



## At Boston Charter School, College Decision Ceremony Mirrors NCAA's National Signing Day

By KIRK CARAPEZZA | June 9, 2017



*Students at Match Charter School in Boston prepare for the school's annual signing day ceremony, weeks before graduation. (Photo credit: Gretchen Ertl)*

Cue pomp and circumstance. High school seniors across the country are prepping for their graduation ceremonies.

At Match Charter School in Boston, another big day comes a few weeks earlier when seniors make their college decisions public at an emotional, school-wide ceremony in front of family and friends.

Inside a packed auditorium at Boston University, 43 seniors take the stage. One by one students grab the mic, hold up their new college sweatshirts and reveal where they will attend college next year.

*“Bunker Hill Community College!”*

This ceremony mirrors the excitement of the NCAA's National Signing Day, when top high school athletes declare which college they will attend. There's no ESPN broadcast, but family members do hold up signs and go wild after each announcement. The goal is to spotlight academic achievers the same way schools celebrate skilled athletes.

*"Framingham State!"*

Many of the students at Match Charter School don't speak English at home, half are poor, and most of them will be the first in their family to go to college. Financial aid offers left many with gaps they'll struggle to cover at a time when more merit aid from universities, along with private programs and government aid, is going to wealthy students with high grade-point averages and entrance test scores.

Since 2004, Match administrators report that 90 percent of its graduates have gone on to a four-year college.

Guidance counselor Shira Zar-Kesler says this signing day ceremony allows these students to be heroes – and forget about their financial struggles – at least for a day.

"We practice this so many times," Zar-Kessler said shortly after the ceremony. "Walking in. Making your announcement. But having the entire school here and getting so excited with them is the best part. There's no way to not get into that and just love every kid and be like, 'Ah, this is happening,'" Zar-Kessler exclaimed.



*Guidance counselor Shira Zar-Kesler introduces each student before they announce their college decisions. (Photo credit: Gretchen Ertl)*

"We try to also hype it up in school to be like a surprise. So, it's like, 'I'm going to' and then that announcement is a big deal," Zar-Kessler explained.

For weeks, senior Aneudy Polanco has been torn between UMass Lowell and UMass Amherst. In April, he was leaning toward Lowell, which gave him more financial aid.

"I just don't want to have a lot of debt, and I don't want to put a lot of debt onto my mom - especially because I have three more little siblings that she has to take care of," Polanco said.

After visiting Amherst, though, the state's flagship campus, Polanco changed his mind.



*Senior Aneudy Polanco makes his college decision public, shouting "UMass Amherst!" (Photo credit: Gretchen Ertl)*

"I instantly fell in love with [UMass Amherst]," Aneudy said. "I could see myself there, taking classes, and thriving with my skills. It's just a big environment where I could find any group to be friends with."

Even though UMass Amherst gave Aneudy less financial aid, his single mom Seanny Nova urged him to go there over UMass Lowell. The decision will cost her at least \$7,580 more out-of-pocket annually.

Still, Nova says, it will all be worth it as long as he earns a degree. Nova emigrated from the Dominican Republic, works as a nursing assistant and lives in public housing with her children.

"When I came here 20 years ago, with nothing but myself, without my family, I went through a hard, hard time, but now seeing him finish high school I am so proud for him," Nova said, holding back tears.

Nova is planning to work overtime shifts to help cover the costs of college.

"No more fun times," said Nova, who is training to become a nurse at Bunker Hill Community College and has two younger sons and a baby girl. "We are going to eat at home. And no more vacations."

At the end of the ceremony, Aneudy and his classmates reach under their chairs, grab clipboards and pens and sign letters of intent, just like star athletes, ready to begin new chapters of their lives.



*Aneudy Polanco and his mom Seanny Nova celebrate his college decision after Match Charter School's signing day ceremony. (Photo credit: Gretchen Ertl)*

***WGBH intern Tomo Singh Jr. contributed reporting.***

***This story was a collaboration between WGBH News and The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.***