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With no silver bullet, innovation abounds at this bilingual high school

The school also features expeditionary learning, mastery-based grading, technology, the arts and community-building

by **TARA GARCÍA MATHEWSON**

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OSTON — The Margarita Muñiz Academy, a public high school in Boston, is best known for its dual language immersion program. But bilingual education isn't the school's only innovation.

The Muñiz Academy opened in 2012 as one of Massachusetts' first "innovation schools," free from many district policies and granted flexibility with its curriculum, budget, school schedule and annual

calendar, among other things.

B Besides offering all classes in both English and Spanish and embracing the language and culture of its a predominantly Latino student body, administrators prioritized a host of highly regarded improvement strategies in the school's design.

The dual language model is considered key to the school's success in boosting graduation rates, especially for native Spanish-speakers, but no one at the school considers it a silver bullet. Teachers and administrators, instead, take a holistic approach to educating teenagers.

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The arts are central to the Muñiz Academy curriculum. Students spend every afternoon taking two arts electives, which can include band, visual arts, theater or technology. Dan Abramski, the school's assistant headmaster, said the arts exposure is multi-purpose and supports more traditional academics.



Carla Savinon, now a sophomore, works on a painting in her visual art class last spring at Boston's Margarita Muñiz Academy, where arts are core component of the curriculum. Photo: Tara García Mathewson/The Hechinger Report

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“If practice makes you better at painting, there’s no reason why practice won’t make you better at math. It allows us to open up the conversation.”

an Abramoski, assistant headmaster, Margarita Muñiz Academy

“This idea that if I work hard, I can get better — that’s really clear in an arts classroom,” Abramoski said. “If practice makes you better at painting, there’s no reason why practice won’t make you better at math. It allows us to open up the conversation.”

Many students enter the Muñiz Academy never having played, or even considered playing, an instrument. Most students take band, and their instruments are free to borrow for the duration of the school year.

José Pinales, a 2017 graduate, credits the school’s band program with getting him off the streets and keeping him out of trouble. He said he turned himself around during his junior year.

“Music saved my life,” Pinales said. “Attending band with Mr. Avi [Mehta] every day, he really showed me that I have skills. I want to make sure I keep music with me my whole life.”

Public displays of student learning are also natural in arts classrooms. Student musicians perform for the community throughout the year. Exhibits in the Museum of Fine Arts allow student painters to display their work. This is important at the Muñiz Academy, where teachers try to connect student learning with the

“real world” as much as possible.

In academic classrooms, that’s not always quite as straightforward, but teachers get creative. As part of a focus on “expeditionary learning,” students go deep into topics throughout the school year, and teachers make sure to connect that deeper learning to life outside of school.

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Last year, students studied the Latino influence in U.S. elections and prepared an in-depth project about their research, which included interviews with experts and average voters they talked to on the street. Ferneidi Pina Baez, a 2017 graduate, counts that as her favorite project of the year. Two years ago, 12th graders produced a book in their humanities class about high school redesign, “[Attendance Would Be 100%](#),” that they ultimately published with 826 Boston, a local nonprofit.

Music saved my life.”

**osé Pinales, 2017 graduate,
Iargarita Muñiz Academy**

“As much as possible we want kids to be producing products that have some value in the world and are not just for the school or the teacher to look at and grade,” Abramoski said.

This emphasis on deeper learning means students don’t get exposed to the same breadth of content as those in other schools, but educators at the Muñiz Academy believe the more in-depth projects better engage them along the way.

When it comes to student engagement, “crew” is another element of

the school's overall strategy. Twice per week for 45 minutes, students meet with about 10 of their peers and one teacher. The crew period emphasizes community building, and students discuss things that are bothering them, current events, college readiness and other topics. Students develop closer relationships with each other and with their crew teacher that can help keep them connected to the school. And the teacher becomes an important liaison to families throughout the year.

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“Mastery-based grading,” an innovation gaining traction in schools around the country, features scoring students based on their academic performance alone. Class participation and effort are separated out so students can't squeeze by with good behavior and obscure a lack of concrete knowledge or skill.

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Additionally, the school is getting close to having one laptop for every student, and a 3D printer gives students in technology classes a chance to go beyond the conceptual stage of design.

All of these elements of the Muñiz Academy school day contribute to higher than average graduation rates. Standardized test scores also track with the district average even though the students could be expected to do worse, given the fact that 86 percent are considered “high risk” because they are economically disadvantaged, an English learner and/or a student with disabilities.

Still, even though headmaster Dania Vázquez is proud of her students and the staff, her mission is to make sure all students succeed. And that's not the case yet. So she said she won't rest on the school's achievements so far.

"We don't do that here," Vázquez said.

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Tara García Mathewson is a staff writer. She launched her journalism career with two award-winning pieces co-produced during a three-month stint at the Kitsap Sun... [See Archive](#) →

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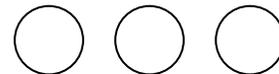


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