I am passionate about education. As readers of my column know, I strongly believe in the power of education to change lives. I’ve devoted many career and volunteer years to working on initiatives in Springfield to help kids develop a passion for reading and learning.

Recently, I joined the board of a public charter school, Springfield Prep. Founded in 2015 with a kindergarten and first grade, this year was the first the school received MCAS results, and they were very encouraging. Seven out of 10 students met or exceeded the state’s expectations in ELA and nearly 8 out of 10 did so in math. Economically disadvantaged students, which make up 70% of our school’s population, thrived, as did Black and Latino students.

I wanted to dig deeper to find out why. There is obviously something positive happening at Springfield Prep that can’t be easily dismissed by saying that the students served are “different”. If that were the case, as the typical critique goes, why would student performance at this school far exceed the stage average for all students and results in some of the most affluent districts in the state? As a board member, my role is to provide oversight of the school and ensure that we meet our charter promises but I wanted to dig deeper and find out what, specifically, our school was doing and what takeaways I could share. I spent some time observing Springfield Prep classrooms and spoke with its teachers and leaders. Here’s what I noticed:

Mindset. Everyone I talked to truly believes that every child they work with can do challenging work. I was often surprised by the level of writing I saw, the books I saw kids reading, and the types of math problems kids were solving. When I asked about this, their Principal, Jessica Yiannos, simply said “when you believe in kids, they believe in themselves too.” It was clear that the school starts with high expectations for their students and that this mindset impacted the type of work kids were doing and the ways that teachers encouraged their students.

A balance of challenge and support. It’s commonly thought that kids don’t like challenges, especially academic ones, but that does not appear to be the case at Springfield Prep. The school has built a love of challenge into their culture. In one class, I heard a teacher say, “I’ve got a challenge for you!” and watched her class reply eagerly, “Bring it on!” Challenge on its own doesn’t lead to success, though. Ms. Yiannos explained to me that you have to balance challenge with relentless support so that scholars have the tools they need to do their best work. Teachers analyze student work and assessment data so they know which kids need more support and on what. Students who struggle academically get more one-on-one support and small group instruction to help them make up ground faster.

Encouraging a culture of learning. One of the first things that jumps out when you spend time in Springfield Prep’s classrooms is that kids – the school calls them “scholars” to signify the school’s college prep mission – are really engaged in their work. Kids are buzzing away quietly on their work, engrossed in their reading, annotating their texts carefully, then eager to discuss what they read with their class. When their teachers ask them a question, students want to answer it; not just a few kids, but the vast majority of the class.

Careful planning. I was struck by one more thing. The school is meticulous in its planning and operations. Teachers pace their lessons purposefully and the level of preparation they’ve put in to the planning is apparent. Hallways are spotless, silent, and neatly decorated with college pennants and quotes that reflect the school’s core values.

So what did my morning at school teach me about the Springfield Prep’s success? It’s not any one thing. It’s a shared belief that every kid has the potential to be a scholar, that they can do challenging work when they get supports to do it, and that kids will love their learning if we give them great content.

One more thing: the charter school movement was designed in part to foster innovative ideas in education and share them with other schools. Springfield Prep has an open door policy. If you want to see what it’s doing for yourself, please schedule a visit!