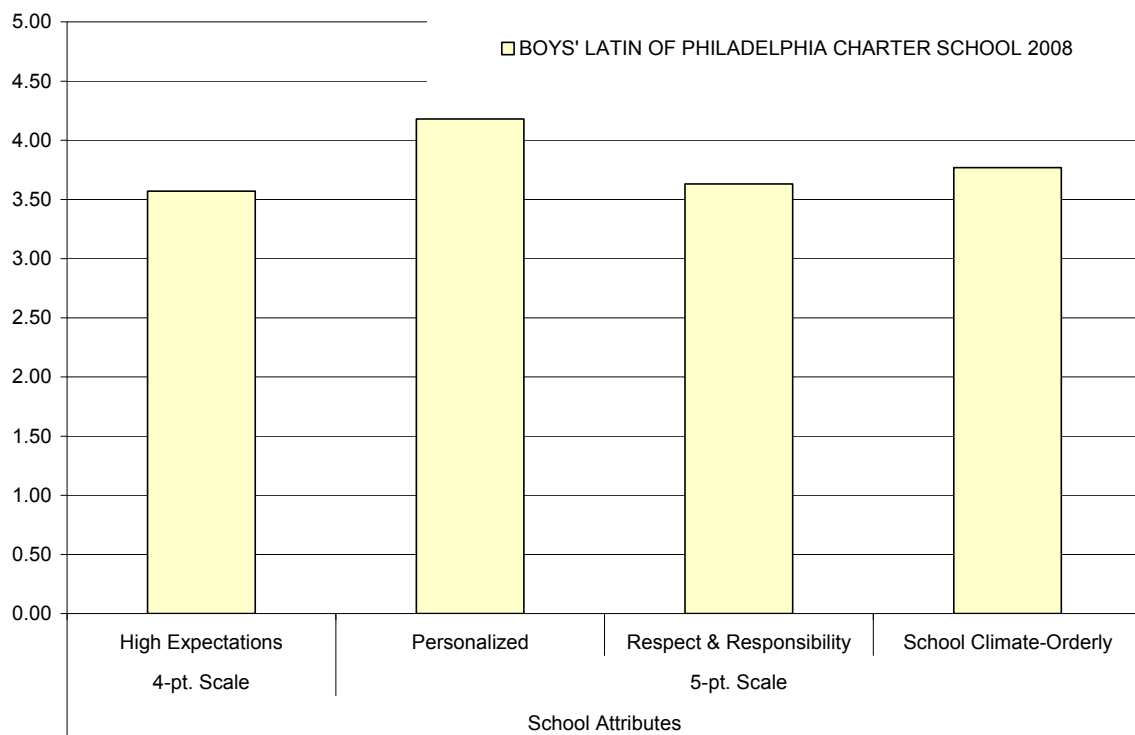
reports the percentage of students indicating they plan to attend college and the percentage of students who believe their teachers expect them to attend college. Results indicate almost 80% plan to attend a four-year college in the year after high school graduation and a similar portion believe their teachers expect them to attend a four-year college.



**Figure 1. Students' Attitudes Towards School**

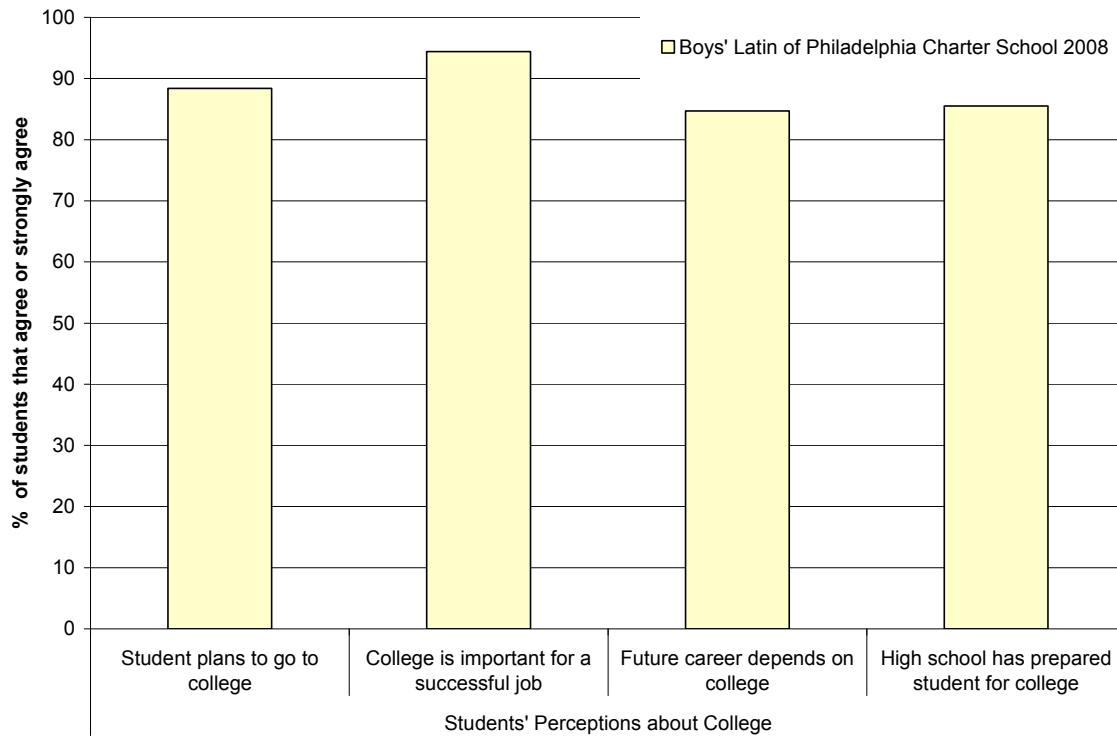


**Figure 2. Classroom Attributes**

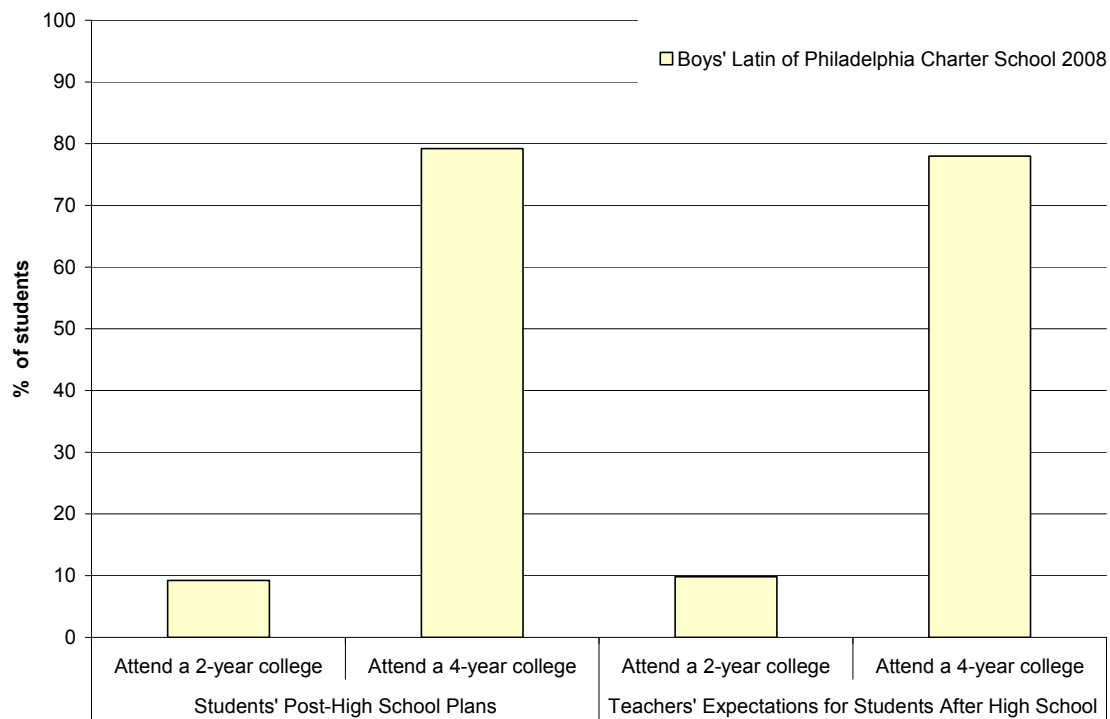


**Figure 3. School Attributes**





**Figure 4. Students' Perceptions about College**



**Figure 5. Students' Post-High School Plans and Teachers' Expectations for Students After High School**

## **SUMMARY**

Boys' Latin Philadelphia Charter School opened in the fall of 2007 for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students and will phase in one grade level annually to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The staff sets high standards for academic performance and for behavior has constructed a school day and an environment to support those expectations. Staff members focus on helping students develop leadership skills within the school and the community. They provide a personalized, standards-based education. They are developing their skills in project-based learning and in collaborative instruction. Staff members are using a variety of strategies to develop the ASHI Distinguishers of authentic teaching, learning, and performance assessment; personalized school culture; shared leadership and responsibility; supportive partnerships; and future focus. Staff members also reported they have seen a lot of progress in their first class of students. They attributed this progress to the high expectations and the teamwork of the staff. One person said, "We are creating a school community and we are supporting that. We reach within ourselves and outside to build the idea of what a school should be in the community."

In evaluating grant progress, it is important to consider contextual factors that may help or hinder that progress. Key contextual factors included initial resistance to the school, strong allies within the community, a strong board that is responsible for their future building, and a community that is challenging and is also supportive. Overall, staff members report seeing increased community support from year to year.

Staff members reported that BAEO played a crucial role in the planning and development of BLP from the very beginning. They attend BAEO meetings and receive professional development around developing curriculum, developing benchmarks, and managing disruptive classrooms.