



June 8, 2006

To the Professional Staff at Codman Academy Public Charter School:

I am pleased to provide you with a report on the findings from our Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound Implementation Review. The report is a compilation and interpretation of information from Codman teacher self-assessments, input from the Academic Dean Thabiti Brown, and my observations from site visits and conversations with staff.

As a school founded on the Design Principles of Expeditionary Learning, Codman exemplifies how a dedicated staff can engage urban learners in relevant, content rich, inquiry-based learning. Because of its small size, Codman's faculty can be unusually coherent in approaches to curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture. This school year just ending represented a deepening of Codman's relationship with EL, but one specifically focused on the following three areas of EL Schools' Core Practice Benchmarks:

1. Culture and Character: Building Professional Learning Communities
2. Culture and Character: Fostering a Safe, Respectful and Orderly School Community.
3. Active Pedagogy: Using Effective Instructional Practices Schoolwide.

This report will address each of those areas and propose some specific areas of focus for next year's work plan.

### **Learning Expeditions and Active Pedagogy**

These two large areas of EL Benchmarks were not the main focus of our work at Codman this year, so my comments rely heavily on the teacher self-assessments and Thabiti's assessments. Codman teachers who have been at the school for several year are consistently designing and implementing at level of 3 and 4, while the roughly half of the staff in their first or second year is at a 1 or 2. I'm not sure the numbers matter so much as the fact that in each department, teachers develop a coherent pathway for students through a rigorous, inquiry based curriculum. In science and math, students are clearly engaged in regular inquiry that emphasizes the large concepts, while also focusing on specific skills. Students are encouraged to apply those skills in multiple investigations and in flexible ways. In Humanities classes, students focus on compelling topics related to their own lives and to larger issues of social justice and economic justice. Students are regularly asked to demonstrate their learning in high

stakes public presentations that require students to use language and speaking skills. A particular strength is integration of regular fieldwork; the relationship between Codman and Huntington Theatre and the Friday fieldwork days provide ongoing structures for students to learn outside the walls of the school building.

As part of our work plan this year, we began to explore more deeply some of the aspects of EL Schools' national professional development focus. After briefly exploring Six + 1 Trait – based approach to writing, we began to dig deeply into the LEO (Learning Expeditions Online) a sophisticated planning tool that enables teachers to build in each aspect of the core benchmarks in a systematic way. Though we are clearly at the beginning stages, we intend to focus on this during this summer's institute and throughout the next school year. This focus has enormous potential for Codman – we will regularly share and co-develop curriculum around common principles and tasks such as developing clear learning targets, designing differentiated learning experiences to scaffold skill-building, integrating quality and craftsmanship into all student products, etc. This work links to excellent works teachers did this year creating a coherent scope and sequence in each discipline, grouping large chunks of content and skills in ways that lend themselves to expeditionary planning, and building coherently from year to year.

Codman is well on the way to being a model for what a sequence of high school expeditions might look like, maximizing student engagement while ensuring mastery of core content and skills.

### **School Culture and Character: Fostering Student Character and intentional School Culture**

This area of the Benchmarks was at the center of one of our two main foci for this year - Codman faculty designed and implemented an entirely new Student Accountability System and reinvigorated the Crew structure that is core to Codman's ability to know each student well.

Beginning last spring and continuing through last summer's end-of-school and before school institutes, Codman teachers asked themselves what kinds of behavioral and cultural challenges were most prevalent in their students and what kind of accountability system might help students develop the character habits that would lead to academic and social success. Over about twenty painstaking hours of small group and whole faculty work, teachers developed a system of points that encourages positive behaviors and has clear consequences for negative behaviors, ranging from violations of dress code and disrespectful language to harassment and violence. While any such system is difficult to implement and fraught with issues of consistent and fair application, the consensus is that this gives teachers and staff a common language and intervention strategy with students, many who may not have been held to high expectations in school before. Work this summer will help fine-tune specifics. A challenge for next year is to translate some of the gains made in strictly behavioral issues to the kinds of habits of work that result in students completing work on time and at a high level of quality.

The other major area of emphasis was on tightening up approaches to crew to lessen the feeling that each crew leader is on their own to come with a compelling curriculum to engage students focus areas of career planning, academic accountability and interpersonal skills. Clearly, some crew leaders have been able to develop structures

that work for them and their students, while others struggle. While this year's work has promise, the coordination was still not as tight as needed. Faculty agrees that we need to focus on this again for next year, in particular developing schoolwide conversations that engage all crews regularly in provocative topics; enhancing the ability to use crew Fridays well, linking crew to an enhanced set of structures for student governance and voice, and regularly mixing crews when appropriate. A remaining challenge is whether the responsibility for this coordination falls to single person or role or happens collectively, which has led to inconsistency in the past.

### **School Culture and Character: Building and Sustaining Professional Learning Community**

The other major focus for this year was around building professional learning community, with a particular focus on complex conversations about race and class. This focus developed from the sense among faculty that race and class were always important underlying issues, but were rarely talked about openly between white and black faculty. A series of structured conversations centered on how to have "fearless" conversations, how cultural background tends to affect attitudes towards race and schools, how individual histories shape opinions and approaches, and how schools can either replicate existing oppressive constructs or invent new ways of talking and working that empower teachers and students. One clear outcome of this is the commitment to what one text refers to as a "discourse II" conversation that breaks down repeated conversations about the same old obstacles and instead focuses only on solutions and forward movement. Codman staff has also committed to share this conversation with students next year.

Related to this is the focus on learning from student work using protocols from the National School Reform Faculty and other organizations. Faculty members commit to sharing the work of their students both in the context of race and class and in the context of the clear learning targets and curriculum goals of Codman. This process has helped staff develop feedback skills and increase the likelihood of sharing dilemmas with colleagues. Our work plan for next year will build in a regular recurring structure where individual teachers place the work of students in front of colleagues for insight into how best to meet student needs.

### **Leadership and School Improvement**

Two areas of Leadership and School Improvement stand out. The role of Academic Dean has been a real boon to coherence and support for teachers. Thabiti has had the time and talent to think through a meaningful professional development pathway, to plan and facilitate agendas, and to introduce clear foci such as the LEO planning template. He had been especially adept at not letting the crisis of the day detract from the school goals decided on at the beginning of the year; he has ensured that structures enable teachers to plan together; and has supported a culture of getting work done rather than cycling around recurring frustrations without much progress. The result is that teachers feel their professional development time is focused, purposeful, and produces results. This is a change from when I began my conversations with the school, and largely attributable to Thabiti's willingness to make clear decisions and respectfully share them with staff.

Another crucial aspect of Codman's success has to do with Meg's leadership in two areas: fundraising and community partnerships and staffing. Codman has set and held itself to high standard for helping students overcome the obstacles that interrupt the

education of many students in the neighborhood - getting each graduate accepted to a 4-year college is just one indication. Not only does Codman need to supplement its budget in order to provide the high level of attention, Saturday classes, and regular work in the community, but teachers need to be free of the responsibility for making all that happen so that they can focus on teaching. Meg's work in generating publicity and support has been exemplary. Additionally, Meg has collaborated with Thabiti in the crucial and enormously difficult task of finding and maintaining a high quality teaching staff. Of particular difficulty is letting teachers go at the end of their first or second year. Teaching at Codman is difficult and requires a complicated alchemy of skills and dispositions; many schools make the mistake of asking teachers whose results with kids have been marginal back in the hope that it will work out or out of fear of being able to find and develop new talent. Codman has had both a healthy rate of retention and a healthy turnover, all which requires emotion energy and the investment of enormous amounts of time, and the courage of school leadership to make difficult choices.

### **School Structures:**

Codman's school structures are largely conducive to high level of implementation of expeditionary learning. Areas of potential focus include a Crew structures and ongoing structures for academic support, but will not be the focus of next years work.

### **Summary and Goals for Next Year**

Codman Academy continues to implement EL Core Benchmarks level commensurate to the individual teacher's experience at the school, but overall feels more "Expeditionary" in both spirit and practice than most schools.

Next years goals include:

- Implementing **Learning Expeditions** across the school based on LEO planning template, with particular emphasis on craftsmanship and quality of products that clearly demonstrate mastery of academic content and skills.
- Building **School Culture and Character** through explicit focus on Crew, Student Accountability, and Student Voice, including development of rituals and roles for students that help weave these three structures together.
- Enhancing **Active Pedagogy** through focus on 6+1 Traits of writing and related concepts of Assessment for Learning, especially through Looking at Student Work protocols.

