Alignment by Design

Lee Academy Pilot School
Dorchester, Massachusetts
Kyle Dodson, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-1
School Enrollment: 152
District Enrollment: 57,900
Community: Urban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 75
• Asian: 5
• Hispanic: 15
• Native-American: 0
• White: 5
Poverty rate*: 75 percent
English language learners: 3 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget, Title I and state funding

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• School’s mission and design emphasize alignment and child development.
• Teachers consider a variety of standards in curriculum and testing decisions.
• Principal’s role highlights teacher leadership in improving achievement.
School Snapshot

Building the Curriculum Year by Year

Lee Academy Pilot School is all about alignment. The process is so central to the school’s mission the school is literally building its program one year at a time. In 2005-06, the second year for the school designed to operate like a charter school within the Boston Public Schools, Lee Academy moved from a PK-K setup to PK-1. Next year, those first graders will move into an all-new second grade and so on, until Lee becomes a full-fledged elementary program through fifth grade. Principal Kyle Dodson says that growing slowly makes sure the school is getting its program right for students year by year. “This school is designed to create a seamless PK/elementary model,” he explains. “At a time when there is growing interest in the importance of early childhood programs, what a lot of elementary schools do is tack on PK. With that kind of alignment, the default mode is looking at the curriculum for kindergarten or first grade and adapting it to lower grades instead of looking at the school developmentally.”

The PK-up approach at Lee does not neglect the state standards for later elementary grades. Those guidelines are an integral part of the learning goals at each grade level. At the same time, Dodson says Lee is committed to building a school that puts developmentally appropriate teaching and learning first. “What goes on when a child is 3 or 4 years old is different than what happens at 6. No Child Left Behind and other mandates create pressure to measure academic and achievement goals earlier than is appropriate. We’re trying deliberately to push against that tide,” he says. Indeed, the school traces its origins back to its design team’s desire to create an early-childhood program and elementary school in an urban setting that would mirror the rich learning experiences and high-quality teaching common in Boston’s affluent neighborhoods.

“Our kids get more autonomy and adults use high-quality materials,” Dodson says. “Our teachers facilitate discovery, vocabulary, guidance and more. That’s a luxury that, in an urban environment like ours, you don’t feel like you’re afforded. Most programs in this area would be more didactic, more about drilling, more focused on straight phonics.” Dodson says that in the second year of the project, the school is pleased with the way children are responding.

PK-3 Alignment

Teachers Consider a Variety of Standards

The school explores a range of standards—including, Massachusetts’ standards, Boston’s curriculum frameworks, National Association for the Education of Young Children guidelines and national subject-area standards—to create classrooms that deliver top-notch academics. Teachers also weigh assessment strategies that balance proficiency goals, standards and best practices built on child development research.

Lee’s PK program includes classes for 3-year-olds, another PK section for 4-year-olds, as well as sections of kindergarten and first grade. The district’s pilot school program is a response to charter schools, autonomous schools that get state funds but are independent of the public school system. In Boston, pilot schools like Lee Academy operate within the public school system but are free of many of the district and teachers union requirements governing traditional public schools. Boston authorizes 19 pilot schools across the district, each pursuing increased achievement in innovative ways.
At Lee Academy, that means keeping developmental issues and alignment at center stage. “We talk a lot about our philosophy,” says Dodson, two years into his first principalship. “As we create a curriculum that’s mapped to the standards on our master list, we’re defining aptitudes focused on content and certain levels of performance students need to reach. After that, teachers have the latitude to create learning experiences.” Toward the goal of teaching about biology basics and ecosystems, for example, one teacher might focus on rain forests while another builds her unit around oceans. The school settled on a common assessment system, and will implement the Work Sampling System starting next year to document teachers’ impressions of student progress.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP
COLLABORATION IN BUILDING QUALITY

Dodson says being a collaborator is emphasized at Lee, where teamwork in decision making is a goal. The school developed a compact that spells out how the staff should work together professionally. The compact states that colleagues should actively listen to each other, especially when problems arise, and that they should deal with each other directly instead of complaining to others. Dodson says the teamwork approach also led to agreement that teachers should take risks if their actions fit with the mission and goals of the school. “My biggest responsibilities are creating circumstances where teachers can do what we need them to do and serving as a salesman for what we’re trying to accomplish,” Dodson says.

In regular school assemblies where student achievement is recognized, students perform and share their work. “In a graphic way, it demonstrates to each other what we’re all about—achievement for kids, positive reinforcement, coming together,” says Dodson.

Collegial spirit is common in pilot schools, where the faculty must vote overwhelmingly to become a pilot school. At Lee Academy, greater flexibility and ownership for teachers means they must put in extra working time—several days in training beyond union limits for traditional district schools. The extra planning time gives teachers a chance to work across grade levels to design the school’s standards-based curriculum, Dodson says, noting that he coordinates the work and serves as another professional voice and resource.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
CHILD DEVELOPMENT ISSUES GUIDE DECISIONS

As a pilot school, Lee Academy’s mission and philosophy help guide the selection of teachers and staff. Last year, when the school had five teaching openings, the staff sorted through more than 500 applications. With that kind of interest, Dodson says the staff can be selectively built with strong teachers committed to the school’s goals. Once on board, teachers are deeply involved in discussions about teaching styles, standards, curriculum and assessment that help the school improve alignment. Those collaborative decisions require teachers to learn a great deal about content and assessment choices.

Settling on the Work Sampling System as a school-wide measure of student progress is a recent example of the research that goes with decision making. Dodson says the system will require teachers to learn more about observing and documenting what children do each day and how their efforts and actions are linked to learning goals. “In the end, we’ll see that a child who came in October with no sense of shapes may be building a structure four feet high because they’ve started to understand about foundations, straightness and how
squares and triangles can fit together. By documenting that, we’ll have still photos and moving images that show us where kids are and the learning that they can apply.” After taking time to choose the system, teachers will need training to make it work. Dodson says that in addition to outside trainers, the school will launch internal discussions to build teachers’ ability to administer the new assessment system.

The school provides many forums for professional development. The schedule allows time for teachers to work in both grade-level teams and across grades. Teachers also identify issues where they need more training or demonstration. Sometimes teachers will appoint a faculty member to research or develop expertise in an area and then serve as a leader for the rest of the staff. Dodson says that regular reflection on what’s working in classrooms is becoming an integral part of the school’s routine. “From my point of view, accountability naturally comes from a system like we’re creating where teachers are regularly giving each other feedback and focused on bringing more professionalism to the job we’re doing,” he says. “It feels like we’re building each other’s competency.”

**RESULTS**

**FINDING THE RIGHT MIX OF MEASURES**

The school’s grade configuration and recent start mean that federal accountability requirements for measuring Adequate Yearly Progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act don’t yet apply. The students are also too young to take state achievement tests. As the school moves toward those formal accountability measures, it uses its own internal data to focus on alignment and child development. In 2006-07, the school will use the Work Sampling System to gauge student progress on classroom tasks to record growth.

In the absence of such overarching assessments, the school uses the Record of Oral Language developed by New Zealand educator Marie Clay and teacher narratives to record each child’s language development against the school’s oral language standards. To assess literacy, teachers use the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement developed by Clay, with emphasis on letter identification and concepts about print and vocabulary development, as well as teacher observation. Teachers rank student performance on math skills like numbers and operations, geometry and spatial sense and measurement to gauge math achievement. The school also measures growth in social and emotional skills over the school year with a variety of assessments including the California Preschool Social Competence Scale, the Denver II Child Development Scale, and the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence.

Dodson says the school takes stock of its student assessments three times a year and charts results to adjust instruction and identify curriculum issues. He says that part of building an attractive urban early childhood center and elementary school is highlighting the knowledge and skills of teachers. “We’re increasingly developing a sense that what we can sell is the idea of our emphasis on adult development—that all the adults here are in the best possible place they can be for kids,” Dodson says. “We’re arguing that’s what helps students get there.”