



Somerville Public Schools

Education • Inspiration • Excellence

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 24, 2017

Contact: Susana H. Morgan -- smorgan@k12.somerville.ma.us; (617) 629-5221

Uri Harel -- uharel@k12.somerville.ma.us

THE BOSTON FOUNDATION AWARDS SOMERVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS \$200K FOR CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT INSIGHTS TOOL

Open-Source student data system offers near real-time information that helps schools provide timely, individualized interventions and student support

Somerville, MA - [The Boston Foundation](#) awarded a two-year, \$200,000 grant to [Somerville Public Schools](#) (SPS) this summer to continue development of Somerville's innovative, open-source [Student Insights](#) online student data software. The funding will be used to add new software features as the district continues to improve and expand the system, and to extend the software to other urban Massachusetts school districts. Under the guidance of SPS K-8 Curriculum Coordinator Uri Harel, Somerville has been working on Student Insights to centralize student data in order to give teachers a fuller and more timely picture of the interventions and supports students need to be successful in their classrooms.

"We are incredibly grateful to The Boston Foundation not only for their generous financial support, but also for their commitment to the well-being of our youth and our communities," stated Somerville Mayor, Joseph A. Curtatone. "Whether it's wrap-around services, enrichment programs, or data insights, if we want to ensure the best outcomes for our students, it's important that we use a range of approaches beyond excellent academic instruction. Student Insights is just another example of how the city and schools can work together and utilize innovative approaches to serve our students. We are thrilled to have The Boston Foundation as a partner in ensuring that every student in our district has the best possible opportunity for success."

"Student Insights is a game-changer. It is an exceptional tool that provides us with a near real-time picture of how a student is doing and where they might need additional support. School districts are often data rich and information poor. Student Insights changes that picture," commented Superintendent of Schools, Mary Skipper. "Student Insights gives teachers access to current data that allows them to make appropriate adjustments in a timely manner to meet their students' needs. We are very grateful to The Boston Foundation for their support and their vision of how transformational Student Insights can be for teachers and for students across the Commonwealth."

The concept of Student Insights evolved nearly three years ago from a need to address persistent questions and problems related to student data. Uri Harel and the SPS Curriculum Team wanted to come up with solutions for the questions "What are the traditional problems around data in schools? How can we solve them in an equitable way? And how can we solve them in a way that makes the teacher's life easier and not harder?"

A potential pathway to addressing those persistent questions surfaced shortly thereafter when the City was awarded the prestigious Code for America Fellowship in 2015 and chose to use the resources that came with it to work with the schools to develop what became Student Insights. A group of Code for America fellows were already in Somerville working on the municipal website. In response, Mr. Harel organized a team of [Code for America](#) programmers and [Healey School](#) teachers and administrators to find gaps in



Somerville Public Schools

Education • Inspiration • Excellence

student data and explore how they might address those gaps through software. The team also made sure to include robust encryption to protect student privacy.

Student Insights provides a single stream of data about a student, pulling together a history of interventions received from different district departments, recommendations from teachers, counselors and administrators and raising a red flag for teachers when a student needs support. Using the centralized data, educators can more easily recognize when students are on track, and when academic or other issues might be affecting a student's well-being or academic performance in the classroom.

“Student Insights coders created a nice, visual way for teachers and principals to log in and see all information about a student in one place and in a graphical format,” explains Mr. Harel. “Then, they gave us a way to keep track of all the interventions and services we have for each student and created a system where we have immediate email alerts if a student's absences spike.”

Grant funds from The Boston Foundation will support programming time to code new features into Student Insights, which is currently being utilized in Somerville Public School's K-8 Schools and the Benjamin G. Brown School (K-5). This funding stream will also allow SPS to expand Student Insights to Somerville High School. Other enhancements to the database will include an analytics feature that allows the district to create in-time research studies of interventions, providing a pre-measure that the data can test to find the actual statistical significance of the effectiveness of an intervention. Somerville also plans to add a Student Voice component that will allow students themselves to contribute information they consider important for teachers to understand such as their goals, learning styles and classroom work. All of these added features will further assist teachers and administrators to get a more complete picture of their students and provide individualized and timely interventions and supports.

“Several teachers at the Healey School are already using Student Insights during parent / teacher conferences. Parent, teacher and student sit together and open Insights to look at what's going on with them. Student Voices will add the whole child aspect,” says Uri Harel.

The Boston Foundation grant funds also support expanding Student Insights into other districts. Fall River Public Schools and New Bedford Public Schools are the first two districts to explore gradually introducing Student Insights into their schools. Coding time will be used to connect the Fall River and New Bedford school districts onto Student Insights by installing the software on their servers and integrating their district data with the system. Trainers from the Somerville project will visit those districts to work with a core team of staff members who will then train their own colleagues on the software. Maintenance costs for using Student Insights are anticipated to remain low for districts adopting the system, since the software is open-source and provided at no cost.

About The Boston Foundation

The Boston Foundation is one of the oldest and largest community foundations in the nation. Their focus is on ensuring that all Greater Boston-area residents are successful and thriving, and that communities are vibrant. This past June, The Boston Foundation awarded \$1.4 million in grants that focus on education, the arts, housing, health and workforce development. Learn more about The Boston Foundation and their work at www.tbf.org.