

# ‘Breakthrough is the place I can be myself’: Connecting Somerville Youth to Out-of-School Opportunities

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## Introduction

Paper balls launched by laughing and cheering middle schoolers fly through the air toward targets from homemade catapults. This isn't recess or just kids playing around, though. It's a physics lesson led by

[Breakthrough Greater Boston](#)

(Breakthrough), which has provided targeted summer instruction, afterschool programming, mentorship, and college access guidance to middle and high school



students in the Boston area for nearly 30 years. The diverse group of 7th graders is learning about force and motion and using these principles to design the catapults. Any one of them can explain the math behind projectile objects. Most will also tell you they love science. Several aspire to be engineers.

Deep learning, authentic engagement and ambitious career goals. This is what Somerville's leaders envisioned when they joined the [Education Redesign Lab's](#) (EdRedesign) [By All Means](#) (BAM) initiative, based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. BAM seeks to improve the lives of children and families affected by poverty by supporting mayoral-led cross-sector collaboration efforts that bring together leaders in education, health, and the government, among others. BAM first launched in six cities across the country in 2016. With training, logistical, and other support from EdRedesign, these cities each developed a children's agenda for their community and work across sectors to coordinate supports and opportunities for young people. Over the years, BAM has grown and currently includes nine communities.

As part of their collective work, Somerville's leaders determined that improving access to quality out-of-school learning is a key driver of success for their city and started to build partnerships to make this aspiration a reality. Enter Breakthrough.

## The Breakthrough Collaborative Model

Breakthrough Greater Boston (Breakthrough) is an affiliate of the [Breakthrough Collaborative](#) (the Collaborative) whose mission is to “narrow the opportunity gap for under-resourced students”

through a six-year, year-round, tuition-free program for middle and high school students from underserved communities throughout the U.S. Headquartered in Oakland, CA, the Collaborative has 24 affiliates throughout the U.S. and one in Hong Kong. Collectively, the Collaborative affiliates serve over 5,000 middle and high school students. Somerville is Breakthrough's third site; other sites are in Cambridge and Boston.

Each individual affiliate is run independently and designed to meet the unique needs of the communities they serve. This leads to some variation in how programs operate; however, the Collaborative is moving toward codifying its 6th-12th program model. The organization is also beginning to create structures to continue its support of students during college.

## *The Model*

Students enter the program during the summer after 6th grade and continue on throughout high school. Rising 7th, 8th, and 9th grade students engage in an intensive six-week summer program each year and participate in programming throughout the school year. They receive supports throughout high school, including tutoring, mentoring, internships, and workshops to help prepare them to apply to and thrive in college. In addition to academic support, the Collaborative aims to cultivate students' social and emotional competencies.

The Collaborative's model embodies a "students-teaching-students, teachers-training-teachers" philosophy. Undergraduate students serve as teaching fellows, leading instruction during the middle school summer program. The teaching fellows are overseen by professional teachers who act as instructional coaches and mentors. The Collaborative focuses on students facing barriers that could impede their ability to attend or graduate from college, and the program recruits a diverse teaching fellow population with the goal of encouraging more students from underrepresented backgrounds to join the teaching profession.

## Expanding Out-of-School Opportunities in Somerville

Somerville's focus on out-of-school learning stems from a desire to address growing inequality in the city by providing "opportunities to close the achievement gap" and give all families access to quality options for their middle school students.

Somerville's children's cabinet has an out-of-school time (OST) working group focused on increasing access to quality OST programs for Somerville children. This group has forged strong partnerships with several out-of-school providers, including Citizen Schools, Breakthrough Greater Boston, the Calculus Project, El Sistema, and Groundwork Somerville. The OST working group developed funding models that leverage support from businesses, Somerville Public Schools, and fundraising by the OST providers. These partnerships provide free access to quality programs for Somerville middle and high school students. Recently, the cabinet hired a full-time out-of-school time coordinator who oversees a network of out-of-school providers, which is seeking to bolster

access to high-quality afterschool and enrichment opportunities. As of 2019, Somerville is providing 1,500 afterschool and summer slots. These programs aim to increase the number of students they serve with each year they operate.

In 2017, Somerville’s children’s cabinet partnered with Breakthrough to expand afterschool and summer opportunities for the city’s youth--which represents a core priority of Somerville’s BAM efforts. According to Breakthrough’s executive director, Somerville’s emphasis on expanding OST learning and the clear desire of Somerville Public Schools to bring quality programs to their students was a big draw.



After intensive recruiting through information sessions at all the local schools throughout the winter and spring of 2018, the program recruited the first cohort of 50 rising 7th grade students from across Somerville. This initial cohort participated in Breakthrough programming in the summer of 2018, and the second cohort of 50 students joined the program this past summer; the vast majority of students are from traditionally underserved backgrounds.

Somerville’s program mirrors the structure of other Breakthrough sites. Students begin their experience with a six-week summer program where they take 7th-grade coursework in groups of ten or less, attend advisory, visit colleges and other area cultural institutions, and build a close-knit community. Students attend this program the summers before their 7th, 8th, and 9th grade years. Throughout their middle school years (7th and 8th grade), Breakthrough participants attend a weekly afterschool program during the school year. In high school, students continue to participate in weekly programming and receive support with internships and college counseling.

Breakthrough’s ability to engage middle school students is impressive: youth are choosing to spend their summer vacation and free time during the school year in an intensive academic program. Several key elements have enabled the program to achieve this feat, including the “near peer” teacher model, embedded college focus, community building, and family support and investment.

## Elements Affecting Success

### *“Near Peer” Teacher Model*

Breakthrough employs what they call a “near peer” teacher model. The teachers in the summer and afterschool program are current college students, some of whom participated in the program when they were younger. Through this model, Breakthrough students have consistent contact with teachers they feel they can relate to and see as role models on the path to college. Since

Breakthrough also works hard to recruit teachers from the same ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds as their students, participants have an opportunity to work with teachers in whom they can see themselves. “I wanted to be somebody who helps somebody like me. I know what it’s like not to be ready and not to have resources,” described one teacher.

Small groups are also integral to the “near peer” model. Advisory groups have at most three students and academic classes have at most 10. These small groupings allow teachers to get to know their students extremely well, provide significant individualized attention, and mitigate some challenges that new teachers might otherwise face in managing a classroom. According to one teacher, to be effective, you need to “foster a personal connection with kids.... Kids know when you’re here for them.”

The summer program focuses on pre-teaching. Over the summer, students learn the skills they will see in the coming year (i.e. they teach 7th grade skills and content in the summer before 7th grade). This model helps students entering the coming year ahead of the game. “I used to be worried about speaking in math class, but now when the teacher shows us something new, I already know it from Breakthrough and I share my answer a lot,” explained one student. This approach also helps differentiate Breakthrough from other summer academic programs which are often focused on remediation. “I thought summer school was boring before I came to Breakthrough, but everything is fun and hands on. I wish school was like this all the time” reported another student.

Pre-teaching also gives Breakthrough teachers greater latitude. Since students will have another opportunity with the material, teachers are able to go deeper into content without worrying about covering every aspect of the curriculum. For novice teachers, knowing that they are not students’ only exposure to the material appears to relieve some of the pressure. In addition to pre-teaching, teaching fellows receive intensive coaching support, which includes regular review of lesson plans, observations, participation in daily department meetings, and weekly professional development opportunities. Breakthrough teachers describe the importance of their coaches to their success. “I got so much better at teaching because I got help. I wasn’t just on my own in the classroom.”

The opportunity to be the lead teacher and have their own classroom helps Breakthrough recruit quality teachers. Teachers express that they picked Breakthrough over other summer opportunities because it was the only organization where they would be the teacher and as one teacher expressed it, “I get to be the actual teacher, not just a helper.” This opportunity to “be the actual teacher” and receive coaching is no doubt part of why so many Breakthrough teaching fellows enter teaching after they graduate college. Annually, over 70% of graduating seniors pursue teaching. Among Breakthrough’s teachers from this past summer, 68% were people of color and 40% were first generation college students.

## *Embedded College Focus*

College-going is embedded throughout the Breakthrough program. Breakthrough participants interact daily with current college students who serve as their summer and afterschool teachers, families receive support in the college application process, and students head out on field trips to college campuses.

Guidance on the college admissions process is part of what attracts both families and students to Breakthrough. “We are not from here and I don’t know how the university system works here so I was really worried about how my daughter will go to college,” expressed a mother who immigrated to the U.S. when her daughter was five-years old. “Now she is in Breakthrough and I know they will help us with the process, so it is one less thing I worry about now.” Another father expressed that although he worries about knowing how to help his daughter pursue her goal of becoming a doctor because he and his wife do not speak English, he is confident that she will have someone on her team to help her with the college process since she attends Breakthrough.

Students also appear to shift their aspirations and plans based on the contact they have with their Breakthrough teaching fellows. As an example, students shared that they wanted to attend the schools their teaching fellows went to because they respected them so much. One mother commented that her son always wanted to go to college but now he is “setting his sights higher” because his Breakthrough teaching fellow goes to Tufts and he wants to be “just like them.”

## *Building Community*

Community membership, effective communication, creative problem solving, and persistence embody Breakthrough’s core values, and building community and developing social and emotional skills represent key goals.

The organization brings the community together in multiple ways, including weekly special events, a daily “community meeting” during the summer program, and an annual “Unity Day.” The “community meeting” is an exuberant celebration of students’ accomplishments, academic and otherwise. Led by students as well as teachers, the event showcases student expression and achievement. Students who demonstrate the core values of Breakthrough receive a “spirit stick” award. During the annual “Unity Day,” students share stories and skits about their own identities, cheered on enthusiastically by their peers. These public events are balanced by a quieter 10-minute period of daily mindfulness each morning. “Breakthrough is the place I can be myself” explained one student. “We get to know each other on a much deeper level. Like, there are all these kids who



are like me, from where I am from, and I didn't even know [them] before we came to Breakthrough." Parents report that their children share more about their day, develop interests, and take more pride in their heritage as a result of their time with Breakthrough.

Breakthrough also brings students together by organizing annual camping trips. For some families, this experience can provoke initial apprehension since many youth hadn't been away from home before. One mother explained that she signed her son up for Breakthrough only under the condition that the camping trip was optional. However, the experience proved to be a highlight for students and families. The mother who initially did not want her son to go on the trip ended up letting him go because he came home a week before the trip and told her, "I know you are afraid of my being with people who aren't family, but they are my family. My Breakthrough family." The camping trip helped students bond with each other and to engage in positive risk taking, and it helped families start to become comfortable with their children spending time away. "I knew she would be okay because she was with Breakthrough, but now I know she is okay and she can advocate for herself," explained one mother. "It helps me think, when it is time for her to go to college, it will be okay for her to be away."

Finally, small cohorts offer another way to build community and foster close relationships. In Somerville, 50 students participate in each cohort. While students attend different schools during the school year, they participate in the same group throughout the six-year Breakthrough program. This allows students to get to know each other in a variety of ways and to develop a support network of other highly motivated, college-bound students in their community.

### *Family Support and Investment*

Breakthrough also supports youth in other concrete ways. Regular check ins with students' families throughout the year helps to identify specific needs. For example, Breakthrough staff will often meet with a child's school or accompany families to meetings if they request it. One father reported that he and his wife feel more connected to his daughter's school now because of the translation services provided by Breakthrough staff. A mother described the advice she was given about advocating for her daughter's IEP, adding "they help with all my children, not only the one in the program."

Building support for and investment in the program through word of mouth among both students and families is a powerful recruitment tool for Breakthrough. "I tell everyone I meet, you have to sign your kid up for Breakthrough" explained one mother. Students universally agreed they would recommend Breakthrough to their friends. "Breakthrough is great. It makes schools fun and they are going to help me get into college. I want all my friends to do it, but some of them didn't want to give up their free time. Now I tell my younger brother's friends they should be in Breakthrough."

Word of mouth among families is also crucial to clarity about the program. “Some parents think it’s just for immigrant families, but I tell them, no. It’s for everyone. It’s for your child, whoever they are,” reported one mother who has her older son in the program and is now trying to get all of her younger son’s friends to sign up. Another mother agreed that she hadn’t signed up her daughter because she thought children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) couldn’t do the program, but now that her son is in the program, she realizes it is open to all children, including those with special needs. “I told the Special Education Coordinator, she better tell the new sixth grade parents about Breakthrough, so more kids know they can be in the program too.”

## Breakthrough’s Impact

Breakthrough’s first summer program in Somerville shows academic and social-emotional gains for the majority of their students. Breakthrough administers the Renaissance Star assessment to students at the beginning and the end of the summer program. According to Breakthrough’s most recent data, on average, students’ reading comprehension grew by three months from 25 days of instruction (with 64 percent of students demonstrating improvement from the beginning of the program). One-hundred percent of students improved in science, 71% in math, and 70% in writing. In addition to academic gains, students self-reported the impact they believe the program had on their social-emotional learning. The most notable of these results include the impact students feel Breakthrough had on their critical thinking (84 percent) and perseverance (80 percent). Families are also surveyed at the end of the program. They reported that the program positively impacted their child’s academic skills, confidence, and love of learning.

Somerville is making substantial progress in improving out-of-school learning options for the city’s children, and Breakthrough is an important partner in this collective effort. Looking ahead, Somerville plans to continue to work closely with Breakthrough and the rest of its OST network to connect young people to high-quality afterschool and summer opportunities.





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Our report, [\*Sustaining Cross-Sector Systems of Support and Opportunity for Children: Interim Lessons from the By All Means Consortium\*](#) (2019), features an excerpt from this case study.

## About Breakthrough Greater Boston

Breakthrough Greater Boston prepares low-income students for success in college and trains the next generation of urban teachers using a unique Students Teaching Students model. Through our six-year program, students gain a passion for learning and the perseverance and tools to succeed in college and beyond. Teaching Fellows gain intensive in-classroom experience, expert training and 1:1 coaching.

## About the Education Redesign Lab

Paul Reville, who served as the former Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and is currently a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, launched the Education Redesign Lab (EdRedesign) in 2014. Our mission is to give every child in the United States the opportunity to succeed in education and in life. We hope to lead a movement to create a new and more comprehensive education model for all children and youth.

## Suggested Citation

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