



Bristol County Chamber of Commerce
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By Bill Perkins, President and CEO of People, Inc., and a member of the Bristol County Chamber of Commerce Education Committee

Partners in Education

When we consider the complexities involved in raising the bar for educational attainment in our community, it is all too common for any one person or one organization or even one school department to fall victim to feelings of despair. Not enough funding, not enough parent engagement, too many students with complex social/emotional needs – these are the phrases we often hear in those negative conversations that end with no hope for solutions or improvements. The antidote for these feelings is collaboration. What is the result when those people, organizations, and institutions rally together to work on a problem? The result is creative thoughts that turn the tide from despair to hope. The result is resources being pooled together to overcome funding barriers. The result is young people, some without direction, becoming inspired by the thoughts of career possibilities and the prospect of higher educational attainment.

Over the years, People, Incorporated's board of directors has consistently embraced the power of collaborative spirit. They have regularly approved expenditures and participated in fund raising efforts that allow the agency to contribute to community improvement efforts. Bringing partners together to promote the downtown Fall River area with concerts and children's activities are examples of this leadership. In 2008, when People, Incorporated was asked to take responsibility for the SMILES Mentoring Program, the Agency's board of directors accepted this challenge and since that time this volunteer mentoring program has grown significantly in Fall River. SMILES Mentoring now operates in all 14 schools in the Fall River School District, in Diman Regional High School and the Argosy Charter School as well as in schools in Westport and New Bedford. SMILES has also had significant financial support from both Mechanics Cooperative Bank and BayCoast Bank. These local institutions have consistently partnered in the effort to bring caring, volunteer adult mentors to children in our schools. They have clearly demonstrated their commitment to the community, their support for education, and, more importantly, the power of collaboration.

Last school year, Magdalena Reis, Principal of Resiliency Preparatory Academy, contacted People, Incorporated in an effort to find a community partner to help support students. She recognized the need for students to be able to develop job skills and have more opportunities to experience potential career pathways. Because some of the students were also parents, they were also in need of parenting supports. People, Incorporated was able



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to utilize the supports of its Healthy Families program and a workforce development grant targeting urban youth to offer both supports and opportunities. As a result of these efforts ten students received training and internships and two students are now employed full time at People Incorporated and are planning to continue their education.

Recognizing the importance of addressing this issue in greater depth, Dr. Matthew Malone, our newly appointed superintendent of schools, reached out to People, Incorporated this past summer to take the lead in designing a **Community Engagement Center** model in the Resiliency Preparatory Academy. He recognized that many of the students attending this alternative high school located in the former Durfee Tech building on Rock St. were in need of assistance. Many needed support in attaining their high school diploma, and others were in need of direction and access to job training opportunities.

With its experience in program delivery, People, Incorporated was motivated to solicit partners to expand resources and create workforce training opportunities in the new center. The next step was finding the right space. RPA Principal Magdalena Reis and her team, identified a space in the building that could work as the center but it was clear that the space needed some renovations. BayCoast Bank has been a long-time partner in People, Incorporated's quest to bring community center models to local schools and it was once again quick to sign on to this effort to create a Community Engagement Center at the RPA. Others partnering with the Fall River School Department and People, Incorporated, along with BayCoast Bank, include Mallard Printing, the Community Development Agency, and the United Way of Greater Fall River. Look for information coming very soon announcing the grand opening of this innovative Community Engagement Center. Several of the support and workforce development activities are under way, and the partners in this educational improvement effort and many students at the RPA are now feeling very hopeful that the future is full of possibilities. As you can see, the Community Engagement Center at RPA is yet another example of what can be done when different groups work together to accomplish one goal.

Another group working that has been working together to address the issues facing Fall River Schools and neighboring districts for some time is the Fall River Chamber of Commerce Education Committee, chaired by Nick Christ, the CEO of BayCoast Bank. This committee brings together business, education and community leaders and offers a place for potential collaborators to discuss how together we might "move the needle" to improve educational attainment in our area. Education Committee members have collaborated to bring



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attention to the issue of student absenteeism with **the Red Chair Campaign** and organized annual **College Days** at schools throughout the region to encourage young students to aspire to attend college. They launched the **Parent Academy** to bring much needed resources, education and information to parents in Fall River and authored dozens of informed and articulate Op Ed pieces that shed light on the problems and potential solutions and make the case that educational attainment is really the cornerstone of economic development for any community. These projects are all great examples of collaboration but what is even more inspiring is the real and positive effect that they can have, for example, in improving school attendance or inspiring more students to go to college. “Many hands make light work” seems to be too simple a statement to solve the complex issues facing urban education today. It may be, but the evidence is clear – when we partner together, we can make a difference.