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A Boston headmaster on ideas, obstacles in urban education

By Chuck Leddy, Globe Correspondent | February 19, 2010

Linda F. Nathan, founding headmaster of the Boston Arts Academy, has achieved considerable success on the frontlines of an urban education system in crisis.

Her BAA is a public high school with a student body that reflects the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the city. Yet, unlike most of its peers, about 95 percent of the school's graduates are accepted to college, close to double the rate of the average urban district.

In "The Hardest Questions Aren't on the Test," Nathan shares her thinking about teaching and creating an environment that fosters results. Despite her considerable experience as an educator, impressive academic credentials, and profound concern for her students, Nathan begins this wonderful book by saying she doesn't have any easy answers. That disarming candor is among her strengths.

Nathan makes it clear that schools must begin by establishing a "unifying framework," a set of core values that stakeholders hammer out together and accept as guiding principles for day-to-day education.

Nathan's method embraces the idea of asking good questions, and getting teachers, students, parents, and others to grapple with tough issues and work toward answers collaboratively and flexibly.

The questioning process triggers conversations, but Nathan offers no epiphanies when everyone sees the shining light of truth. She readily admits that she might push too hard sometimes in the face of discomfort. She also admits making mistakes. When two Christian students walk out in protest during a play addressing homosexuality, Nathan is deeply concerned about their lack of respect for diversity, but chooses not to discipline them: "I didn't want to take on their parents and enter into this murky area of the rightness or wrongness of our values."

Nathan works tirelessly to create a collaborative climate for teachers, emphasizing a team approach where opinions and ideas are shared about how best to serve students. Through the examples she offers, we see these collaborations leading to bet-

ter student outcomes, but Nathan is honest enough to show that collaboration can fail, too. She describes a music teacher who resigned after being unwilling to work with the system.

On the subject of student assessment (i.e., measuring student success), Nathan is skeptical of prepackaged, off-the-shelf solutions such as standardized testing as inconsistent with more holistic goals. She describes how educators are inevitably pressured to "teach to the test," organizing all their efforts around the content expected to be on standardized tests. She repeatedly expresses

her suspicion of trendy, quick-fix changes that schools try out for a few months and then discard after they inevitably fail, leaving everyone disillusioned.

Nathan and her Boston Arts Academy staff are haunted by the "achievement gap," the statistical underperformance of African-American male students. She describes in detail the long, messy, ongoing process of discussing the problem and the steps being taken at the school to try to address it.

What's revolutionary about Nathan is her refusal to believe in miracles; her acceptance of imperfection; her embrace of the difficult process of asking hard questions and working with others to move toward solutions that may themselves be imperfect but an improvement. For educators or anyone else interested in city schools, this is essential, provocative reading.

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