



A Better Chance (ABC) began in 1963 as an experiment in educational equity. The Charles E. Merrill Foundation provided a grant that enabled 23 independent schools to respond to President John F. Kennedy's call for equal access to the nation's top high schools for minority students. The schools' response: The Independent School Talent Search Program (ISTSP). ISTSP held its first session for academically talented youth in the summer of 1964 at Dartmouth College.

In August 1970, Peter Sipple and Alice B. Robinson, two professors at Wellesley College, launched in earnest to charter a Wellesley chapter of A Better Chance. At this time, only 15 public school chapters of ABC existed — and the only program exclusively for girls was in Andover. Wellesley — given its home to Wellesley College — proved an ideal location for a second program.

We include here a history of the program, originally authored by Alice B. Robinson in June, 1992, with revisions made in September 2010 and in October 2017.

Wellesley ABC – The Beginnings

September 1992 marks the 20th anniversary of the town of Wellesley's A Better Chance public school program. However, before the first eight students entered the high school in the fall of 1972 the program had been in gestation for more than two years. Two events, unrelated at the time, took place early in August 1970. First, Wellesley College decided to purchase a large single-family house that had recently come on the market. Second, the Report of the Commission on the Future of the College was presented to the Wellesley College Board of Trustees. One section dealt with a projected Regional-Suburban Focus. An illustration was given in a summary about a possible ABC outreach, written by Peter Sipple, an assistant professor in the department of Education.

During the ensuing academic year Mr. Sipple, aided by History Professor Alice Robinson, who had been on the faculty over twenty years and had written the original report on a Regional-Suburban focus, arranged endless meetings with assorted members of the Wellesley College community, including alumnae who were local residents, who became eager to help implement an ABC program in the town. The college Administration contact person was the Executive Vice President Philip Phibbs (now President of the University of Puget Sound). Other local people who were active in the various churches and in community and school affairs were contacted and lent their considerable support and expertise. At that time, there were only 15 public

school ABC programs in the entire United States, and the only one for girls was in Andover, Mass. It seemed logical that Wellesley should aim to have the second such program. Thomas Mikula, Director of the ABC Public School Program, then based at Dartmouth College, came to a Wellesley meeting in November of 1970 and provided the group with the details of what would be needed to launch an ABC public school program here. (Dana Hall had one of the private school programs, with which ABC had begun). The largest need, beyond money, was a house in which the projected 8-10 students could live together, with a resident couple. Meantime, Vice-President Phibbs had been approached about the possibility of the college providing a house, finding a resident couple, sponsoring tutors, etc. He expressed his personal interest but was unable to do anything officially.

Then, on the night of August 4/5, exactly a year after the college had decided to purchase the house, there was a fire, causing fairly extensive damage to the property. The college did not repair it, since no firm plans had been made about its specific use; now there was some thought of razing it and using the site in some other way. Sipple and Robinson had an alternate proposal, and after sounding out Vice-President Phibbs, requested that the college lease the house, rent-free, to an ABC Board, which would undertake the cost of all repairs and whatever other expenses would be entailed in taking over the property. A letter of March 29, 1972 from Vice-President Phibbs informed them that President Ruth Adams had agreed to present their request to the Board of Trustees, with the proviso that "under no circumstances" could ABC have the house for more than three years, that it would take care of all repairs, taxes, etc.

In that same month of March, Steve Porter, one of ABC's founders and a member of the Town of Wellesley School Committee, was instrumental in securing that body's approval for accepting ABC students tuition-free. He had been helped by the Principal of the High School, Ted Rokiki, an enthusiastic supporter of the program from the beginning. Steve Burt, another founder, helped persuade the Town fathers to grant ABC a property tax exemption as a non-profit organization.

The Wellesley ABC Program was officially incorporated after some twenty initiators held a meeting on April 12, 1972, in compliance with the requirements of General Laws, Chapter 180, Section 3 of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The signers of the Articles of Organization were Peter Sipple, President; Stephen Burt, Treasurer; Paul Jameson, Clerk/Secretary; and Stephen Porter, Barbara Joyce, Dorothy Uhlig, and Dorinda Cruickshank, "being a majority of the Directors." President Adams was informed of the incorporation the next day and took the ABC request to the Board of Trustees, which, on April 20, voted: "to approve in principle that the College permit [the house] to be used for the proposed ABC Program." President Adams sent Sipple and Robinson official notification of the Trustee vote, but reminded them that "the vote was taken with the understanding that the house will be used for three years only after which it will be razed and that the organizers will take full responsibility for taxes, repairs, renovation, insurance coverage, and the necessary activities in connection with zoning, and health and safety requirements. The College will provide only the site itself."

Late spring and summer brought a mad flurry of activity: selecting the original eight students from applicants whose names were forwarded from the national headquarters; finding a resident couple to serve as “house parents” for the students; selecting a resident tutor from the Wellesley college student body; and, last but far from least, getting the house in livable shape. Many, many individuals and groups contributed materials, supplies, and labor for the substantial repairs of the fire damage. Then members of the “Square churches” (Village Congregational, Methodist, and St. Andrews Episcopal) took the lead in friendly competition plastering, painting and furnishing the three large bedrooms. Other groups and individuals readied the common rooms, including the kitchen. Everything was completed during the last weekend in August, just before the arrival of the initial eight students.

In 1972 Wellesley High School was a three-year program, and five of the incoming ABC students entered the 10th grade, with the other three coming as juniors. Three were from Spanish-speaking backgrounds; the other five were black. Five came from New York City, and one each from Columbus and Cleveland, Ohio, and one from Philadelphia. The first resident couple was Bill and Dana McCurin, and the resident tutor was a Wellesley College sophomore, Kathy Rollins. Dr. Arthur Baldwin, whose office was on Washington Street near the house, became the ABC students’ personal physician. The first year’s budget was \$32,000, half being paid by the National ABC organization and the other half being raised locally. Kenneth Rossan and Edward Proctor saw to the accomplishment of that goal.

So began the first year. The college’s absolutely no-longer-than-three-years for the house, and nothing more, was substantially modified in the intervening years. First, an additional three years were granted, again and again. In fact, once the lease expired and nobody noticed for several months. When the then Financial Officer of the college did notice he called it to the attention of the then Board and offered a renewal, which soon became a five- rather than three-year lease. Then access for the students to the Infirmary was granted, and to the Library and the Sports Center, with, now, Wellesley College IDs for the ABC students. The college also, under the present Administration, took on the repair and renovation of the House—a major responsibility. The current Vice President for Financial Affairs, William Reed, was especially helpful in this regard.

The National financial support for the Wellesley ABC Program ended after the second year, leaving funding entirely to local efforts.

Wellesley ABC – Today

In 2013, Wellesley ABC celebrated its 40th anniversary with a weekend of events: 19 graduates of the program returned, including the original 1972 ABC house participants, to celebrate and share their experiences and successes. The alumnae shared memories and stories about the impact ABC made on their lives:

“I’m just overwhelmed today. I can’t stop crying,” said Altagracia Medrano, one of the first women in the program, Class of 1975, who holds a master’s degree in public administration. “I’m completely overwhelmed.”

Tona Dickerson, Class of 1976 who holds a Ph.D. in Spanish, said that she “came from a segregated community in Columbus, Ohio, to Wellesley. Had I not come to Wellesley, I would not have known even other races existed.” Ms. Dickerson now holds a doctorate and am a professor in Spanish and creative writing,” she said.

“The ABC program stepped-up life for me,” said Andrea Robinson, Class of 1988, who works in finance at Miller, Coors Beer Company in Chicago. “It taught me that whatever you do, do it in an excellent way. The exposure provided through the program enabled me to explore, travel, and go to France. It makes me a better parent.”

Today, as Wellesley ABC approaches its 45th anniversary, it continues to deliver on the mission:

To provide academically talented and promising young women of color from underserved communities A Better Chance through enrollment at Wellesley High School and participation in a residential program. Wellesley ABC is committed to fostering the achievement of each student’s academic, personal and community-oriented goals through year-round support.

Wellesley ABC is managed by a team of dedicated volunteers each year: 24 Board members, 6 academic advisors, drivers, host families, student affairs committee members, and our strong base of community donors. The students are additionally supported by a Residential Advisor, a Residential Tutor, and a Residential Chef. Wellesley ABC works to support the scholars both academically, socially and emotionally.

Our students have proven to be extremely active members of the Wellesley High School community, participating activities diverse as WHS Step Team, theatrical productions and National Honor Society. Further, 100% of our scholars matriculate to four-year colleges around the country.

Fundraising activities have expanded to include numerous community events:

- Wellesley ABC has assigned town-provided numbers to runners for the annual Boston Marathon since 2015.
- Wellesley ABC supports the Wellesley Education Foundation’s annual Spelling Bee by providing some event volunteers.

We appreciate the continued generous support of our volunteers and donors. Your efforts enable Wellesley ABC to truly make a difference in the lives of our scholars.